

**DANE
COOLIDGE**

THE DESERT
TRAIL

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The Desert Trail

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I

The slow-rolling winter's sun rose coldly, far to the south, riding up from behind the saw-toothed Sierras of Mexico to throw a silvery halo on Gadsden, the border city. A hundred miles of desert lay in its path – a waste of broken ridges, dry arroyos, and sandy plains – and then suddenly, as if by magic, the city rose gleaming in the sun.

It was a big city, for the West, and swarming with traffic and men. Its broad main street, lined with brick buildings and throbbing with automobiles, ran from the railroad straight to the south until, at a line, it stopped short and was lost in the desert.

That line which marked the sudden end of growth and progress was the border of the United States; the desert was Mexico. And the difference was not in the land, but in the government.

As the morning air grew warm and the hoar frost dripped down from the roofs the idlers of the town crept forth, leaving chill lodgings and stale saloons for the street corners and the sun.

Against the dead wall of a big store the Mexicans gathered in shivering groups, their blankets wrapped around their necks and their brown ankles bare to the wind. On another corner a bunch of cowboys stood clannishly aloof, eying the passing crowd for others of their kind.

In this dun stream which flowed under the morning sun there were mining men, with high-laced boots and bulging pockets; graybeards, with the gossip of the town in their cheeks; hoboese, still wearing their Eastern caps and still rustling for a quarter to eat on; somber-eyed refugees and soldiers of fortune from Mexico – but idlers all, and each seeking his class and kind.

If any women passed that way they walked fast, looking neither to the right nor to the left; for they, too, being so few, missed their class and kind.

Gadsden had become a city of men, huge-limbed and powerful and with a questing look in their eyes; a city of adventurers gathered from the ends of the world. A common calamity had driven them from their mines and ranches and glutted the town with men; for the war was on in Mexico and from the farthest corners of Sonora they still came, hot from some new scene of murder and pillage, to add their modicum to the general discontent.

As the day wore on the crowd on the bank corner, where the refugees made their stand, changed its complexion, grew big, and stretched far up the street. Men stood in shifting groups, talking, arguing, gazing moodily at those who passed.

Here were hawk-eyed Texas cattlemen, thinking of their scattered herds at Mababi or El Tigre; mining men, with idle prospects and deserted mines as far south as the Rio Yaqui; millmen, ranchers, and men of trades – all driven in from below the line and all chafing at the leash. While a hundred petty chiefs stood out against Madero and lived by ransom and loot, they must cool their heels in Gadsden and wait for the end to come.

Into this seething mass of the dispossessed, many of whom had lost a fortune by the war, there came two more, with their faces still drawn and red from hard riding through the cold. They stepped forth from the marble entrance of the big hotel and swung off down the street to see the town.

They walked slowly, gazing into the strange faces in the vague hope of finding some friend; and Gadsden, not to be outdone, looked them over curiously and wondered whence they had come.

The bunch of cowboys, still loitering on the corner, glanced scornfully at the smaller man, who sported a pair of puttees – and then at the big man's feet. Finding them encased in prospector's shoes they stared dumbly at his wind-burned face and muttered among themselves.

He was tall, and broad across the shoulders, with far-seeing blue eyes and a mop of light hair; and he walked on his toes, stiff-legged, swaying from the hips like a man on horseback. The rumble of comment rose up again as he racked past and then a cowboy voice observed:

"I bet ye he's a cowpunch!"

The big man looked back at them mockingly out of the corner of his eye and went on without a word.

It is the boast of cowboys that they can tell another puncher at a glance; but they are not alone in this – there are other crafts that leave their mark and other men as shrewd. A group of mining men took one look at the smaller man, noting the candle-grease on his corduroys and the intelligence in his eyes; and to them the big man was no more than a laborer – or a shift-boss at most – and the little man was one of their kind. Every line in his mobile face spoke of intellect and decision, and as they walked it was he who did the talking, while the big man only nodded and smiled.

They took a turn or two up the street, now drifting into some clamorous saloon, now standing at gaze on the sidewalk; and as the drinks began to work, the little man became more and more animated, the big man more and more amiable in his assent and silence.

Then as they passed the crowd of refugees they stopped and listened, commenting on the various opinions by an exchange of knowing smiles. An old prospector, white-haired and tanned to a tropic brown, finally turned upon a presumptuous optimist and the little man nodded approvingly as he heard him express his views.

"You can say what you please," the prospector ended, "but I'm going to keep out of that country. I've knowed them Mexicans for thirty years now and I'm telling you they're gitting treacherous. It don't do no good to have your gun with you – they'll shoot you from behind a rock – and if they can't git you that way, they'll knife you in your sleep.

"I've noticed a big change in them *paisanos* since this war come on. Before Madero made his break they used to be scared of Americans – thought if they killed one of us the rest would cross the border and eat 'em up. What few times they did tackle a white man he generally give a good account of himself, too, and I've traveled them trails for years without hardly knowing what it was to be afraid of anybody; but I tell you it's entirely different over there now."

"Sure! That's right!" spoke up the little man, with spirit. "You're talking more sense than any man on the street. I guess I ought to know – I've been down there and through it all – and it's got so now that you can't trust *any* of 'em. My pardner and I came clear from the Sierra Madres, riding nights, and we come pretty near knowing – hey, Bud?"

"That's right," observed Bud, the big man, with a reminiscent grin. "I begin to think them fellers would get us, for a while!"

"Mining men?" inquired the old prospector politely.

"Working on a lease," said the little man briefly. "Owner got scared out and let us in on shares. But no more for muh – this will hold me for quite a while, I can tell you!"

"Here, too," agreed the big man, turning to go. "Arizona is good enough for me – come on, Phil!"

"Where to?" The little man drew back half resentfully, and then he changed his mind. "All right," he said, falling into step, "a gin fizz for mine!"

"Not on an empty stomach," admonished his pardner; "you might get lit up and tell somebody all you know. How about something to eat?"

"Good! But where're you going?"

The big man was leading off down a side street, and once more they came to a halt.

"Jim's place – it's a lunch-counter," he explained laconically. "The hotel's all right, and maybe that was a breakfast we got, but I get hungry waiting that way. Gimme a lunch-counter, where I can wrop my legs around a stool and watch the cook turn 'em over. Come on – I been there before."

An expression of pitying tolerance came over the little man's face as he listened to this rhapsody on the quick lunch, but he drew away reluctantly.

"Aw, come on, Bud," he pleaded. "Have a little class! What's the use of winning a stake if you've got to eat at a dog-joint? And besides – say, that was a peach of a girl that waited on us this morning! Did you notice her hair? She was a pippin! I left four-bits under my plate!"

The big man waggled his hand resignedly and started on his way.

"All right, pardner," he observed; "if that's the deal she's probably looking for you. I'll meet you in the room."

"Aw, come on!" urged the other, but his heart was not in it, and he turned gaily away up the main street.

Left to himself, the big man went on to his lunch-counter, where he ordered oysters, "a dozen in the milk." Then he ordered a beefsteak, to make up for several he had missed, and asked the cook to fry it rare. He was just negotiating for a can of pears that had caught his eye when an old man came in and took the stool beside him, picking up the menu with a trembling hand.

"Give me a cup of coffee," he said to the waiter, "and" – he gazed at the bill of fare carefully – "and a roast-beef sandwich. No, just the coffee!" he corrected, and at that Bud gave him a look. He was a small man, shabbily dressed and with scraggly whiskers, and his nose was very red.

"Here," called Bud, coming to an instant conclusion, "give 'im his sandwich; I'll pay for it!"

"All right," answered the waiter, who was no other than Sunny Jim, the proprietor, and, whisking up a sandwich from the sideboard, he set it before the old man, who glanced at him in silence. For a fraction of a second he regarded the sandwich apathetically; then, with the aid of his coffee, he made way with it and slipped down off his stool.

"Say," observed the proprietor, as Bud was paying his bill, "do you know who that oldtimer was?"

"What oldtimer?" inquired Bud, who had forgotten his brusque benefaction.

"Why, that old feller that you treated to the sandwich."

"Oh – him! Some old drunk around town?" hazarded Bud.

"Well, he's that, too," conceded Sunny Jim, with a smile. "But lemme tell you, pardner, if you had half the rocks that old boy's got you wouldn't need to punch any more cows. That's Henry Kruger, the man that just sold the Cross-Cut Mine for fifty thousand cash, and he's got more besides."

"Huh!" grunted Bud, "he sure don't look it! Say, why didn't you put me wise? Now I've got to hunt him up and apologize."

"Oh, that's all right," assured the proprietor; "he won't take any offense. That's just like Old Henry – he's kinder queer that way."

"Well, I'll go and see him, anyway," said Bud. "He might think I was butting in."

And then, going about his duty with philosophical calm, he ambled off, stiff-legged, down the street.

II

It was not difficult to find Henry Kruger in Gadsden. The barkeepers, those efficient purveyors of information and drinks, knew him as they knew their thumbs, and a casual round of the saloons soon located him in the back room of the Waldorf.

"Say," began Bud, walking bluffly up to him, "the proprietor of that restaurant back there tells me I made a mistake when I insisted on paying for your meal. I just wanted to let you know – "

"Oh, that's all right, young man," returned Old Henry, looking up with a humorous smile; "we all of us make our mistakes. I knowed you didn't mean no offense and so I never took none. Fact is, I liked you all the better for it. This country is getting settled up with a class of people that never give a nickel to nobody. You paid for that meal like it was nothing, and never so much as looked at me. Sit down, sit down – I want to talk to you!"

They sat down by the stove and fell into a friendly conversation in which nothing more was said of the late inadvertence, but when Bud rose to go the old man beckoned him back.

"Hold on," he protested; "don't go off mad. I want to have a talk with you on business. You seem to be a pretty good young fellow – maybe we can make some dicker. What are you looking for in these parts?"

"Well," responded Bud, "some kind of a leasing proposition, I reckon. Me and my pardner jest come in from Mexico, over near the Chihuahua line, and we don't hardly know what we do want yet."

"Yes, I've noticed that pardner of yours," remarked Henry Kruger dryly. "He's a great talker. I was listening to you boys out on the street there, having nothing else to do much, and being kinder on the lookout for a man, anyway, and it struck me I liked your line of talk best."

"You're easy satisfied, then," observed Bud, with a grin. "I never said a word hardly."

"That's it," returned Kruger significantly; "this job I've got *calls* for a man like that."

"Well, Phil's all right," spoke up Bud, with sudden warmth. "We been pardners for two years now and he never give nothing away yet! He talks, but he don't forget himself. And the way he can palaver them Mexicans is a wonder."

"Very likely, very likely," agreed Kruger, and, then he sat a while in silence.

"We got a few thousand dollars with us, too," volunteered Bud at last. "I'm a good worker, if that's what you want – and Phil, he's a mining engineer."

"Um-m," grunted Kruger, tugging at his beard, but he did not come out with his proposal.

"I tell you," he said at last. "I'm not doing much talking about this proposition of mine. It's a big thing, and somebody might beat me to it. You know who I am, I guess. I've pulled off some of the biggest deals in this country for a poor man, and I don't make many mistakes – not about mineral, anyway. And when I tell you that this is rich – you're talking with a man that knows."

He fixed his shrewd, blue eyes on the young man's open countenance and waited for him to speak.

"That's right," he continued, as Bud finally nodded non-committally; "she's sure rich. I've had an eye on this proposition for years – just waiting for the right time to come. And now it's come! All I need is the man. It ain't a dangerous undertaking – leastwise I don't think it is – but I got to have somebody I can trust. I'm willing to pay you good wages, or I'll let you in on the deal – but you'll have to go down into Mexico."

"Nothin' doing!" responded Bud with instant decision. "If it's in Arizona I'll talk to you, but no more Mexico for me. I've got something pretty good down there myself, as far as that goes."

"What's the matter?" inquired Kruger, set back by the abrupt refusal. "Scared?"

"Yes, I'm scared," admitted Bud, and he challenged the old man with his eyes.

"Must have had a little trouble, then?"

"Well, you might call it that," agreed Bud. "We been on the dodge for a month. A bunch of *revoltosos* tried to get our treasure, and when we skipped out on 'em they tried to get us."

"Well," continued Kruger, "this proposition of mine is different. You was over in the Sierra Madres, where the natives are bad. These Sonora Mexicans ain't like them Chihuahua fellers – they're Americanized. I'll tell you, if it wasn't that the people would know me I'd go down after this mine myself. The country's perfectly quiet. There's lots of Americans down there yet, and they don't even know there *is* a revolution. It ain't far from the railroad, you see, and that makes a lot of difference."

He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper as he revealed the approximate locality of his bonanza, but Bud remained unimpressed.

"Yes," he said, "*we* was near a railroad – the Northwestern – and seemed like them red-flaggers did nothing else but burn bridges and ditch supply trains. When they finally whipped 'em off the whole bunch took to the hills. That's where we got it again."

"Well," argued Kruger, "this railroad of ours is all right, and they run a train over it every day. The concentrator at Fortuna" – he lowered his voice again – "hasn't been shut down a day, and you'll be within fifteen miles of that town. No," he whispered; "I could get a hundred Americans to go in on this to-morrow, as far's the revolution's concerned. It ain't dangerous, but I want somebody I can trust."

"Nope," pronounced Bud, rising ponderously to his feet; "if it was this side the line I'd stay with you till the hair slipped, on anything, but –"

"Well, let's talk it over again some time," urged Kruger, following him along out. "It ain't often I git took with a young feller the way I was with you, and I believe we can make it yet. Where are you staying in town?"

"Up at the Cochise," said Bud. "Come on with me – I told my pardner I'd meet him there."

They turned up the broad main street and passed in through the polished stone portals of the Cochise, a hotel so spacious in its interior and so richly appointed in its furnishings that a New Yorker, waking up there, might easily imagine himself on Fifth Avenue.

It was hardly a place to be looked for in the West, and as Bud led the way across the echoing lobby to a pair of stuffed chairs he had a vague feeling of being in church. Stained-glass windows above the winding stairways let in a soft light, and on the towering pillars of marble were emblazoned prickly-pears as an emblem of the West. From the darkened balconies above half-seen women looked down curiously as they entered, and in the broad lobby below were gathered the prosperous citizens of the land.

There were cattlemen, still wearing their boots and overalls, the better to attend to their shipping; mining men, just as they had come from the hills; and others more elegantly dressed – but they all had a nod for Henry Kruger. He was a man of mark, as Bud could see in a minute; but if he had other business with those who hailed him he let it pass and took out a rank brier pipe, which he puffed while Bud smoked a cigarette.

They were sitting together in a friendly silence when Phil came out of the dining-room, but as he drew near the old man nodded to Bud and went over to speak to the clerk.

"Who was that oldtimer you were talking to?" inquired Phil, as he sank down in the vacant chair. "Looks like the-morning-after with him, don't it?"

"Um," grunted Bud; "reckon it is. Name's Kruger."

"What – the mining man?"

"That's right."

"Well," exclaimed Phil, "what in the world was he talking to you about?"

"Oh, some kind of a mining deal," grumbled Bud. "Wanted me to go down into Mexico!"

"What'd you tell him?" challenged the little man, sitting up suddenly in his chair. "Say, that old boy's got rocks!"

"He can keep 'em for all of me," observed Bud comfortably. "You know what I think about Mexico."

"Sure; but what was his proposition? What did he want you to do?"

"Search me! He was mighty mysterious about it. Said he wanted a man he could trust."

"Well, holy Moses, Bud!" cried Phil, "wake up! Didn't you get his proposition?"

"No, he wasn't talking about it. Said it was a good thing and he'd pay me well, or let me in on the deal; but when he hollered Mexico I quit. I've got a plenty."

"Yes, but – " the little man choked and could say no more. "Well, you're one jim dandy business man, Bud Hooker!" he burst out at last. "You'd let – "

"Well, what's the matter?" demanded Hooker defiantly. "Do *you* want to go back into Mexico? Nor me, neither! What you kicking about?"

"You might have led him on and got the scheme, anyway. Maybe there's a million in it. Come on, let's go over and talk to him. I'd take a chance, if it was good enough."

"Aw, don't be a fool, Phil," urged the cowboy plaintively. "We've got no call to hear his scheme unless we want to go in on it. Leave him alone and he'll do something for us on this side. Oh, cripes! what's the matter with you?"

He heaved himself reluctantly up out of his chair and moved over to where Kruger was sitting.

"Mr. Kruger," he said, as the old man turned to meet him, "I'll make you acquainted with Mr. De Lancey, my pardner. My name's Hooker."

"Glad to know you, Hooker," responded Kruger, shaking him by the hand. "How'do, Mr. De Lancey."

He gave Phil a rather crusty nod as he spoke, but De Lancey was dragging up another chair and failed to notice.

"Mr. Hooker was telling me about some proposition you had, to go down into Mexico," he began, drawing up closer while the old man watched him from under his eyebrows. "That's one tough country to do business in right now, but at the same time – "

"The country's perfectly quiet," put in Kruger – "perfectly quiet."

"Well, maybe so," qualified De Lancey; "but when it comes to getting in supplies – "

"Not a bit of trouble in the world," said the old man crabbedly. "Not a bit."

"Well," came back De Lancey, "what's the matter, then? What is the proposition, anyway?"

Henry Kruger blinked and eyed him intently.

"I've stated the proposition to Hooker," he said, "and he refused it. That's enough, ain't it?"

De Lancey laughed and turned away.

"Well, yes, I guess it is." Then, in passing, he said to Bud: "Go ahead and talk to him."

He walked away, lighting a cigarette and smiling good-naturedly, and the oldtimer turned to Bud.

"That's a smart man you've got for a pardner," he remarked. "A smart man. You want to look out," he added, "or he'll get away with you."

"Nope," said Bud. "You don't know him like I do. He's straight as a die."

"A man can be straight and still get away with you," observed the veteran shrewdly. "Yes, indeed." He paused to let this bit of wisdom sink in, and then he spoke again.

"You better quit – while you're lucky," he suggested. "You quit and come with me," he urged, "and if we strike it, I'll make you a rich man. I don't need your pardner on this deal. I need just one man that can keep his head shut. Listen now; I'll tell you what it is.

"I know where there's a lost mine down in Mexico. If I'd tell you the name you'd know it in a minute, and it's free gold, too. Now there's a fellow that had that land located for ten years, but he couldn't find the lead. D'ye see? And when this second revolution came on he let it go – he neglected to pay his mining taxes and let it go back to the government. And now all I want is a quiet man to slip in and denounce that land and open up the lead. Here, look at this!"

He went down into his pocket and brought out a buckskin sack, from which he handed over a piece of well-worn quartz.

"That's the rock," he said. "She runs four hundred dollars to the ton, and the ledge is eight inches wide between the walls. Nice ore, eh? And she lays between shale and porphyry."

His eyes sparkled as he carefully replaced the specimen, and then he looked up at Bud.

"I'll let you in on that," he said, "half and half – or I'll pay two hundred dollars a month and a bonus. You alone. Now how about it?"

For a moment Hooker looked at him as if to read his thoughts, then he shook his head and exhaled his smoke regretfully.

"Nope," he said. "Me and Phil are pardners. We work together."

"I'll give you three hundred!" cried Kruger, half rising in his chair.

"Nope," grunted Bud, "we're pardners."

"Huh!" snorted the mining man, and flung away in disgust. But as he neared the door a new thought struck him and he came as quickly back.

"You can do what you please about your pardner," he said. "I'm talking to *you*. Now – will you think about it?"

"Sure!" returned Hooker.

"Well, then," snapped Kruger, "meet me at the Waldorf in an hour!"

III

On the untrammelled frontier, where most men are willing to pass for what they are without keeping up any "front," much of the private business, as well as the general devilment, is transacted in the back rooms of saloons. The Waldorf was nicely furnished in this regard.

After a drink at the bar, in which De Lancey and Hooker joined, Henry Kruger led the way casually to the rear, and in a few moments they were safely closeted.

"Now," began Kruger, as he took a seat by the table and faced them with snapping eyes, "the first thing I want to make plain to you gentlemen is, if I make any deal to-day it's to be with Mr. Hooker. If you boys are pardners you can talk it over together, but I deal with one man, and that's Hooker.

"All right?" he inquired, glancing at De Lancey, and that young man nodded indulgently.

"Very well, then," resumed Kruger, "now to get down to business. This mine that I'm talking about is located down here in Sonora within three hours' ride of a big American camp. It isn't any old Spanish mine, or lost *padre* layout; it's a well-defined ledge running three or four hundred dollars to the ton – and I know right where it is, too.

"What I want to do is to establish the title to it now, while this revolution is going on, and make a bonanza out of it afterward. Of course, if you boys don't want to go back into Mexico, that settles it; but if you do go, and I let you in on the deal, you've got to see it through or I'll lose the whole thing. So make up your minds, and if you say you'll go, I want you to stick to it!"

"We'll go, all right," spoke up De Lancey, "if it's rich enough."

"How about you?" inquired Kruger, turning impatiently on Bud. "Will you go?"

"Yes, I'll go," answered Bud sullenly. "But I ain't stuck on the job," he added. "Jest about get it opened up when a bunch of rebels will jump in and take everything we've got."

"Well, you get a title to it and pay your taxes and you can come out then," conceded Henry Kruger.

"No," grumbled Hooker, "if I go I'll stay with it." He glanced at his pardner at this, but he, for one, did not seem to be worried.

"I'll try anything – once!" he observed with a sprightly air, and Bud grinned sardonically at the well-worn phrase.

"Well," said Kruger, gazing inquiringly from one to the other, "is it a go? Will you shake hands on it?"

"What's the proposition?" broke in De Lancey eagerly.

"The deal is between me and Hooker," corrected Kruger. "I'll give him three hundred a month, or an equal share in the mine, expenses to be shared between us."

"Make it equal shares," said Hooker, holding out his hand, "and I'll give half of mine to Phil."

"All right, my boy!" cried the old man, suddenly clapping him on the shoulder, "I'll go you – and you'll never regret it," he added significantly. Then, throwing off the air of guarded secrecy which had characterized his actions so far, he sat down and began to talk.

"Boys," he said, "I'm feeling lucky to-day or I'd never have closed this deal. I'm letting you in on one of the biggest things that's ever been found in Sonora. Just to show you how good it is, here's my smelter receipts for eight hundred pounds of picked ore – one thousand and twenty-two dollars! That's the first and last ore that's ever been shipped from the old Eagle Tail. I dug it out myself, and sacked it and shipped it; and then some of them crooked Mexican officials tried to beat me out of my title and I blowed up the whole works with dynamite!

"Yes, sir, clean as a whistle! I had my powder stored away in the drift, and the minute I found out I was euchred I laid a fuse to it and brought the whole mountain down. That was ten years ago, and old Aragon and the *agente mineral* have had the land located ever since.

"I bet they've spent five thousand pesos trying to find that lead, but being nothing but a bunch of ignorant Mexicans, of course they never found nothing. Then Francisco Madero comes in and fires the *agente mineral* off his job and old Aragon lets the land revert for taxes. I've got a Mexican that keeps me posted, and ever since he sent me word that the title had lapsed I've been crazy to relocate that claim.

"Well, now, that don't look so bad, does it?" he asked, beaming paternally at Bud. "There ain't a man in town that wouldn't have jumped at the chance, if I was where I could talk about it, but that's just what I couldn't do. I had to find some stranger that wouldn't sense what mine I was talking about and then git him to go in on it blind.

"Now here's the way I'm fixed, boys," he explained, brushing out his unkempt beard and smiling craftily. "When I dynamited the Eagle Tail it was mine by rights, but Cipriano Aragon – he's the big Mexican down at old Fortuna – and Morales, the mineral agent, had buncoed me out of the title.

"So, according to law, I blowed up their mine, and if I ever showed up down there I reckon they'd throw me into jail. And if at any time they find out that you're working for me, why, we're ditched – that's all! They'll put you out of business. So, after we've made our agreement and I've told you what to do, I don't want to hear a word out of you – I don't want you to come near me, nor even write me a letter – just go ahead the best you can until you win out or go broke.

"It ain't a hard proposition," he continued, "if you keep your mouth shut, but if they tumble, it'll be a fight to a finish. I'm not saying this for you, Hooker, because I know you're safe; I'm saying it for your pardner here. You talk too much, Mr. De Lancey," he chided, eying him with sudden severity. "I'm afraid of ye!"

"All right," broke in Hooker good-naturedly, "I reckon we understand. Now go ahead and tell us where this mine is and who there is down there to look out for."

"The man to look out for," answered Kruger with venom, "is Cipriano Aragon. He's the man that bilked me out of the mine once, and he'll do it again if he can. When I went down there – it was ten years and more ago – I wasn't onto those Spanish ways of his, and he was so dog-goned polite and friendly I thought I could trust him anywhere.

"He owns a big ranch and mescal still, runs cattle, works a few placers, sends out pack-trains, and has every Mexican and Indian in the country in debt to him through his store, so if he happens to want any rough work done there's always somebody to do it.

"Well, just to show you how he did me, I got to nosing round those old Spanish workings east of Fortuna and finally I run across the ledge that I'm telling you about, not far from an abandoned shaft. But the Mexican mining laws are different from ours, and an American has lots of trouble anyway, so I made a trade with old Aragon that he should locate the claim for me under a power of attorney. Didn't know him then like I do now. The papers had to be sent to Moctesuma and Hermosillo, and to the City of Mexico and back, and while I was waiting around I dug in on this lead and opened up the prettiest vein of quartz you ever saw in your life. Here's a sample of it, and it's sure rich."

He handed De Lancey the familiar piece of quartz and proceeded with his story.

"That ore looked so good to me that I couldn't wait – I shipped it before I got my title. And right there I made my mistake. When Aragon saw the gold in that rock he just quietly recorded the concession in his own name and told me to go to blazes. That's the greaser of it! So I blew the whole mine up and hit for the border. That's the Dutch of it, I reckon," he added grimly. "Anyway, my old man was Dutch."

He paused, smiling over the memory of his misplaced credulity, and Hooker and De Lancey joined in a hearty laugh. From the town bum that he had first seemed this shabby little man had changed in their eyes until now he was a border Cræsus, the mere recital of whose adventures conjured up in their minds visions of gold and hidden treasure.

The rugged face of Bud Hooker, which had been set in grim lines from the first, relaxed as the tale proceeded and his honest eyes glowed with admiration as he heard the well-planned scheme.

As for De Lancey, he could hardly restrain his enthusiasm, and, drawn on by the contagion, Henry Kruger made maps and answered questions until every detail was settled.

After the location had been marked, and the lost tunnel charted from the corner monuments, he bade them remember it well – and destroyed every vestige of paper. Then, as a final admonition, he said:

"Now go in there quietly, boys – don't hurry. Prospect around a little and the Mexicans will all come to you and try to sell you lost mines. Cruz Mendez is the man you're looking for – he's honest, and he'll take you to the Eagle Tail. After that you can use your own judgment. So good-bye" – he took them by the hands – "and don't talk!"

He held up a warning finger as they parted, and Bud nodded briefly in reply. Silence was a habit with him, desert-bred, and he nodded his head for two.

IV

From the times of David and Jonathan down to the present day the world has been full of young men sworn to friendship and seeking adventure in pairs. "Pardners," they call them in the West, and though the word has not crept into the dictionary yet, it is as different from "partner" as a friend is from a business associate.

They travel together, these pardners of the West, and whether they be cowboys or "Cousin Jacks," the boss who fires one of them fires both of them, and they go share and share in everything.

Bud Hooker and Philip De Lancey had met by chance in El Paso when the revolution was just beginning to boil and the city was swarming with adventurers. The agents of the rebels were everywhere, urging Americans to join their cause. Military preferment, cash payments, and grants of land were the baits they used, but Hooker stood out from the first and took De Lancey with him. A Mexican promise did not pass current where he was born and they went to the mines instead.

Then the war broke out and, while fugitives streamed out of stricken Chihuahua, they finally struck out against the tide, fighting their way to a certain mine far back in the Sierra Madres, where they could dig the gold on shares.

Behind them the battle waged; Casas Grandes was taken and retaken; Juarez, Agua Negra, and Chihuahua fell; Don Porfirio, the Old Man of Mexico, went out and Madero took his place; and still they worked for their stake.

Then new arms and ammunition flowed in from across the border; Orozco and his rebel chiefs went out, and the breath of war fanned higher against the hills. At last the first broken band of rebels came straggling by, and, reading hate and envy in their lawless eyes, the Americans dug up their gold at sundown and rode all the night for their lives.

And now, welded together by all that toil and danger, they were pardners, cherishing no delusions as to each other's strength or weaknesses, but joined together for better or worse.

It was the last thing that either of them expected, but three days after they fled out of Mexico, and with all their money unspent, the hand of fate seized upon them and sent them back on another adventure.

It was early morning again, with crowds along the street, and as they ambled slowly along toward the line, the men on the corners stared at them. The bunch of cowboys gazed at Bud, who sported a new pair of high-heeled boots, and knew him by the way he rode; and the mining men looked searchingly at De Lancey, as if to guess the secret of his quest.

A squad of mounted troopers, riding out on border patrol, gazed after them questioningly, but Bud and Phil rode on soberly, leading their pack, and headed for Agua Negra across the line.

It was a grim place to look at, this border town of Agua Negra, for the war had swept it twice. A broad waste of level land lay between it and the prosperous American city, and across this swath, where the Mausers and machine guns had twice mowed, lay the huddle of low houses which marked the domain of Mexico.

Fussy little customs officials, lurking like spiders in their cooped-up guard-houses, rushed out as they crossed the deep trench and demanded their permit to bear arms. The moment they crossed the line the air seemed to be pervaded with Latin excitability and Indian jealousy, but De Lancey replied in florid Spanish, and before his polite assurances and fulsome compliments it was dissipated in a moment.

"Good! Pass on, *amigos*," cried the beady-eyed little *jefe*, pasting a label on their pack. "*Adios, señor*," he added, returning Phil's salute with a military flourish, and with a scornful glance at Bud he observed that the *gentleman* was *muy caballero*.

"Huh!" remarked Bud, as they rode on through the town, "we're in Mexico all right, all right. Talk with both hands and get busy with your eyebrows – and holy Joe, look at them *pelónes*!"

The *pelónes* referred to were a squad of Mexican Federal soldiers, so-called from their heads being shaved, and they were marching doggedly to and fro through the thorny mesquit-bushes in response to shouted orders from an officer. Being from Zacatecas, where the breed is short, they stood about as high as their guns; and their crumpled linen suits and flapping sandals detracted sadly from the soldierly effect.

Big and hulking, and swelling with the pride of his kind, Hooker looked them over slowly, and spoke his hidden thought.

"I wonder," he said, turning to Phil, "how many of them I could lick with one hand?"

"Well, they're nothing but a lot of petty convicts, anyway," answered De Lancey, "but here's some boys ahead that I'll bet could hold you, man for man, husky as you are, old fellow."

They were riding past a store, now serving as an improvised barracks, and romping about in the street were a pair of tall Yaqui Indians, each decorated with a cartridge-belt about his hips in token of his military service. Laughing and grabbing for holds, they frolicked like a couple of boys until finally they closed in a grapple that revealed a sudden and pantherlike strength.

And a group of others, sunning themselves against the wall, looked up at the Americans with eyes as fearless as mountain eagles.

"Yes, that's right," admitted Bud, returning their friendly greeting, "but we'll never have no trouble with them."

"Well, these *Nacionales* are not so bad," defended Phil, as they passed the State soldiers of Sonora on the street, "but they're just as friendly as the Yaquis."

"Sure," jeered Bud, "when they're sober! But you get a bunch of 'em drunk and ask 'em what they think of the Gringos! No, you got to show me – I've seen too much of 'em."

"You haven't seen as much of 'em as *I* have, yet," retorted De Lancey, quickly. "I've been all over the republic, except right here in Sonora, and I swear these Sonorans here look good to me. There's no use holding a grouch against them, Bud – they haven't done us any dirt."

"No, they never had no chance," grumbled Bud, gazing grimly to the south. "But wait till the hot weather comes and the *revoltosos* come out of their holes; wait till them Chihuahua greasers thaw out up in the Sierras and come down to get some fresh mounts. Well, I'll tell 'em one thing," he ended, reaching down to pat his horse, "they'll never get old Copper Bottom here – not unless they steal him at night. It's all right to be cheerful about this, Phil, and you keep right on being glad, but I got a low-down hunch that we're going to get in bad."

"Well, I've got just as good a hunch," came back De Lancey, "that we're going to make a killing."

"Yes, and speaking of killings," said Bud, "you don't want to overlook *that*."

He pointed at a group of dismantled adobe buildings standing out on the edge of the town and flanked by a segment of whitewashed wall all spattered and breached with bullet-holes.

"There's where these prize Mexicans of yours pulled off the biggest killing in Sonora. I was over here yesterday with that old prospector and he told me that that wall is the bull-ring. After the first big fight they gathered up three hundred and fifty men, more or less, and threwed 'em in a trench along by the wall – then they blowed it over on 'em with a few sticks of dynamite and let 'em pass for buried. No crosses or nothing. Excuse *me*, if they ever break loose like that – we might get planted with the rest!"

"By Jove, old top!" exclaimed De Lancey, laughing teasingly, "you've certainly got the blues to-day. Here, take something out of this bottle and see if it won't help."

He brought out a quart bottle from his saddle-bags and Bud drank, and shuddered at the bite of it.

"All right," he said, as he passed it back, "and while we're talking, what's the matter with cutting it out on booze for this trip?"

"What are we going to drink, then?" cried De Lancey in feigned alarm. "Water?"

"Well, something like that," admitted Bud. "Come on – what do you say? We might get lit up and tell something."

"Now lookee here, Bud," clamored Phil, who had had a few drinks already, "you don't mean to insinuate, do you? Next thing I know you'll be asking me to cut it out on the hay – might talk in my sleep, you know, and give the whole snap away!"

"No, you're a good boy when you're asleep, Phil," responded Bud, "but when you get about half shot it's different. Come on, now – I'll quit if you will. That's fair, ain't it?"

"What? No little toots around town? No serenading the *señoritas* and giving the *rurales* the hotfoot? Well, what's the use of living, Bud, if you can't have a little fun? Drinking don't make any difference, as long as we stick together. What's the use of swearing off – going on record in advance? We may find some fellow that we can't work any other way – we may have to go on a drunk with him in order to get his goat. But will you stick? That's the point!"

Bud glanced at him and grunted, and for a long time he rode on in silence. Before them lay a rolling plain, dipping by broad gulches and dwindling ridges to the lower levels of Old Mexico, and on the sky-line, thin and blue, stood the knifelike edges of the Fortunas miles away.

With desert-trained eyes he noted the landmarks, San Juan mountain to the right, Old Niggerhead to the left, and the feather-edge of mountains far below; and as he looked he stored it away in his mind in case he should come back on the run some night.

It was not a foreboding, but the training of his kind, to note the lay of the ground, and he planned just where he would ride to keep under cover if he ever made a dash for the line. But all the time his pardner was talking of friendship and of the necessity of their sticking together.

"I'll tell you, Bud," he said at last, his voice trembling with sentiment, "whether we win or lose, I won't have a single regret as long as I know we've been true to one another. You may know Texas and Arizona, Bud, but I know Old Mexico, the land of *mañana* and broken promises. I know the country, Bud – and the climate – and the women!"

"They play the devil with the best of us, Bud, these dark-eyed *señoritas*! That's what makes all the trouble down here between man and man, it's these women and their ways. They're not satisfied to win a man's heart – they want him to kill somebody to show that he really loves them. By Jove! they're a fickle lot, and nothing pleases 'em more than setting man against man, one pardner against another."

"We never had no trouble yet," observed Bud sententiously.

"No, but we're likely to," protested De Lancey. "Those Indian women up in the Sierras wouldn't turn anybody's head, but we're going down into the hot country now, where the girls are pretty, ta-ra, ta-ra, and we talk through the windows at midnight."

"Well, if you'll cut out the booze," said Hooker shortly, "you can have 'em all, for all of me."

"Sure, that's what you say, but wait till you see them! Oh, la, la, la!" – he kissed his fingers ecstatically – "I'll be glad to see 'em myself! But listen, Bud, here's the proposition: Let's take an oath right now, while we're starting out, that whatever comes up we'll always be true to each other. If one of us is wounded, the other stays with him; if he's in prison, he gets him out; if he's killed, he avenges his –"

"Say," broke in Bud, jostling him rudely as he reached into the saddle-bags, "let me carry that bottle for a while."

He took a big drink out of it to prevent De Lancey from getting it all and shoved it inside his overalls.

"All right, pardner," he continued, with a mocking smile, "anything you say. I never use oaths myself much, but anything to oblige."

"No, but I mean it, Bud!" cried De Lancey. "Here's the proposition now: Whatever happens, we stay with each other till this deal is finished; on all scratch cases we match money to see who's it; and if we tangle over some girl the best man wins and the other one stays away. We leave it to the girl which one wins. Will you shake hands on that?"

"Don't need to," responded Bud; "I'll do it anyway."

"Well, shake on it, then!" insisted De Lancey, holding out his hand.

"Oh, Sally!" burst out Bud, hanging his head in embarrassment, "what's the use of getting mushy?"

But a moment later he leaned over in his saddle and locked hands with a viselike grip.

"My old man told me not to make no such promises," he muttered, "but I'll do it, being's it's you."

V

The journey to Fortuna is a scant fifty miles by measure, but within those eighty kilometers there is a lapse of centuries in standards. As Bud and De Lancey rode out of battle-scarred Agua Negra they traveled a good road, well worn by the Mexican wood-wagons that hauled in mesquit from the hills. Then, as they left the town and the wood roads scattered, the highway changed by degrees to a broad trail, dug deep by the feet of pack-animals and marked but lightly with wheels. It followed along the railroad, cutting over hills and down through gulches, and by evening they were in the heart of Old Mexico.

Here were men in sandals and women barefooted; chickens tied up by the legs outside of brush *jacales*; long-nosed hogs, grunting fiercely as they skirmished for food; and half-naked children, staring like startled rabbits at the strangers.

The smell of garlic and fresh-roasting coffee was in the air as they drew into town for the night, and their room was an adobe chamber with tile floor and iron bars across the windows. Riding south the next day they met *vaqueros*, mounted on wiry mustangs, who saluted them gravely, taking no shame for their primitive wooden saddle-trees and pommels as broad as soup-plates.

As they left the broad plain and clambered up over the back of a mountain they passed Indian houses, brush-built and thatched with long, coarse grasses, and by the fires the women ground corn on stone *metates* as their ancestors had done before the fall. For in Mexico there are two peoples, the Spaniards and the natives, and the Indians still remember the days when they were free.

It was through such a land that Phil and Hooker rode on their gallant ponies, leading a pack-animal well loaded with supplies from the north, and as the people gazed from their miserable hovels and saw their outfit they wondered at their wealth.

But if they were moved to envy, the bulk of a heavy pistol, showing through the swell of each coat, discouraged them from going further; and the cold, searching look of the tall cowboy as he ambled past stayed in their memory long after the pleasant "*Adios!*" of De Lancey had been forgotten.

Americans were scarce in those days, and what few came by were riding to the north. How bold, then, must this big man be who rode in front – and certainly he had some great reward before him to risk such a horse among the *revoltosos!* So reasoned the simple-minded natives of the mountains, gazing in admiration at Copper Bottom, and for that look in their eyes Bud returned his forbidding stare.

There is something about a good horse that fascinates the average Mexican – perhaps because they breed the finest themselves and are in a position to judge – but Hooker had developed a romantic attachment for his trim little chestnut mount and he resented their wide-eyed gapings as a lover resents glances at his lady. This, and a frontier education, rendered him short-spoken and gruff with the *paisanos* and it was left to the cavalier De Lancey to do the courtesies of the road.

As the second day wore on they dipped down into a rocky cañon, with huge cliffs of red and yellow sandstone glowing in the slanting sun, and soon they broke out into a narrow valley, well wooded with sycamores and mesquits and giant hackberry-trees.

The shrill toots of a dummy engine came suddenly from down below and a mantle of black smoke rose majestically against the sky – then, at a turn of the trail, they topped the last hill and Fortuna lay before them.

In that one moment they were set back again fifty miles – clear back across the line – for Fortuna was American, from the power-house on the creek-bank to the mammoth concentrator on the hill.

All the buildings were of stone, square and uniform. First a central plaza, flanked with offices and warehouses; then behind them barracks and lodging-houses and trim cottages in orderly rows; and over across the cañon loomed the huge bulk of the mill and the concentrator with its aerial tramway and endless row of gliding buckets.

Only on the lower hills, where the rough country rock cropped up and nature was at its worst, only there did the real Mexico creep in and assert itself in a crude huddle of half-Indian huts; the dwellings of the care-free natives.

"Well, by Jove!" exclaimed De Lancey, surveying the scene with an appraising eye, "this doesn't look very much like Mexico – or a revolution, either!"

"No, it don't," admitted Bud; "everything running full blast, too. Look at that ore-train coming around the hill!"

"Gee, what a burg!" raved Phil. "Say, there's some class to this – what? If I mistake not, we'll be able to find a few congenial spirits here to help us spend our money. Talk about a company town! I'll bet you their barroom is full of Americans. There's the corral down below – let's ride by and leave our horses and see what's the price of drinks. They can't faze me, whatever it is – we doubled our money at the line."

Financially considered, they had done just that – for, for every American dollar in their pockets they could get two that were just as good, except for the picture on the side. This in itself was a great inducement for a ready spender and, finding good company at the Fortuna hotel bar, Phil bought five dollars' worth of drinks, threw down a five-dollar bill, and got back five dollars – Mex.

The proprietor, a large and jovial boniface, pulled off this fiscal miracle with the greatest good humor and then, having invited them to partake of a very exquisite mixture of his own invention, propped himself upon his elbows across the bar and inquired with an ingenuous smile:

"Well, which away are you boys traveling, if I may ask?"

"Oh, down below a ways," answered De Lancey, who always constituted himself the board of strategy. "Just rambling around a little – how's the country around here now?"

"Oh, quiet, quiet!" assured their host. "These Mexicans don't like the cold weather much – they would freeze, you know, if it was not for that *zarape* which they wind about them so!"

He made a motion as of a native wrapping his entire wardrobe about his neck and smiled, and De Lancey knew that he was no Mexican. And yet that soft "which away" of his betrayed a Spanish tongue.

"Ah, excuse me," he said, taking quick advantage of his guess, "but from the way you pronounce that word '*zarape*' I take it that you speak Spanish."

"No one better," replied the host, smiling pleasantly at being taken at his true worth, "since I was born in the city of Burgos, where they speak the true Castilian. It is a different language, believe me, from this bastard Mexican tongue. And do you speak Spanish also?" he inquired, falling back into the staccato of Castile.

"No, indeed!" protested De Lancey in a very creditable imitation; "nothing but a little Mexican, to get along with the natives. My friend and I are mining men, passing through the country, and we speak the best we can. How is this district here for work along our line?"

"None better!" cried the Spaniard, shaking his finger emphatically. "It is of the best, and, believe me, my friend, we should be glad to have you stop with us. The country down below is a little dangerous – not now, perhaps, but later, when the warm weather comes on.

"But in Fortuna – no! Here we are on the railroad; the camp is controlled by Americans; and because so many have left the country the Mexicans will sell their prospects cheap.

"Then again, if you develop a mine near-by, it will be very easy to sell it – and if you wish to work it, that is easy, too. I am only the proprietor of the hotel, but if you can use my poor services in any way I shall be very happy to please you. A room? One of the best! And if you stay a week or more I will give you the lowest rate."

They passed up the winding stairs and down a long corridor, at the end of which the proprietor showed them into a room, throwing open the outer doors and shutters to let them see the view from the window.

"Here is a little balcony," he said, stepping outside, "where you can sit and look down on the plaza. We have the band and music when the weather is fine, and you can watch the pretty girls from here. But you have been in Mexico – you know all that!" And he gave Phil a roguish dig.

"*Bien my frien'*, I am glad to meet you – " He held out his hand in welcome and De Lancey gave his in return. "My name," he continued, "is Juan de Dios Brachamonte y Escalon; but with these Americans that does not go, as you say, so in general they call me Don Juan.

"There is something about that name – I do not know – that makes the college boys laugh. Perhaps it is that poet, Byron, who wrote so scandalously about us Spaniards, but certainly he knew nothing of our language, for he rimes Don Juan with 'new one' and 'true one'! Still, I read part of that poem and it is, in places, very interesting – yes, *very* interesting – but 'Don Joo-an'! Hah!"

He threw up his hand in despair and De Lancey broke into a jolly laugh.

"Well, Don Juan," he cried, "I'm glad to meet you. My name is Philip De Lancey, and my pardner here is Mr. Hooker. Shake hands with him, Don Juan de Dios! But certainly a man so devoutly named could never descend to reading *much* of Don Joo-an!"

"Ah, no," protested Don Juan, rolling his dark eyes and smiling rakishly, "not moch – only the most in-teresting passages!"

He saluted and disappeared in a roar of laughter, and De Lancey turned triumphantly on his companion, a self-satisfied smile upon his lips.

"Aha!" he said; "you see? That's what five dollars' worth of booze will do in opening up the way. Here's our old friend Don Juan willing, nay, anxious, to help us all he can – he sees I'm a live wire and wants to keep me around. Pretty soon we'll get him feeling good and he'll tell us all he knows. Don't you never try to make me sign the pledge again, brother – a few shots just gets my intellect to working right and I'm crafty as a fox.

"Did you notice that *coup* I made – asking him if he was a Spaniard? There's nothing in the world makes a Spaniard so mad as to take him for a Mexican – on the other hand, nothing makes him your friend for life like recognizing him for a blue-blooded Castilian. Now maybe our old friend Don Juan has got a few drops of Moorish blood in his veins – to put it politely, but – " he raised his tenor voice and improvised —

"Jest because my hair is curly
Dat's no reason to call me 'Shine'!"

"No," agreed Bud, feeling cautiously of the walls, "and jest because you're happy is no reason for singing so loud, neither. These here partitions are made of inch boards, covered with paper – do you get that? Well, then, considering who's probably listening, it strikes me that Mr. Brachamonte is the real thing in Spanish gentlemen; and I've heard that all genuwine Spaniards have their hair curly, jest like a – huh?"

But De Lancey, made suddenly aware of his indiscretion, was making all kinds of exaggerated signs for silence, and Bud stopped with a slow, good-natured smile.

"S-s-st!" hissed De Lancey, touching his finger to his lips. "Don't say it – somebody might hear you!"

"All right," agreed Bud; "and don't you say it, either. I hate to knock, Phil," he added, "but sometimes I think the old man was right when he said you talk too much."

"Psst!" chided De Lancey, shaking his finger like a Mexican. Tiptoeing softly over to Bud, he whispered in his ear: "S-s-st, I can hear the feller in the next room – shaving himself!"

Laughing heartily at this joke, they went downstairs for supper.

VI

If the Eagle Tail mine had been located in Arizona – or even farther down in Old Mexico – the method of jumping the claim would have been delightfully simple.

The title had lapsed, and the land had reverted to the government. All it needed in Arizona was a new set of monuments, a location notice at the discovery shaft, a pick and shovel thrown into the hole, and a few legal formalities.

But in Mexico it is different. Not that the legal formalities are lacking – far from it – but the whole theory of mines and mining is different. In Mexico a mining title is, in a way, a lease, a concession from the general government giving the *concessionaire* the right to work a certain piece of ground and to hold it as long as he pays a mining tax of three dollars an acre per year.

But no final papers or patents are ever issued, the possession of the surface of the ground does not go with the right to mine beneath it, and in certain parts of Mexico no foreigner can hold title to either mines or land.

A prohibited or frontier zone, eighty kilometers in width, lies along the international boundary line, and in that neutral zone no foreigner can denounce a mining claim and no foreign corporation can acquire a title to one. The Eagle Tail was just inside the zone.

But – there is always a "but" when you go to a good lawyer – while for purposes of war and national safety foreigners are not allowed to hold land along the line, they are at perfect liberty to hold stock in Mexican corporations owning property within the prohibited zone; and – here is where the graft comes in – they may even hold title in their own name if they first obtain express permission from the chief executive of the republic.

Not having any drag with the chief executive, and not caring to risk their title to the whims of succeeding administrations, Hooker and De Lancey, upon the advice of a mining lawyer in Gadsden, had organized themselves into the Eagle Tail Mining Company, under the laws of the republic of Mexico, with headquarters at Agua Negra. It was their plan to get some Mexican to locate the mine for them and then, for a consideration, transfer it to the company.

The one weak spot in this scheme was the Mexican. By trusting Aragon, Henry Kruger had not only lost title to his mine, but he had been outlawed from the republic. And now he had bestowed upon Hooker and De Lancey the task of finding an honest Mexican, and keeping him honest until he made the transfer.

While the papers were being made out there might be a great many temptations placed before that Mexican – either to keep the property for himself or to hold out for a bigger reward than had been specified. After his experience with the aristocratic Don Cipriano Aragon y Tres Palacios, Kruger was in favor of taking a chance on the lower classes. He had therefore recommended to them one Cruz Mendez, a wood vender whom he had known and befriended, as the man to play the part.

Cruz Mendez, according to Kruger, was hardworking, sober, and honest – for a Mexican. He was also simple-minded and easy to handle, and was the particular man who had sent word that the Eagle Tail had at last been abandoned. And also he was easy to pick out, being a little, one-eyed man and going by the name of "El Tuerto."

So, in pursuance of their policy of playing a waiting game, Hooker and De Lancey hung around the hotel for several days, listening to the gossip of Don Juan de Dios and watching for one-eyed men with prospects to sell.

In Sonora he is a poor and unimaginative man indeed who has not at least one lost mine or "prospecto" to sell; and prosperous-looking strangers, riding through the country, are often beckoned aside by half-naked *paisanos* eager to show them the gold mines of the Spanish *padres* for a hundred dollars Mex.

It was only a matter of time, they thought, until Cruz Mendez would hunt them up and try to sell them the Eagle Tail; and it was their intention reluctantly to close the bargain with him, for a specified sum, and then stake him to the denouncement fees and gain possession of the mine.

As this was a commonplace in the district – no Mexican having capital enough to work a claim and no American having the right to locate one – it was a very natural and inconspicuous way of jumping Señor Aragon y Tres Palacios's abandoned claim. If they discovered the lead immediately afterward it would pass for a case of fool's luck, or at least so they hoped, and, riding out a little each day and sitting on the hotel porch with Don Juan the rest of the time, they waited until patience seemed no longer a virtue.

"Don Juan," said De Lancey, taking up the probe at last, "I had a Mexican working for me when we were over in the Sierras – one of your real, old-time workers that had never been spoiled by an education – and he was always talking about 'La Fortuna,' I guess this was the place he meant, but it doesn't look like it – according to him it was a Mexican town. Maybe he's around here now – his name was Mendez."

"José Maria Mendez?" inquired Don Juan, who was a living directory of the place. "Ricardo? Pancho? Cruz?"

"Cruz!" cried De Lancey. "That was it!"

"He lives down the river a couple of miles," said Don Juan, "down at Old Fortuna."

"Old Fortuna!" repeated Phil. "I didn't know there was such a place."

"Why, my gracious!" exclaimed Don Juan de Dios, scandalized by such ignorance. "Do you mean to say you have been here three days and never heard about Fortuna Vieja? Why, *this* isn't Fortuna! This is an American mining camp – the old town is down below.

"That's where this man Aragon, the big Mexican of the country, has his ranch and store. Spanish? Him? No, indeed —*mitad*! He is half Spanish and half Yaqui Indian, but his wife is a pure Spaniard – one of the few in the country. Her father was from Madrid and she is a Villanueva – a very beautiful woman in her day, with golden hair and the presence of a queen!

"No, *not* Irish! My goodness, you Americans think that everybody with red hair is Irish! Why, the most beautiful women in Madrid have chestnut hair as soft as the fur of a dormouse. It is the old Castilian hair, and they are proud of it. The Señora Aragon married beneath her station – it was in the City of Mexico, and she did not know that he was an Indian – but she is a very nice lady for all that and never omits to bow to me when she comes up to take the train. I remember one time – "

"Does Cruz Mendez work for him?" interjected De Lancey desperately.

"No, indeed!" answered Don Juan patiently. "He packs in wood from the hills – but as I was saying – " and from that he went on to tell of the unfailing courtesy of the Señora Aragon to a gentleman whom, whatever his present station might be, she recognized as a member of one of the oldest families in Castile.

De Lancey did not press his inquiries any further, but the next morning, instead of riding back into the hills, he and Bud turned their faces down the cañon to seek out the elusive Mendez. They had, of course, been acting a part for Don Juan, since Kruger had described Old Fortuna and the Señor Aragon with great minuteness.

And now, in the guise of innocent strangers, they rode on down the river, past the concentrator with its multiple tanks, its gliding tramway and mountains of tailings, through the village of Indian houses stuck like dugouts against the barren hill – then along a river-bed that oozed with slickings until they came in sight of the town.

La Fortuna was an old town, yet not so old as its name, since two Fortunas before it had been washed away by cloudbursts and replaced by newer dwellings. The settlement itself was some four hundred years old, dating back to the days of the Spanish *conquistadores*, when it yielded up many mule-loads of gold.

The present town was built a little up from the river in the lee of a great ridge of rocks thrust down from the hill and well calculated to turn aside a glut of waters. It was a comfortable huddle of whitewashed adobe buildings set on both sides of a narrow and irregular road – the great trail that led down to the hot country – and was worn deep by the pack-trains of centuries.

On the lower side was the ample store and *cantina* of Don Cipriano, where the thirsty *arrieros* could get a drink and buy a *panoche* of sugar without getting down from their mounts. Behind the store were the pole corrals and adobe warehouses and the quarters for the peons, and across the road was the *mescal* still where, in huge copper retort and worm, the fiery liquor was distilled from the sugar-laden heads of Yuccas.

This was the town, but the most important building – set back in the shade of mighty cottonwoods and pleasantly aloof from the road – was the residence of Señor Aragon. It was this, in fact, which held the undivided attention of De Lancey as they rode quietly through the village, for he had become accustomed from a long experience in the tropics to look for something elusive, graceful, and feminine in houses set back in a garden. Nothing stirred, however, and, having good reason to avoid Don Cipriano, they jogged steadily on their way.

"Some house!" observed Phil, with a last, hopeful look over his shoulder.

"Uh," assented Bud, as they came to a fork in the road. "Say," he continued, "let's turn off on this trail. Lot of burro tracks going out – expect it's our friend, Mr. Mendez."

"All right," said De Lancey absently. "Wonder where old Aragon keeps that bee-utiful daughter of his – the one Don Joo-an was telling about. Have to stop on the way back and sample the old man's *mescal*."

"Nothing doing!" countered Hooker instantly. "Now you heard what I told you – there's two things you leave alone for sixty days – booze and women. After we cinch our title you can get as gay as you please."

"Oo-ee!" piped Phil, "hear the boy talk!" But he said no more of wine and women, for he knew how they do complicate life.

They rode to the east now, following the long, flat footprints of the burros, and by all the landmarks Bud saw that they were heading straight for the old Eagle Tail mine. At Old Fortuna the river turns west and at the same time four cañons come in from the east and south. Of these they had taken the first to the north and it was leading them past all the old workings that Kruger had spoken about. In fact, they were almost at the mine when Hooker swung down suddenly from his horse and motioned Phil to follow.

"There's some burros coming," he said, glancing back significantly; and when the pack-train came by, each animal piled high with broken wood, the two Americans were busily tapping away at a section of country rock. A man and a boy followed behind the animals, gazing with wonder at the strangers, and as Phil bade them a pleasant "*Buenos días!*" they came to a halt and stared at their industry in silence. In the interval Phil was pleased to note that the old man had only one eye.

"*Que busca?*" the one-eyed one finally inquired. "What are you looking for?"

And when Phil oracularly answered, "Gold!" the old man made a motion to the boy to go on and sat down on a neighboring rock.

"Do you want to buy a prospect?" he asked, and Bud glanced up at him grimly.

"We find our own prospects," answered Phil.

"But I know of a very rich prospect," protested Mendez; "*very rich!*" He shrilled his voice to express how rich it was.

"Yes?" observed Phil. "Then why don't you dig the gold out? But as for us, we find our own mines. That is our business."

"*Seguro!*" nodded Mendez, glancing at their outfit approvingly. "But I am a poor man – very poor – I cannot denounce the mine. So I wait for some rich American to come and buy it. I have a friend – a very rich man – in Gadsden, but he will not come; so I will sell it to you."

"Did you get that, Bud?" jested Phil in English. "The old man here thinks we're rich Americans and he wants to sell us a mine."

Bud laughed silently at this, and Mr. Mendez, his hopes somewhat blasted by their levity, began to boast of his find, giving the history of the Eagle Tail with much circumstantiality and explaining that it was a lost *padre* mine.

"Sure," observed Phil, going back to his horse and picking up the bridle, "that's what they all say. They're *all* lost *padre* mines, and you can see them from the door of the church. Come on, Bud, let's go!"

"And so you could this," cried Mendez, running along after them as they rode slowly up the cañon, "from the old church that was washed away by the flood! This is the very mine where the *padres* dug out all their gold! Are you going up this way? Come, then, and I will show you – the very place, except that the *Americano* ruined it with a blast!"

He tagged along after them, wheedling and protesting while they bantered him about his mine, until they finally came to the place – the ruins of the old Eagle Tail.

It lay spraddled out along the hillside, a series of gopher-holes, dumps, and abandoned workings, looking more like a badly managed stone-quarry than a relic of *padre* days. Kruger's magazine of giant powder exploded in one big blast, had destroyed all traces of his mine, besides starting an avalanche of loose shale that had poured down and filled the pocket.

Added to this, Aragon and his men had rooted around in the *débris* in search of the vein, and the story of their inefficient work was told by great piles of loose rock stacked up beside caved-in trenches and a series of timid tunnels driven into the neighboring ridges.

Under the circumstances it would certainly call for a mining engineer to locate the lost lead, and De Lancey looked it over thoughtfully as he began to figure on the work to be done. Undoubtedly there was a mine there – and the remains of an old Spanish smelter down the creek showed that the ground had once been very rich – but if Kruger had not told him in advance he would have passed up the job in a minute.

"Well," he said, turning coldly upon the fawning Mendez, who was all curves in his desire to please, "where is your prospecto?"

"*Aquí, señor!*" replied the Mexican, pointing to the disrupted rock-slide. "Here it was that the *Americano* Crooka had his mine – rich with gold —*much* gold!"

He shrilled his voice emphatically, and De Lancey shrilled his in reply.

"Here?" he exclaimed, gazing blankly at the hillside, and then he broke into a laugh. "All right, my friend," he said, giving Bud a facetious wink; "how much do you want for this prospecto?"

"Four hundred dollars," answered Mendez in a tone at once hopeful and apologetic. "It is very rich. Señor Crooka shipped some ore that was full of gold. I packed it out for him on my burros; but, I am sorry, I have no piece of it."

"Yes," responded De Lancey, "I am sorry, too. So, of course, we cannot buy the prospecto since you have no ore to show; but I am glad for this, Señor Mendez," he continued with a kindly smile; "it shows that you are an honest man, or you would have stolen a piece of ore from the sacks. So show us now where the gold was found, the nearest that you can remember, and perhaps, if we think we can find it, we will pay you to denounce the claim for us."

At this the one good eye of Cruz Mendez lighted up with a great hope and, skipping lightly over the rock-piles with his sandaled feet, he ran to a certain spot, locating it by looking across the cañon and up and down the creek.

"Here, *señores*," he pronounced, "is where the mouth of the old tunnel came out. Standing inside it I could see that tree over there, and looking down the river I could just see the smelter around the point. So, then, the gold must be in there." He pointed toward the hill.

"Surely," said De Lancey; "but where?"

The old Mexican shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly.

"I do not know, *señor*," he answered; "but if you wish to dig I will denounce the claim for you."

"For how much?" inquired De Lancey guardedly.

"For one hundred dollars," answered Mendez, and to his delight the American seemed to be considering it. He walked back and forth across the slide, picking up rocks and looking at them, dropping down into the futile trenches of Aragon, and frowning with studious thought. His pardner, however, sat listlessly on a boulder and tested the action of his six-shooter.

"Listen, my friend," said De Lancey, coming back and poising his finger impressively. "If I should find the ledge the one hundred dollars would be nothing to me, *sabe*? And if I should spend all my money for nothing it would be but one hundred dollars more. But listen! I have known some false Mexicans who, when an American paid them to denounce a mine, took advantage of his kindness and refused to give it over. Or, if it turned out to be rich, they pulled a long face and claimed that they ought to be paid more. Now if – "

"Ah, no, no, *señor*!" clamored Mendez, holding up his hand in protest. "I am a poor man, but I am honest. Only give me the hundred dollars – "

"Not a dollar do you get!" cried De Lancey sternly; "not a dollar – until you turn over the concession to the mine. And if you play us false – " he paused impressively – "*cuidado, hombre*– look out!"

Once more Cruz Mendez protested his honesty and his fidelity to any trust, but De Lancey silenced him impatiently.

"Enough, *hombre*!" he said. "Words are nothing to us. Do you see my friend over there?" He pointed to Bud who, huge and dominating against the sky-line, sat toying with his pistol. "*Buen!*" He is a cowboy, *sabe*? A Texan! You know the *Tejanos*, eh? They do not like Mexicans. But my friend there, he likes Mexicans – when they are honest. If not – no! Hey, Bud," he called in English, "what would you do to this fellow if he beat us out of the mine?"

Bud turned upon them with a slow, good-natured smile.

"Oh, nothing much," he answered, putting up his gun; and the deep rumble of his voice struck fear into the old man's heart.

Phil laughed and looked grimly at Mendez while he delivered his ultimatum.

"Very well, my friend," he said. "We will stay and look at this mine. If we think it is good we will take you to the mining agent and get a permit to dig. For sixty days we will dig, and if we find nothing we will pay you fifty dollars, anyway. If we find the ledge we will give you a hundred dollars. All right?"

"*Sí, señor – sí, señor!*" cried Mendez, "one hundred dollars!"

"When you give us the papers!" warned Phil. "But remember – be careful! The Americans do not like men who talk. And come to the hotel at Fortuna to-morrow – then we will let you know."

"And you will buy the mine?" begged Mendez, backing off with his hat in his hand.

"Perhaps," answered De Lancey. "We will tell you to-morrow."

"*Buen!*" bowed Mendez. "And many thanks!"

"It is nothing," replied De Lancey politely, and then with a crooked smile he gazed after the old man as he went hurrying off down the cañon.

"Well," he observed, "I guess we've got Mr. Mendez started just about right – what? Now if we can keep him without the price of a drink until we get our papers we stand a chance to win."

"That's right," said Bud; "but I wish he had two good eyes. I knowed a one-eyed Mex up in Arizona and he was sure a thieving son of a goat!"

VII

There are doubtless many philanthropists in the Back Bay regions of Boston who would consider the whipsawing of Cruz Mendez a very reprehensible act. And one hundred dollars Mex was certainly a very small reward for the service that he was to perform.

But Bud and Phil were not traveling for any particular uplift society, and one hundred pesos was a lot of money to Cruz Mendez. More than that, if they had offered him a thousand dollars for the same service he would have got avaricious and demanded ten thousand.

He came to the hotel very early the next morning and lingered around an hour or so, waiting for the American gentlemen to arise and tell him his fate. A hundred dollars would buy everything that he could think of, including a quantity of *mescal*. His throat dried at the thought of it.

Then the gentlemen appeared and asked him many questions – whether he was married according to law, whether his wife would sign the papers with him, and if he believed in a hereafter for those who played false with Americans. Having answered all these in the affirmative, he was taken to the *agente mineral*, and, after signing his name – his one feat in penmanship – to several imposing documents, he was given the precious permit.

Then there was another trip to the grounds with a surveyor, to make report that the claim was actually vacant, and Mendez went back to his normal duties as a packer.

In return for this service as a dummy locator, and to keep him under their eye, the Americans engaged El Tuerto, the one-eyed, to pack out a few tools and supplies for them; and then, to keep him busy, they employed him further to build a stone house.

All these activities were, of course, not lost on Don Cipriano Aragon y Tres Palacios, since, by a crafty arrangement of fences, he had made it impossible for anyone to reach the lower country without passing through the crooked street of Old Fortuna.

During the first and the second trip of the strange Americans he kept within his dignity, hoping perhaps that they would stop at his store, where they could be engaged in conversation; but upon their return from a third trip, after Cruz Mendez had gone through with their supplies, he cast his proud Spanish reserve to the winds and waylaid them on the street.

"*Buenas tardes, señores*," he saluted, as they rode past his store, and then, seeing that they did not break their gait, he held up his hand for them to stop.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, speaking genially but with an affected Spanish lisp. "I have seen you ride past several times – are you working for the big company up at New Fortuna?"

"No, *señor*," answered De Lancey courteously, "we are working for ourselves."

"Good!" responded Aragon with fatherly approval. "It is better so. And are you looking at mines?"

"Yes," said De Lancey non-committally; "we are looking at mines."

"That is good, too," observed Aragon; "and I wish you well, but since you are strangers to this country and perhaps do not know the people as well as some, I desire to warn you against that one-eyed man, Cruz Mendez, with whom I have seen you riding. He is a worthless fellow – a very *pelado* Mexican, one who has nothing – and yet he is always seeking to impose upon strangers by selling them old mines which have no value.

"I have no desire to speak ill of my neighbors, but since he has moved into the brush house up the river I have lost several fine little pigs; and his eye, as I know, was torn from his head as he was chasing another man's cow. I have not suffered him on my ranch for years, he is such a thief, and yet he has the effrontery to represent himself to strangers as a poor but honest man. I hope that he has not imposed upon you in any way?"

"No; not at all, thank you," responded De Lancey, as Bud raised his bridle-reins to go. "We hired him to pack out our tools and supplies and he has done it very reasonably. But many thanks, sir, for your warning. *Adios!*"

He touched his hat and waved his hand in parting, and Bud grinned as he settled down to a trot.

"You can't help palavering 'em, can you, Phil?" he said. "No matter what you think about 'em, you got to be polite, haven't you? Well, that's the way you get drawn in – next time you go by now the old man will pump you dry – you see. No, sir, the only way to get along with these Mexicans is not to have a thing to do with 'em. 'No savvy' – that's my motto."

"Well, '*muchas gracias*' is mine," observed De Lancey. "It doesn't cost anything, and it buys a whole lot."

"Sure," agreed Bud; "but we ain't buying nothing from him – he's the one particular *hombre* we want to steer clear of, and keep him guessing as long as we can. That's my view of it, pardner."

"Oh, that's all right," laughed De Lancey, "he won't get anything out of me – that is, nothing but a bunch of hot air. Say, he's a shrewd-looking old guinea, isn't he? Did you notice that game eye? He kept it kind of drooped, almost shut, until he came to the point – and then he opened it up real fierce. Reminds me of a big fighting owl waking up in the daytime. But you just watch me handle him, and if I don't fool the old boy at every turn it'll be because I run out of bull."

"Well, you can hand him the bull if you want to," grumbled Bud, "but the first time you give anything away I'm going to pick such a row with the old cuss that we'll have to make a new trail to get by. So leave 'im alone, if you ever expect to see that girl!"

A close association with Phil De Lancey had left Bud not unaware of his special weaknesses, and Phil was undoubtedly romantic. Given a barred and silent house, shut off from the street by whitened walls and a veranda screened with flowers, and the questing eyes of Mr. De Lancey would turn to those barred windows as certainly as the needle seeks the pole.

On every trip, coming and going, he had conned the Aragon house from the vine-covered *corredor* in front to the walled-in summer-garden behind, hoping to surprise a view of the beautiful daughter of the house. And unless rumor and Don Juan were at fault, she was indeed worthy of his solicitude – a gay and sprightly creature, brown-eyed like her mother and with the same glorious chestnut hair.

Already those dark, mischievous eyes had been busy and, at the last big dance at Fortuna, she had set many heads awl. Twice within two years her father, in a rage, had sent her away to school in order to break off some ill-considered love-affair; and now a battle royal was being waged between Manuel del Rey, the dashing captain of the *rurales* stationed at Fortuna, and Feliz Luna, son of a rich *haciendado* down in the hot country, for the honor of her hand.

What more romantic, then, than that a handsome American, stepping gracefully into the breach, should keep the haughty lovers from slaying each other by bearing off the prize himself?

So reasoned Philip De Lancey, musing upon the ease with which he could act the part; but for prudential purposes he said nothing of his vaunting ambitions, knowing full well that they would receive an active veto from Bud.

For, while De Lancey did most of the talking, and a great deal of the thinking for the partnership, Hooker was not lacking in positive opinions; and upon sufficient occasion he would express himself, though often with more force than delicacy. Therefore, upon this unexpected sally about the girl, Phil changed the subject abruptly and said no more of Aragon or the hopes within his heart.

It was not so easy, however, to avoid Aragon, for that gentleman had apparently taken the pains to inform himself as to the place where they were at work, and he was waiting for them in the morning with a frown as black as a thunder-cloud.

"He's on!" muttered Phil, as they drew near enough to see his face. "What shall we do?"

"Do nothing," growled Bud through his teeth; "you jest let me do the talking!"

He maneuvered his horse adroitly and, with a skilful turn, cut in between his pardner and Aragon.

"*S días*," he greeted, gazing down in burly defiance at the militant Aragon; and at the same moment he gave De Lancey's horse a furtive touch with his spur.

"*Buenos días señores!*" returned Aragon, striding forward to intercept them; but as neither of the Americans looked back, he was left standing in the middle of the street.

"That's the way to handle 'im," observed Hooker, as they trotted briskly down the lane. "Leave 'im to me."

"It'll only make him mad," objected De Lancey crossly. "What do you want to do that for?"

"He's mad already," answered Bud. "I *want* to quarrel with him, so he can't ask us any questions. Get him so mad he won't talk – then it'll be a fair fight and none of this snake-in-the-grass business."

"Yes, but don't put it on him," protested De Lancey. "Let him be friendly for a while, if he wants to."

"Can't be friends," said Bud laconically; "we jumped his claim."

"Maybe he doesn't want it," suggested Phil hopefully. "He's dropped a lot of money on it."

"You bet he wants it," returned Hooker, with conviction. "I'm going to camp out there – the old boy is liable to jump us."

"Aw, you're crazy, Bud!" cried Phil; but Hooker only smiled.

"You know what happened to Kruger," he answered. "I'll tell you what, we got to keep our eye open around here."

They rode on to their mine, which was only about five miles from Fortuna, without discussing the matter further; for, while Phil had generally been the leader, in this particular case Kruger had put Bud in charge, and he seemed determined to have his way so far as Aragon was concerned. In the ordering of supplies and the laying out of development work he deferred to Phil in everything, but for tactics he preferred his own judgment.

It was by instinct rather than reason that he chose to fight, and people who follow their instincts are hard to change. So they put in the day in making careful measurements, according to the memoranda that Kruger had given them; and, having satisfied themselves as to the approximate locality of the lost vein, they turned back again toward town with their heads full of cunning schemes.

Since it was the pleasure of the Señor Aragon to make war on all who entered his preserves, they checkmated any attempt on his part to locate the lead by driving stakes to the north of their ledge; and, still further to throw him off, they decided to mark time for a while by doing dead work on a cut. Such an approach would be needed to reach the mouth of their tunnel.

At the same time it would give steady employment to Mendez and keep him under their eye, and as soon as Aragon showed his hand they could make out their final papers in peace and send them to the City of Mexico.

And not until those final papers were recorded and the transfer duly made would they so much as stick a pick into the hillside or show a lump of quartz.

But for a Spanish gentleman, supposed to be all supple curves and sinuous advance, Don Cipriano turned out somewhat of a surprise, for when they rode back through his narrow street again he met them squarely in the road and called them to a halt.

"By what right, gentlemen – " he demanded in a voice tremulous with rage, – "by what right do you take possession of my mine, upon which I have paid the taxes all these years, and conspire with that rogue, Cruz Mendez, to cheat me out of it? It is mine, I tell you, no matter what the *agente mineral* may say, and – "

"Your mine, nothing!" broke in Hooker scornfully, speaking in the ungrammatical border-Mexican of the cowboys. "We meet one Mexican – he shows us the mine – that is all. The expert of the mining agent says it is vacant – we take it. *Stawano!*"¹

He waved the matter aside with masterful indifference, and Aragon burst into a torrent of excited Spanish.

"Very likely, very likely," commented Bud dryly, without listening to a word; "*sí, señor, yo pienso!*"

A wave of fury swept over the Spaniard's face at this gibe and he turned suddenly to De Lancey.

"Señor," he said, "you seem to be a gentleman. Perhaps you will listen to me. This mine upon which you are working is mine. I have held it for years, seeking for the lost vein of the old padres. Then the rebels came sweeping through the land. They stole my horses, they drove off my cattle, they frightened my workmen from the mine. I was compelled to flee – myself and my family – to keep from being held for ransom. Now you do me the great injustice to seize my mine!"

"Ah, no, señor," protested De Lancey, waving his finger politely for silence, "you are mistaken. We have inquired about this mine and it has been vacant for some time. There is no vein – no gold. Anyone who wished could take it. While we were prospecting we met this poor one-eyed man and he has taken out a permit to explore it. So we are going to dig – that is all."

"But, *señor!*" burst out Aragon – and he voiced his rabid protests again, while sudden faces appeared in the windows and wide-eyed peons stood gawking in a crowd. But De Lancey was equally firm, though he glimpsed for the first time the adorable face of La Gracia as she stared at him from behind the bars.

"No, *señor*," he said, "you are mistaken. The land was declared forfeit for non-payment of taxes by the minister of Fomento and thrown open for location. We have located it – that is all."

For a minute Don Cipriano stood looking at him, his black eyes heavy with rage; then his anger seemed to fall away from him and he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Very well," he said at last, "I perceive that you are a gentleman and have acted in good faith – it is only that that fellow Mendez has deceived you. Let it pass, then – I will not quarrel with you, my friend – it is the fortune of war. But stop at my store when you go by and come and see me. It is indeed lonely here at times, and perhaps I can pass a pleasant hour with you. My name, *señor*, is Don Cipriano Aragon y Tres Palacios – and yours?"

He held out his hand with a little gesture. "Philip De Lancey," replied that gentleman, clasping the proffered hand; and with many expressions of good-will and esteem, with a touching of hats and a wriggling of fingers from the distance, they parted, in spite of Bud, apparently the best of friends.

¹ A shortening of *está bueno* – it is good – a common expression in cowboy Spanish.

VIII

There are some people in this world with whom it seems impossible to quarrel, notably the parents of attractive daughters.

Perhaps, if Gracia Aragon had not been watching him from the window, Philip De Lancey would not have been quite so cordial with her father – at least, that was what Hooker thought, and he was so badly peeved at the way things had gone that he said it, too.

Then, of course, they quarreled, and one thing leading to another, Phil told Bud he had a very low way of speaking. Bud replied, that whatever his deficiencies of speech might be, he was not fool enough to be drawn in by a skirt, and Phil rebuked him again. Then, with a scornful grunt, Bud Hooker rode on in silence and they said no more about it.

It was a gay life that they led at night, for the Fortuna Hotel was filled with men of their kind, since all the staid married men had either moved across the line with their families or were under orders to come straight home.

In the daytime the hotel was nearly deserted, for every man in town was working for the company; but in the evening, when they gathered around the massive stove, it was a merry company indeed.

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