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E-text prepared by Jim Ludwig

THE YOUNG ENGINEERS IN MEXICO

or, Fighting the Mine Swindlers

by

H. IRVING HANCOCK

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CHAPTER I

THE LAND OF GOLDEN EGGS

Luis Montez, mine owner, stood on the broad veranda in front of his handsome home, looking out over the country sweeping away to the eastward.

"Gentlemen, you are in a land of golden promise," began Senor Montez, with a smile and a bow. "I should call it more than promise. Why not? My beloved country, Mexico, has been shipping gold to the world ever since the days of Montezuma."

"Yes; in a mineral sense Mexico has truly a golden history," nodded Tom Reade, one of the engineers to whom Montez was speaking.

"And a golden history in every sense," added Senor Montez, with a quick rush of patriotism. "Mexico is the finest country on earth. And, though we are neither as numerous in population, or as progressive as your own great country, still Mexico has greater possibilities than the United States."

Tom was too polite to argue that point. And Harry Hazelton, whom a seventy-mile ride in an automobile over dusty roads, that day, had rendered very drowsy, didn't consider an argument worth while.

"Mexico has almost incredible natural wealth," Montez went on, his voice soft and purring, his eyes glowing with something that might have passed for pride. "Yet, through all the centuries that white men have been here, I am confident that not one per cent. of the country's natural resources has yet been taken from the ground. Enough wealth lies at man's beck and call to change the balance of power between the nations of the world. I have been in your great city, New York. It is a place of tremendous wealth. Yet, within ten years, gold enough can be taken from the ground within a radius of twenty miles of here to buy the whole great city of New York at any sane valuation."

"That purchase would require billions of dollars," broke in the practical Hazelton.

"But the wealth is here," insisted Senor Montez, still smiling. "Truly, *caballeros*, as I have told you, this is the land of golden—"

Again the Mexican paused, eloquently.

"The land of golden eggs?" suggested Harry.

For an instant there was a flash in the Mexican's eyes. Then the friendly smile reappeared.

"Of course, you jest, senor," he replied, pleasantly.

"Not at all, Senor Montez," Hazelton assured him. "When gold is so plentiful that it can be picked up everywhere, there must be a goose at hand that lays golden eggs. Eggs are among the most common things that we have. When gold nuggets are as large and as abundant as eggs then we may properly call them golden eggs."

Senor Montez, flipped away the cigar that he had finished, and reached for another. This he carefully cut at the end, lighting it with graceful, elegant deliberation. The Mexican was a distinguished-looking man above medium height. A little past forty years of age, he possessed all the agility of a boy of twenty. Frequently his sudden, agile movements indicated the possession of unusual strength. Dark, like most of his countrymen, constant exposure to the tropical sun had made his face almost the color of mahogany. His carriage was erect, every movement instinctive with grace. Clad in a white linen suit, with white shoes, he wore on his head a Panama hat of fine texture and weave.

The house of which the broad veranda was a part, was a low, two-story affair in stone, painted white. Through the middle of the house extended the drive-way leading into a large court in which a fountain played. Around the upper story of the house a balcony encircled the court and around the windows there were also small balconies.

Many servants, most of them male, ministered to the wants of those in the house. There were gardeners, hostlers, drivers, chauffeurs and other employes, making a veritable colony of help that was housed in small, low white houses well to the rear.

Some thirty acres of grounds had been rendered beautiful by the work of engineers, architects and gardeners. Nature, on this estate, had been forced, for the natural soil was stony and sterile, in keeping with the mountains and the shallow valleys in this part of the little and seldom-heard-of state of Bonista.

To the eastward lay, at a distance of some two miles, one of the sources of Senor Montez's wealth *El Sombrero* Mine, producing some silver and much more gold. At least so the owner claimed.

It was Senor Luis Montez himself who had gone to the nearest railway station, seventy miles distant, and there had made himself known, that forenoon, to the two young engineers from the United States.

Tom and Harry had come to *El Sombrero* at the invitation of Montez. After many careful inquiries as to their reputation and standing in their home country, Montez had engaged the young men as engineers to help him develop his great mine. Nor had he hesitated to pay the terms they had named—one thousand dollars, gold, per month, for each, and all expenses paid.

Over mountain trails, through the day, much of the way had of necessity been made slowly. Wherever the dusty, irregular roads had permitted greater speed, the swarthy Mexican who had served Senor Montez as chauffeur on the trip had opened wide on the speed. At the end of their long automobile ride Tom and Harry fairly ached from the jolting they had received.

"There are other beautiful features of this grand country of mine," the Mexican mine owner continued, lighting his second cigar. "I am a noble, you know, Senor Tomaso. In my veins flows the noble blood of the hidalgos of good old Spain. My ancestors came here two hundred and fifty years ago, and ever since, ours has been truly a Mexican family that has preserved all of the most worthy traditions of the old Spanish nobles. We are a proud race, a conquering one. In this part of Bonista, I, like my ancestors, rule like a war lord."

"You don't have much occupation at that game, do you, senor?" Tom asked, with an innocent smile.

"That—that—game?" repeated Senor Montez, with a puzzled look at his young guest.

"The game of war lord," Reade explained. "Mexico is not often at war, is she?"

"Not since she was forced to fight your country, Senor Tomaso, as you help to remind me," pursued Montez, without a trace of offense. "Though I was educated in your country, I confess that, at times, your language still baffles me. What I meant to say was not 'war lord,' but—but—"

"Over lord?" suggested Reade, politely.

"Ah, yes! Perhaps that better expresses what I mean. In Mexico we have laws, senor, to be sure. But they are not for *caballeros* like myself—not for men who can boast of the blood of Spanish hidalgos. I am master over these people for many miles around. Absolute master! Think you any judge would dare sign a process against me, and send *peon* officers of the law to interfere with me? No! As I tell you, I, Luis Montez, am the sole master here among the mountains. We have laws for the *peons* (working class), but I—I make my own laws."

"Does it take much of your time, may I ask?"

"Does what take much of my time?" repeated Senor Montez, again looking puzzled.

"Law making," explained Tom Reade.

Montez shot a swift look at the young engineer. He wondered if the American were making fun of him. But Reade's face looked so simple and kindly, his eyes so full of interest, that the Mexican dismissed the thought.

"I spend no time in making laws—unless I need them," the Mexican continued. "I make laws only as the need arises, and I make them to suit myself. I interpret the laws as I please for my own pleasure or interests. Do you comprehend?"

"I think so," Tom nodded. "Many of the big corporations in my country do about the same thing, though the privilege has not yet been extended to individuals in the United States."

"Here," continued the mine owner, earnestly, "no man disputes my will. That, of itself, is law. Here no man sues me, for if he attempted to do so, he would go to prison and remain there. If I tell a man to leave these mountains, he does so, for otherwise he would never leave them. If a man annoys me, and I tell one of my trusted servants to attend to my enemy—then that enemy never troubles me further."

"That is interesting—it's so simple and effective!" cried Tom, pretended enthusiasm glowing in his eyes. "Say, but that's practical! A man annoys you, and you send a servant to tell him to stop. Then he stops."

"Because my enemy also vanishes, you understand," smiled Senor Luis, indulgently.

"But doesn't the governor of Bonista ever hear of the disappearances?" suggested Reade, very casually.

"What if he does?" demanded Don Luis, snapping his fingers gayly. "Are not his excellency, the governor, and I, the best of friends? Would he give heed to rumors against me, brought by evil-tongued men? Oh, no! *El gobernador* (the governor) has, at times, even kindly lent me his troops to make sure that an enemy of mine doesn't travel too far. No! I tell you, Senor Tomaso, I am over lord here. I am the law in these mountains."

"It must be a great comfort, Don Luis—if you have many enemies," suggested Tom Reade smilingly.

"Ah, no! I have no enemies to-day," cried the Mexican. "Why should I? I am generous and indulgent, and the soul of honor. No one has just reason to disagree with me. Here I give all men the round trade—no, what in your country you call the square deal. But you shall see. You are now associated with me in a great, a gr-r-rand enterprise. You shall soon see how just and generous I can be—am always. You shall understand why the son of a noble house need have no foes. Senor Tomaso, I have taken one great liking to you in the few hours that we have been together. And as for you, Senor Henrico—"

With a courtly flourish Don Luis wheeled about to face young Hazelton. But the sound of deep breathing was all that came from Harry. Fatigued by the long, rough automobile ride, that young engineer had dropped fast asleep in the broad porch rocker.

"Your friend is much fatigued," spoke Don Luis, with fine consideration. "If you deem it best, Senor Tomaso, we will arouse him and he shall go to his room for an hour's sleep before the evening meal."

"If his sleeping in the chair doesn't annoy you, Don Luis, my friend will wake up, refreshed, in twenty minutes or so."

"So be it, then. Let him sleep where he is. But you, Senor Tomaso, would you not like to step inside and lie down for a while?"

"No, I thank you," Reade answered. "Unlike Hazelton, I feel very wide awake. When shall we go to the mine?"

"To-morrow, or the next day," replied the Mexican, with a gesture which almost said that "any day" would do. "First, you must both rest until you are wholly refreshed. Then you may want to stroll about the country a bit, and see the odd bits of natural beauty in these mountains, before you give too serious thought to work."

"But that is not our way, Don Luis," Tom objected. "When we are paid a thousand dollars a month apiece we expect to do an honest day's work six days in every week."

"Ah, then, to-morrow, perhaps we will talk about the work. And now, if you will pardon me, I will go inside for a few minutes in order to see about some business matters."

Readers of the "*Grammar School Boys Series*," the "*High School Boys Series*" and of the preceding volumes in the present series, will feel that they are already intimately acquainted with Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton, a pair of young civil engineers who, through sheer grit, persistence and hard study had already made themselves well known in their profession.

In the first volume of the "*Grammar School Boys Series*," Dick Prescott and his five boy chums, Greg Holmes, Dave Darrin, Dan Dalzell, Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton, were introduced under the name of Dick & Co. These six chums, standing shoulder to shoulder, made a famous sextette in school athletics. Their start was made during their grammar school days, when they had many adventures and did much in the field of junior sport. Their high school life, as set forth in the series of that name, was one of athletics, mixed with much study and efforts to find their true paths in life. In high school athletics the members of Dick & Co. won a statewide reputation, as to-day members of winning high school athletic teams are bound to do. It was during their high school days that Dick & Co. determined on their professions through life. Dick Prescott and Greg Holmes both secured competitive appointments to the United States Military Academy, and their further doings are set forth in the "*West Point Series*." Dave Darrin and Dalzell, with a burning desire for naval life, obtained appointments to the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. What befell them is fully told in the "*Annapolis Series*." As for Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton, while still in high school they became seized with a strong desire for careers as civil engineers. They were fortunate enough to secure their first practice and training in a local engineering office in the home town of Gridley. Then, with vastly more courage than training, Tom and Harry went forth into the world to stand or fall as engineers.

Their first experiences are told in the opening volume of this series, "*The Young Engineers In Colorado*." Joining a western engineering force as "cub" engineers, at first the laughing-stock of the older engineers on the staff of a new railroad then building in Colorado, the two boys did their best to make good. How well they succeeded is known to readers of that volume. Their adventures in the Rocky Mountains were truly astounding; some of them, especially those with "Bad Pete," a braggart and scoundrel of the old school, were sometimes mirth-provoking and sometimes tragic. Other adventures were vastly more serious. When the boys reached the crisis of their work it seemed as though every tree in the mountains concealed an enemy. All these and many more details are told in that first volume.

In "*The Young Engineers In Arizona*," we found the pair engaged in a wholly new task—that of filling up an apparently unfillable quicksand in the desert so that a railway roadbed might be built safely over the dangerous quicksand that had justly earned the name of the "Man-killer." Here, too, adventures quickly appeared and multiplied, until even the fearful quicksand became a matter of smaller importance to the chums. How the two young engineers persevered and fought pluckily all the human and other obstacles to their success the readers of the second volume now know fully.

Then Tom and Harry, who had been putting in many spare hours, days and weeks on the study of metallurgy and the assaying of precious metals, went, for a "vacation," to Nevada, there further to pursue their studies. Quite naturally they became interested in gold mining itself, and all their adventures, their mishaps, failures, fights and final successes were fully chronicled in the third volume, entitled "*The Young Engineers in Nevada*." The mine that finally proved a dividend payer was named "The Ambition Mine." A staunch Nevadan, Jim Ferrers, by name, became their partner in the Ambition. Jim, who was an old hand at Nevada mining, was now managing the mine while Tom and Harry, after going East and establishing an engineers' office in a large city not far from New York, had traveled to other states, studying mines and assay methods. Within the last few months, so rapid had been their progress in mine engineering, that they had been consulted by a number of mine owners. Articles that they had written had appeared in journals devoted to mining and engineering, and the fame of our two friends had been rapidly spreading.

Both scrupulously honest in all things, Reade and Hazelton had also won a reputation as "square" mining men. With their skill and honesty established, the opinions of the two partners on mining problems were generally respected wherever they happened to be known.

So, in time, Luis Montez had heard of them, and had decided that he needed their services at *El Sombrero* (The Hat) Mine in the Mexican state of Bonista. After some correspondence the two engineers had been speedily engaged, and the opening of this volume deals with the time of their arrival at the handsome country house of Senor Montez.

After his host had gone inside, and Harry Hazelton slept on, Tom, who had risen—to bow to Senor Montez, remained on his feet, pacing slowly and thoughtfully up and down the porch.

"Now that I've seen my new employer," mused Tom, under his breath, "I wonder just how much I really like him. He's a polished man, and a charming fellow from the little that I've seen of him. But his talk of ruling these hills, even in life and death—does that speak well for him. Is he a knave, or only a harmless braggart? Is he a man against whom one should be seriously on his guard? Don Luis's manners, in general, I admire, but I don't quite like the cruel expression about his mouth when he laughs. However, that may be the way of the country, and I may be the victim of prejudice. Anyway, as far as Harry and I are concerned, we needn't worry much about the kind of man Don Luis is. The few thousands of dollars that he will owe us as his engineers we are pretty certain to get, for Don Luis is a very wealthy man, and he couldn't afford to cheat us. For the rest, all he wants us to do is to work hard as engineers and show him how to get more valuable ore out of his mines. So, no matter what kind of man Don Luis may be, we have nothing to fear from him—not even being cheated out of our pay."

Having settled this in his mind, Tom Reade sank into one of the roomy porch chairs, half closing his eyes. He was soon in danger of being as sound asleep as was Harry Hazelton.

Certainly Reade would have been intensely interested had he been able to render himself invisible and thus to step into one of the rooms of the big, handsome house.

In a room that was half office, half library, Señor Luis Montez was now closeted with another man, whom neither of the engineers had yet met. This man was short, slight of build and nervous of action and gesture—a young man perhaps twenty-six years of age. Carlos Tisco was secretary to Don Luis. Tisco was a graduate of a university at the capital City of Mexico, a doctor of philosophy, no mean chemist, a clever assayer of precious metals and an engineer. In a word Dr. Tisco had been so well trained in many fields of science that it was a wonder that Don Luis should feel the need of employing the two young American engineers.

"You have seen my new engineers, Carlos?" queried Don Luis, almost in a whisper, as the two men, bending forward, faced each other over a flat-top desk.

"Through the window shutters—yes, Don Luis," nodded the secretary, a strange look in his eyes.

"Then what do you think of the Gringo pair, my good Carlos?" pursued Don Luis.

"Gringo" is a word of contempt applied by some Mexicans to Americans.

"I—I hardly like to tell you, Don Luis," replied the younger man, with an air of pretended embarrassment.

"Ah! Then no doubt you feel they are not as clever as they have been rated—my two Gringos," smiled the mine owner. "Rest easy, Carlos. It may be better if they be not too clever."

"It—it is that which I fear, Don Luis," replied the secretary, in a still lower voice. "I have been studying their faces—especially their eyes as they spoke. Don Luis, I much fear that they are very clever young men."

"Ah! Then again that is not bad," laughed the master gayly. "If they be clever, then they will not need so much explanation."

Now the secretary became bolder.

"Don Luis, though you have spent many years in the United States, I fear you do not at all understand some traits of the Gringo character," warned Dr. Tisco. "For example, you want these young men for a special service, and you are willing to pay them generously—lavishly in fact. Has it escaped you, Don Luis, that some of these obstinate, mule-headed Gringos are guilty of an especial form of ingratitude which they term honor?"

"I know that some Gringos make much bombastic use of that term, while other Gringos scoff at the word 'honor,'" replied the mine owner, thoughtfully. "But even suppose that these Gringos have absurdly fanciful ideas of honor? They will never guess for what I really want them. Their work will be done, to my liking, and they will go away from here with never a suspicion of the kind of service they have performed for me."

"Pardon me, Don Luis," murmured Dr. Tisco, "but to me they do not look like such fools. They will suspect; they will even know."

"It matters little what they suspect, if they hold their tongues," replied the mine owner.

"You will have to appeal to their love of money, then," suggested the secretary. "You will have to pay

them extremely well. Even then they may balk and refuse."

"Refuse?" repeated Don Luis opening his eyes wide. "Carlos, you do not seem to understand how hopeless it would be for them to refuse. I am master here. None knows better than you that I hold life and death in my hand in these mountains. Do not all men hereabouts obey my orders? Will *el gobernador* ask any awkward questions if two Gringos should stroll through these mountains and never be heard from again? Who can escape the net that I am able to spread in these mountains? The Gringos refuse me—betray me? Are they such fools as to refuse me when they find that I hold their lives in the palm of my hand?"

"They may even refuse your bait with death as the alternative," persisted the secretary. "Don Luis, you know that there are such foolish men among the Gringos."

"Then let them refuse me," proposed Don Luis, jestingly, though his white teeth shone in a savage smile. "If they are difficult to manage—these two young Gringos—then they will quickly disappear, and other Gringos shall come until I find those that will serve me and be grateful for their rewards."

"I wish you good fortune with your great schemes, Don Luis," sighed young Dr. Tisco.

"Carlos, you have not eaten for hours. You are so famished that the whole world is colored blue before your eyes. Come, it is close to the hour for the meal. You shall meet and talk with my Gringos. You will then be able to judge whether I shall be able to tame them."

CHAPTER II

THE WOLF WHO SHOWED HIS TEETH

A rare host at table was Don Luis Montez. He possessed the manner, even if not the soul, of a great nobleman.

His daughter, Francesca, reputed to be a beauty, did not appear at table. So far the young engineers had not met her. They would be presented, however, within a day or two, after the Mexican custom, for Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton were to be guests in the white palace during their residence in this part of Mexico.

Dr. Tisco, too, tried to be most entertaining, and succeeded.

"You are the surgeon at the mine?" Harry ventured.

"A *medico*?" suggested Dr. Tisco, with a bow of humility. "Ah, no, *senor*, I have not that honor. I am a doctor of philosophy, not of medicine."

"Then you may be a scientific expert," Harry hazarded. "You are the expert here at the mine?"

"Not so," broke in Don Luis, gently. "It is true that Carlos has some knowledge of chemistry, but he is not a mining expert. He is my secretary, my man of affairs."

"Oh, really the manager of the mine, then?" pursued Harry. "Pardon me if I ask too many questions. I do not mean to be impertinent. But, as we are going to work here I wish to know who's who is *Senor Montez*' representative."

"Carlos," broke in Don Luis, again, "is rather more than the mine manager. He serves me in a variety of interests, and the mine is only one of them."

"If you wish to know whether you are to be under my instructions," Dr. Tisco continued, "I can assure you that you are not. I seldom give orders except as the direct—I might say the directed—mouthpiece of Don Luis."

"I have a separate manager at the mine," added Don Luis. "You shall meet him to-morrow. His name is Pedro Gato. You will find him a self-opinionated fellow, and one used to having his own way. He has to be somewhat turbulent, or he would never hold some of my *peons* (laborers) in check. But under the surface you will find Pedro Gato an excellent fellow if you do not rub him too hard the wrong way."

"Gato will not attempt to give us any orders, of course?" Tom asked very quietly.

"Possibly not," dubiously replied Don Luis. "I really do not know. That point has not before come up to me for consideration."

"Then I hope you will make it clear to Senor Gato, Don Luis, that we are engineers, wholly in charge of our own work; that we have been engaged as experts and that we manage our own work in the way that appears to us best to serve our employer's interests."

"That can all be arranged very amicably, I am certain," replied Don Luis, as though to dismiss the matter for the present.

Dr. Tisco, covertly, was intently watching the eyes and faces of the young engineers. The secretary was most anxious to take an accurate measure of these two young Americans, who were now highly important to his plans.

After the evening meal, Don Luis summoned a number of his home retainers, who played mandolins and guitars. Some of them sang with considerable sweetness and power. The full moon, soon to wane, shed lustrous light over the tropical scene of beauty. It was a delightful evening. Tom and Harry, when they retired, found themselves ready to sleep instantly. Their bedrooms opened into a common parlor. Early in the morning they were astir.

"What shall we wear, Tom?" inquired Hazelton, going toward his trunks.

"Eh?"

"I wonder what people wear in Mexico," Harry continued. "I don't want to make any mistake in my clothing."

"The best clothing for engineers about to go down into a mine will be top-boots, khaki trousers and flannel shirts."

"But will that be suitable to go to breakfast in?" Harry asked. "Will it be showing sufficient courtesy to our host? And suppose the daughter should be at table?"

"That's so," Reade nodded. "I am sorry that we didn't fish for points last evening."

A knock came at the door.

"Aqui!" (here) Tom answered.

The door opened slowly. A man servant of perhaps twenty-five years, attired in clean white clothes, but bare-footed, stood in the doorway, bowing very low.

"*Buenos dias, caballeros!*" (good morning, gentlemen) was his greeting.

Tom invited him to enter.

"*Caballeros,*" announced the *peon*, "I am your servant, your slave, your dog! My name is Nicolas."

"How do you do, Nicolas," responded Tom, holding out his hand, which the Mexican appeared too dazed, or too respectful to take. "We may find a servant useful. But we never kept slaves, and we wouldn't dream of calling any man a dog."

"I am your dog, *caballeros,*" Nicolas asserted. "I am yours to do with as you wish. Beat me, if I do not perform my work well."

"But I wouldn't beat a dog. Almost any dog is too fine a fellow to be served in that fashion," Tom explained.

"*Caballeros,* I am here to receive your pleasure and commands concerning breakfast."

"Is it ready?" demanded Harry hopefully.

"The kitchen is open, and the cooks there," Nicolas responded. "When your excellency's orders have been given the cooks will prepare your meal with great dispatch."

"Has Don Luis come down yet?" Tom inquired.

"No; for his great excellency has not yet eaten," answered the *peon*.

"Oh! Then your master eats in his own room?" Tom asked.

"Don Luis eats always his breakfast in bed," Nicolas told them.

"Then I guess we were too fresh, Tom, in getting up," laughed Harry.

As this was spoken in English, Nicolas, not understanding, paid no heed. Tom and Harry, on the other hand, had a conversational smattering of Spanish, for in Arizona they had had a large force of Mexican laborers working under them.

"Nicolas, my good boy," Tom went on, "we are quite new to the ways of Mexico. We shall have to ask you to explain some matters to us."

"I am a dog," said Nicolas, gravely, "but even a dog may speak according to his knowledge."

"Then of what does the breakfast here usually consist?"

"Of anything in Don Luis's larder," replied the *peon* grandly.

"Yet surely there must be some rule about the meal."

"The only rule, excellency, is the pleasure of the host."

"What does Don Luis, then, usually order?"

"Chocolate," replied the servant.

"Nothing else?"

"And a roll or two, excellency."

"What does he eat after that?" Harry demanded, rather anxiously.

"Nothing, *caballero*, until the next meal."

"Chocolate and a roll or two," muttered Harry. "I am afraid that wouldn't hold me through a day's work. Not even a forenoon's toil. I never did like to diet on a plan of tightening my belt."

"Anything for which the *caballero* will ask shall be brought," replied Nicolas, with another bow.

"How about a steak, Tom?" Harry asked, turning to his chum.

"Pardon, excellency, but we have no such thing here," Nicolas interposed, meekly.

"Eggs?" Harry guessed.

"Excellency, we shall hope to have some eggs by to-morrow,"

"Harry, you idiot, why didn't you ask for mince pie and doughnuts, too?" laughed Reade.

"Nicolas, my boy, the trouble with me," Harry explained, "is that chocolate and rolls will never hold my soul and body together for more than an hour at a time. Chocolate and rolls by all means, but help us out a bit. What can we call for that is more hearty."

"There are *tortillas* to be had sometimes," the servant answered.

"Also, sometimes, *frijoles*."

"They both sound good," Harry assented vaguely. "Bring us some."

"*Caballeros*, you shall be served with the speed at which the eagle flies!" exclaimed the servant. With a separate bow to each he withdrew, softly closing the door after him.

"Now Harry, let's hustle into some clothes," urged Tom. "Since we are to eat here mine clothes will be the thing. Hustle into them!"

Bred in the ways of the camps, ten minutes later Tom and Harry were washed, dressed and otherwise tidy in every respect.

"I've a mind to go outdoors and get some glimpses of the scenery for a few minutes," Harry hinted.

"Don't think of it. You don't want to come back to a cold breakfast."

So both seated themselves, regretting the absence of morning newspapers.

Then the time began to drag. Finally the delay became wearisome.

"I wonder how many people Nicolas is serving this morning?" murmured Hazelton, at last.

"Everyone in the house would be my guess," laughed Tom. Still time dragged by.

"What on earth will Don Luis think of us?" Harry grunted.

"There is only one thing for it, if this delay lasts any longer," Tom answered. "If this delay lasts much longer we shall have to put off breakfast until to-morrow and get to work."

"Put off breakfast until to-morrow?" Hazelton gasped. "That's where I draw the line. Before I'll stir a step from here I must have at least food enough to grubstake a canary bird."

Some minutes later, Nicolas rapped at the door. He then entered, bearing a tray enveloped in snowy linen. This tray he put down, then spread a tablecloth that he had brought over one arm.

"Will you be seated, *caballeros*?" he asked, respectfully, as he took his stand by the tray. Then he whisked away the linen cover. Gravely he set upon the table a pot of chocolate, two dainty cups and saucers and a plate containing four rolls.

"Where's the butter, Nicolas?" asked Harry.

"Butter, *caballero*? I did not understand that you wished it. I will get it. I will run all the way to the kitchen and back."

"Never mind the butter this morning, Nicolas," spoke up Tom, at the same time kicking Harry gently under the table.

"Can I serve you further, now, *caballeros*" inquired Nicolas, with great respect, "or shall I bring you the remainder of your breakfast?"

"Bring us the rest of the breakfast, by all means," begged Harry, and the servant left them.

"Why did you tell him not to mind the butter?" grunted Hazelton.

"Because," Tom answered, "it struck me that, in Mexico, it may not be customary to serve butter in the morning."

Harry took a bite of one of the rolls, finding it to be soft, flaky and delicious. Then he removed another linen covering from the pot and started to pour the chocolate. That beverage did not come as freely as he had expected.

"What ails the stuff?" grunted Hazelton. "This isn't the first of April."

Then Harry removed the lid from the pot, glancing inside, next he picked up a spoon and stirred the contents of the pot.

"I wish Nicolas were here," said Hazelton.

"Why?" Tom wanted to know.

"I'm bothered about what's etiquette in Mexico. I don't know whether it's right to eat this stuff with a knife, or whether we're expected to spread the stuff on the rolls."

"It is pretty thick stuff," Tom agreed, after taking a look.

"But let me have the pot and the spoon. I think I can manage it."

After some work Tom succeeded in reducing the chocolate to a consistency that admitted of pouring, though very slowly.

"It took you almost three minutes to pour two cups," said Harry, returning his watch to his pocket. "Come on, now! We've got to make up for lost time. What will Don Luis think of us? And yet it is his household arrangements that are keeping us away from our work."

Chocolate and rolls were soon disposed of. Then the two engineers sat back, wondering whether Nicolas had deserted them. Finally, both rose and walked to stretch their legs.

"No restaurant in New York has anything on this place for slow-march service!" growled Hazelton.

As all things must come at last, so did Nicolas. He carried a tray and was followed by a second servant, bringing another.

The *tortillas* proved to be, as Harry put it, "a cross between a biscuit and flapjack." The *frijoles* were just plain boiled beans, which had evidently been cooked on some other day, and were now mushy. But it was a very solid meal that now lay before them, and the young engineers ate heartily.

"Will the *caballeros* have some more chocolate?" suggested Nicolas.

"Not now," said Hazelton. "But you might order some for to-morrow's breakfast, and then we shan't have to wait for so long next time."

The additional servant had gone, noiselessly, but Nicolas hovered about, silently.

At last the meal was finished. Tom had chewed his food thoroughly, what he had eaten of it, but Harry, in his hunger, had eaten hurriedly.

"Now we'll have to find Don Luis and apologize," hinted Tom.
"Hereafter I can see that we shall have to rise much earlier.
Confound it, it's a quarter of nine, already."

The two youngsters hastened out to the veranda. A man servant was lazily dusting and placing porch chairs.

"Has Don Luis gone to the mine?" asked Tom in Spanish.

"Don Luis?" repeated the servant, in evident astonishment. "Presently his excellency will be dressing."

"Thank you," nodded Tom, and paced the veranda, leisurely. "Harry, we didn't make such a bad break after all, then. Plainly Don Luis didn't plan an early start."

"Is Dr. Tisco around?" asked Harry, of the servant.

"The learned doctor must be dressing by this time, *caballero*," replied the servant respectfully.

"Hm!" mused Harry. "Can it be that the people in Bonista do their work at night?"

"Oh, I'll wager the poor *peons* at the mine have been at work for some time," Tom smiled. "Anyway, I'm glad we haven't kept everyone else waiting."

At half-past ten o'clock Dr. Tisco appeared, immaculate in white. He bowed low and courteously to the guests.

"I trust, *caballeros*, that you have enjoyed perfect rest."

"Yes," answered Harry. "And now we're fidgeting to get at work. But, of course, we can't start for the mine until Don Luis gives us the word, and we are at his pleasure."

"It is nearly time for Don Luis to appear," said Tisco gravely.

"Is he always as late as this?"

"Here, Senor Hazelton, we do not call eleven o'clock a late hour for appearing."

Twenty minutes later Don Luis appeared, clad in white and indolently puffing at a Mexican cigarette.

"You will smoke, gentlemen?" inquired their host, courteously, after he had inquired concerning their rest.

"Thank you," Tom responded, pleasantly. "We have never used tobacco."

Don Luis rang and a servant appeared.

"Have one of my cars ordered," commanded Don Luis.

Ten minutes later a car rolled around to the entrance.

"You will come with us, Carlos?" inquired Don Luis.

"Assuredly, Don Luis," replied the secretary, in the tone of a man who was saying that he would not for worlds miss an expected treat.

It was a seven-passenger car of late design. Into the tonneau stepped the two Mexicans and the two young engineers.

"To the mines," ordered Don Luis.

"Do you wish speed, excellency?" inquired the chauffeur.

"No; we will go slowly. We may wish to talk."

Gravely, in military fashion, the chauffeur saluted, then allowed the automobile to roll slowly away.

"It is not an attractive road, after we leave the *hacienda*," explained Don Luis Montez to Tom. "It is a dusty road, and a somewhat hard one. The mining country is not a beautiful place in which to live."

"It is at least more beautiful than the country in which our mine is located," Tom replied.

"Are you gentlemen, then, mine owners as well as mine experts?" inquired their host.

Tom told Don Luis briefly about their mine, the Ambition, in the Indian Smoke Range, Nevada.

"And is your mine a profitable one?" inquired the Mexican.

"It hasn't made us millionaires," Tom rejoined, modestly, "but it pays us more money, every month, than we really need."

Don Luis glanced covertly at his secretary, with a look that conveyed:

"If these young Gringos have all the money they want, and more, then we may find it difficult to appeal to their avarice."

Dr. Tisco's return glance as much as said:

"I am all the more certain that we shall find them difficult."

Don Luis commented to the two young men on the country through which they were passing. Finally the car drew up before the entrance to *El Sombrero* Mine. There was the shaft entrance and near it a goodly-sized dump for ore. Not far from the entrance was a small but very neat looking office building, and a second, still smaller, which might have been a timekeeper's office.

"Hello, Pedro!" called Don Luis.

Out of the office building sprang a dark-featured Mexican, perhaps forty years of age. He was truly a large man—more than six feet in height, broad of shoulder and deep of chest, a splendid type of manhood.

"My good Gato," purred Don Luis, "pay your respects to *Los Caballeros* Reade and Hazelton."

Gato approached, without offering his hand. His big, wolfish eyes looked over the young American pair keenly.

"So Don Luis has brought you here to show whether you are any good?" said the mine manager, in a voice as big as his frame. "I shall soon know."

Before the big, formidable manager Harry Hazelton remained silent, while Don Luis and his secretary slid softly into the office building.

"Gato, just what do you mean by your remark?" asked Tom Reade, very quietly.

"I mean that I shall put you at work and find out what you can do," leered the mine manager.

"Mistake number one!" rejoined Tom coolly. "I do not understand that you have any authority to give us orders."

"You shall soon learn, then!" growled the man. "I am the mine manager here."

"And we are the engineers about to be placed in charge," Tom continued. "If we stay, Gato, you will assist us in all ways that you can. Then, when you have received our instructions you will carry them out according to the best of your ability."

The two looked each other sternly in the eyes, Pedro Gato appearing as though he enjoyed young Americans better than any other food in the world. Indeed, he might have been expected to eat one of them right then and there.

Behind a shade in the office building Dr. Tisco stirred uneasily.

"What did I say to you, Don Luis?" inquired the secretary. "Did I not suggest that these Gringos would not be easily controlled?"

"Wait!" advised Don Luis Montez. "Wait! You have not yet seen what my Gato will do. He is not a baby."

"These Gringos will balk at every hour of the day and night," predicted Dr. Tisco.

"Wait until you have seen my good Gato tame them!" chuckled Don Luis, softly.

CHAPTER III

GATO STRIKES THE UP TRAIL

"When you speak to me, Gringo," bellowed Pedro Gato, "you will—"

"Stop, Greaser!" shot back Tom, sternly, though he did not even stir or raise his hands.

"Greaser?" bellowed Pedro Gato. "That is foul insult!"

"Not more so than to call me a Gringo," Tom Reade went on coolly. "So we are even, though I feel rather debased to have used such a word. Gato, if you make the mistake, again, of using an offensive term when addressing me, I shall—well, I may show a somewhat violent streak."

"You?" sneered Gato. Then something in the humor of the situation appealed to him. He threw back his head and laughed loudly.

"Gringo," he began, "you will—"

"Stop that line of talk, fellow," commanded Tom quietly. "When you address me, be good enough to say either 'senor' or 'sir.' I am not usually as disagreeable as this in dealing with my fellow men, but you have begun wrong with us, Gato, and the first thing you'll have to learn to do will be to treat us with proper courtesy."

From the shaft entrance showed the faces of four grinning, wondering Mexicans of the usual type. The talk had proceeded in Spanish, and they had been able to follow it.

As for the mine manager, his bronzed face was distorted with rage. The veins near his forehead were swelling. With a sudden roar, Pedro Gato sprang forward, aiming a blow with his open right hand at Reade's face.

Bump! That blow failed to land. It was Gato, instead, who landed. He went down on his back, striking the ground with jarring force.

"What did I say?" whispered Dr. Tisco.

"Wait!" responded Don Luis, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Well-nigh frothing at the mouth, Pedro Gato leaped to his feet. All was red now before his eyes. He rushed forward bellowing like a bull, intent on crushing the young American who had dared to treat him thus.

Tom's left fist drove into the fellow's unguarded face. His right followed, and Gato, big as he was, staggered back. Tom's right foot performed a trip that sent the big Mexican bully to earth again.

"Now get up, Gato, like a man of intelligence, and behave yourself," advised Reade coolly. "Just

because we have had a bad introduction is no reason why we should continue enemies. You treat me with proper respect and I'll do as much for you."

But Gato snarled like a wild beast. He was not armed. With every man in these Bonista mountains afraid of him, Gato had never felt the need of carrying weapons. But now he plunged to the doorway of the shaft house, then came bounding back, flourishing a knife that he had snatched from one of the *peons*.

"Back! Back, Gato!" shouted Dr. Tisco, rushing from the office building.

To the secretary Gato paid no heed. He was close to Tom now, circling cautiously around the young engineer. Harry, though not at all minded to bolt, had stepped back far enough to give Reade elbow room.

"Stop, Gato!" shouted Don Luis. "It is I who command it—I, Don Luis. Throw your knife on the ground."

Gato snarled, but he was cowed. The brutal manager held his employer in awe. He was about to cast his weapon down when Tom Reade interposed.

"Don Luis, I ask you to let the fellow go on. This question will have to be settled right before we can proceed. This fellow is only a coward, or he wouldn't need a knife in fighting with a man half his size."

"Better throw away your knife, my good Gato," purred Don Luis, "or Senor Reade will shoot you."

"I won't," Tom retorted. "I couldn't, anyway. I am not armed. I never was enough afraid of any one to carry weapons. But let Gato go on with his knife. If he fails, then I shall hit him until my arm aches."

"Stop, Senor Reade! I command it!" cried Don Luis, imperiously. "And you, Gato, throw down your knife. I will not have fighting here among men who must be friends."

But Gato, after hearing himself described as a coward, saw only red before his eyes. He must have this Gringo's life, and that quickly. Afterwards he would explain and seek Don Luis's pardon.

"If you prefer, Gato, we will shake hands and forget this," suggested Tom Reade.

"Ah, so you are afraid?" sneered the mine manager.

"Try me and see, if you prefer that," Tom retorted.

With a snarl Gato circled closer. Don Luis Montez snatched from one of his pockets a silver-mounted revolver, but Hazelton caught the flash and in the next instant he had wrenched the pistol away from the mine owner.

"This is Reade's fight, Don Luis," Harry explained.

"Hand back my pistol instantly," hissed Don Luis.

"Not until the fight is decided, Don Luis," Harry rejoined. Slipping the weapon into one of his own pockets he retreated a few yards.

Suddenly Gato sprang, the knife uplifted. Tom Reade leaped in the same fraction of a second. Tom's shoulder landed under Gato's right shoulder, and the knife did not descend. Like a flash Tom bent as he wheeled. Gripping the mine manager by the captured arm, Tom threw him forcefully over his own shoulder. Pedro Gato landed, half-dazed, on the ground. Tom, snatching the knife, hurled it as far as he could throw it.

Snarling, the big fellow started to rise. As he did so Tom Reade's fist landed, sending the Greaser bully to earth. The big fellow made several efforts to rise, but each time Tom's fist sent him flat again, until a final heavy blow silenced him.

"Don Luis," explained Tom, quietly, turning and bowing, "I can't begin to tell you how much I regret this unavoidable scene. When I encountered this big bully I was at once tempted to resign my position here with you, for I realize, of course, that I cannot hope to go on with any such man in a position where I would have to depend so much upon his cheerful and friendly service. I would have resigned, but I realize, Don Luis, how much expense you have gone to in the matter of getting us here, and I know, also, that there might be a good deal of delay in getting some one else to take our places."

"Gato will not trouble you again," promised Don Luis, bowing charmingly.

"Of course not, sir," Tom rejoined. "I couldn't work here and let him go on annoying me all the time. Don Luis, I shall have to crave your indulgence to the extent of discharging this fellow and securing another manager who is less of a wild beast and more of a man."

"Oh, but I cannot let Pedro Gato go," protested Don Luis, quickly. "He is too old an employ, too valuable a man. No other could manage my *peons* as he does."

"Let me go!" begged Gato, harshly. "Let me go, that I may have all my time to myself that I may find the best way to avenge myself on this miserable Gringo. Don Luis, do not think of attempting to keep me penned in *El Sombrero*. I must be idle that I may have the more time to think."

Tom remained silent. He had stated his case, and the decision must be found by Don Luis.

"For many reasons," whispered Dr. Tisco, "let Gato go. For either good or bad reasons it will be best to let him go."

"You are right, Carlos," nodded the mine owner quickly. Then, raising his voice:

"My good Gato, you shall have your wish," he went on, in his purring tone. "Yet do not think there is anger behind my words. I let you go because it is your wish. I do not so decide that I may humiliate you, but because you have served me well. When you need a friend, Gatito, you will know to whom to send word. Go your way in friendship."

Even Tom Reade, with his somewhat scant knowledge of Spanish, was quick to note, mentally, the meaning of that term, "Gatito," which meant "little Gato," and was used as a term of affection. It was a form of telegraphy that was not wasted on the departing mine manager, either, for it told him that Don Luis had some excellent reason for thus quickly falling in with the wishes of the new American chief engineer.

With a grateful smile at Don Luis, then with a scowl of unutterable hatred flung in Tom Reade's direction, Pedro Gato next turned on his heel and strode up the path.

From his pocket Harry Hazelton drew forth the silver-mounted revolver and approached the owner of the mine.

"Allow me to return this to you, Don Luis," urged Hazelton. "I must also apologize for having snatched it from you so rudely. I did not know what else to do, for I feared that you intended to interfere in the quarrel."

"And what if I had so intended?" asked the Mexican mine owner, with one of his puzzling smiles.

"Just this," Harry answered, candidly. "Mr. Reade never gets into a fight if he can help it. When he does find himself in one I have learned, from long experience, not to interfere unless he calls for help. So I did not want any one to interfere between him and Gato."

"It was a most unfortunate affair," said the Mexican. "Senor Tomaso, I must warn you that Pedro Gato is one who never forgives an injury. He will devote himself to thoughts of a revenge that shall be terrible enough to satisfy his wounded feelings. You will do well to be on your guard."

Tom smiled as he replied:

"Don Luis, I trust that I have seen the last of the fellow."

"Be assured that you have not seen the last of him, Senor Tomaso."

"Then it may go hard with Gato," smiled Tom, carelessly. "But I trust I have not offended you in this matter, Don Luis. If I have, I am willing to withdraw, and I will reimburse you for the expense you have incurred in bringing us here."

"I shall not let you go," smiled the Mexican, "unless you feel that you no longer wish to remain in the same country with Pedro Gato."

"That thought has not entered my mind, sir," Reade responded, almost stiffly.

"Then we will say no more about the matter, and you will remain," nodded the Mexican. "And now we will go down into the mine and give you your first chance to examine our problems there."

As they entered the shaft house it was discovered that the elevator cage was at the foot of the shaft. While they waited for the cage to come up, keen Dr. Tisco whispered to Tom:

"Senor Reade, night and day you must be unceasingly on your guard against Gato. In these mountains a hundred men will follow his beck and call."

"If they are all like him, then Gato should turn bandit," laughed young Reade.

"It is not unlikely that he will do so," sighed Tisco, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "In Mexico, when a defeated man seeks blood revenge it is no uncommon thing for him to turn bandit until he has accomplished his hope of a terrible revenge. Then, afterwards, if the bandit has annoyed the government enough, and has repeatedly escaped capture, the bandit makes his peace with the authorities and receives his pardon."

The cage arriving at this moment, the four men entered, and started downward. Three hundred and sixty feet from the earth's surface Don Luis led them from the car into a tunnel.

"I will now show you," promised Don Luis, "something of the problem that confronts the engineers of this mine."

"Keep your eyes open, and your wits about you, Harry," whispered Tom Reade. "I may be wholly wrong, yet, somehow, I can't quite rid myself of a notion that Don Luis wants us for some piece of rascally work, though of what kind I can't imagine."

"I shall watch these two Gringos like a cat," reflected Dr. Tisco. "I half suspect that they will foolishly sacrifice their lives sooner than serve us."

CHAPTER IV

TOM DOES SOME SAMPLING

At sight of Don Luis's party a Mexican foreman came running forward.

"How runs the ore this morning?" asked Don Luis.

"Not quite as well as usual, excellency," replied the man, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"How! Do you mean to tell me that the ore is running out for a streak!"

"Oh, no, excellency. Yet it is the poorest ore that we have struck for a fortnight. However, it will pay expenses and leave something for profit, too, excellency."

"Show us what you have been doing," Don Luis directed.

Leading the way with a lantern that threw a brilliant light, the foreman went on down the tunnel to the heading. As he neared the end of the tunnel the man called loudly and a number of workmen stepped aside.

As they reached the spot, Tom's quick eye saw that the morning's blasts had loosened some eight tons or so of ore. Drillers stood ready to drive through the rock for the next blast.

"Let us look at the ore, Senor Tomaso," suggested the mine owner.

Tom began to delve through the piles of shattered, reduced rock. The foreman held the lantern close, that the young engineer might have all the light he wanted, and called to miners to bring their lights closer.

Then Harry, also, began to examine the rock. For some minutes the two young engineers picked up specimens and examined them.

"What do you make of it?" inquired Don Luis Montez at last.

"Is this what you call a run of poor luck?" Tom asked the foreman, dryly.

"Yes, senor; rather poor," answered the foreman.

"Then it must be rather exciting here when the ore is running well," smiled Tom. "At a guess I should say that this 'poor' stuff before us will run thirty dollars to the ton."

"It usually runs fifty, senior," broke in Don Luis. "Sometimes, for a run of a hundred tons, the ore will show up better than seventy-five dollars per ton."

"Whew!" whistled Reade. "Then no wonder you call this the land of golden promise."

"By comparison it would make the mines in the United States look poor, would it not?" laughed the mine owner.

"There are very few mines there that show frequent runs of fifty dollars to the ton," Harry observed.

"Are you going to clear out this ore, and send it to the dump?"
Tom asked the foreman.

"Yes."

"Then I would be glad if you would do so at once," Tom remarked.

For answer the Mexican foreman stared at Tom in a rather puzzled way.

"I will do so as soon as I am ordered," he responded, respectfully.

"All right," returned Reade. "I'll give you the order. Clear this stuff out and get it up in the ore cage. Clear this tunnel floor with all the speed you comfortably can."

"Perhaps the senior will explain?" suggested the foreman.

"These *caballeros* are the new engineers in charge of the mine," said Dr. Tisco.

"Ah! So? Then if Pedro Gato will only give the order—" began the foreman.

"If Pedro Gato gives you any orders," Tom suggested, briskly, "you will ignore them. Pedro Gato is no longer connected with the mine."

"Not connected?" gasped the foreman, who plainly doubted his ears.

"No," broke in Don Luis. "You will take no more orders from Gato. These *caballeros* are the engineers, and they are in charge. You heard the order of Senior Reade. You will clean out this tunnel, sending the ore above to the dump."

"It shall be done," cried the foreman, bowing low before the mine owner.

"And now, Senior Tomaso, if it suits you, we will go to another tunnel," proposed Don Luis.

"Very good, sir," Tom assented. "What had been in my mind was to order the drillers at work here and see a blast made."

"We can be back long before the next blast can be prepared," replied Montez. "Carlos, lead the way to tunnel number four."

The secretary turned, retracing his steps, Don Luis bringing up the rear.

"Oho! I have dropped my cigar case," remarked Don Luis a minute later. "I will go back and get it."

The others waited near the shaft. Tom wondered, slightly, why Dr. Tisco had not volunteered to go back after his employer's missing cigar case.

Presently Don Luis appeared.

"Now we will go to number four," he said.

The cage carried them to a lower level. Here another foreman came forward to meet them and to conduct them to the heading. Here were some five tons of rock. Tom and Harry found it to be about the same grade of ore as that seen above.

"Is this ore as good as you usually find in this vein?" Tom inquired of the second foreman.

"Not quite, senior, though to-day's blasts have turned out to be very fair ore," responded the foreman.

"I should say it is good ore," Tom remarked dryly. "Now, will you set the shovelers at work moving

this stuff back a little way? I want to see a new drilling made and watch the results of the blast."

"If Pedro Gato—" began the foreman, reluctantly.

"Pedro Gato has nothing to do with this," Tom answered quickly. "Mr. Hazelton and I are privileged to give such orders as we deem best. Will you kindly tell the foreman so, Don Luis?"

"It is quite true," replied the mine owner. "Gato is no longer with us, and these gentlemen are in charge."

"Then I will have the ore moved back at once," agreed the foreman.

"But first we will go back out of the dirt and out of the danger from the blast," spoke Don Luis, using a good deal the tone of an order.

"The rest of you may go back," suggested Reade. "But I wish to see the drilling done."

"It is unnecessary, Senor Tomaso," smiled Don Luis, blandly.
"Come back with us."

"I must see the men work, Don Luis, if I am to understand the work here," Tom rejoined, very quietly, though with a firmness that was wholly apparent.

"Oh, very good then," smiled Montez, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Three of the inspecting party went back, but Tom remained close behind the drillers. Twice he stopped them in their work, to collect small samples of the pulverized stuff that the drills turned back. These specimens he placed in sample envelopes and stored in his pockets. From the ore that was being shoveled back he chose other small specimens, labeling the envelopes in which he stored them.

By the time that the ore had been shoveled well back the drillers had completed their work. Now the "dope men" came forward, putting the sticks of dynamite in place. Tom watched them closely.

"Do you call this last work well done?" Tom inquired of the foreman of the tunnel.

"Yes, yes, senor, as well as I have been able to see," responded the Mexican.

"Then come with me. Just look at the tamping. Hardly worthy of the name of tamping, is it?" Tom asked, poking at the material that had been forced in as tamping.

"Senor, my men must have been indolent, this time," admitted the foreman.

"Very indolent, or else indifferent," Tom smiled, grimly. "Here, you men, come here and let me show you how to set dynamite and tamp it. Perhaps I do not understand the job very well, but we shall see."

Ten minutes later Tom Reade abandoned his work, rather well satisfied.

"Now, when we fire the blasts, we shall move some rock, I believe," he smiled.

The wires were attached, and all hands went back, most of them going considerably to the rear of the man at the magneto battery.

A rocking explosion followed. Tom was among the first to run forward. At the heading were heaps of rock.

"Get in and pry it loose. Shovel it back," Tom ordered, in Spanish.

Shortly after, Don Luis, Dr. Tisco and Harry appeared on the scene. They found Tom turning over the ore as it came back. More than a dozen samples he dropped into envelopes, labeled them and put them away in his pockets.

"What ails this lot of ore?" inquired Harry, after looking at specimens.

"It is not running as well," said Tom briefly. "Go through the stuff and see what you think of it."

"But we have much more to see, *caballeros*," interposed Don Luis.

"If you will be kind enough to indulge me here, for a few minutes more, I shall be grateful," Tom informed him.

"Oh, very good," assented Don Luis, with a shrug of his shoulders. "But it is not my purpose to tire you with too many observations on our first trip through the mine."

With a fine sample of Castillian courtesy and patience, Don Luis waited, smoking, until Reade had quite finished his inspection.

"I am now at your service, Don Luis," announced the young chief engineer, rising and going toward his employer.

The remaining four tunnels of *El Sombrero* Mine were visited. In each tunnel was the same pile of ore awaiting them, and it all looked good. That in number three was the richest ore of all.

"Now, I think we have seen enough for today," announced Don Luis, when they had inspected number three tunnel.

"Then if you will go along and let me join you later, I shall appreciate it," Tom suggested politely.

"You wish to linger?" queried Don Luis, looking amused.

"I wish to see a blast made here," Tom replied.

"I, too, would like to see one," Harry added.

"Then we will wait for you," agreed Don Luis, with a sigh that contained just a trace of impatience.

A drilling and a blast were made. Again a lot of poor rock was loosened. Tom and Harry collected specimens, labeling them.

"Now, we will return to the house," said Don Luis.

"I would really like to put in a long day here at the mine," proposed Reade, reluctantly.

"To-morrow, then," nodded Don Luis. "But, for to-day, I am tired of this place. There is much about which I wish to consult you, *caballeros*, at my office."

Tom glanced swiftly, covertly at Harry, then responded:

"In that case, my dear Don Luis, we are wholly at your service."

CHAPTER V

THE MINE THAT DID AND DIDN'T

At the head of the shaft, Nicolas, the servant, awaited them.

"Nicolas, you rascal!" exclaimed Don Luis, angrily. "You have not been attending your *caballeros*."

"Your pardon, excellency, but the automobile moved too swiftly for me," pleaded Nicolas. "All the way to the mine I ran, and here I have waited until now."

"Keep pace with your duties hereafter, scoundrel," commanded Don Luis, angrily.

Nicolas stepped meekly to the rear of the party. It was his business to attend Tom and Harry everywhere. In Mexico one of the grade of gentleman, if he wishes only a glass of water, does not go for it; he sends the attending servant.

This time Nicolas slipped up on the front seat of the car beside the chauffeur. The car traveled at a high rate of speed over the rough road.

"It must cost you a mint of money for tires and repairs, not to speak of new cars," laughed Tom, after he had been bounced up two feet in the air as the automobile ran over a rough place in the road.

"Pouf! What does it matter, to a man who owns *El Sombrero*?" smiled Don Luis Montez.

"I am answered," Tom agreed. "The price of a few imported cars cannot matter much to you."

"How many better mines than *El Sombrero* have you seen?" questioned the mine owner, leaning

forward.

"None," said Tom, promptly.

"If all days' indications are as good as those of to-day," Harry added.

"To-day has been but a poor day at the mine," murmured Dr. Tisco.

"Then *El Sombrero* is indeed a marvel," Tom declared.

"It is a very rich mine," nodded Don Luis. "Yet there may be richer ones, in these mountains, yet undiscovered."

"Where is the next best mine around here?" Tom inquired.

"Perhaps it is *El Padre*," murmured Don Luis, after a slight pause.

"Where is *El Padre* (the Priest) located?" Tom wanted to know.

"It is about four miles from here, up over that road," Don Luis rejoined, pointing out the direction.

"May I ask if *El Padre* is one of your properties, Don Luis?"
Tom continued.

"No; why should I want it when I own *El Sombrero*?"

"Not unless you wish to own as many mines as possible."

"*El Sombrero* should be enough for my greatest dreams of wealth," declared Don Luis, closing his eyes dreamily.

Then the car stopped before the house.

Don Luis alighted, Tom and Harry at his heels. A servant appeared at the entrance to the court and informed him that the midday meal was ready to serve.

"We will go to the table, then," exclaimed the Mexican. "After having luncheon we shall be ready for an afternoon of hard work."

No sooner had the young engineers slipped into their seats at table than Nicolas appeared behind their chairs. He served them gravely and without a word.

For nearly an hour the luncheon lasted. Finally the dishes were cleared away and several boxes of cigars were brought. Tom and Harry both declined them. Dr. Tisco lighted a cigar at once; Don Luis spent much time in selecting his cigar. This he lighted with the same deliberation. At last the mine owner settled back in his seat.

"*Caballeros*," he inquired, suddenly, "what did you think of *El Sombrero*?"

"I would call it, Don Luis," Harry replied, with enthusiasm, "the finest mine I have seen or heard of."

"You did not see the best of the ore to-day," Montez assured them.

"What ore we did see is as fine as any we would ever wish to see,"
Tom said.

"Then you were delighted with the mine?" inquired their host, turning to Reade and speaking more eagerly.

"If the ore always runs as well," Tom rejoined, "it ought to be one of the richest gold and silver properties in the world."

"Pouf! The ore usually runs much better—is worth much more than that which you saw to-day," protested Don Luis.

"Then you are to be congratulated on possessing a treasure among mines," Tom commented.

"I am delighted to hear you say that."

"But when we adjourn to your office," Reade continued, "there are a few questions that I shall want to ask you."

"Why not ask them here, Senor Tomaso?" queried Don Luis, in his purring, half affectionate voice.

"Here at your table?" protested Reade.

"But this is not dinner. This is a mere business luncheon," replied Don Luis, with another smile.

"Yet I would like to discuss some of the samples with you, Don Luis," Tom explained. "Surely, you do not wish me to bring out dirty samples to spread on your fine linen."

"It would matter not," declared the Mexican. "Still, if you have scruples about the proprieties, then we will go to the office within a few minutes."

The two who were smoking continued to do so. Don Luis started to describe some of his experiments in raising Spanish mules. The finest mules that come out of Spain, class, in price, with blooded horses. Don Luis talked with the enthusiasm of one who understood and loved mules.

Then, finally, they passed to the office.

"Now, I shall be glad to talk with you for hours," the Mexican hidalgo assured the young engineers.

Dr. Tisco, as though to show that he took no personal interest in the talk, retired to an armchair at the further end of the room. Nevertheless, the secretary observed carefully all that was said. Covertly he studied the faces of the young engineers at all times.

"Ask me what you will," begged Don Luis, as he sank into an easy chair close to the table on which Tom began to arrange his envelopes of specimens taken from the mine.

"First of all, Don Luis," Tom began, "you spoke of some problems that you wished us to solve in the operation of your mine."

"Yes, Senor Tomaso."

"I would like to ask you what the problems are that we are to consider," Tom announced.

"Did you not see some of the problems before you, while we were going through the mine?" inquired Montez.

"At the risk, Don Luis, of appearing stupid, I must confess that I did not."

"Ah, well, then we shall come to the problems presently. You have other questions. Ask some of them."

For a moment or two Reade studied what he had written on the various envelopes before him. Then he picked out two.

"Here, Don Luis," the young chief engineer went on, "are samples of two lots of ore. The first is from the pile that we found pried loose when we went into the first tunnel that we visited. It is rich ore."

"It is good enough ore," Montez replied, with a polite shrug of the shoulders.

"Now, from the second tunnel that we entered, and where we also found a pile of loose ore, here is another sample. It is as rich as the first sample."

"Certainly, Senor Tomaso."

"But in this second tunnel I had a drilling made and a blast fired. Here," picking up a third envelope and emptying it, "is a sample of the ore that we saw taken from that blast. If this sample contains any gold or silver the quantity is so small, evidently, as to render this kind of ore worthless."

"Yes?" murmured Don Luis, softly. "What is it that you have to say?"

"Why, sir, how does it happen that, right on top of such extra-fine ore we run upon blank rock at the very next blasting."

"That sometimes happens in *El Sombrero*," Don Luis replied, smoothly,

"How often has it happened?" asked Tom, looking up from the table and glancing keenly at Don Luis.

Dr. Tisco, though he appeared to be almost asleep, stirred uneasily.

"How often has it happened?" repeated Don Luis. "Oh, perhaps a dozen times in a few months, taking all the tunnels together."

"How long have these streaks of blank rock been?" insisted Tom Reade, while Harry wondered at what his chum was driving.

"How long?" echoed Montez, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Oh, how should I know? Personally I am not interested in such things."

"But have you gone as much as a whole week drilling and blasting through blank rock?" Tom pressed.

"A week? No; not for two days. Of that I am certain. But why do you ask all this, Senor Tomaso?"

"In order that I may better understand the nature of the mine," Reade responded. "I want to know what the chances are, as based on the record of the mine to date. Of course, Don Luis, you know what it means, often, when pay ore fails to come out of a streak, and a solid wall of blank rock is encountered."

By "blank rock" Tom meant rock that did not contain a promising or paying amount of metal in the ore.

"What it means?" Montez asked. "No; I can't say that I do."

"The wall of blank rock, found at the end of a vein of gold, Don Luis, often, if not usually, means that the vein has run out, and that it is useless to dig further."

"I did not know that," murmured the Mexican, in a tone of merely polite astonishment. "Then you believe that *El Sombrero* will not turn out much more profitable ore?"

"I didn't say that," Tom continued. "But I will admit that finding the wall of blank rock ahead made me a bit nervous. Some great mines have been started, Don Luis, as you must be aware. For a few weeks they have panned out ore of the highest value. Much capital has been put into such mines, and for a time men have thought they owned a new Golconda. Then—suddenly—the blank wall, and no more gold has ever come out of that mine. In other words, it was but a pocket of rich gold that had been struck, and nothing more. Hundreds of men have ruined themselves by investing in such mines."

"I see," murmured Don Luis, thoughtfully.

"You did not know this before?" Tom asked, in some amazement.

"No, Senor Tomaso. I have been a good business man, I suppose, for I have prospered; and much of my money has been made in mining. Yet I have never had the assurance to consider myself a practical mining man. Dr. Tisco, here, is—"

"An ignoramus on the subject of mining," declared the secretary, who appeared just then to wake up.

"Carlos is modest," laughed Don Luis. "True, he is not a skilled mining man, yet he knows so much on the subject that, compared with him, I am an ignoramus. But that is what you are here for, you two. You are the experts. Investigate, and then instruct us."

"Have you any record of the number of times that you have encountered the blank rock, and the number of feet in thickness of the wall in each case?" Tom asked.

"Oh, no."

"That is unfortunate," said Reade, thoughtfully. "Hereafter we will keep such a record carefully. Don Luis, I will admit that I am perplexed and worried over this blank rock problem. I know Hazelton is, too."

"Yes, it is very strange," agreed Harry, looking up. Truth to tell, he had hardly been following the talk at all. Harry Hazelton was quite content to be caught napping whenever Tom Reade had his eyes open.

"Now, I would like to go back to the mine and stay there until some time in the night," Tom proposed. "I would like to take Hazelton with me. Soon we will arrange it, if necessary, so that Harry and I shall divide the time at the mine. Whenever, in any of the tunnels, blank rock is struck, whichever one of us is in charge will stay by the blank rock blasting, keeping careful record, until pay ore is struck again."

"You two young engineers are too infernally methodical," grumbled Dr. Tisco under his breath."

"That is a very excellent plan," smiled Montez, amiably. "We will put some such plan into operation as soon as we are fairly under way. But not to-day."

"I would like to start at once," Tom insisted.

"Not to-day," once more replied Don Luis, though without losing patience. "Yet, if you are anxious to know how the blank rock is coming I can telephone the mine and get all the information within five minutes. That will be an excellent idea. I will do it now, in fact."

Crossing the room, Don Luis rang and called for the mine.

"Our young engineers are very sharp—especially Senor Reade," murmured Dr. Tisco to himself, while the telephone conversation was going on in Spanish. "Yet I wonder if our young engineer does not half suspect that Don Luis has no man at the other end of the wire?"

Tom did not suspect the telephone trick. In fact, the young chief engineer had as yet no deep suspicion that Don Luis was a rogue at heart.

"The report is excellent," called Don Luis, gayly, as he came back. "In that tunnel where we saw the blasting done the blank rock has been penetrated, and the rich ore is coming again."

"How I'd like to see it!" Tom glowed.

"Why?" asked Don Luis, quickly.

"Because I am anxious to know all the secrets, all the indications, of fine old *El Sombrero*."

"It *is* a fine mine, isn't it, Senor Tomaso?" demanded Don Luis, enthusiastically.

"From all indications it ought to be," Reade answered. "Yet it's a new formation of rock to me—this sandwich formation as I might call it, with the alternate layers of rich ore and blank stuff."

"I have been drawing up a report on the mine," murmured Montez, opening a drawer in his desk. "This report describes the operations and the profits so far. Glance through it with me."

The report had been written in English, by either Dr. Tisco or his employer.

Tom and Harry listened carefully to the reading.

"But why do you put so much enthusiasm into the report, Don Luis, when the mine is not for sale and is not to be run as a stock company property?"

"Of course, *El Sombrero* is my sole property, and of course I shall keep it so," smiled the Mexican. "But I like, even in a report to myself, for my own use, to have the report set forth all the truths concerning the mine."

"That is reasonable," Tom agreed.

"Now, Senor Tomaso, as you have seen, this report is couched in my own English. I would be glad if you would write this out for me, putting it into better English."

"It would seem like presumption in me to think that I could put it into better English," Reade protested.

"Nevertheless, to please me, will you put this report into your own English?" requested Don Luis.

"With all the pleasure in the world," Tom assented.

"Here are writing materials, then."

"But I see that you have a typewriting machine over in the corner," suggested the young chief engineer. "I can write the report much better and more rapidly on the machine."

"Ah!" breathed the Mexican, looking highly pleased. "If you will but do that! We will go outside so as not to disturb you."

The report, being a long one and containing several tables of figures, Reade was occupied nearly three hours. During this time Don Luis conducted Harry over the estate, pointing out many things of

interest. At last Tom, with a slight backache from bending so long over the machine, leaned back and carefully read what he had written.

"Do you wish anything, *caballero*?" inquired Nicolas, appearing as though from hiding.

"You might be good enough to tell Don Luis that I have finished, and that I await his pleasure."

Nicolas disappeared. Five minutes later Montez, his secretary and Hazelton came in. Tom read through his typewritten draft of the report.

"Excellent! gr-r-r-rand! glorious!" breathed Don Luis. "Ah, you are a master of English, Senor Tomaso. Myself, I understand Spanish better. And now one stroke of the pen for each of you," added the *hidalgo*, crossing the room to his desk. "As my new engineers you shall both sign this report, and I shall have much pleasure from reading this, many times, when I am an old man."

Don Luis dipped a pen in ink, then held it up. Harry was about to take the pen when Tom Reade drawled:

"It wouldn't be quite right for us to sign this report, Don Luis."

"Why not?" queried the Mexican, wheeling like a flash.

"Just for the simple reason," Reade answered, "that to sign the report would be to state all the facts contained in the report as being of our personal observation. We haven't seen enough of the mine, as yet, for it to be right for us to sign the report. An engineer's signature to a report is his statement—ON HONOR—that he personally knows such report to be true. So I am very certain you will understand that it would be a breach of honor for us to sign this document."

"Ah! He is clever—and now the real trouble must begin!" Dr. Tisco told himself. "These engineers are not easily duped, but in Don Luis's hands they will destroy themselves!"

CHAPTER VI

WATCHING THE MIDNIGHT LIGHTS

Don Luis Montez laid down the pen. Outwardly he was as amiable as ever; certainly he was all smiles.

"A thousand pardons, *caballeros*!" he murmured. "Of course, you are quite right. It had not occurred to me in that light before. True, the report was intended only for my own pleasure in later years, but that does not alter the nice point of honor."

Tom Reade was deceived by Don Luis's manner. He did not suspect that, at this very instant, the Mexican was consumed with demoniacal rage.

"I shall not be patient another time," muttered Don Luis, between his teeth and under his breath. Yet aloud he said:

"We have had too much of business to-day. We are tiring ourselves. Until dinner time let us go outside and be gentlemen. Business for to-morrow or next week. And my dear daughter. Brute! I have been forgetting her."

Senorita Francesca, a darkly beautiful girl of eighteen, shy and retiring from the convent schooling that had ended but lately, soon came downstairs at her father's summons. Dr. Tisco bowed low before the charming girl. Tom and Harry were presented, and tried to make themselves agreeable to the young Mexican girl. Senorita Francesca's shyness, however, made this somewhat difficult, so the young engineers felt inwardly grateful when Dr. Tisco strolled down the porch with her.

Dinner proved to be a somewhat formal affair. Yet, as soon as the meal was finished Senorita Francesca was escorted from the dining room by her father and returned to her room.

"What did you think of the young lady, Tom?" Harry asked his chum when he could do so privately.

"A fine-looking girl," Reade answered briefly. "But I fear she would be highly offended if she knew that, all through dinner, my every thought was on the mine and the problems that we shall find there."

"I want to talk with you about that mine, and about some impressions that I have formed here," murmured Hazelton.

"Then another time, my dear fellow, for here comes Don Luis, and I see Dr. Tisco returning from the garden."

That forestalled conversation for the time being. When the young engineers, still relentlessly attended by Nicolas, sought their own rooms Hazelton was so drowsy that he undressed hurriedly and dropped into bed.

Later in the night Harry sat up suddenly in the dark. Some one was moving in the parlor that separated the two bedrooms. An instant after awakening Harry slipped off the bed, then stole toward the next room.

In the darkness he made out a moving figure. Like a panther Harry sprang, landing on the all but invisible figure.

"Now, I've got you!" Hazelton hissed, wrapping his arms around the prowler.

"And small credit to you," drawled Tom's dry voice. "Hist!"

"What's up?" demanded Hazelton, dropping his voice to a whisper.

"You and I are."

"But what's the matter?"

"I couldn't sleep," Tom whispered.

"You—troubled with nerves!" gasped Hazelton.

"Not just the way you understand it," returned Tom. "But I was thinking, thinking, and I sat by the window yonder. Come over there, Harry, but step without noise."

Wondering what it all meant, Hazelton softly followed his chum to the open window.

"Now, look," said Tom, pointing, "and tell me what you see."

"A moment ago I thought I saw a light twinkling over there among the hills."

"Look sixty seconds longer, and you'll see more lights, Harry; those lights are on the trail that leads from the nearest gold mines to *El Sombrero*. It is the trail Don Luis pointed out to us to-day."

"But what—"

"Harry, I'm going to get on my clothes and slip over in that direction. Do you want to go with me?"

"Yes; but what—"

"I can tell you better when we're on the way. Come on; dress! We can easily leave the house without being detected."

Though Harry had already been through hosts of adventures, he felt creepy as he dressed with speed and stealth, bent on slipping unobserved out of their employer's house. But he was used to following his chum's lead.

When both were ready, which was very soon, Tom softly opened the door of their parlor, thrusting one foot out into the broad corridor. As he did so he kicked against a man lying prostrate on the floor. It was Nicolas, the Mexican attendant, sleeping across their threshold that he might be on hand when wanted.

The man stirred, muttered something almost inaudible, then gradually began to breathe more deeply. Tom, after waiting, took a step over the body of Nicolas. Harry closed the door behind them, then followed. Soon after they stood out on the lawn.

"I'm glad Nicolas went to sleep again," muttered Tom, in a low voice. "The fellow would have insisted on following us, and I wouldn't want him with us to-night, to tell Don Luis everything."

"But what on earth—"

"Harry, old fellow, Don Luis is the essence of courtesy. He has been very polite to us, too. Yet something has aroused a suspicion in me that Don Luis Montez wishes to use us in some way that we wouldn't care to be used. So I'm saying little, but my eyes are going to be open all the time from now on."

"Oh, Don Luis must be on the square," Hazelton retorted. "What could he want of us that is crooked?"

"I don't know, yet," Tom replied, as he led the way rapidly down the road. "But I'm going to watch, and, if there's anything wrong, I'm going to get a line on it."

"*El Sombrero* is Don Luis's own mine. Surely he hasn't hired us to fool him about his own property."

"I don't know what it is that's wrong," Tom admitted. "Nor am I sure that anything is wrong. But I'm going to do my own watching and gather some of my own information. See, there are the lights on that trail beyond, and there are several lights. It looks like a caravan moving down the trail."

"A caravan?" Harry repeated. "Of what?"

"I don't know, Harry. That's what I'm here to-night to find out."

Brisk, soft walking brought them nearer and nearer to the twinkling lights along the trail that ran into their own road at a point lower down.

"I wish I knew what on earth Tom is thinking about," Harry muttered to himself. "However, I may as well save my breath just now. If I hang to him I'm likely to know what it is."

"We'll reach a hiding place from which we can watch that caravan, or whatever it is, turn from the hill trail into this road," Tom whispered, after they had gone somewhat further.

At this point the main road that ran from Don Luis's estate to his mine was decidedly irregular. Many boulders jutted out, making a frequent change in the course of the road necessary. It was Tom's intention to gain the nearest ledge of rock of this sort to the hill trail, and there hide to watch the caravan.

They had nearly reached this point when out of the darkness a figure stole softly to meet them.

"Nicolas!" muttered Tom, in a low voice, all but rubbing his eyes. "How on earth did you get here?"

"Am I not commanded to keep with you everywhere, and serve you in all things?" demanded the servant. "Do not go around that next point in the road, *caballeros*. If you do, you will run straight into Pedro Gato, who has other men with him."

CHAPTER VII

DON LUIS'S ENGINEERING PROBLEM

"Gato?" whispered Harry. "What is he doing around here?"

"There is no reason why we should care what he is doing," Tom returned. "He isn't in the employ of the mine. Come along, Harry."

But Nicolas seized the young chief engineer by the arm.

"Beat me, if you will, Senor Americano," pleaded Nicolas. "But don't encounter Gato. It would be as much as your life is worth."

"Why? Is Gato on the warpath for us?" Tom questioned.

"I fear so," Nicolas answered. "Don't let him see you."

"But I must see him, if the fellow is out for us," muttered Tom. "Show me where he is."

"He and three or four men are camped just around there," said the Mexican servant, pointing.

"Come along, Harry," Tom whispered. "Go cat-foot."

Ere the young engineers came in sight around the turn a slight glow of light against the stones caught their glance. Tom held a hand behind him as a signal to Hazelton to slow up. Then Reade peered around a jutting ledge of rock.

On the ground, around a low camp-fire, were seated four Mexicans. Two of the number had rifles, that lay on the ground near them. Behind them, an ugly scowl on his face, sat Gato, his back resting against a rock.

"But you will not find your enemies out here to-night, Senor Gato," softly remarked one of the quartette around the fire.

"No," admitted Gato, in a growling voice.

"Then why are we waiting here?"

"Because it pleases me," snapped the big fellow. "What ails you? Am I not paying you?"

"But two of us—and I am one of them—do not like to be seen," rejoined the speaker at the fire. "The troops hunt us. There is a price on our heads."

"Bandits!" muttered Tom Reade, under his breath, as he drew back. "I have heard that Mexico is overrun with bandits. These gentlemen are some of the fraternity."

"Take us up to the house, Gato," urged one of the men at the fire. "We shall know how to enter and find your friends. Everyone sleeps there. It will be the safer way."

"It does not suit me," retorted Gato, sullenly.

"But why not?"

"Am I not paying you?"

"Yes."

"Then take my orders and do not ask questions."

At this there were sounds of dissatisfaction from all four of these bad men.

"For one thing," Gato explained, "Don Luis would not like it. He would accuse me of treachery—or worse. I do not want Don Luis's ill will, you see."

"But Don Luis will be angry, in any case, if you injure his engineers, won't he?" asked one of the men.

"A little, but after a while, Don Luis will not care what I do to the Americanos," growled Pedro Gato.

"Humph! That's interesting—if true," whispered Tom Reade.

"Yet what are we doing here?" insisted one of the men. "Here, so close to where the troops might pick us up?"

"You are obeying orders," snarled Gato.

"But that information is not quite enough to suit us," objected one of the Mexicans.

"You might go your own way, then," sneered Gato. "I can find other men who are not so curious. However, I will say that, when daylight comes, we will hide not far from here. None of you know the Americanos by sight. I will point them out to you as they pass by in the daylight."

"And then—what?" pressed one of the rough men. "Are we to kill the Americanos from ambush?"

"Eh?" gasped Tom Reade, with a start.

"If you have to," nodded Pedro Gato. "Though, in that case, I shall call you clumsy. I shall pay you just four times as much if you bring them to me as prisoners. Remember that. Before I despatch these infernal Gringos I shall want the fun of tormenting them."

"Oh, you will eh?" thought Tom, with a slight shudder.

"I heard, Gato," ventured one of the Mexicans, incautiously, "that one of the Americanos beat you fearfully—that he threw you down and stamped on you."

"It is a lie!" uttered Gato, leaping to his feet, his face distorted with rage. "It is a lie, I tell you. The man does not live who can beat me in a fight."

"I was struck with amazement at the tale," admitted the Mexican who had brought about this outburst.

"And well you might be," continued Gato, savagely. "But the Americanos procured my discharge. And that was humiliation enough."

"Yet what difference does it make, Gato. As soon as Don Luis is through with the Americanos he will restore you to your old position."

"It is because the Americanos treated me with such contempt," retorted Pedro. "No man sneers at me and lives."

"You unhung bandit!" muttered Tom under his breath. "Why don't you tell your bandit friends that you are angry because of the trouncing I gave you before a lot of men? But I suppose you hate to lose caste, even before such ragged specimens as your friends."

Suddenly one of the men around the fire snatched at his rifle. Next scattering the embers of the fire, the fellow threw himself down flat, peering down the road.

"The troops are coming," he whispered. "I hear their horses."

"The horses that you hear are mules," laughed Gato, harshly. "It is the nightly transport of ore down to *El Sombrero*. Just now Don Luis is having fine ore brought over the hills from another mine and dumped into *El Sombrero*."

"Why should he bring ore from another mine to *El Sombrero*?" asked one of the men, curiously.

"How should I know?" demanded Gato, shrugging his shoulders and spitting on the ground. "Why should I concern myself with the business that belongs to an hidalgo like Don Luis?"

"It is queer that—"

"Silence!" hissed Gato. "Do not meddle with the secrets of Don Luis Montez, or you will be sorry for it."

Gato's explanation about the mule-train had quieted the fears of the bandits as to the approach of troops. In some mountainous parts of Mexico the government's troops are nearly always on the trail of bandits and the petty warfare is a brisk one.

"Go to sleep, my friends. There will be nothing to do until day comes."

"Then, good Gato, take us somewhere off this road," pleaded one of the men. "It is too public here to be to our liking."

"You may go to a quieter place," nodded Gato. "You know where—the place I showed you this afternoon. As for me, after the mule-train has left the mine, I must go there. I will join you before daybreak."

"We'll go now, then," muttered one of the men, rising.

They were coming up the road in the direction of the young engineers. There was no time to retreat. Tom glanced swiftly around. Then he made a sign to Harry. Both young engineers flattened themselves out behind a pile of stones at the roadside. Their biding-place was far from being a safe one. But four drowsy bandits plodded by without espying the eavesdroppers. As for Nicolas, he had vanished like the mist before the sun.

"Ha-ho-hum!" yawned Pedro Gato, audibly.

Tom raised his head, studying their immediate surroundings. He soon fancied he saw a safe way of slipping off to the southward and finding the road again below where Gato stood.

Signing to Hazelton, Reade rose softly and started off. Two or three minutes later the young engineers were a hundred yards away from Gato, though in a rock-littered field where a single incautious step might betray them.

"Come on, now," whispered Tom. "Toward the mine."

"And run into Gato?" grimaced Harry. "Great!"

"If we meet him we ought to get away with him between us," Tom retorted. "One of us did him up this morning."

"Go ahead, Tom!"

Reade led the way in the darkness. They skirted the road, though keeping a sharp lookout.

"There are the lights of the mule-train ahead," whispered Tom. "Now, we're close enough to see things, for there is *El Sombrero* just ahead."

"What's the game, anyway?" whispered Harry.

"Surely you guess," protested Tom.

"Why, it seems that Don Luis is having ore from another mine brought down in the dead of the night."

"Yes, and a lot of it," Tom went on. "Did you notice how much rich ore there was in each tunnel to-day? And did you notice, too, that when blasts were made with us looking on, no ore worthy of the name was dug loose? Don Luis has been spending a lot of money for ore with which to salt his own mine!"

"Salting" a mine consists of putting the gold into a mine to be removed. Such salting gives a worthless mine the appearance of being a very rich one.

"But why should Don Luis want to salt his own mine?" muttered Harry.

"So that he can sell it, of course!"

"But he doesn't want to sell."

"He says he doesn't," Tom retorted, with scorn. "This afternoon, you remember, he got me to copy a report in English about his mine and then he wanted us to sign the report as engineers. Doesn't that look as though he wanted to sell? Harry, Don Luis has buyers in sight for his mine, and he'll sell it for a big profit provided he can impose on the buyers!"

"What does he want us for, then? He spoke of engineering problems."

"Don Luis's engineering problem," uttered Tom Reade, with deep scorn, "is simply to find two clean and honest engineers who'll sign a lying report and enable him to swindle some man or group of men out of a fortune."

"Then Don Luis is a swindler, and we'll throw up the job," returned Harry Hazelton, vehemently. "We'll quit."

"We won't help him swindle any one," Tom rejoined. "We won't quit just yet, but we'll stick just long enough to see whether we can't expose the scoundrel as he deserves! Harry, we'll have to be crafty, too. We must not let him see, too soon, that we are aware of his trickery."

CHAPTER VIII

DANGLING THE GOLDEN BAIT

Creeping closer to the mine, Tom and Harry saw the ore dumped from a train of forty mules. They also heard the fellow in charge of the train say that he would be back with two more loads that night.

"We don't need to wait to see the rest of the ore brought," Tom whispered to his chum. "We know enough now."

"Look over there," urged Hazelton. "There goes the rest of the trick. Men are shoveling the borrowed ore into the ore hoists."

"Of course," nodded Tom, disgustedly. "The ore is going below, to be piled in the tunnels. It will be 'salted' there all right for us to inspect in the morning. Oh, this trickery makes me sick!"

"What are you going to do now?" Hazelton asked.

"We may as well go back to the house and get some sleep."

"I'm strong for getting out of here in the morning," Harry muttered.

"Fine!" Tom agreed. "So am I. But what I want to do is to find out who is marked out for the victim of this gigantic swindle. I want to put the victim wise. I'd be wild if I failed to find Don Luis's intended dupe and tell him just what he's in for."

"Do you imagine that Montez will ever allow us to get face to face with the man who's to be fleeced?"

"He won't do it intentionally, Harry. But we may have a way of locating the victim in time to save him from being robbed."

"Anyway, I should think the victim would have every chance in the world to sue and get his money back," Harry mused.

"How is one to get back the money that he has put into a gold mine?" Tom demanded. "Everyone knows that the most honest mine is a gamble. It may stop turning out paying ore at any hour. Besides, what show would a stranger have in the courts in this part of Mexico? You have heard Don Luis boast that he practically owns the governor of Bonista. No, sir! The only way to stop a swindle will be to stop it before it takes place."

Tom rose from his hiding place, back in the dark away from the lights at the mine shaft. He nudged his chum, then started to creep away. Presently they rose and moved forward on foot. Ere long they had left the mine well behind.

"I hate to go back into that polished robber's house at all," Harry muttered. "Tom, what do you say? We can cover at least the first dozen miles between now and daylight. Let's make a streak for the railway and get back to the States."

"But what about saving the victim of the intended swindle?" objected Reade.

"We could come out with a newspaper exposure that would stop any American from buying the mine, or putting any money into it," proposed Hazelton.

"We might, only no newspaper would print such stuff. It would be libelous, and subject the newspaper editor to the risk of having to go to jail."

"All I know," sighed Harry, "is that I want, as speedily as possible, to put as much distance as possible between us and Don Luis's home."

"We'll go out through the front door, though, when we go," Tom proposed. "We won't sneak."

They did not encounter Gato on the way back to the big, white house. Though they did not know it, the boys were being trailed by the alert, barefooted Nicolas. Nor did that servant feel easy until he had seen them softly enter the house. Then Nicolas, as before, stretched himself on the floor before the door of the rooms occupied by the young engineers.

Tom's alarm clock woke him that morning. In another moment Reade was vigorously shaking Hazelton.

"Now don't give a sign to-day," Tom whispered to his friend. "If Don Luis is going to be crafty, we shall have to fight him with craft—at the outset, anyway."

"I hate to eat the old scoundrel's food," muttered Harry.

"So do I, but it can't be helped for the present. We're not guilty of a breach of hospitality in planning to show the rascal up. It is Don Luis who is guilty in that direction. He is planning to use his guests as puppets in a dishonest game. Keep up your nerve, Harry, and don't let your face, your manner, or anything give you away."

Nicolas knocked as soon as he heard the boys stirring. He moved with speed this morning, spreading the table and then rushing away for chocolate, *frijoles* and *tortillas*.

As soon as the boys had finished their breakfast they hastened out to the porch, but they found their host ahead of them. More, Don Luis wore field clothing and high-topped, laced walking boots.

"Going afield, sir?" Tom inquired, genially.

"I have been afield, already," replied Montez, bowing and smiling. "Down to the mine I have been and back. The air is beautiful here in the early morning, and I enjoyed the walk. You, too, will enjoy our walks when you become used to them."

Dr. Tisco came out, bowing most affably to the young Americans.

"You look as though you had been walking, too," suggested Tom, noting Tisco's high-topped shoes.

"I went with Don Luis," replied the secretary. "Oh, by the way, Senor Hazelton, I believe some of your property has come into my possession. This is yours, is it not?"

Tisco held out a fine linen handkerchief, with an embroidered initial "H" in one corner. Harry was fond of fine linen, and effected these handkerchiefs.

"Yes; it's mine, thank you," nodded Harry, accepting the proffered bit of linen and pocketing it.

"I found it in a field, just this side of *El Sombrero*," remarked Tisco, artlessly, turning away.

Though the secretary did not watch Hazelton's face, Don Luis did, and saw the slight start of surprise and the flush that came to the young engineer's face.

"You, too, have been walking then, Senor Hazelton?" inquired Don Luis, pleasantly, though with an insistence that was not to be denied.

Harry didn't know how to lie. He might have dodged the question, but he was quick enough to see that evasion would make the matter worse.

"Tom and I took a stroll last night," he admitted, indifferently. "How far did we go, Tom?"

"Who can say?" replied Reade, lightly. "It was so dark, and the way so unfamiliar that we were glad when we got home, I know."

"They have been prowling," muttered Don Luis, sharply, under his breath. "I must have them watched."

"Are we going to the mine this morning, Don Luis?" Tom asked, carelessly.

"Do you care to go, Senor Tomaso?"

"Why, that's just as you say, sir," Reade rejoined. "Of course, we would like to get actively engaged at our work. In fact, it seems to me that Harry and I should rise earlier and be at the mine at least from eight in the morning until six at night."

"You would soon tire yourselves out. The mine is a dirty hole."

"By the way, sir," Reade went on, carelessly, "how far do you have to send ore to have it smelted?"

"About sixty miles."

"By mule-train, I suppose."

"Yes, Senor Tomaso."

"It must be costly shipping."

"So it is," sighed Don Luis, "and yet the ore is rich enough to bear easily the cost of shipping."

"In what direction is the smelter?"

Don Luis pointed.

"Straight ahead, as I am showing you," he added.

"We saw the lights of a train last night," Tom went on. "I judged that the mule-train came from the mines above. Yet the mule-train did not follow the direction that you have just shown me. The road runs

crooked, I take it."

"Oh, yes," nodded their host, as carelessly as Tom had spoken.

"Do the other mines pay as well as *El Sombrero*?"

"Oh, no, Senor Tomaso," Montez replied quickly. "The other mines yield not anywhere near as rich ore as comes from *El Sombrero*."

"Are you going to take us to see the other mines?" Tom hinted.

"Gladly would I do so, Senor Tomaso, only I am not on good terms with the owners."

"I'm sorry," Tom sighed. "While we are here I wish that we could see much of Mexican mines. Nevertheless, when we are through here I have no doubt that you can give us letters to other mine owners."

"Beyond a doubt," smiled Don Luis, "and it will give me great pleasure. But I, myself own many mines, and I am seeking to locate more. If you are suited with my employment, and if we agree, I shall be able, undoubtedly, to keep you both engaged for many years to come. Indeed, if you display sufficient resourcefulness in handling mines I do not believe it will be long ere I shall be able to pay you each fifty thousand dollars a year. I have plenty of money, and I pay generously when I am pleased and well served."

"The scoundrel is fishing for something," thought Tom Reade, swiftly.
"I must not let him beat me in craft."

So he exclaimed, aloud:

"Fifty thousand dollars a year, Don Luis? You are jesting!"

"I beg to assure you that I am not," replied Montez, smiling and bowing.

"But fifty thousand a year is princely pay!" cried Reade.

"Such pay goes, of course, only to the most satisfactory of employes," declared Don Luis.

"At such pay," Tom said, "Harry and I ought to be satisfied to remain in Mexico all our lives."

"We shall see," nodded Montez. "But the sunlight is growing too strong for my eyes. Suppose, *caballeros*, that we move into the office?"

The others now rose and followed Don Luis.

"What on earth is Tom driving at?" Harry wondered. "He's stringing Don Luis, of course, but to what end?"

Montez stood at the door of his office, indicating that the young engineers pass in ahead of him. The instant they had done so Montez turned to his secretary, whispering:

"Send my daughter here."

Dr. Tisco vanished, though he soon reappeared and entered the office.

Don Luis, after indicating seats to the young Americans, crossed to a ponderous safe, toyed with the combination lock, threw open the door and then brought out a ledger that he deposited on one of the flat-top desks. Five minutes later his daughter Francesca entered the room.

"Now, what part is the girl to play here?" wondered Tom, instantly. "If I know anything of human nature she's a sweet and honest girl. She is no rascal, like her father. Yet he has sent for her to play some part!"

CHAPTER IX

DON LUIS SHOWS HIS CLAWS

Senorita Francesca greeted her guests with extreme courtesy.

"She's a fine young woman," thought Harry, with a guilty feeling. "Blazes, but it's going to come hard to show her father up as a scoundrel."

"*Chiquita*," (pet) called her father, "it has not been the custom of this country to train our women in the ways of business. But you are my only child. Every *peso* (dollar) that I earn and save is for you one of these days. I have much money, but I crave more, and it is all for you, *chiquita*. It is my wish to see you, one of these days, a very queen of wealth, as you are already a queen of goodness and tenderness. Since you must handle the great fortune that I am building for you I have concluded to override the customs of our people for generations. In other words, I am going to begin to train you, *chiquita*, in business."

"Business?" murmured the girl. "Ah! That word frightens me—I am so ignorant."

"Your first lesson shall not tire or dismay you," promised Don Luis, gently. "Now, place your chair close beside mine, and look over this ledger with me. I shall not attempt to make you comprehend too much at first."

With pencil and paper beside the ledger, Don Luis read off many items. Occasionally he did some figuring on the sheet of paper, as though to make the matters more clear to his daughter. She made a very pretty picture, trying to follow her father's explanations, but the perplexed wrinkling of her brow showed how hard it was for her to do so.

The figures that Don Luis took from his ledger all tended to show the immensity of the wealth already produced from *El Sombrero*. Tom and Harry listened courteously, for they had been invited to join the group.

"You are tired, *chiquita*," said her father, at last. "I have taken you too far on our first excursion into the realm of finance. This morning we will have no more figures. But here is something that cannot fail to interest you in parts at least."

Shoving aside the ledger, Don Luis drew from a drawer a bulky document.

"This is the report which Senor Reade prepared for me yesterday," Montez explained, looking at the young engineers for an instant. "The report is written in English, as I desired it written so. But I will read the most interesting parts in Spanish to you, *chiquita*. You will observe that this report is a masterpiece of business composition."

"I am sure that it must be," murmured Francesca, and Tom bowed his thanks.

"This report, too, is a part of your fortune," continued Don Luis. "That is, it will help to make your fortune, for it concerns *El Sombrero*, one of the finest parts of your fortune. We have been planning, these *caballeros* and I, that they shall remain in my employ indefinitely, and they are to be paid better and better if they serve you through me and serve us well. I shall reward them as an *hidalgo* ever rewards."

"I do not need to be told that my father is generous when he is pleased," murmured Francesca.

"Listen, then, to what Senior Reade has written. It cannot help but give you much pleasure."

"The shameless rascal!" Tom exclaimed, inwardly, as the trick became clear to him. "Don Luis is trading upon our sympathies for the girl in order to induce us to sign his lying report."

Don Luis began to read the report, translating into Spanish as he went along. When he came to tables of tedious figures Montez skipped over them hurriedly. He dwelt eagerly, however, on the paragraphs of the report that asserted such vast wealth to exist in *El Sombrero*. Francesca listened with rising color. Once in a while she shot a pretty, sidelong glance at Tom to show her pleasure over the report, the whole authorship of which she plainly believed to belong to him.

"Why, it reads like a romance!" the girl cried, clapping her hands when the reading had finished.

"A romance? Yes!" ground Tom, under his breath. "It is romance—pure fiction and absurdly false in every line!"

"It must be a wonderful talent to possess, senor," said Francesca, turning to Tom Reade. "A wonderful talent to be able to describe a matter of business in such eloquent language."

"It is a rare gift," Tom admitted modestly, though he had a design in what he was saying. "A rare gift, indeed, and one which I must not claim. This is your father's report, not mine. He had written it in

English, and all I did was to copy it on the typewriter, and to make the English stronger at points. So I am not the author—merely the clerk."

Don Luis frowned for a fleeting instant. Then his brow cleared, and one of his charming smiles lighted his face.

"The report is a superb piece of work, and you must not believe as much as Senor Tomaso's modesty would lead him to believe, *chiquita*. But this is an engineer's report, and, as such, it is not complete until it is signed. Hand it to Senor Reade, *chiquita*, and ask him to sign it. Then Senor Hazelton will do the same."

Francesca accepted the document from her father, turned, and, with a fascinating smile, handed it to the young chief engineer.

It was a cleverly contrived bit of business, in which the girl played a wholly innocent part. Francesca dipped a pen in ink and offered it to Tom, who accepted it. Surely, he could not embarrass the girl, nor could he seem to refuse to add to her fortune by any means within his power. Don Luis had brought about the climax with great cleverness, for he felt certain of Tom Reade's gallantry.

And gallant Tom Reade ever was. Yet he was keen and self-possessed as well. While he held the pen in his hand he turned to the Mexican with one of his pleasantest smiles.

"Don Luis," said the young engineer, "I feel certain that you did not wholly understand what I said yesterday. What I meant to make clear was that an engineer's signature to a report is his written word of honor that every word in the report is true, to his own knowledge. As I merely transcribed this report from your own, and have not yet had sufficient opportunity to prove to myself the value of the mine, I could not in honor sign this report as yet. As a man of honor you will certainly understand my position."

"But you are too particular on a point of honor," insisted Don Luis Montez, with a shrug of his shoulders. "You do not need to draw the line so sharply with a man of honor. I assure you that every word in the report is true. Therefore, will you not be so good as to sign the report?"

"I regret that I have not yet succeeded in making an engineer's point of honor clear," Tom replied, placing the pen back on the stand. "It will be some weeks, Don Luis, before Hazelton and I can possibly hope to find ourselves sufficiently well informed about the mine to sign the report."

Francesca was by no means stupid. While she did not understand business matters, she was sufficiently keen to note, from her father's very insistent manner, and from Tom's equally firm refusal to sign, that some point of honor was in dispute between the two. She flushed deeply, glanced wonderingly from one to the other, and then her gaze fell to the floor.

"*Chiquita*," said Don Luis, tenderly, "I have been thoughtless, and have given you too long a lesson in business. Besides, Senor Reade is not yet ready to serve us in this matter. You may go to your room, my daughter."

Without a word Francesca rose and left the room.

As soon as the door had closed Don Luis broke forth bitterly:

"You have done well to insult me before my daughter. She understands only enough to realize that you have doubted my honor, and she certainly wonders why I permitted you to live longer. Senor Reade, whether or not your American ideas of courtesy enable you to understand it, you have grievously insulted me in my own house, and have intensified that insult by delivering it before my daughter. There is now but one way in which you can retrieve your conduct."

Don Luis Montez rose, dipped the pen freshly in ink, and thrust it into Reade's hand.

"*Sign that report!*" ordered the Mexican.

Tom rose to his feet. So did Harry.

"Don Luis," spoke Reade calmly, though he was inwardly raging. "I always like to do business like a gentleman. I feel very certain that I must have made it very clear to you yesterday that I could not possibly sign any such report at the present time. I still prefer to keep our talk within the limits of courtesy if that be also your wish."

"Sign that report!"

"*I won't do it!*"

Tom accompanied his response by tossing the pen across the room.

"Don Luis, I don't believe that you are a fool," continued the young chief engineer, calming down again. "If you consider that I am utterly a fool, either, then you are doing your own intelligence an injustice. I refuse to sign this report until I have gained the knowledge for myself that every word in it is true. Further, I don't believe that I would sign it after I had made the fullest investigation. I am aware that, last night, mule-trains brought ore down over the hills from another mine, and that ore was sent down by the ore hoists into *El Sombrero*."

"That's a lie!" cried the Mexican, hoarsely.

"I am describing what I saw with my own eyes," Tom insisted.

"You will sign this report, and at once!" quivered Don Luis Montez, a deadly look glittering in his eyes.

"I am quite satisfied that I shall never sign it," Tom retorted.

"That goes for me, too," put in Harry, stolidly.

"I feel that we have finished our work here, since we can do nothing more for you, Don Luis," Tom went on. "I therefore ask you to consider our engagement at an end. If you are disinclined to furnish us with transportation to the railway, then we can travel there on foot."

"Do you hear the Gringo, my good Carlos?" laughed Don Luis, derisively.

"I hear the fellow," indifferently replied Dr. Tisco, from the other end of the room.

"Will you furnish us with transportation from here?" Tom inquired.

"I will not," hissed Montez, allowing his rage to show itself now at its height. "You Gringo fools! Do you think you can defy me—that here, on my own estates, you can slap me in the face and ride away with laughter?"

"I haven't a desire in the world to slap your face," Tom rejoined, dryly. "All I wish and mean to do is to get back to my work in life."

"Then listen to me, Gringos," said Don Luis Montez, in his coldest tones. "Your work here is to sign that report. If you do not, then you shall never leave these mountains! Your lives are in my hands. If you do not serve me as I have ordered, then I shall feel obliged—in self-defense—to destroy you!"

CHAPTER X

THE SPIRIT OF A TRUE ENGINEER

"Do you know, Don Luis," drawled Tom, "that you have one fine quality?"

"What do you mean?" demanded the Mexican.

"You are very explicit. You are also extremely candid! You don't leave the other fellow guessing."

Don Luis Montez frowned. He felt certain that fun was being poked at him.

"I am trying to make you young men understand that you must do exactly what I wish of you," he returned, after a moment.

"And we have tried to make it plain, sir, that we haven't, any idea of doing what you want," Tom Reade answered him.

"You will change your minds," retorted the mine owner.

"Time will show you that, sir. In the meantime, since we cannot live here, what do you expect us to do?"

"I have said nothing about your not living here," uttered Don Luis, looking astonished. "You are very

welcome to all that my poor house affords."

"Thank you; but we can't live here, just the same."

"And why not, *caballeros*?"

"Because we shall henceforth be on the most wretched sort of terms with the owner of this house."

"There is no need of that, *caballeros*. You will, I think, find me extremely courteous. My house is open to you, and there is no other place that you can go."

"Nowhere to go but out," mimicked Harry Hazelton, dryly.

"You will find yourselves unable to get out of these hills," Don Luis informed them, politely, though with an evil smile. "You may decide to leave us, and you may start at any time, but you will assuredly find yourselves stopped and brought back. You simply cannot leave me, *caballeros*, until I give my consent. Remember, no king could rule in these hills more absolutely than I do. No one may enter or leave this part of the state of Bonista without my consent."

"As to that, of course we shall know more later, Don Luis," Tom returned. "However, we cannot and shall not remain longer as guests in your house."

"I trust you will consider well and carefully on that point," retorted the Mexican.

"No; we simply can't and won't remain here unless—well, unless—"

"What are you trying to say, *senor*?"

"Then possibly you have overlooked building any dungeons under the house? Dungeons, I understand, were a part of the housekeeping scheme in old Mexico."

"There are no dungeons here," said Don Luis icily.

"You relieve me, sir. Then the last obstacle is removed to our departure. We shall go at once. Come on, Harry."

Tom turned to leave the room, Hazelton at his heels. But Montez, with an angry exclamation, leaped to the doorway, barring their exit.

"*Caballeros*, you shall not leave like this!"

"No?" Tom inquired. "Harry, our late host wishes us to leave by the windows."

"All right," nodded Hazelton, smiling. "I used to be something of an athlete."

"You shall not leave me in any such childish spirit," Don Luis insisted, stubbornly.

"If you are going to try to reopen the proposition that you made us," said Reade, "you may as well stop."

"You will come to your senses presently."

"We are in full possession of them at present."

"We shall yet come to a sensible arrangement of the matter," Montez continued, coaxingly. Indeed, the Mexican had suddenly come to see that he was absolutely dependent upon the young Americans if he hoped to sell his mine in the near future.

"You are wrong, Don Luis," Reade continued. "We can come to no understanding. Matters have now gone so far that we are no longer bound by the rules of courtesy. Nor do the laws of hospitality weigh with us, for you have chosen to bully and threaten us under your own roof. I will therefore be frank enough to tell you that we regard you as a mere rogue. Am I right, Harry?"

"Wholly right," nodded Hazelton. "Don Luis, I cannot see that you are one whit more honest, or in any sense more of a gentleman, than any of the outlawed bandits who roam these mountains. Therefore, as Americans and gentlemen, we find it wholly impossible for us to remain either your employes or your guests. There can be no hope whatever that we shall consent to serve you, even in the most innocent way."

Don Luis heard them with rising anger, which, however, he kept down with a fine show of self-control.

"*Caballeros*, you are young. You have not seen much of the world. You are mere boys. You have not even, as yet, developed good manners. Therefore I overlook in you what, in men, might arouse my anger. Take my advice. Go to your rooms. Think matters over. When you have cooled we will talk again. No—not a word, now."

Don Luis stepped aside. Tom bowed, very stiffly, in passing the Mexican. Harry merely gazed into the Mexican's eyes with a steadiness and a contempt that made the mine owner wince.

Straight down the hallway, to their rooms, Tom marched, Harry following. Barefooted Nicolas sprang forward, bowing, then swinging open the door. He bowed again as the young engineers stepped inside. Then Nicolas pulled the door shut.

"Are you going to stay, Tom, and have any further talk with this thief?" sputtered Harry, who had held in about as long as was safe for him.

"What do you think?" Tom asked, grimly, as he knelt upon his trunk and tugged at the strap.

"I reckon I think about the same as you do," rejoined Hazelton, closing his own trunk and strapping it.

"One—two *hoist!*" ordered Reade, settling his own trunk upon his shoulder.

Harry followed suit. In Indian file they moved across the room.

"Nicolas," called Tom, "be good enough—the door!"

The barefooted servant swung the barrier open.

"Thank you," said Tom, marching out. Then he dumped the trunk, noiselessly, to the floor. Going into an inner pocket he produced a five dollar bill.

"Nicolas," said the young chief engineer, "you have certainly done all in your power to make us comfortable. I am sorry that we are not longer to have the comfort of your services. Will you do me the favor of accepting this as a remembrance? It is American money, but you can easily get it changed. And now, let us shake hands."

Nicolas appeared dazed, both by the money and by Tom's desire to shake hands with him. The hand that Tom clasped trembled.

"Same here," murmured Harry, also producing a five-dollar bill. "Nicolas, you're a Mexican, but I wish they produced more of your kind on the American side of the Rio Grande."

"The *caballeros* have been too generous with me," protested the poor fellow, in a husky voice. "I have not deserved this. And, though I have been a stupid servant, you have not once beaten me with your canes."

"If you can find the canes you may keep them, then, as a souvenir of what you didn't get," laughed Reade. "And now, Nicolas, we must hasten, or we shall lose our trains."

The Mexican would have said more, but he was too dazed. In his left hand he held ten dollars in American money, about the same thing as twenty in Mexican coin. It was more money than he had ever held of his own before—it was almost a fortune. Surely, these *Americanos* must suddenly have taken leave of their senses! Then, too, Senor Reade had just spoken of missing the train. Did they not realize that the nearest railway train was seventy miles away? Assuredly, they must be mad!

In the meantime Tom and Harry, having once more shouldered their trunks, kept on down the broad hallway and out on to the porch. There was no one there to oppose them, though Don Luis was secretly regarding them through the crack of a nearly closed door. There was an evil, leering smile on the face of the Mexican mine owner.

Down the steps, along the drive—it was not a short one, and then out into the road, Tom continued. His back was beginning to feel the unaccustomed load on his shoulder.

"Drop it, pretty soon, Tom," muttered Hazelton, behind him.

"I believe I will Reade nodded. Reaching the farther side of the road he dropped one end of the trunk to the ground. Harry did likewise.

"Whew!" sputtered Tom. "I'd rather be an engineer, any day, than a delivery wagon!"

"Well, we're here," announced Harry. Then inquired, "What are we going to do now?"

CHAPTER XI

A PIECE OF LEAD IN THE AIR

"Get your wind back," advised Tom. "Also ease your shoulder a bit."

"And then?"

"We'll carry the trunks up the slope and dump them in some depression in the rock."

"What's the use of the trunks, anyway?" Harry wanted to know. "No one else will shelter us in this country. We can't get a wagon to take our trunks away in. Surely, you don't intend to shoulder these trunks to the railway station—seventy miles away?"

"No," Reade admitted. "We'll have to abandon our trunks. All I wanted to be sure about was to get them out of Don Luis's house. And now I am just as anxious to get them out of sight of his porch. As long as the trunks stand here they'll tell Don Luis of our discomfort. I don't want that thieving rascal to have the satisfaction even of laughing at our trunks."

"All right, if that's the way you feel about it," Hazelton grunted. "I'm ready to shoulder mine."

"Come along, then," Tom nodded. "Up the slope we go."

Their climb was a hard one. But at last they halted, dropping their heavy baggage on a flat surface of rock that was not visible from the big white house. Then up a little higher the now unencumbered engineers trod. When they halted they could see far and wide over this strange country.

"Now, what?" asked Hazelton.

"Luncheon, if I had my choice," muttered Tom. "But that's out of the question, I fear."

"Unless we can catch a rabbit, or something, with our hands."

"Harry, I wonder if we can find the trail all the way back to the railroad. These mountain paths are crooked affairs at best."

"We know the general direction, and our pocket compasses will serve us," Hazelton nodded.

"Don Luis seems to think that he can stop us from getting through to the railroad."

"I'm not so sure that he can't, either, Tom. Hang these little Mexicans. With our hands either one of us could thrash an armful of these people, but a Mexican with a gun is almost the size of an American with a gun. Tom, if we only had a brace of revolvers I believe we could go through to civilization without mishap."

"We haven't any pistols, so there's no use in talking about them," Reade retorted.

"But we would have had revolvers, at least in our baggage, if you hadn't always been so dead set against carrying them," Harry complained.

"I'm just as much set against firearms as ever," Tom answered, dryly. "Revolvers are made for killing people. Now, why any sane man should desire to kill any one goes beyond me."

"Humph! We'll be lucky if we can get out of these mountains without killing any one," grunted Hazelton.

"Cheer up!" laughed Tom. "The whole world hasn't turned black just because we've skipped our luncheon."

"I wouldn't mind the luncheon," Harry began, "if—"

He stopped short, as he caught a glimpse of the spot where they had left their trunks.

"Tom, let's hustle back to where we left our trunks," he whispered. "I just saw some one moving about on that spot"

"Oh, if any thief is after our baggage, let him have it," smiled Tom. "The stuff all goes to a thief in the

end, anyway, for we know that we can't carry our trunks with us."

But that didn't suit. Hazelton, who still felt as though he owned his own trunk. So he started back, soft-footed. Presently they came in sight of a human being seated on Reade's trunk.

"Nicolas!" breathed Tom.

"*Si, señor*," (yes, sir) returned the servant.

"But what are you doing here?"

"I am your servant," replied the Mexican, calmly.

"Wrong; you're Don Luis's servant."

"But he ordered me to wait on you both unceasingly, señor."

"We have left Don Luis's house, for good," Tom continued, walking over to where the barefooted one sat.

"That may be true, señor; it is true, since you say it, but my orders have not been changed. Until Don Luis tells me differently I shall go on serving you."

"Did Don Luis send you after us, Nicolas?" Reade demanded, wonderingly.

"No, señor."

"Did any one at the house send you?"

"No, señor. I did not need to be sent. I am faithful."

Nicolas followed this with a smile that showed his white teeth. He spoke in utter simplicity.

"And now what can I do for you, *caballeros*?" the Mexican inquired.

"Nicolas," asked Tom, with sudden inspiration, "is there any store hereabouts? Any place where food can be purchased?"

"No, señor; there is a store not far from the shaft entrance of *El Sombrero* Mine. That is where the *peons* of the mine draw their food, and have it charged against their pay accounts. But no one may buy there for cash."

"Is there no place where you can buy food for us?"

"*Caballeros*, of course, I will not pretend not to understand that you are on bad terms with Don Luis. Hence, both his storekeeper and his *peons* would hesitate to sell food for you or to you. But I have a relative who works in the mine, and he is a brave man. I think I can persuade him to sell me food and ask no questions. In fact, *caballeros*, that is what I will do."

"It won't get your relative into any trouble, will it, Nicolas?" Tom asked.

"I can manage it, señor, so that no trouble will follow."

"Then take this money and get some food, my good Nicolas, if you can manage it without getting any one into trouble."

"It will have to be very plain food, Señor Reade, such as *peons* eat," urged Nicolas.

"Plain food never killed any man yet," Tom laughed. "Well, then, take this money and serve us at your convenience."

"I have no need of money," replied the Mexican, shaking his head. "I am well supplied, *caballeros*."

Displaying the two banknotes that he had received an hour before, Nicolas took three steps backward, then vanished.

"There goes a faithful fellow!" glowed Tom.

"If he isn't doing this under Don Luis's orders," muttered Hazelton.

"Harry, I'm ashamed of you," retorted Tom, finding a soft, grass-covered spot and stretching himself out. He pulled his sombrero forward over his face and lay as though asleep. Any one, however, who had tried to creep upon Reade would speedily have discovered that he was far from drowsy.

"Humph!" said Harry, after glancing at his chum. "You don't appear to realize that there's any such thing as danger around us."

"If there is, I can't keep it away," Tom rejoined. "Harry, this idle life is getting into my blood, I fear. Now, I know just how happy a tramp feels."

"Go ahead and enjoy yourself, then," laughed Hazelton. "For fifteen minutes at a time you'd make an ideal tramp. Then you'd want to go to work"

"I wouldn't mind having a little work to do," Reade admitted.
"Harry, it took nerve to throw up our connection with Don Luis.
At least, that meant some work to do."

"It did not," Harry contradicted. "Don Luis didn't want us in his mine at all, and showed us that as plainly as he could. All the work he wanted out of us was the writing of two signatures. The need of the signatures was all that ever made him bring us down from the United States."

"He'd he such a charming fellow, too, if he only knew a little bit about being honest," sighed Tom, regretfully.

"There is one thing about his rascality that I shall never forgive," growled Hazelton. "That was, dragging his innocent daughter into the game, just in the hope that her presence would influence us to sign."

"I trust, *caballeros*, that you did not find me too slow and lazy," broke in the soft voice of Nicolas, as that servant stole back in on them. He was well laden with parcels, at sight of which Reade sat up with a jerk.

"Anything in that lot that's all ready to be eaten without fussy preparation, Nicolas?" the young chief engineer asked eagerly.

"Oh, *si señor!*"

"Then lead us to it, boy!"

The Mexican servant unwrapped a package, revealing and holding up a tin.

"Food of your own kind, from your own country, *caballeros*," the Mexican announced proudly.

"Canned baked beans," chuckled Harry, after glancing at the label.
"Hurry and get the stuff open."

Nicolas opened two tins of the beans, then produced a package of soda biscuits.

"This will be enough for one meal, *caballeros?*" he asked.

"Oh, plenty," nodded Tom.

"And then I have some of our Mexican beans, dried," Nicolas continued. "They will do when we are not so near a food supply. I have also a little dish in which to boil them over a fire. Oh, we shall get along excellently, *caballeros*."

Shortly the very simple meal was ready and eaten in record time.

"And here is something else that we shall drink in the morning," Nicolas announced, presently as he held up a package. "It is chocolate."

As Tom and Harry both detested this beverage, they were forced to feign their enthusiasm.

"Now, I feel as though we ought to do some walking," Tom declared, rising and stretching.

"Walking?" queried Nicolas. "Where?"

"Over the hills to the nearest telegraph station. There is one within twenty miles, is there not?"

"There is, *caballero*," Nicolas assented, gravely, "but it will be impossible for us to reach it."

"Impossible? Why?" Reade demanded.

"On my way back I kept my eyes open," the Mexican explained. "As a result I discovered who is in these hills about us."

"Who, then?" Harry asked.

"Pedro Gato," Nicolas affirmed solemnly.

"Who?" said Tom. "Oh, Gato? Only he?"

"Only he and some of his worthless, criminal companions," the servant went on, solemnly. "Senor Reade, at no greater distance than this from Don Luis you may be safe from Gato. Yet, if you stroll but a few miles from here Pedro Gato will not so greatly fear the hidalgo. Then Gato will work his own will with you."

"He will, oh?" Tom demanded grimly.

"Of a surety, senor!"

"If I should see Pedro Gato first, he would be likely to come in for another walloping," Tom laughed, dryly.

"But you would not see him, senor. You would hear him only, and Gato's message would be a bullet."

"Can Gato shoot any better than he fights?" smiled Reade.

Bang! An unseen rifle spoke. Judged by the sound the marksman was not more than three hundred yards away.

"Sz-z-z-zz!" the leaden missile sang through the air. It flattened against a rock in front of which the young chief engineer was standing.

"You are answered, *mi caballero!*" cried Nicolas, throwing himself flat on the earth. "Drop to the earth, senor, before the second shot is fired!"

CHAPTER XII

NICOLAS DOES AN ERRAND

Tom did not follow the advice to flatten himself on the ground. Instead, he stood straighter—even rose on his toes and stared in the direction whence he judged the shot to have come.

"Gato, you treacherous scoundrel!" Reade roared, in Spanish. "Do you call yourself a brave man, to fight an unarmed foe like this?"

All was silent amid the rocks in the distance.

"Have you too little courage to answer me?" Tom again essayed. "Or are you man enough to show yourself—to come forward and listen to me. Don't be afraid. I can't hurt you. I have no weapon worse than my fists."

As the young chief engineer spoke in Spanish, Nicolas understood.

"Don't! Don't, *mi caballero,*" implored the Mexican servant "Don't let him know that you are unarmed. Make a move as though to draw a pistol, and Gato may run away instead of sighting his rifle once more at you."

"Now I know you, Gato, for the wolfish coward that you are," Tom Reade shouted mockingly. "You are desperately afraid when you won't meet me, unarmed as I am."

"If Senor Reade is so utterly brave when he has no weapons," thought the barefooted servant, "then if he had a gun in his hand he would be the bravest man in all the world!"

"I guess that yellow dog isn't going to bark at us again, just now," laughed Tom, carelessly, when some moments had passed without another shot. "Doubtless, the fellow was frightened away by the sound of his own rifle."

"That shot was a warning," chattered Nicolas. "It is his way of sending you his defiance. When Gato fires again he will try in earnest to kill you, and he will keep on firing until he succeeds. Oh, *mi caballero*, if you will give me some more of your Americano money, I will hasten about until I find some one who will sell me a gun for you. You must have one in your hands all the time."

"Not for mine," smiled Reade. "To tell you the truth, Nicolas, guns sometimes make me nervous. If I had one I might be clumsy enough to shoot myself with it."

"Nicolas is talking sense," interrupted Hazelton, speaking in English. "Both you and I should be armed."

"By all means have Nicolas get a gun for you, Harry, if you will," Reade answered, coolly. "But none for me."

"I'd like to meet Gato face to face and on equal terms," Harry went on, dropping back into the Spanish tongue.

"So would I," agreed his chum. "I have much to say to Gato. If there were mail boxes in this wild country I'd drop him a letter."

"Do you really wish to send Gato a letter?" asked Nicolas, eagerly.

"Why, I'd send him one if I could," nodded Tom.

"Have you writing materials?" pressed the servant.

"Yes—but what's the use?"

"Write your letter, *mi caballero*, and I will hand it to Gato," urged the Mexican.

"You?" gasped Tom.

"Certainly."

"But how?"

"I will hand the letter to him in person."

"You—go to Gato?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Gato would kill you!"

"Kill a poor *peon*?" smiled Nicolas. "Oh, no; I am not worth while. I am not a fighting man."

"Do you mean to tell me," demanded Tom, astonished, "that you could go openly and safely to Gato?"

"Assuredly," declared Nicolas, composedly. "Gato would not harm me. I am one of his own people, a Mexican, and have not the courage to fight. So he would only disgrace himself in the eyes of his countrymen if he tried to do me harm."

"Is that the truth?" Reade persisted.

"Certainly, Senor Reade. If there were a priest here I would swear to it as the truth."

"And you have the courage to try to hand a note to Gato?"

"Under the circumstances it does not require courage, since I am safe," replied Nicolas, steadily and easily.

"Hanged if I don't think I will write a note to Pedro Gato!" chuckled Tom.

"Do so, *mi caballero*; at your convenience."

Tom tore a page out of a notebook, and with his fountain pen wrote the following note in Spanish:

"Pedro Gato: If you had half the courage of a rabbit you would not go skulking through the hills, shooting at me without giving me any chance to tell you or show you what I think of you. A shot has just struck near my head, yet no glimpse was to be had of the man who fired the shot. If you did that, then you are a coward of a low, mean type. If you do not feel like accepting my opinion of you, then will you meet me and explain your conduct as one real man talks with another? If you will not give me this explanation, and persist in trying to shoot at me, then I warn you that I will and must pummel you with my fists if I ever have the pleasure of meeting you face to face."

"Thomas Reade."

Harry glanced through the note and smiled. "That ought to scare the bold, bad man," said he.

"Read this, Nicolas, and see if you think the note will shame the scoundrel," laughed Tom.

"Pardon, *mi caballero*," objected Nicolas, "but I am no scholar. I do not know how to read or write."

"Oh!" said Tom simply. "Then let me read it to you."

Tom repeated what he had written, then asking:

"Do you think, Nicolas, that it will be safe for you to take this to Pedro Gato?"

"Assuredly, *senor*."

"And you are sure you can find the scoundrel?"

"I think so, though it may take considerable time."

Nicolas took the note, holding it tight in his left hand. He was visible for a few steps, after which he dodged down behind a rock and was seen no more.

Moving stealthily over the hillsides, Nicolas spent a full hour in obtaining the first glimpse of Gato. That worthy was seated on the ground, smoking and chatting in low tones with his desperate-looking companions. Suddenly Pedro caught sight of the servant and started up. He beckoned, and Nicolas approached.

"You have come to serve us," said Gato, delightedly. "You are a good youth, and I shall reward you handsomely some day. You are ready to tell us how we can trap the two Gringos. How many weapons have they, and of what kind?"

"Truly, I do not know, *Senor Gato*," Nicolas answered.

"That taller Gringo taunted me with the claim that he was not armed at all," grinned Gato, ferociously. "But I am too old a man to be caught by any such lie as that. He was trying to lead us on, that we might walk into their Gringo trap. Was he not?"

"Truly I do not know," Nicolas repeated.

"Then what are you doing here, if you bring us no news?" snarled Gato, whereat Nicolas began to tremble.

"I—I bring a letter from his excellency, *el caballero*, Reade," faltered the servant.

"A letter?" cried Gato, hoarsely. "Why did you not say so before."

"I have been waiting, *Senor Gato*, until you gave me time to speak," protested the messenger.

"Hand me the letter," ordered Gato, stretching forth his hand.

Nicolas handed over the page torn from Tom's notebook. Gato slowly puzzled his way through the note, his anger rising with every word.

"The insolent Gringo!" he cried. "He insults my courage! This from one who is a mere Gringo—the most cowardly race of people on the earth. Oh, I shall exact revenge for this insolence. And you, Nicolas, had the impudence to come here with such an insult."

"I assure you, *Senor Gato*, I was but the unfortunate messenger." Nicolas replied, meekly.

"Since you brought this insolence to me you shall take back my message. Tell the dogs of Gringos

that I laugh at them. Tell the Gringo, Reade, that, in these hills, I shall do as I please. That I shall let him pass safely, if I am so minded, or that I shall shoot at him whenever I choose. Assure him that I regard his life as being my property. Begone, you rascal!"

Nor did Nicolas linger. From the outset he had been badly scared, though he had been truthful in assuring Tom Reade that a bandit would hardly hurt a poor *peon*.

When Nicolas at last reached the young engineers he delivered the message that Pedro Gato had regarded the whole matter as insolence, and had been very angry.

"Gato added," continued Nicolas, "that he would shoot at you when and where he pleased. And he will do it. He is a ferocious fellow."

"Humph!" muttered Tom. "If your feet don't mind, my good Nicolas, I have a good mind to send Gato another and much shorter note. Is it far to go!"

"N-not very far," said Nicolas, though he began to quake.

"Of course, I shall pay you well for this and all the other trouble you are taking on my account," Tom continued, gently.

"I am finely paid by being allowed to serve you at all, Senor Reade," Nicolas protested.

CHAPTER XIII

PINING FOR THE GOOD OLD U.S.

"You will have to be very careful that Gato does not get another chance to shoot at you, *mi caballero*," Nicolas went on. "He does not believe that you are unarmed, or he would speedily settle with you. But he will shoot at you frequently, from ambush, if you give him the chance."

"Then I hope he'll do it frequently," grimaced Reade. "The need of frequent shooting indicates bad marksmanship."

"Senor," begged Nicolas, "I would not joke about Gato. He means to kill you, or worse."

"Worse?" queried Tom, raising his eyebrows. "How could that be?"

The Mexican servant made a gesture of horror.

"It is worse when our Mexican bandits torture a man," he replied, his voice shaking. "They are fiends—those of our Mexicans who have bad hearts."

"Then you believe that Gato plans something diabolical, just because I walloped him in a fair fight—or in a fight where the odds were against me?"

"It matters not as to the merits of the fight," Nicolas went on. "Gato will never be satisfied until he has hurt you worse than you hurt him."

"And perhaps Don Luis may be behind the rascal, urging him on and offering to protect him from the law? What do you think about that, Nicolas?"

"I cannot say," Nicolas responded, with a slight shrug. "I am Don Luis's servant."

"Pardon my forgetting that," begged Harry. "I should not have spoken as I did."

"For more than one reason," Tom muttered, "we shall do well to get out of this unfriendly stretch of country. Harry, we're pining for the good old U.S., aren't we?"

"Just a glimpse of the American side of the border—that's all we want," laughed Hazelton.

"And, if we're to be killed, we'll at least be killed while trying to reach the border," Reade proposed.

"Do you intend starting now, senior?" asked Nicolas, in a low voice.

"Not before dark," Tom murmured.

"Then why do you two not sleep for a while?" begged the servant. "You will need some strength if you are to travel through these mountains all night. Sleep! You can trust me to keep awake and to warn you if danger gets close."

"Thank you, old fellow; I know we can trust you," Tom replied. He stretched himself out on the ground, pulling his hat down over his eyes. Within two minutes he was sound asleep. Not more than a minute after that Harry, too, was dozing.

It was still daylight when Tom awoke. He sat up. Harry was sleeping soundly, and Nicolas was not in sight.

"Abandoned?" thought Reade. "No; that's hardly likely. Nicolas rings true. Hiding close to here, undoubtedly, that he may keep better watch. A call will bring him here."

Tom rose, to look about.

"Be cautious, senior," came the whispered advice from an unseen speaker. "If you expose yourself you may invite a bullet."

Tom promptly accepted the advice. Going toward the sound of the voice, he found Nicolas crouched in a trough of rock not far from where they had lain down.

"Now, Nicolas, it's your turn," whispered Reade.

"My turn for what, senior?"

"Sleep!"

"I am but a servant, senior. I do not need rest."

"Nicolas, you go in and lie down near Hazelton, and go to sleep."

The Mexican grumbled a little, but all his life he had been taught to obey orders. Within sixty seconds the servant was sound asleep.

An hour later it began to darken.

Harry Hazelton awoke with a start, to find Tom with his finger on his lips.

"Nicolas is asleep," whispered Reade. "Don't make any noise that will awaken him. I have no doubt that he would go through with us and be our guide. But that would put him in bad with Don Luis, and we have no right to expose the poor fellow to blame. Move about without noise, and we'll eat some of the stuff that Nicolas brought us."

This was done. It was dark by the time that the simple meal had been finished. Tom drew out another five-dollar bill, which he pinned to the shirt of the poor Mexican.

"Now we'll take all the food with us," Tom whispered. "Nicolas won't need any of it, as he's less than twenty minutes' walk from a square feed. Come along—on tip-toe."

Tom led the way through the darkness, not halting until they were well away from the Mexican.

"Now, wait a moment, until we get our bearings from the stars," Tom proposed. "Then we'll make a straight, fast, soft hike to the telegraph station."

"Only twenty miles away, over the boulders," murmured Hazelton.

"This is where our past physical training comes in finely," Tom rejoined. He looked up at the sky, pointing to and naming several of the fixed stars.

"Now, as we know our course, we can hardly, go astray," Reade suggested. "Ready! Forward march!"

Tom took the lead in this, as he did in nearly everything else. For more than an hour the young engineers trudged ahead. When at last they halted for breath they had covered at least three miles of their way.

"Nicolas will feel insulted when he wakes, I'm afraid," suggested

Hazelton.

"I'm afraid he will. Nicolas may have a copper skin, and be under-sized and illiterate, but he's one of the old-fashioned, true-to-the-death kind. But, if he helped guide us out of this wilderness, Don Luis would probably flay the poor fellow alive afterwards."

"I wonder if we're going to make the telegraph station by daylight!"
Harry went on.

"I'm afraid not. But we ought to be there some time during the forenoon."

"That will give Don Luis time, perhaps, to wake up to our disappearance and send men after us," hinted Harry.

Tom's face grew long at this suggestion. He was well aware that Don Luis Montez was a man who was both dreaded and obeyed in these mountains.

"Oh, well, we'll do all we can for ourselves," Tom proposed.
"We'll keep cheerful about it, too—until the worst happens."

"I'm rested, Tom. Shall we start along?"

"Yes; for we're both anxious to get through!"

Once more Reade took the lead. They trudged another mile, often without finding the semblance of a trail. Finally, they discovered what seemed to be a crude road leading in their general direction.

Ahead boulders loomed up. They were getting into a rough part of the mountains.

As Tom plodded around a bend in the road, past a big rock, he heard a low laugh.

"Oblige me, senores, by showing me how high you can reach in the air!" came a mocking voice.

Tom and Harry had both stepped around into the plain range of vision of Pedro Gato.

That scoundrel stood with rifle butt to his shoulder, his glance running along the barrel. The weapon covered them.

"Don't forget! Your hands, *caballeros!*" insisted Gato, jubilantly.

For a brief instant Tom Reade hesitated. He was doing some lightning calculating as to whether he would be able to spring forward under the rifle barrel and knock up the weapon.

But a second glance showed him that he could not hope to do it.
Pedro Gato was completely master of the situation.

"For the third time—and the last, *caballeros* your hands!
Up high!" commanded Gato exultantly.

"Now, stand just so, until I get back of you," ordered Gato.
"Do not attempt any tricks, and do not turn to look back at me.
If you do I shall pull the trigger—once and again. This rifle
shoots fast."

While talking Gato had placed himself to the rear of his captives, who, with hands up, remained facing ahead.

"Do you want us to keep our hands up forever?" demanded Tom Reade, gruffly.

"To take them down will be the signal for death," replied Gato coolly. "Take your hands down, or turn this way, if you deem it best. Possibly you will prefer to die, for to-night's entertainment may strike you as being worse than death. The matter is within your own choice, wholly, *caballeros*. Perhaps on the whole it would be far better for you to lower your hands and die."

"Cut out the thrills and the mock-comedy, Gato, and tell us what else you want us to do," Tom urged, stiffly.

"Oho! My Gringo wild-cat is much tamer, isn't he?" sneered Gato. "But he shall be tamer still before the night is over. Now—are you listening?"

Harry made no sign, but Tom shrugged his shoulders.

"Keep your noses pointed the same way. March!" commanded Gato.

CHAPTER XIV

NEXT TO THE TELEGRAPH KEY

Tom and Harry started along the trail, side by side.

Something whizzed through the air. Then something struck the earth heavily, and there was a slight, quickly repressed groan.

"Quick, *caballeros!*"

For the life of him Tom could not help halting and wheeling about. The next second he uttered a low cry of glee.

For Pedro Gato lay flat on the ground, Nicolas bending over him.

"Quick, *caballeros!*" implored Nicolas again.

"You fine chap," chuckled Reade, bounding back and bending over Gato, as Nicolas was doing.

"There was no other way to save you," whispered the servant. "I had to do it."

As Nicolas raised his right hand, Reade could not help seeing that it was stained with blood.

"See here," gasped Tom, recoiling. "You didn't—you didn't knife the scoundrel?"

He had all of an American's disgust of knife-fighting.

"Oh, no—not I," returned the little Mexican. "I do not use the knife. I am a servant, not a coward. But I had to throw a stone. I am thankful, *senor*, that my aim was good."

Tom now discovered that blood was coming from a wound in Gato's head. Moreover, the rascal was beginning to moan. He would soon recover consciousness.

"Do you know how to use this, *senor?*" Nicolas asked, as he passed over a small coil of stout hempen cord.

"I think we can fix the fellow," Tom nodded. "Roll him over, Harry, and hold him. Don't let the scoundrel reach for any other weapons."

Gato's rifle lay on the ground. Tom pushed it aside with one foot as Harry turned the fellow.

"Get his hands behind him," muttered Tom. "I'll do the tying."

In a very short space of time Gato's hands had been securely bound behind him. More cord was tied around his ankles, in such a way that Gato would be able to take short steps but not run.

Suddenly Gato groaned and opened his eyes.

"You'll be more comfortable on your back, old fellow," murmured Tom. "Wait. I'll turn you."

Gato stared blankly, at first. Evidently he did not realize the situation all at once. At last a curse leaped to his lips.

"Go easy on that bad-talk stuff," Tom urged him. "Gentlemen don't use such language, and men who travel with us must be gentlemen."

"You miserable Gringo!" wailed Gato, gnashing his teeth. "You will always be full of treacherous tricks. Even when I had you in front of me, and my eyes on you, you managed to knock me down."

"Oh, no!" laughed Tom. "The credit for this stunt belongs to good little Nicolas!"

The servant uttered a protesting cry, but too late. Tom had spoken indiscreetly.

"Nicolas! You? You little mountain rat of a *peon*!" growled Gato. "Excellent! I am glad I know, for I shall destroy you."

Nicolas cowered and shivered before the baleful glare in the larger Mexican's eyes. But Tom took a savage grip of one of Gato's shoulders, digging in with his pressure until he made the scoundrel wince.

"You'd better go slow with that talk, Gato," Tom warned him. "If you don't we'll turn you over to Nicolas to do with as he pleases."

"All right," sneered Gato, not a whit dismayed. "He would dare to do nothing to me. He would be too afraid of the vengeance that he well knows stalks in these hills."

"It is all too true," shuddered Nicolas.

"Come, brace up, Nicolas, and be a man," Tom urged, slapping the servant cordially on the shoulder. "Don't be afraid of any man. Let Gato threaten you if he wants to. Nothing has happened to you yet, and he who is afraid is the only man that suffers. Come, Gato, you will have to get up on your feet. We can't let you delay us."

"I shall not stir a step," declared the fellow, grimly.

"Oh, yes, you will."

"Not if you kill me for refusing. If you wish to take me anywhere, Gringos, you will have to carry me every step of the way."

"We won't carry you, either," Tom continued, coolly. "Gato, a few moments ago, you had the whip-hand. Now, we're carrying the whip. We don't want any nonsense. If you carry matters too far you'll discover that Hazelton and I have had more or less experience as wild animal trainers. But, first of all, your head. It must be attended to."

Tom wiped away the blood, which was now clotting, with his own handkerchief.

"Help me to stand him on his feet, Harry," Reade then commanded.

Between them they dragged the heavy fellow to his feet, but Gato promptly cast himself down again.

"We'll haul you up again," Tom went on, patiently. "Don't try that mulish trick any more, Gato, or I promise you that you'll regret it."

No sooner had he been placed on his feet than Gato once more threw himself down. As soon as he went down, however, Tom jerked him to his feet.

A roar like that of an angry bull escaped the lips of the suffering Mexican.

"He is trying to summon his men!" cried Nicolas, snatching up the rifle.

No sooner was Gato upright than he threw himself down once more.

Again he was roughly jerked to a standing position.

The fourth time that Gato was placed on his feet he stood, though he was shaking with fury.

"That's a little better," Tom nodded. "Now, Nicolas, I imagine you know more than I do about where your countrymen carry their extra arms. Search this fellow for weapons, and don't overlook anything."

No pistol was revealed by the search, but a long, keen-edged knife was brought to light.

"No gentleman has any occasion to carry a thing like that," mocked Reade. Thrusting the blade into a cleft of rock close by, Tom snapped the blade, rendering the weapon useless.

"Now, we're ready to go on," announced Tom. "Harry, will you keep behind our guest of the evening and spur him on if he shows signs of lagging?"

"Take this gun, Senor Reade," Nicolas hinted, trying to pass the weapon to the young chief engineer.

"I don't want it," returned Tom, shaking his head and making a gesture of repulsion. "I don't like guns. They always make me nervous. I'm afraid of accidents, you see."

"You take the gun, then, Senor Hazelton," begged Nicolas, turning to the other engineer.

"Don't you believe it," retorted Harry, gruffly. "I'd lose caste forever with Tom if I carried firearms. Tom says that nobody but a coward will carry firearms. You keep the gun yourself."

"*Muy bien, senor,*" (very good, sir) agreed Nicolas, meekly. "It is better that I should carry the weapon then, for I am truly worthless. I am but a *peon*."

"Oh, confound you!" choked Harry. "I didn't mean that. You're one of the best fellows on earth, Nicolas, for you're a man that can be trusted. Better unstrap that belt of cartridges from Gato, too."

The big Mexican ground his teeth and cursed in helpless rage while the little servant stripped him of the belt and adjusted it about his own waist.

"Now, let's get along," Reade urged. "We've been losing a lot of valuable time. Besides, we don't know when we'll run into some of this mountain pirate's choice friends."

Tom strode on ahead. Nicolas ran to his side, walking with him. Then came Gato, urged on by Harry Hazelton.

"See here, you Nicolas," remarked Tom, protestingly, "why on earth didn't you stay put? We left you behind to-night so that you wouldn't run into trouble with Don Luis."

"Don Luis himself told me to wait on your excellencies night and day, as long as you remained in Bonista," Nicolas affirmed, solemnly. "Don Luis hasn't yet changed those orders, and so I must remain with you. But I had flattered myself that just now I was of enough service to you so that you wouldn't be displeased."

"Displeased? Not a bit of it," muttered Tom. "But we didn't want you to get yourself into trouble on our account. Now, you've gone and written your name in Gato's bad books for certain."

"I have, senor," the *peon* admitted. "Gato will take delight in cutting my throat for me one of these days."

"Great Scott!" Reade gasped, shivering. "That's cheerful."

"So that, perhaps, senor," suggested the *peon*, slyly, "you will be willing to take me with you to your own country. Perhaps there, also, you will be able to give me work as your servant."

"Rest assured of one thing, Nicolas. If we can get you safely over on to the American side of the border we'll look after you properly."

"I am very grateful, senor," protested Nicolas, humbly.

"But we're a long way from the American border as yet," Tom went on.

"You will get there safely, senor," predicted the *peon*. "You are a great man, and you know how to do things."

"Well, for simple faith you're the limit, Nicolas, my boy. For one thing, though, it strikes me that our getting over the border, which is some hundreds of miles away, might be hindered if we have the tough luck to run into any of Gato's armed pals along this route."

"You do well to remind me, senor!" cried Nicolas, in a low tone, but one, nevertheless, which was full of self-reproach. "So much have I enjoyed my talk with you that I have been forgetting to look after your safety. Pardon me, senor. I will vanish, but I shall watch over you with the wide-open eyes of the panther."

In another instant Nicolas had vanished from the trail. Tom, however, did not worry. He knew that Nicolas was not far away, and that the little *peon* was doubtless as valuable a scout as their expedition could have.

"I wish I had asked him to unload that gun, though," Reade muttered to himself. "He's likely as not to hurt some one else beside the enemy with a stray bullet or two."

Three miles further on Tom, Harry and their prisoner halted, for on the rough road they were now becoming winded.

"I am near, senores," whispered a familiar voice, though Nicolas did not show himself over the rocks that concealed him.

"Yes," sneered Gato, harshly, "you are indeed near—near death, you silly little fool. Always before you have been safe because you were not a fighting man. But now you have taken to deeds of arms, and you shall take your chances whenever you stir in these mountains. For that matter you will surely be cut down before the dawn comes."

"That reminds me," muttered Tom. "We want to be farther from Don Luis before dawn arrives. Gato, oblige us by rising and joining in the hike."

Though Gato snarled, he allowed himself to be hoisted to his feet. Then, with alert Harry behind him the villain allowed himself to be ordered along the trail.

When dawn came Nicolas informed the young engineers that they were now within about four miles of the nearest telegraph station. The food that they had brought along was opened; even Gato had his share. Then Nicolas vanished once more, and the march was resumed.

The sun was well up, and beating down hot and fiery when Nicolas, standing on a jutting ledge of rock, pointed down into the valley at a little clump of wooden buildings, roofed with corrugated iron.

"That third house is the telegraph station," said the *peon*. "You will know it by the wires running in."

"Shan't we all go down?" asked Harry.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be wise," Tom answered. "We can't turn our prisoner loose. On the other hand, if we took him with us, roped as he is, it might stir up a lot of questioning and make some trouble. But Nicolas will know better. What do you say, my boy?"

"I say that Senor Reade is right."

Tom therefore started down into the valley alone. A few half-clad natives lounged in the street. They stared curiously at this stalwart-looking, bronzed young Gringo who walked toward them with alert step.

Two or three of the children, after the custom of their kind, called out for money. Tom, smiling pleasantly, drew forth a few loose American coins that he had with him and scattered them in the road. Then he hastened on to the telegraph station, a squalid-looking little one-room shanty. But the place looked good to Tom, for its wires reached out over the civilized world, and more especially ran to the dear old United States that he was so anxious to reach with a few words.

Tom passed inside, to find a bare-footed, white-clad Mexican soldier at a telegraph desk. The soldier wore the chevrons of a sergeant.

"Sergeant, may I send a telegram from here?" Tom inquired in Spanish.

"Certainly, senor," replied the sergeant, pushing forward a blank. As this telegraph station was a military station, it was under the exclusive control of the soldiery.

Tom picked up the blank and the proffered pencil. He dated the paper, then wrote the name and address of the manager of his and Harry's engineering office in the United States. Below this Reade wrote:

"Hazelton and I are now endeavoring to reach railway and return immediately. If not heard from soon, look us up promptly through Washington."

"Our man will know, from this, if he doesn't hear from us soon," Tom reflected, "that there has been foul play, and that he must turn the matter over to the United States Government at Washington for some swift work by Uncle Sam on our behalf. Once this message gets through to the other end, Harry and I won't have to worry much about being able to get out of Mexico in safety."

The sergeant read the English words through carefully.

"Will the senor pardon me for saying," ventured the telegrapher, "that this message reads much as though yourself and a friend are trying to escape?"

The man spoke in English, though with a Spanish accent.

"What do you mean, Sergeant?" Tom queried, quickly.

"Why should you need to escape, if you are honest men, engaged in honest business?" demanded the sergeant, eyeing Reade keenly.

"Why, it isn't a felony to try to get out of Mexico, is it?" Tom counter-queried.

"That depends," said the sergeant. "It depends, for instance, on why you are leaving."

"We're leaving because we want to," Tom informed him.

"You are Senor Reade, are you not?" pressed the sergeant, after eyeing the telegram once more. "And your friend, who does not appear here in person, is Senor Hazelton? Unless I am wrong, then you are the two engineers whom Don Luis Montez engaged. How do I know that you have any right to leave Mexico? How do I know that you are not breaking a contract?"

"Breaking a contract?" Tom retorted, somewhat indignantly. "Sergeant, we are not contract laborers. We are civil engineers—professional men."

"Nevertheless," replied the sergeant, handing back the telegram into the hands of bewildered. Tom Reade, "I cannot undertake to send this message until it is endorsed with the written approval of Don Luis Montez, your employer."

"Does Don Luis own this side of Mexico, or this wing of the Mexican Army?" Tom inquired, with biting sarcasm.

"I cannot send the telegram, senor, except as I have stated."

Whereupon the sergeant began firmly, though gently, to push Tom out of the room. Comparing the size and muscular development of the two, it looked almost humorous to see this effort. But Tom, who now realized how hopeless his errand was, allowed himself to be pushed out. Then the door was slammed to and locked behind him.

"Nothing doing!" muttered Reade, in chagrin and dismay. "In fact, much less than nothing! Harry and I will simply have to tramp fifty miles further and find the railway. Great Scott! I doubt if the conductor will even let us aboard his train without a pass signed by Don Luis. Hang the entire state of Bonista!"

Deep in thought, and well-nigh overwhelmed by the complete realization of his defeat, Tom stalked moodily back up among the rocks.

As he turned a sharp, jutting ledge, Tom suddenly recoiled, as a brisk military voice called:

"Para! Quien vive!" (Halt! Who goes there?)

Reade found a Mexican military bayonet pressing against his chest, behind the bayonet a rifle, and to the immediate rear of the rifle a ragged, barefooted young soldier, though none the less a genuine Mexican soldier!

Further back other soldiers squatted on the ground. In their centre sat the scowling Gato, handcuffed and therefore plainly a prisoner.

Harry and Nicolas were also there—not handcuffed, yet quite as plainly prisoners.

CHAPTER XV

THE JOB OF BEING AN HIDALGO

"This must be a part of the army that Don Luis also owns!" flashed through Reade's mind.

From behind the group stepped forth a boyish-looking young fellow at whose side dangled a sword. He was a very young lieutenant.

"Are these your men?" inquired Tom.

"Yes," nodded the lieutenant.

"Why have they stopped me?" Tom demanded, calmly.

"On suspicion, senor."

"Suspicion of what?" demanded Reade, his eyes opening wider. "Is it suspicious for a foreigner to be walking about in Mexico?"

"I am not here to answer questions, senor," replied the young officer. "You will be good enough not to resist."

"I haven't any intention of resisting," Tom retorted. "I know better than to think that I can thrash the whole Mexican Army that is behind you."

"You are as sensible as I had hoped you would be, senor," continued the lieutenant, with a slight bow.

"But I wish you would tell us why you are holding us," Tom insisted.

"I am not obliged to tell you, senor, and I am not certain that it would be wise of me to do so," the officer answered. "However, I will say that I found your party with a Mexican citizen as a prisoner."

"And you seem to have made a prisoner of the same fellow yourself," Reade retorted.

"As an officer of the Mexican Army, senor, that is my privilege," came the lieutenant's response. "As to your right, however, to arrest and hold a Mexican citizen, there may be some question. I shall have to satisfy myself on this point before I can release you."

"Why, I'll be wholly frank with you," Tom Reade offered. "This fellow, Gato, is a rascal whom I had occasion to thrash. In revenge for the humiliation he has given me to understand that he would kill me. Last night he held us up at the point of his rifle. Our servant, Nicolas, threw a stone that bowled Gato over. Then, for our own safety, we tied him up and brought him with us."

"Why was it necessary to your safety, senor, since you had the fellow's rifle and his ammunition? You see, I have gained this much from your friend."

"Why was it necessary?" Tom repeated, wonderingly. "Why, Lieutenant, do you feel that we should have turned a deadly enemy loose?"

"But you had no right to arrest him, senor."

"Nor did we arrest him in the sense that you mean, Lieutenant. All we did was to render Gato helpless and bring him along with us until we should have passed out of the bit of country in which he might have been dangerous to our safety."

"How could he be dangerous when you had his weapon?" the lieutenant demanded, argumentatively.

"Why, he had other men out with him. How long would it have taken Gato to find his men and bring them down upon us—three or four guns against one?"

"But did you see his other men at any time in the night?"

"No," Tom admitted.

"Senor, you have made a grave mistake in arresting and holding the man, Gato. You had no right to do so."

"Why, in our own country," Tom protested, "any one may arrest a man who is committing a crime. In our own case we very likely would have lost our lives to bandits if we had not tied Gato and brought him with us."

"Had you tied him and left him behind it might have been different," explained the lieutenant. "But what you did, Senor Reade, was to make an actual arrest, and this you, as an American, had no right to do. Therefore, I shall hold you until this matter has been further inquired into."

It was a bad plight, and there seemed to be no simple way out of it. The young chief engineer began to see that, innocently, and wholly for the purpose of self-protection, he very likely had infringed upon the kinds of rights that foreigners in Mexico do not possess.

"All right, Lieutenant," sighed Tom. "I suppose we shall have to go along with you. Where are you taking us?"

"That will have to be decided," said the officer. "Nowhere for the presents my men are tired and need rest. We will not humiliate you, Senor Reade, by placing you in irons, but I will ask your word of honor that you won't attempt to escape from us."

"I give you that word of honor," said Tom, simply.

"And I have only to remind you, senor, that, if you make the mistake of breaking your word, bullets travel fast and several of my men are sharpshooters."

"I am an American and a gentleman," Reade returned, with offended dignity. "My word of honor is not given to be broken."

"Then you will seat yourself, senor, or stroll about and amuse yourself within the narrow limits of this small camp."

Tom stepped over, rested his hand on Harry's shoulder, then dropped to a seat beside his chum.

"Can you beat it?" Tom demanded, in ready American slang.

"It would be hard to, wouldn't it?" Harry asked, smiling sheepishly.

Pedro Gato turned to regard them with a surly grin. Though handcuffed, Gato seemed to feel that he was now enjoying his own innings.

For an hour or more the soldiers continued to rest. All of them, including the lieutenant, who sat stiffly aloof from his men, rolling and smoking cigarettes.

"I see a bully argument against cigarette smoking," whispered Tom in his chum's ear.

"What is it?" Harry wanted to know.

"All of these fellows are smoking cigarettes. I am proud of myself to feel that I don't belong in their class."

"A year ago Alf Drew would have felt at home in this cigarette-puffing, sallow-faced lot, wouldn't he?" grinned Harry.

"I am glad to say that Alf now knows how measly a cigarette smoker looks," answered Tom.

Alf Drew, as readers of the preceding volume will remember, was a boy addicted to cigarettes, but whom Tom had broken of the stupid habit. Alf was now employed in the engineering offices of Reade & Hazelton.

"There's something coming," announced Reade, presently. "It sounds like a miniature railroad train."

"I wish it were a real one, and that we had our baggage aboard," muttered Harry, with a grimace.

One of the sentries had gone to intercept the approaching object. Instead the soldier now permitted the approaching object to roll into camp. It proved to be Don Luis's big touring car. In the tonneau sat the mine owner and Dr. Carlos Tisco.

"What is this, Senor Reade?" cried Don Luis Montez, in pretended astonishment. "In trouble? Lieutenant, these gentlemen are friends of mine. May I ask you what this means?"

Tom was not deceived by this by-play. He snorted mildly while the young army lieutenant explained why he had detained the engineers.

"But these gentlemen are friends and employes," Don Luis explained. "What they tell you about Gato is quite true. Will you oblige me by releasing these gentlemen, Lieutenant."

The young officer seemed to hesitate.

"It's all a part of the comedy," whispered Tom, and Harry nodded.

"I—I will let these Americanos go, for the present, Don Luis," suggested the lieutenant, "provided you will take them back to your estate, and agree to be responsible for them if they are wanted.

"Thank you very much, Lieutenant. I will readily undertake that," agreed Montez, smiling. "Then come, Senores Reade and Hazelton, and I will interrupt my journey to take you back to safety under a hospitable roof."

"I don't know that I wouldn't rather go with the soldiers," Harry muttered to his chum.

"No!" murmured Reade. "I've heard too much about these Mexican prisons to care anything about

going to one. I reckon we'd better go with Don Luis. After we've rid ourselves of military guard, and have reached the Montez estate, we are at least released from our word of honor not to attempt an escape. I guess, Harry, we had better take up with Don Luis's rascally offer."

"Well, *caballeros*, does it need much discussion to enable you to accept my kindness?" called Montez, banteringly.

"Not at all, Don Luis," Tom made answer. "We're going with you—with the lieutenant's consent."

The young lieutenant bowed his agreement. Tom and Harry lifted their hats lightly to the officer, then stepped into the tonneau of the car.

"Home," said Don Luis.

The chauffeur made a quick turn, and the car speedily left the camp behind.

"I have often heard, gentlemen, that foreigners have difficulty in understanding our laws," observed Don Luis. He spoke affably, but mockery lurked in his tones. "Without realizing it you two have committed a serious offense against our laws. You have ventured to arrest a Mexican citizen."

Nicolas, who sat in front with the chauffeur, sat as stiff and silent as though he had been a figure of stone.

"What will be the outcome of this adventure, under the law?" Tom inquired, dryly.

"It would need one of our judges to say that," replied Don Luis, shrugging his shoulders. "However, I may be able to arrange the matter with the authorities."

"And, if you can't arrange it—?"

"Why, then, I dare say, my friends, you will have to be arrested again. Then you would be taken to one of our prisons until your trial came off. You might even be held *incommunicado*, which means that, as prisoners, you would not be allowed to communicate with the outside world—not even with your American government."

"And how long would we be held *incommunicado*?" Tom asked.

Don Luis gave another shrug of his shoulders.

"You would be held *incommunicado*, Senor Reade, until the judges were ready to try you."

"And that might be years off," Tom muttered.

Don Luis beamed delightedly, while a thin smile curled on Dr. Tisco's lips.

"You are beginning, senor, to get some grasp of Mexican law," laughed Montez.

"In other words, Don Luis," said Tom, dryly, "it's a game wherein you can't possibly lose, and we can remain out of prison only as long as you are gracious enough to will it?"

"That might be rather a strong way of stating the case," murmured the Mexican. "However, after your unlawful act of last night, you undoubtedly are liable to a long confinement in one of our prisons. But believe me, Senor Reade, you may command me as far as my humble influence with our government goes!"

The situation was certainly one to make Tom think hard. He was certain that Don Luis had engineered the whole situation, even to urging Gato on to a part in this grin drama.

"Well, you've got us!" sighed Tom.

"You will find me your best friend, always," protested Montez.

"You have us," Tom continued, "but you haven't our signatures to the report on your mine. That is going to be more difficult."

"Time heals all breaches between gentlemen who should be friends," declared Don Luis, quite graciously.

After that it was a silent party that rode in the touring car. Though the road back to the estate was worthy of no such name as road, the big car none the less "ate up the miles." It was not long before the young engineers caught sight of the big white house.

"Come, gentlemen," begged Don Luis, alighting, and turning to the young engineers with a courtly grace that concealed a world of mockery. "You will find your rooms ready, and my household ready to minister to your comfort."

Tom Reade, as he stepped upon the porch, drew himself up as stiffly as any American soldier could have done.

"We've had to come this far with you, Don Luis," admitted the young engineer, dropping all his former pretense of dry good humor, "but you can't make us live under your roof unless you go so far as to have us seized, tied and carried in."

"I have no intention of being anything but a gracious friend and host," murmured Montez.

"Then, while we probably must stay here," Tom resumed, "we'll leave your place and go to live somewhere in the open near you. We can accept neither your house nor your food."

"Very good," answered Montez, meekly, bowing again. "I will only suggest, *caballeros*, that you do not attempt to go too far from my house. If you do, the soldiers will surely find you. Then they will not bring you back to me, and you will learn what *incomunicado* means in our Mexican law. *Adios, caballeros!*"

"Am I still the servant of the American gentlemen, Don Luis?" asked Nicolas, humbly.

"You may go with them. They will need you, little Nicolas," answered Don Luis, and watched the three out of sight with smiling eyes.

Montez could afford to be cheerful. He knew that he had triumphed.

CHAPTER XVI

TWO VICTIMS OF ROSY THOUGHTS

"There is one thing about it," remarked Reade, as he rose and stood at the doorway of the tent. "We're not being overworked."

"Nor are we getting awfully rich, as the weeks go by, either," smiled Harry.

"No; but we're puppets in a game that interests me about as much as any that I ever saw played," Tom smiled back.

"This game—interests you?" queried Harry, looking astonished. "That is a new idea to me, Tom. I never knew you to be interested, before, in any game that wasn't directly connected with some great ambition."

"We have a great ambition at present."

"I'd like to know what it is," grumbled Harry. "It's three weeks since that scoundrel, Don Luis, brought us back in triumph. We refused to enter his house as guests, and started to camp in the open in these two old tents that Nicolas secured for us. In all these three weeks we haven't done a tap of work. We haven't studied, or read because we have no books. We sleep, eat, and then sleep some more. When we get tired of everything else we go out and trudge over the hills, being careful not to get too far, lest we run into the guns of Gato and his comrades, for undoubtedly Gato was turned loose as soon as he was lost to our sight. We don't do anything like work, and we're not even arranging any work for the future. Yet you say that you're boosting your ambitions."

"I am," Tom nodded solemnly. "Harry, isn't it just as great an ambition to be an honest engineer as it is to be a highly capable one?"

"Of course."

"Don't capitalists usually invest large sums on a favorable report from engineers?"

"Often."

"And, if the engineers were dishonest the capitalists would lose their money, wouldn't they?"

"Certainly."

"Then here's our ambition, and we're working it out—finely, too," Tom went on, with much warmth. "Don Luis has a scheme to rob some people of a large sum of money by selling them a worthless mine in a country where there are several good ones. If he could get us to help him, to our own dishonor, Don Luis Montez would succeed in swindling this company of men. Harry, we're just lying around here, day after day, doing no hard work, but we're blocking Don Luis's game and saving money for honest men. Don Luis doesn't care to have us assassinated, for he still hopes to break down our resistance. He can't bring the capitalists here to meet us until we do give in, and so the game lags for Don Luis. He can't bring in other engineers, for they'd meet us and we would post them. The American engineer must be a serious problem for Don Luis. He thought he could buy almost any of us. Our conduct has made him afraid that American engineers can't be bought. Evidently he must have his report signed by American engineers of repute, which means that he is trying to sell his worthless mine to Americans. Harry, we're teaching Don Luis to respect the honesty of American engineers; we're saving some of our countrymen from being swindled, probably out of thousands of dollars; we're proving that the American engineer is honest, and we're discouraging rascals everywhere from employing us in crooked work. Now, honestly, isn't all that ambition enough to hold us for a few weeks?"

"I suppose so," Harry agreed. "But what is the end of all this to be. Won't Don Luis merely have us assassinated in the end, if we go on proving stubborn?"

"He may," Tom answered, pressing his lips grimly. "But, if he does, he'll pay heavily for his villainy."

"How?"

"Every man has to pay for his sins."

"That's what we were taught in Sunday school," Harry nodded, "and I've always believed it. Yet here, in these remote mountains of the state of Bonista, if anywhere, Don Luis would appear to be safe. If a few of his men crept up here, late some night, with pistols or knives, and finished us before we had time to wake up, do you imagine that any one hereabouts would dare to make any report of the matter? Would our fate ever reach the outside world?"

"It would be sure to, in time, I believe," Tom answered, thoughtfully.

"How?"

"That I can't tell. But I believe in the invariable triumph of right, no matter how great the odds against it may seem."

"Let right triumph, after we're buried," continued Harry, "and what good would it do us?"

"None, in any ordinary material sense. Yet good would come to the world through our fate, even if only in proclaiming, once more, the sure defeat of all wicked plans in the end."

Harry said no more, just then. Tom Reade, who ordinarily was intensely practical, was also the kind of young man who could perish for an ideal, if need be. Tom went outside, stretching himself on the grass under a tree. He sighed for a book, but there was none, so he lay staring off over the valley below.

Twenty minutes later Harry, after trying vainly to take a nap on a cot in the tent, followed his chum outside.

"Odd, isn't it, Tom?" questioned Hazelton. "We're living what looks like a wholly free life. Nothing to prevent us from tramping anywhere we please on these hills, and yet we know to a certainty that we wouldn't be able to get twenty miles from here before soldiers would have us nabbed, and marching away to a prison from which, very likely, no one in the outside world would ever hear of us again."

"It is queer," agreed Tom, nodding. "Oh, just for one glimpse of Yankee soil!"

"Twice," went on Harry, "we've even persuaded Nicolas to bribe some native to take a letter from us, to be mailed at some distant point. After two or three days Don Luis, in each instance, has come here, and, with a smile, has shown us our own intercepted letter. Yet Nicolas has been honest in the matter, beyond a doubt. It is equally past question that the native whom Nicolas has trusted and paid has made an honest attempt to get away and post our letter; but always the cunning of a Montez overtakes the trusted messenger."

"And one can only guess what has happened to the messengers," Tom said, soberly. "Undoubtedly both of the two poor fellows are now passing the days *incommunicado*. It makes a fellow a bit heartsick,

doesn't it, chum, to think of the probable fates of two men who have tried to serve us. And what, in the end, is to be the fate of poor little Nicolas? Don Luis Montez is not the sort of man to forgive him his fidelity to us."

"And where's Nicolas, all this time?" suddenly demanded Harry, glancing at his watch. "Why, the fellow hasn't been here for three hours! Where can he be?"

"*Quien sabe?*" responded Reade, using the common Spanish question, given with a shrug, which means, "Who knows! Who can guess?"

"Can Nicolas have fallen into any harm?" asked Hazelton, a new note of alarm in his voice. "The poor, faithful little fellow! It gives me a shiver to think of his suffering an injury just because he serves us so truly."

"I shall be interested in seeing him get back," Tom nodded thoughtfully.

"And I'm beginning to have a creepy feeling that he won't come back!" cried Harry. "He may at this moment be past human aid, Tom, and that may be but the prelude to our own craftily-planned destruction."

Tom Reade sat up, leaning on one elbow, as he regarded his chum with an odd smile.

"Harry," Tom uttered, dryly, "we certainly have no excuse for being blue when we have such rosy thoughts to cheer us up!"

"Hang Mexico!" grunted Hazelton.

CHAPTER XVII

THE STRANGER IN THE TENT

By and by Tom Reade began to grow decidedly restless. He would sit up, look and listen, and then lie down again. Then he would fidget about nervously, all of which was most unusual with him, for Reade's was one of those strong natures that will endure work day and night as long as is necessary, and then go in for complete rest when there is nothing else to do.

Harry did not observe this, for he had gone back into the tent. Two sheets of a Mexican newspaper had come wrapped around one of Nicolas's last food purchases. Hazelton was reading the paper slowly by way of improving his knowledge of Spanish.

At last Tom called, in a low voice:

"Don't worry about me, chum, if you miss me. I'm going to take a little stroll."

"All right, Tom."

Reade did not hurry away. He had to remember that in all probability he was being watched. So he strolled about as though he had no particular purpose in mind. Yet, after some minutes, he gained a point from which he could gaze down the hill-slope toward the little village of huts in which the mine laborers lived.

There were a few small children playing about the one street that ran through the village. A few of the women were out of doors, also, but none of the men were in sight, for these were toiling away at the mine. Though *El Sombrero* had so far shown no ore that amounted to anything, Don Luis, while waiting to sell his mine for a fortune, kept his *peons* working hard in the hope that they might strike some real ore.

After Tom had been gazing for three or four minutes his eyes suddenly lighted, for he saw Nicolas come out of one of the huts.

"I wonder what has kept the little fellow so long," Tom murmured. But he turned away with an appearance of listlessness, for, if he were observed, he did not care to have a watcher note his interest in the servant's coming.

So Nicolas passed on toward the tents without having observed Reade.

"I won't get back too soon," Tom decided. "If we are watched at all it wouldn't do to have me appear too much interested in the *peon's* doings."

Now that his mind was somewhat easier, Tom strolled on once more. His roundabout path took him along among the rocks that littered the ground over the principal tunnels of *El Sombrero*. Hundreds of feet beneath him now toiled some of the *peons* who lived in the village of huts yonder.

Presently Reade increased his speed considerably, deciding that now it would be safe to return directly to camp. Suddenly he stopped short, head up, his gaze directed at the tops of three or four rocks. Some human being had just dodged out of sight at that point.

Tom felt a swift though brief chill. Something had made him suspect that the prowler might be Gato, or one of the latter's companions.

Instead of running away Tom made for the place of hiding in short leaps.

"Hold on there a minute, my friend," Tom called in Spanish. "I think it may be worth my while to look you over."

Just as Reade was ready to bound over the rocks a figure rose as though to meet him. A light leap landed Reade on top of the stranger, who was borne to earth.

"Mercy *senor!*" begged the other. "Do not be rough with me. I am not strong enough to stand it."

The man spoke Spanish and was well past middle age, of a very spare figure, and his face was very thin, although there was a deep flush on his cheeks.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Tom in Spanish. He touched the stranger's cheeks, which were hot with fever.

Then Tom slid off his poor captive and squatted beside him. Reaching for the man's left wrist and resting two fingers on his pulse, Tom added, gently:

"Tell me all about it, *senor.*"

"There is not much to tell," panted the stranger, weakly, for Tom's landing on him had jarred him severely. "I am sick, as you can see."

"Oh, that isn't much," said Tom, blithely. "With decent care you will soon be well. It is plain that you are a gentleman—no *peon*. Yonder, some distance, is a house where I think you are very likely to be well taken care of. Don Luis Montez—"

Despite the hectic flush in the cheeks, the stranger's face paled visibly. Tom, always observant, noted this.

"Oh, I see," Reade went on, calmly. "You do not like Don Luis Montez, or you do not care about going to his house."

The stranger gazed up wistfully at the young engineer's kindly face.

"*Senor,*" he asked, "you would not betray me?"

"You mean to Don Luis?"

A weak nod was the answer.

"Rest easy on that score, my friend," Tom begged, dryly. "Don Luis and I are not on the best of terms. I do not like him very well myself."

"Will you help to hide me here, and then go away and be silent?"

"Go away and leave you here?" suggested Reade.

"Yes, *senor.* It will be a great favor."

"It would be murder," Tom retorted. "Man, you're ill and you need care—nursing. I don't know much about doctoring, but if you have any reason why you don't want Don Luis to know you're here, then I'll do the best I can for you here. I have a chum who'll help me. You have been traveling for some time?" Tom continued, his glance taking in the stranger's well-worn shoes and trousers.

"That is true, yes," nodded the stranger.

"You've been over a rough road, also," Tom continued, "and now you're ill. Your pulse is a hundred and twenty, and you're breathing thirty-two times to the minute. You must have a good bed, be covered comfortably and have plenty of water to drink while we're getting some medicines for you."

"You are indeed kind, but I fear," protested the stranger, "that you will attract attention my way, and then I shall be captured."

Tom studied the face of the sick man keenly.

"I wish you would tell me something about yourself," the young engineer hinted. "It might help me to decide what it is best to do for you."

"Senor," begged the stranger, with a start of dread "it would be a great kindness to me if you would go away and leave me here. Do not come back—and forget that you have seen me."

"It can't be done," replied Tom, with gentle positiveness. "It wouldn't be in American nature to go away and leave a fellow creature to die of helplessness when a little care and nursing ought to put that man on his feet again. But I won't argue with you, for I see the excitement is bringing a deeper flush into your face. Senor, as you are a gentleman trust another gentleman to serve you loyally and not betray you. I am going to leave you for a little while. Will you give me your word to remain here until I return?"

"Yes," nodded the other, weakly.

"I'll wrap this around you," Reade continued, taking off his own blouse and wrapping it around the thin body of the older man. "This will help you a little if you are taken with chills. I shall be back as soon as I can possibly come without attracting attention. Do not be startled if you hear other footsteps than my own. I shall bring with me a friend. I would trust in his hands anything or all that I have in the world. Will you trust me to serve you, senor?"

"I shall trust you," promised the other, simply. "In truth, my young friend, I have many reasons why I could wish to recover of this illness and be well again."

Tom slipped away, then rose to his full height, and resumed his late appearance of lounging along without an object. As he neared the camp he espied Nicolas, whom he had forgotten.

"Our little fellow came back, you see," called Harry, as Tom neared the tents. "What have you been doing?"

"Loafing," yawned Reade, as he strolled up. When he reached the cook tent, however, he stepped inside and the Mexican servant followed him.

"Senor," Nicolas reported, in a whisper, "I think I succeeded in my errand."

"But you do not yet know?" queried Tom.

"How can I know so soon, senor?" questioned Nicolas.

"True," nodded Tom.

Then he stepped outside the tent, remarking: "Our food supply is so low, Nicolas, that I fear you will have to take the basket and go after more."

"It shall be done, senor," promised the servant, and going into the tent appeared a moment later with a basket.

Tom handed him some money.

"I am listening to your orders, senor."

"Oh, you know as well what food to get as I do," Tom rejoined. "But," he added, under his voice, "you *must* get me some—"

Here Tom added the Spanish names of three or four drugs that he wanted.

"I think I shall be able to get the drugs, senor. Some of the *peons* must keep them in their houses."

"You must get them, as I said. Now, make good time. I will await your return."

Then Tom drew Harry aside, describing the finding of the fever-stricken stranger.

"Who on earth can he be?" wondered Harry, curiously. "And what can he be doing in this out of the way part of the world?"

"That's his own secret," retorted Tom, dryly; and the man is bent on keeping it. There are only two things that we need to know—one that he is ill, and the other that he is very plainly a gentleman, who would be incapable of repaying our kindness with any treachery. What do you say, Harry? Shall we bring him here and look after him?"

"That's for you to say, Tom."

"It's half for you to say, Harry. Half the risk is also yours, if anything goes wrong."

"Tom, I feel the same way that you do about it," Harry declared, his eyes shining brightly. "A fellow creature in distress is one whom we can't pass by. We can't leave him to die. Such a thing would haunt me as long as I live. When do you want to go after him?"

"Just as soon as it's dark," Reade replied. "That will be within the hour, for here in the tropics night comes soon after the sun sets."

When the time came Tom and Harry left their tent, strolling slowly. It was very dark and the young engineers listened intently as they went along. They found their stranger and lifted him from the ground. He was so slight and frail that he proved no burden whatever. Apparently without having been seen by any one Reade and Hazelton bore their man back to camp.

"Into the cook tent," whispered Reade. "Don Luis, if he should visit us, is less likely to look there than anywhere else."

Into the cook tent they bore the stranger, arranging a bed on the floor, and covering the sick man with such blankets as his condition appeared to call for.

"I am back, *caballeros*," announced Nicolas, treading softly into the tent. "To the praise of Heaven, be it said, I secured the medicines you told me to get."

Then Nicolas stopped short, gazing wonderingly at the fever-flushed face of the stranger.

CHAPTER XVIII

CRAFT—OR SURRENDER?

"He's a puzzle," remarked Harry, four days later.

"Meaning our sick man?"

"Of course. But he isn't going to be a sick man much longer, thanks to you, Tom. You were born to be a physician."

"Don't you believe it," smiled Reade. "The only previous experience I've had was when I simply had to pull you through out on Indian Smoke Range last winter. Harry, I was afraid you were a goner, and I couldn't let you go. But then, just when you were at your worst I had the best of outside help in pulling you through."

"You mean you got help after you had pulled me out of all danger," Hazelton retorted. "And now you've pulled our stranger through. Or the next thing to it. His fever is gone, and he's mending."

"Nothing much ailed him, I reckon, but intense anxiety and too little food. Our man is resting, now, and getting strong."

"But he's a mystery to me," Harry continued.

"How so?"

"I can't make anything out of him."

"That's right."

"Do you figure out anything concerning him?" Hazelton inquired.

"I don't want to. It isn't any of my business. Our unknown guest is very plainly a gentleman, and that's enough to know about him. If he hasn't told us anything more then it's because he thinks his affairs are of more importance to himself than to us."

"Oh, of course, I didn't mean that I wanted to pry into his affairs," Harry protested.

"No; and we won't do it, either, Harry. If our guest should happen to be missing some morning, without even a note of thanks left behind, we'll understand what it cost him to slip away without saying farewell."

The day before Don Luis had made one of his occasional visits, but he had not gone into the cook tent. Even had he done so the mine owner would probably have seen nothing to make him curious. At the further end of the cook tent lay the stranger, and his bed had been curtained off by a dark-colored print curtain that looked as though it might have been placed there to partition off part of the tent. Don Luis had called merely to chat with the young engineers, and to use his keen eyes in determining whether his enforced guests were any nearer to the point of yielding to his demands upon them.

Concerning the sick man, Nicolas had remained wholly silent. He did not offer to go near the sick man, but brought whatever Tom or Harry had called for. To have the sick man on their hands had been a rather welcome break for the young engineers, since it had given them something with which to occupy themselves.

Just before dark on the fifth day, Tom strolled into the cook tent, going to the rear and parting the curtain.

"How do you feel, now?" Reade asked in a whisper.

"Much stronger, senor," came the grateful answer. "Last night, when your servant slept, I rose and walked about the tent a little to find the use of my legs again. To-day, when alone, I did the same thing. By morning I shall be fit to walk once more. Senor, do not think me ungrateful if you come into this tent, some morning, soon, and find my end of it deserted. I shall go, but I shall never forget you."

"You will please yourself, sir," Tom answered, simply. "Yet I beg you not to attempt to leave until you are able to take care of yourself. We shall not think you ungrateful if it be a long time before we hear from you again. Another thing, sir. When you go do not fail to take with you, in your pockets, food enough to last you for some days."

"I—I cannot pay for it," hesitated the stranger. "Nor, for the present, can I offer to pay you back the money you have expended on my medicines."

"Now, who said anything about that?" Tom asked, nearly as gruffly as it was possible for him to speak to a sick man. "Pay for nothing here, sir, and do not worry about it, either. You do not know how much pleasure your coming has given us. We needed something to do needed it with an aching want that would not be stilled. Looking after you, sir, has been a very welcome treat to us."

"You have been kinder to me, senores, than any one has been to me in many years," murmured the stranger, tears starting to his eyes.

"There, there! Forget it," urged Tom.

"Good evening, Don Luis!" sounded Harry's voice outside. "Ah, Dr. Tisco."

"That's our warning to stop talking," whispered Tom in the stranger's ear, then rose and slipped outside the curtain.

"Where is Senor Reade?" inquired Don Luis.

"Any one calling me?" inquired Tom, looking out of the cook tent. "Ah, good evening, gentlemen."

Tom stepped outside, offering his hand. As this was the first time of late that he had made any such overture to the mine owner, Montez was quick to grasp the hope that it conveyed.

"You are not comfortable here, Senor Reade," said Don Luis, looking about. "I regret it the more when I remember how much room I have under my poor roof. Why don't you move up there, at once. There are several apartments any one of which you may have."

"On the contrary we are very comfortable here," Tom rejoined, seating himself on the ground. "We have lived the open-air life so much that we are really happier in a tent than we could be in any house."

"I cannot understand why you can feel so about it," murmured the Mexican stepping to the entrance of the larger tent and glancing inside. "I will admit, Senor Reade, that you keep a very tidy house under canvas, and your wants may be extremely simple. But a house offers comforts that cannot possibly be found in a tent like this. And the other is still smaller and more cheerless," he added, crossing into the other tent.

Don Luis was now within arm's length of the thin curtain, and was apparently about to push it aside.

"Won't you come outside," suggested Tom, "and tell me the object of your call this evening? It is too warm in here."

"Gladly," smiled the Mexican, letting go of the curtain, which he had just touched, and wheeling about.

"Hang the rascal!" muttered Tom, inwardly. "Has he gotten wind of the fact that we have a stranger here? Does Don Luis know all about the man? Is he playing on my nerves at this moment?"

But Montez, with an appearance of being wholly interested in Tom Reade, went outside with him. Harry placed campstools for the callers, while the young engineers threw themselves upon the ground. Don Luis Montez, as usual, was to do the talking, while Dr. Tisco's purpose in being present was to use his keen, snapping eyes in covertly studying the faces of the two Americans.

"I have called to say," declared Don Luis, coming promptly to the point, "that within three days a party of American visitors will be here. They come with a view to buying the mine, and I shall sell it to them at a very handsome profit. Before we can deal with these Americans it will be absolutely necessary for me to have that report, signed by you both. Moreover, you must both give me your word of honor that you will meet the Americans, and stand back of that report. That you will do all in your power to make possible the sale of the mine."

"We've discussed all of that before," said Harry, dryly.

"And we shall yet require a little more time before we can give a too definite answer," Tom broke in hastily, to head off his chum.

"But the time is short, *caballeros*," Don Luis urged, a new light, however, gleaming in his eyes, for this was the first time that the young engineers had shown any likelihood of granting his wishes.

"A great deal can be decided upon in three days, Don Luis," Tom went on, slowly. "You will have to give us a little more time, and we will weigh everything carefully."

"But you believe that you will be ready to meet my views?" Don Luis demanded, eagerly.

"I cannot see how our endorsement of your mine can be of any very great value to you," Tom resumed. "It is hardly likely that any of these capitalists who are coming have ever heard of us. In any case, they are quite likely to feel that we are much too young to be able to form professional opinions of any value."

"You give me your help in the matter," coaxed Montez, "and I will attend to the rest. More, *caballeros*; stand by me so well that I dispose of the mine, and I will promise you twenty thousand dollars, gold, apiece."

"That is a lot of money," Reade nodded, thoughtfully. "But there are other considerations, too."

"Yes; your liberty and your safety," Montez broke in, quickly, with a meaning smile. "*Caballeros*, do not for one moment think that I can be hoodwinked, and that you will be safe as soon as you meet your fellow Americans. One single flaw in your conduct, after they arrive, and I assure you that you will be promptly arrested. That would be the end of you. It is always easy for government officers to report that prisoners attempted to escape, and were shot dead because of the attempt. That is exactly what will happen if you do aught to hinder the sale of this mining property."

"Nothing like a clear understanding," smiled Tom, rising, and once more holding out his hand. "Don

Luis, it will be enough if we give you our answer by the morning of day after to-morrow? And I will add that I think we shall see our way clear to help along the sale of this mining property at a high figure. Let me see; at what value do you hold it?"

"At two million and a half dollars, Senor Reade."

"I think we can assure your visitors that they are doing well enough," Tom nodded.

"One word more, *caballeros*," said Montez, as he let go of the young chief engineer's hand. "If you fail us, do not either of you imagine, for a moment, that you have any further lease of life."

"I don't believe we shall fail you," Tom assured the Mexican. "I believe that the visiting Americans will buy. If they don't it won't be our fault."

"And now that we are at such an excellent understanding once more, Senor Reade," proposed the mine owner, "can't we prevail upon you to come up to the house and spend a pleasant evening."

"Thank you," Tom returned, graciously. "But not to-night. I am restless. I must do considerable thinking, and I don't want to talk much. Action is what I crave. If you see us running all over your property, don't imagine that we are trying to run away from here."

"My property is at your disposal," smiled Don Luis. "I shall feel assured that you will not go many miles from here."

The remark covered the fact that Montez had all avenues of escape so well guarded that the young engineers simply could not escape by flight.

Good nights were exchanged, and the visitors, smiling politely, departed.

"Now, why on earth did you talk to Don Luis in that fashion?" Harry demanded, as soon as they were alone. "You know, well enough, that not even the certainty of immediate death would make you accede to his rascally wishes."

"I'm afraid I don't know anything of the sort," Tom drawled. "On the contrary, we may help Montez sell out to the American visitors."

Harry gasped.

"Tom Reade, are you going crazy?"

"Not that I've noticed."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"Harry, I'm tired, and I think you are."

"I'm sick and tired with disgust that Don Luis should think he could use us to bait his money-traps with," Hazelton retorted.

"Let's turn in and get a good night's rest."

"Oh, bother!" retorted the junior engineer. "I couldn't sleep. Tom, I shan't sleep a wink to-night, for dreading that you'll turn rascal-helper. Tell me that you've been joking with me, Tom!"

"But I can't truthfully tell you that," Reade insisted. "I am not joking, and haven't been joking to-night."

"Then I wish you'd open up and tell me a few things."

"Wait," begged Tom. "Wait until I'm sure that the few things will bear telling."

With that much Harry Hazelton found that he would have to be content. He allowed himself to be persuaded to turn in.

Tom Reade was asleep in a few minutes. It was after two in the morning ere Harry, after racking his brains in vain, fell asleep.

The next morning it was found that the stranger in the back of the cook tent had made good his prophecy by vanishing.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HIDALGO PLANS GRATITUDE

Soon after an early breakfast Tom and Harry were afield.

From behind a window in the upper part of his big house, Don Luis, equipped with a powerful field glass, watched them keenly whenever they were in sight.

"What on earth are the Gringos doing?" he wondered, repeatedly. "Are they just walking about, aimlessly? At times it looks like it. At other times it doesn't."

Then Montez sent for Tisco and discussed with him the seeming mystery of the actions of the young engineers.

"Don't ask me, Don Luis," begged the secretary. "I am not clever at guessing riddles. More, I have not pretended to understand this Gringo pair."

"Are they, in the end, going to trick me, Carlos?"

"Who can say?" demanded Dr. Tisco, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Of course, they both know that it will be but a short cut to suicide if they attempt to fool you."

"Their deaths will cause me no anxiety, Carlos, either before or after the sale," murmured Montez. "In fact, my good Carlos—"

"Say it," leered Dr. Tisco, as his employer paused.

"I may as well say it, for you have guessed it, Carlos. Yes, I will say it. Even if this Gringo pair appear honestly to aid me in making the sale—and even if I do make the sale and receive the money—this Gringo pair must die. We know how to arrange that, eh, my staunch Carlos?"

Dr. Tisco shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, we can put them out of the way, at any time, with secrecy and dispatch, Don Luis. But what will be the use—provided they help you to get the American money into your hands? To be sure, the new buyers will soon find that they have a worthless mine on their hands, but that may happen with the finest mine. The new buyers will never be able to prove that you brought all of your pretty-looking ore from another mine. You can depend upon the secrecy of the people from whom you have been buying the baiting ore for *El Sombrero*."

"Ah, but there is another side to that, Carlos. If Senores Reade and Hazelton serve us, and then go safely back to the United States, they can swear that they found and knew *El Sombrero* to be worthless. Then their evidence, flanked by the sudden running-out of *El Sombrero*, will make a case that the new American buyers could take into court."

"Let them take it into court," proposed the secretary, contemptuously. "The governor of Bonista rules the judges of the courts of the state of Bonista with an iron hand. Rest assured that, if the Americans were to take their claims into the courts of this state, the judges would decide for you, and that would be the end of the matter. And do you believe, Don Luis, that, after Senores Reade and Hazelton once get alive out of Bonista, any consideration would tempt them to come back here to testify? They have sampled your power,"

"Yet why do you object, Carlos, to having the Gringo pair put out of the way?"

"I do not care anything about their lives," Tisco declared, coolly. "It is only on general business principles that it seems to me unwise to have human lives taken when it is not necessary. He who resorts too often to the taking of life is sure to meet his own doom."

"Not in Bonista," jeered Montez, "and not where Don Luis is concerned in business matters."

"As you will, then," sighed the secretary. "You will please your own self, anyway, Don Luis."

"Truly, Carlos. And so I have decided that these Gringo engineers shall perish, anyway, as soon as they have served my purpose."

This talk had taken place in a cupola. Down the stair, with stealthy steps, crept a young, horrified, trembling girl.

Francesca, knowing that her father had gone to the cupola, had followed him to talk with him. She had halted on hearing voices. Now, with despair in her eyes, the terrified girl stole away like one haunted and hunted by evil spirits.

"My father—an intending murderer! He, of a proud hidalgo family, a vile assassin, in thought at least?" moaned the girl, wringing her hands as soon as she had stolen to the privacy of her own rooms.

"My father's hands—to be covered with human blood!" sobbed Francesca, sinking down before a crucifix to pray.

For hours the girl remained in terror-stricken solitude. Then she rose, somewhat comforted at last, and with the aid of cold water removed the traces of her tears from her dark, beautiful face.

Her plan was to seek her father, throw herself at his feet, and beg him not to disgrace the blood of the hidalgos nor to destroy his own soul with a hideous crime.

"I must seek him in private. There must be no others near when I make my appeal!" thought the girl.

Just then a servant entered.

"Your father is in the garden, *Senorita Francesca*," reported the woman, "and wonders why you do not join him. It is his wish that you join him now."

"Say to my father that his wish is my law," quavered the terrified girl.

Five minutes later Francesca went timidly up to her father in the gardens before the house.

Don Luis turned to her. He was thinking, at the moment, of his dark plans regarding the young engineers. In his eyes, despite his effort to smile on his daughter, was a deadly glitter that dried up hope in the heart of the daughter.

"You have been secluding yourself more than usual to-day, *chiquita*," chided Montez.

That word *chiquita*, meaning "pet," caused the girl to recoil inwardly. Could it be that this hard, cruel man had the right to address her in endearing terms?

"I am not well to-day, my father," she answered, in a low voice.

"Then take my arm, *chiquita*, and walk with me," urged Montez.

"My father," she cried, shrinking back, "if you will indulge me, I will walk alone. Perhaps, in that way, I shall gain more strength from the exercise."

"As you will," smiled Don Luis, coldly. "For myself, I have much to think of. I have American guests coming soon. I expect that they will buy *El Sombrero* for money enough to make you one of the richest heiresses in all Mexico, *chiquita*."

"For me? And I do not know how to care for money!" answered the girl, unsteadily. Then she turned away, swiftly, unable to stand longer looking into Don Luis's eyes.

Through the day Tom and Harry had tramped about almost feverishly, stopping at intervals as though for rest. Now, in the late afternoon, they were on their way back to camp by a route that took them not far from Don Luis's grounds.

As they came within sight of the place, Tom espied Montez and Dr. Tisco walking slowly at one end of the garden, seemingly engaged in earnest conversation. At the farther end of the garden from them, Francesca walked by herself, seeming outwardly composed.

"It seems strange, doesn't it," asked Harry, "that such a fine girl can possibly be Don Luis's daughter?"

"She inherits her mother's purity and goodness, doubtless," Tom replied.

"Ouch!" grunted Hazelton, stumbling over a stone with which his foot had collided. At Harry's exclamation Tom glanced up, then his eyes met a strange sight.

Lying in a cleft in the rocks, with his head behind a bush, and well concealed, lay the stranger whom the young engineers had nursed through an illness.

That stranger was intently gazing at the garden of Don Luis. So absorbed was he that he had either

not heard or did not heed the passing of the two Americans.

For a brief instant Tom Reade halted, regarding the face of the absorbed stranger.

"I didn't have an idea about you, Mr. Stranger," muttered Tom to himself, as he plodded forward once more. "But now—now, I'll wager that I've guessed who and what you are. Mr. Stranger, I believe that this one glance at your face has told me your story and your purpose in being in these mountains of Bonista!"

CHAPTER XX

TWO REAL SIGNATURES

Though they were in Mexico the young engineers found it chilly that evening, after sundown.

"Nicolas, can you spare wood enough to start a little campfire?" Tom asked, as he put on his blouse after supper.

"Yes," replied the little Mexican. "For what is the use of being strong if I could not tramp after more wood to-morrow?"

"We'll pay you well for all your trouble for us, *mi muchacho*" (my boy) Tom promised.

"I am rewarded enough in being allowed to serve you, *caballeros*," Nicolas answered.

"And the queer part of it is that he means what he says," muttered Tom, gazing after the departing little *peon*.

Very shortly a cheerful fire was crackling away. Tom and Harry brought their campstools and sat down before it.

"I'll be thankful when we get back to the States," mused Tom.

"I hope it'll be soon, too," answered Harry, with a wistful glance toward the north, where, several hundred miles away, lay their country.

Nor did either one expect to be many days more away from home. The young engineers had arrived at a somewhat surprising conclusion. They had agreed to sign a suitable report and to stand back of Don Luis in all the claims he might make concerning *El Sombrero* Mine.

Much different would their feelings have been had they known all that frightened little Francesca had overheard that they were to be secretly slain, as soon as their usefulness in the swindle was past.

Rather late into the night the young engineers sat up, talking in such low tones that even Nicolas, squatted on the ground beside a smaller fire, could not hear what they were saying. He would not have understood, anyway, as the young engineers were talking in English.

It was very late when the young engineers turned in that night. It was eight in the morning when Nicolas aroused them.

"Is the stranger back in your tent, Nicolas?" Tom inquired, as soon as his eyes were open.

"No, *senor*."

"Well, I'm not astonished. I didn't really expect him to return."

Tom and Harry were quickly astir, and ready for breakfast. Nicolas served them carefully, as always.

"We're not through much too early, anyway," Tom murmured. "Here come Don Luis and his artful shadow."

The touring car stopped, at a little distance from camp. After the two passengers had alighted the

chauffeur drove on two hundred yards further ere he drew up to wait for them.

"Good morning," hailed Don Luis, cordially. "I see you are waiting for us."

"We have been ready for you since we first rose," Tom answered.

"Is your answer ready?" Don Luis demanded, eyeing them searchingly.

"Don Luis," Tom replied, instantly, "the report that you wanted us to sign for you would hardly answer the purpose with shrewd American investors. That report goes back too far; it covers too many points that you might be supposed to know were true, but which engineers who had been here but a few weeks could hardly be expected to know at first hand. Do you see the point that I am raising?"

Don Luis deliberated for a few moments.

"I think I do see the point, Senor Reade. You mean that the report will not do."

"So," Tom continued, "Hazelton and I don't feel that we ought to sign that report. However, we will get up and sign for you a report that will answer in every way, and this new report will be satisfactory. If you will let your driver take Nicolas up to the house, Nicolas can bring the typewriting machine from your office, and some stationery with it. We can set the machine up on the camp table, and within the next two hours we can agree upon a satisfactory report, which I will write out on the machine."

"And you will sign the new report—when?"

"Just as soon as we have it written out in form that will suit you."

"You will want the big ledger for facts?" asked Montez.

"No," smiled Tom; "because the ledger doesn't contain facts anyway. We can invent just as good statements without any reference to the ledger."

Don Luis laughed softly. Then he turned to his secretary.

"My good Carlos, see that Nicolas knows what he is going after. Then let him go in the car."

Nicolas sped away in the automobile. Presently he was back, with the typewriting machine and an abundance of stationery.

Tom quickly fitted a sheet of heavy bond paper to the carriage of the typewriter.

"Now, let us agree," asked Tom, "on what the report is to contain."

Slowly at first, then more rapidly, the matter was planned. Tom winced a bit, as he made up some tables of alleged output of the mine supposed to have come under his own observation and Harry's. But he wrote it all down with lead pencil and afterwards copied it on the machine.

At the end of three hours the report was finished. Tom read it all over slowly to Don Luis. As Tom laid down each page Dr. Tisco picked it up to scan it.

At last the infamously lying document had been read through and approved.

"Let us have the end of it over with quickly," begged Tom, producing and shaking his fountain pen. He affixed his signature. Hazelton did the same.

"So far, good," declared Don Luis, passing the complete, signed document to Dr. Tisco. "Now, senores, let us have the whole matter understood. The report is excellent; it could not be better for the purpose. The American visitors will be delighted with it. But you are not to play me any tricks of any kind!"

"Don Luis," promised Tom, earnestly, "we shall stand by that report first, last and through to the finish. We shall not—by word, gesture, wink, or by any trick or device—give your coming American visitors the least warning that the report is not fully as honest as it appears to be."

"We shall back you firmly and as strongly as we know how, and help you in any way in our power to put the deal through. Can we promise you more?"

"No," said the mine owner. "And, on my part, I promise you that, if I sell the mine, as I now surely shall do, you shall have twenty thousand dollars, gold, apiece, and your lives also. Here is my hand on the pledge of an hidalgo."

Don Luis shook hands with both American engineers. Even as he did so a wolfish gleam crept into his eyes. Montez, in his mind's eye, already saw the two Gringos stretched on the ground in death in a remoter part of the mountains. That was to be his real reward to the young dupes of his villainy.

"When do you expect your purchasers?" Tom Reade inquired.

"Two days after to-morrow, Senor Reade. But, in the meantime, now that we are friends and really partners—will you not come over and share the comforts of my poor home while we wait?"

"You will pardon us for not accepting, Don Luis," Tom urged. "We have met your wishes, and shall continue to meet them, but we feel that we would rather remain where we are—at least, until your visitors arrive."

"So be it, then," muttered Don Luis. Yet he appeared slightly offended by their decision. Since the young engineers had now proved themselves to be as great rascals as he himself, Don Luis Montez could not understand why they should refuse to associate with him.

"You wish me to leave you alone, now?" asked the mine owner, smiling rather coldly.

"Only when you wish to leave us, Don Luis," Tom protested, so artlessly that the Mexican felt less offended.

"Sit down and chat with us until you tire of our company," urged Harry Hazelton.

So Montez and Tisco dropped into the campstools again. They tried to chat on various topics, but conversation proved a failure.

"We will go, now," said Don Luis, rising twenty minutes later. "But, senores, we shall hope to see you daily until our investors arrive and then all the time."

"You will find us always at your command, Don Luis," Tom remarked, cordially.

"Ah, my good Carlos," murmured Don Luis, as the Mexican pair sped homeward in the car, "for once you made a bad guess. You insisted that the Gringos would hold out and would not serve me. You have seen my patience and my firmness win over their foolish, stubborn objections."

"But they still hope to trick you, my patron," suggested Dr. Tisco. "Doubtless, now, their intention is to serve you until they can escape; then they plan to get back to the United States and furnish the testimony on which the American investors can sue you in the courts for the return of the purchase money on a charge of fraud."

"There, again, the Gringos can meet only defeat," chuckled Don Luis, his lips to his secretary's ears. "As soon as the sale is made I shall see to it that our pair of young American engineers are promptly done to death!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE FINAL TOUCH OF TRAGEDY

On the day announced, at about eleven in the morning, two automobiles reached Don Luis's home. Besides the mine owner the cars contained nine other travelers, all Americans.

These were the investors who were expected to buy *El Sombrero* at a price of two and a half million dollars.

Over at the camp Tom and Harry saw the party arrive. They could see the travelers being served with refreshments on the veranda.

"There's the crowd, Harry. And here's a car, coming this way, undoubtedly for us. Now, we've got to go over there for our first practice as bunco men."

Harry Hazelton made an unpleasant grimace. "I feel like a scoundrel of the worst sort, but it can't be helped," he muttered.

The car was soon at hand. Tom and Harry were dressed and ready. Though their clothing suggested the field engineer, they were none the less dressed with a good deal of care. They entered the tonneau of the automobile and started on their way to help put the mine swindle through.

"Here are my engineers, gentlemen," smiled Don Luis, "and at least three of your number, I believe, are well acquainted with Messrs. Reade and Hazelton."

Tom ascended the steps, feeling rather weak in the knees. Then the young engineers received one of the severest jolts of their lives.

Three of the gentlemen in that group, both young men knew well. They were President Haynes, General Manager Ellsworth and Director Hippen of the A.G. & N.M. Railroad. These gentlemen Tom and Harry had served in railroad work in Arizona, as told in "*The Young Engineers in Arizona*."

Now, in a flash, it was plain to both young Americans why Don Luis had wanted them, especially, to report favorably concerning *El Sombrero* Mine. President Haynes and his associates in the A.G. & N.M. R.R. had every reason in the world to trust the young engineers, who had served them so faithfully on another occasion. These gentlemen would believe in anything that Reade and Hazelton backed with their judgment.

"You?" cried Tom, with a start, as President Haynes held out his hand. Then, by a mighty effort, Reade recovered himself and laughed easily.

"This is a pleasant surprise, Mr. Haynes! And you, Mr. Ellsworth, and you, Mr. Hippen."

"And we're equally surprised to find you here, Reade, and you, Hazelton," rejoined President Haynes. "But we feel more at home, already. You know, Reade, we're quite accustomed to looking upon anything as an assured success when you're connected with it."

"And, in its way, this mine is the biggest success we've backed yet," Tom declared readily.

Don Luis Montez, though he was keenly watchful, was delighted so far.

"What do you really think of this mine, Reade?" broke in Mr. Ellsworth. "Is it all that a careful investor would want?"

"If you're getting what I think you are," Tom answered, "you're getting a lot more, even, than you might be led to expect. *El Sombrero*, if it includes the limits that I suppose the tract does, will be worth a great deal more than you are paying for it."

"The limits?" asked Mr. Ellsworth, keenly. "Don't you really know, Reade, what the limits of the property are?"

"Why, that is a matter to which I haven't given much attention, so far," answered Tom, with disarming candor. "But, if we can have a map of this part of the country, I'll quickly mark off the limits on which I think you should insist."

Don Luis caught at this readily.

"My good Carlos," Don Luis directed, turning to his secretary, "place in Senor Reade's hands a map of this part of the country."

"A map of your possessions only, Don Luis?" asked Dr. Tisco.

"A map of my possessions, of course," agreed Don Luis.

The map was brought, a large one, and spread on the table.

"Now, perhaps," suggested Tom, "the tract I am about to mark off on this map is a larger one than Don Luis had intended to include in the sale, but let us see what Don Luis will have to say."

With Harry's help Reade marked off on the map a tract containing about forty-four hundred acres. This was fully twice as large as the tract Don Luis had planned to deed with *El Sombrero*. However, as Don Luis reckoned all this wild mountain land to be worth not more than twenty-five cents an acre, he did not care about Tom's liberality in the matter of real estate.

"We will have these limits ruled in with red ink," Montez proposed, "and the deed shall cover the limits so indicated. Yes; I will sell that whole tract of rich mineral land to you, gentlemen, for two

million and a half of dollars."

"Then," declared Tom Reade, "you will find that you will not regret your purchase, gentlemen."

"You are confident of that, Reade?" asked President Haynes, anxiously.

"I am more than confident," Tom declared, promptly. "I am as certain of what I state as ever an engineer can be of anything."

"If we were alone," thought Don Luis Montez, exultantly, "I would take off my hat to this young Gringo, Reade. He is a far more accomplished liar than I can ever hope to be. And these Americanos are becoming convinced all ready."

"Do you agree with your associate, Hazelton?" inquired Mr. Ellsworth.

"Absolutely," Harry proposed. "I have been watching Tom Reade to see if he was making the statement emphatic enough to suit my ideas. Gentlemen, the property we have staked off on this map is a good investment one that will soon make the American financial markets ring."

"I'm satisfied, on Reade and Hazelton's report," declared Mr. Haynes. "I know these young men, and I'd trust my life or my fortune to their honesty or their judgment alike."

"I'm satisfied, too," nodded Ellsworth.

"I can say the same," nodded Mr. Hippen.

"Then we hardly need to look or inquire further," laughed another of the intending investors, pleasantly.

From this will be seen how much frequently depends upon the reputation of an engineering firm for honor and judgment. In New York City, downtown, is an almost dingy suite of offices. It is the business headquarters of a firm of mining engineers known and trusted the world over. Probably the entire equipment of these offices, including the laboratories and assay rooms, could be purchased for seven or eight thousand dollars. The real asset of this firm is its reputation for splendid judgment and unfailing honor. Let this firm of engineers indorse a new mine sufficiently, and Wall Street will promptly raise twenty million dollars to finance the scheme. This firm of engineers, despite its rather dingy quarters, often earns a yearly income running into hundreds of thousands of dollars.

These men of the A.G. & N.M. R.R. knew Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton as well and favorably as the mining world at large knows the New York firm which has been referred to above.

"It all looks good to me," declared President Haynes, speaking again.

"And to me," nodded several others of the visitors.

"In the mine, this afternoon," Tom proposed, "we can show you much more that you will like."

Now, as by magic, Don Luis's servants appeared with tables which they set and spread on the porch and luncheon was served.

"Now, we will go see *El Sombrero* itself," Don Luis proposed. "I shall not have much to say to-day. I understand that you are willing to have Senor Tomaso Reade do the explaining."

"More than willing—anxious," replied General Manager Ellsworth.

That night Tom and Harry returned to their tent. As they went at a late hour their absence from the house was barely noted.

All through the afternoon the visitors had been busy inspecting ore supposed to have been blasted in the tunnels of *El Sombrero* Mine. As the reader will understand, every bit of this ore had been brought from a profitable mine further up in the mountains.

"How does it seem to be a rascal, Tom?" inquired Harry, as he blew out the candle in their tent.

"Great!" muttered Tom Reade.

The day following was given somewhat to sight-seeing in and around the mine, but still more to a discussion of the intended purchase. As Don Luis would not hear to reducing his price, the visitors were finally satisfied to pay the money demanded.

"When will you be ready to turn the money over, gentlemen?" inquired

Montez.

"As soon as we can reach a town where there is both a bank and a telegraph office," replied Mr. Haynes. "The whole amount of money is on deposit in New York City, subject to sight draft. If you are well enough known at the bank, Don Luis, to introduce us, the draft may be drawn at that bank, and accepted from New York on telegraphic inquiry."

"The speed of you American business men is marvelous!" cried Don Luis Montez, delightedly.

The next morning Don Luis, Mr. Haynes and a New York capitalist in the party departed in an automobile, going back to the railway town. Two days later they returned. The entire deal had been put through. The mine had become the property of this group of American capitalists. Don Luis's home was included in the sale. The money had been paid over on telegraphic advice from New York. Don Luis, in turn, had transferred his huge credit to Mexico City by wire, and this fortune now awaited his orders at the capital of the republic.

Soon after Don Luis had returned he called the young engineers aside.

"*Caballeros*," he murmured, "I am delighted with the loyal service you have rendered me. Before today is over I shall hand you drafts on my bank at the capital for twenty thousand dollars each, gold. Then the transaction will be closed. Again I thank you. Be good enough to remain about, for I shall soon want you."

Over the hills a white-clad figure rode on horseback. As he came nearer, still at a gallop, the man was seen to be a soldier.

"I wonder if there is any treachery in this?" muttered Harry, in Tom's ear. "Does Don Luis intend to have us arrested, after all, and sent to prison to be held *incommunicado*, and so make sure of keeping us out of the way?"

"I don't believe so," Tom replied. "It wouldn't be a wise move on his part. He'd be afraid that we'd denounce him even as we were being led away."

"Then why the soldier?"

"Let's wait and see."

No one else appeared to have paid any heed to the horseman. A few minutes later the soldier rode up the driveway.

"Senor—Haynes?" called the soldier, holding up an envelope.

Tom passed the word. Messrs, Haynes and Ellsworth were absent, it seemed, on a walk.

"If it's a telegram," said Mr. Hippen, "I'm a director in the same road. It may be on railroad business. I'll take the telegram."

It was turned over to him. Mr. Hippen broke the seal of the envelope, took out the enclosure and read it. Then he read it aloud, as follows:

"Train thirteen wrecked this forenoon." It was signed by President Haynes's secretary.

"Humph!" said Mr. Hippen. "I don't see the need of wasting the railroad's money to send that despatch here."

He folded it and placed it in his pocket, against Mr. Haynes's return.

"I shall want to talk with you two for a few minutes," Don Luis presently whispered to Tom. "I shall have my car here soon. When you see it, both of you come forward and be ready to take a short ride with me."

In the background stood Dr. Tisco, looking on with cynical eyes.

"Of course, the poor American fools haven't any idea that they will set out on the ride, but will never return," murmured Don Luis's secretary, to himself. "Pedro Gato, turned loose on the same day he was arrested, has waited a long time for his revenge. He and the dozen bandits he has gathered around him will shoot the American engineers full of holes out on the road, and Don Luis, when he returns, deluged in his own tears, will tell the awful story of the encounter with the bandits. What a clever scoundrel

Don Luis is!"

Fifteen minutes later the automobile stood before the steps to the big porch.

"You two, my friends," called Don Luis, resting a hand on Tom's shoulder and beckoning to Harry. "You will take one last ride with me, will you not? And, while we are gone, I shall discuss a few more of my plans with you."

Wholly unsuspecting of this final tragic touch to the drama, Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton went down the steps, following Don Luis Montez into the car.

CHAPTER XXII

MR. HAYNES ASKS A FEW QUESTIONS

Slowly the car started down the drive. "Oh, Don Luis!" called Mr. Hippen, running to the corner of the porch.

"Stop!" said Montez to his chauffeur. "Mr. Haynes is signaling you," continued Mr. Hippen. "I think he wants to say something to you."

Don Luis turned, and beheld the president and the general manager of the A.G. & N.M. Railroad hastening toward the gate.

"Drive down to the gate and await the gentlemen there," was Don Luis's next order.

Mr. Hippen, too, started down the roadway, seeing which Dr. Tisco reached his side and went with him.

There was a general meeting of the different parties at the gate.

"I signaled you, Don Luis, to inquire if Ellsworth and myself might go on your drive with you?" explained Mr. Haynes.

"Gentlemen, I am truly sorry," began Don Luis Montez, in his most honeyed tones, "but the truth is that I desire to have a private conference with Senores Reade and Hazelton."

"Then we won't ask to accompany you, this time," said Mr. Haynes, laughing.

"We would be glad to take you, but our business conversation would then be delayed," Don Luis explained. "However, if you wish—"

"I don't want to spoil your talk," laughed Mr. Haynes. "But I have this to say to Reade and Hazelton. We gentlemen have been discussing the new management of the mine, and we are united in feeling that we want these young men to remain here and manage our new property for us. In fact, with such a valuable mining property on our hands we wouldn't feel in the least easy with any one else in charge."

"Here is a telegram that came for you, Mr. Haynes," said Mr. Hippen, quietly, handing over the sheet. "Of course, Reade and Hazelton are not going to sign with any one else."

"Pardon me," said Mr. Haynes, and let his glance fall on the telegram.

Any one noting the railway president's face at that moment would have noted a quick, though suppressed, change there.

"Don Luis," went on Mr. Haynes, quickly, "I fear that I really shall have to interrupt your drive for a little while. I have just received news that I shall want to discuss with you."

"Why, your news refers to nothing more than a wreck on your Arizona railway system, doesn't it?" inquired Don Luis, who was eager to get away and attend, as speedily as possible, to the impending assassination of the young engineers.

"You will oblige me by coming back to the house, won't you, Don Luis?" insisted Mr. Haynes, who seemed, somehow, a changed man within the last minute.

"Certainly," agreed the Mexican courteously, and the chauffeur turned the car.

As they walked along, Mr. Haynes managed to whisper a few words in Mr. Ellsworth's ear.

"I have sent Ellsworth to call all our associates together," explained Mr. Haynes, as he joined Don Luis and the young engineers on the porch. Something in the changed atmosphere of the place made Don Luis Montez feel decidedly uneasy.

The Americans responded quickly to Mr. Ellsworth's rounding up. Each of them, as he came forward, looked unusually grave. Mr. Haynes waited until he saw all of his associates around him. Then he began:

"Don Luis, in my recent absence a telegram came for me. Mr. Hippen, though a director of our railway, is not familiar with the telegraph code that we use in our inner office. This telegram, sir"—unfolding it—"is from my private secretary, a most careful and trustworthy man of affairs. I feel certain, Don Luis, that he would not have sent this telegram unless he had had the strongest reasons. Now, in our office code a wire relating to a wreck of Train Thirteen—there's no such train on our schedule—means always just one thing. The significance of this telegram is, 'Don't on any account put through the impending deal.'"

If Don Luis Montez felt any inward start he controlled his facial expression wonderfully.

"Senor Haynes," he replied, "I don't understand the meaning of your code message. You have no deal here to put through. You have made and closed the only deal here about which I have the honor to know anything."

"But my secretary doesn't yet know the state of affairs here," continued Mr. Haynes, gravely, "and he doesn't know that we have yet bought the *El Sombrero* Mine. Therefore, his despatch can't refer to anything else. My private secretary is certainly warning me not to buy *El Sombrero* Mine until we have further information."

"But you have bought it," cried Don Luis, in a voice pitched rather higher than usual. "You have bought it and have the deed to all this property. The money has been paid, and is now mine, subject to my order."

"Don Luis," continued the American railway president, "I ask you, before all my associates, to consider the matter still open until I can receive further particulars from my private secretary. If there is any good and sound reason why we should not have bought this mine—"

"But you have bought it, paid for it, and the money is mine!" cried Don Luis Montez. "There is no more to be said about it."

"Sir," went on Mr. Haynes, gravely, "there is but one question of fact that can affect the sale. Suppose—I hate to say it, but suppose that the mine is not a rich one, not worth any such price as we paid for it, and that you sold it to us, knowing—"

"The mine is a rich one—one of the richest in Mexico," insisted Montez, "and you have secured a very great bargain."

"I trust and hope that all that is true," continued Mr. Haynes. "Yet, if such should not be the case, and if we have bought a property under conditions that would make it certain swindle had been perpetrated—"

"Senor!" warned Don Luis, taking a step forward, a deadly light in his eyes. "Be Careful!"

"I am only stating a supposition," resumed Mr. Haynes, coolly. "Don Luis, I believe I have stated enough of that supposition to make it all clear. If that supposition is true, then you would have to buy the mine back from us again."

"Would I?" sneered the Mexican.

"Yes, Don Luis, or we could bring the matter about in another way. I know the name of the bank in Mexico City to which you have transferred the funds received from us. Our attorneys, acting through Mexican lawyers, can tie that money up and keep it in the bank until the question has been decided as

to whether—"

"Be careful, senor!" again warned Don Luis.

"Sir," demanded Mr. Haynes, bluntly, "is the mine a valuable one, or is it a swindle?"

"You should not ask me," Montez retorted, bitterly. "You have your own engineers on the ground—engineers whom you trust. Ask them! They will tell you."

"Thank you," assented Mr. Haynes, bowing. Then, turning to Tom, the American railway president went on:

"Reade, tell me the truth about this matter in a word. Have we been defrauded in any way?"

"You have not, Mr. Haynes," Tom answered steadily. "You have now in your possession a property that is worth far more than has been paid for it."

"You agree with that statement, do you, Hazelton?" asked Mr. Haynes.

"I do, sir," Harry nodded.

Dr. Tisco, standing in the background, had all he could do to keep himself from dancing a few jig-steps.

"Decidedly, these young Americans are champion liars!" he thought to himself. "They can readily outlie Don Luis or myself. Now, if Don Luis still insists on having these gifted young engineers killed I am afraid I shall look upon him as being a man without honor."

"You have heard your own engineers, senores," broke in Don Luis. "You trust them. Now, are you not satisfied that I have dealt fairly with you?"

"Somehow, I ought to be satisfied," agreed Mr. Haynes. "And yet my private secretary is such a very careful and dependable man that I shall have to await further advices. Of course, I place the fullest confidence in the honesty of our American engineers, Reade and Hazelton. Tom, do you believe that you could possibly have been deceived as to the valued of this mining property?"

"I do not believe it possible, sir," Tom replied, as steadfastly as before. "In the face of anything that might be said, Hazelton and I will continue to claim that you have bought a property here worth more than you have paid for it."

"Then I apologize, Don Luis, for what might have seemed to be slighting language," Mr. Haynes continued, bowing to the Mexican. "You will understand, of course, what good reason I had to be anxious."

"Say no more, senor. You had most excellent reasons," smiled Don Luis, at ease once more. "I cannot blame you in the least for your passing doubts, but I am glad they have been set at rest by these capable and honest young engineers. And now, Senores Reade and Hazelton, shall we resume our interrupted ride in the car?"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ENGINEER TURNS

"You are about to have more visitors, I see," announced Mr. Hippen, from a corner of the porch.

Barely five hundred yards from the house, on one of the roughest roads coming down the mountains, were some forty or fifty horsemen. Nor did it require more than a second glance to show that the newcomers were cavalry troops of the Mexican army.

At the head of the cavalcade rode three or four men who had an official appearance.

"It is one of the periodical visits of the governor of the state of Bonista," explained Don Luis. "Ah, if the governor is with that party, Senor Haynes, you will soon have more reason to know that it would be impossible for me to defraud you. The governor himself will assure you that I am of an old Spanish

family and of the highest personal honor."

"I shall be most glad to meet the governor," remarked Mr. Haynes, dryly.

Don Luis Montez stepped to where he could obtain a better view of the horsemen, who were moving their horses at a walk. He held his hands over his eyes to keep the light from interfering with his view.

"I am afraid, after all, that his excellency, the governor of the state, is not one of the horsemen," said Montez, regretfully. "Not unless he is riding at the rear of the party. But we shall soon know."

Just inside the limits of the estate all of the cavalymen except a half dozen halted. Three officers, six troopers and a gentleman in citizen's dress rode on up to the porch.

"Is Don Luis Montez of your number?" called the man in citizen's clothes.

"I am Don Luis," responded Montez, going forward and raising his hat.

"I am Manuel Honda," continued the stranger, raising his hat in return. "Will you be good enough to have one of your servants take my horse?"

This was done at a gesture from Montez. Senor Honda dismounted, then came up the steps.

"You are very welcome, senor," said Don Luis, holding out his hand, which the other accepted. Then the stranger swept his glance over the others grouped on the porch.

"These are your American visitors?" inquired Honda.

"Yes," nodded Don Luis.

"We will withdraw if you two gentlemen have business to discuss," suggested Mr. Haynes.

"I beg that all of you gentlemen will remain," urged Senor Honda.

"I wish to show you every courtesy, senor," said Montez, quickly, "but it seems to me that you are taking the liberty of giving orders in my home."

"Have you sold your mine?" asked Honda.

"Yes," Montez acknowledged.

"And this estate was part of the mine property?"

"Yes."

"Then I would suggest, Don Luis," Honda answered, with a smile, "that this place is no longer your home."

"Senor, are you making fun of me?" demanded Don Luis, with heightening color.

"By no means, Don Luis. But you have observed that I have an escort of our country's troops."

"Assuredly."

"From that what would you infer?"

"You may very likely hold some government commission," guessed Don Luis.

"Assuredly I do," Honda replied.

"In the state of Bonista especially?"

"Even so."

"Then if you hold a commission in the state of Bonista," replied Don Luis Monte; "you must represent my very good friend, his excellency, the governor of this state."

"Just at present the governor of Bonista is in difficulties," hinted Senor Manuel Honda.

"How?" demanded Don Luis.

"Yes; in difficulties," continued the visitor. "At least, his excellency, the governor, is not able to leave his house."

"Ah! He is ill, then?"

"Ill in spirit, yes," smiled Senor Honda.

"Will you be good enough to explain?" Montez asked, anxiously.

"Don Luis, it was I, Manuel Honda, who confined his excellency to his official dwelling and placed a guard about the buildings."

"Oh? Is there a revolution, then, in the state of Bonista?"

"None that I know of," Honda rejoined. "Don Luis, I am from the national capital. I represent the government of the Republic of Mexico, and I have considerable power in this state. I am solely in command, at present, of all the national troops within this state. These army officers will assure you that I hold a national commission to investigate affairs even in this remote state of Bonista. I could show you my credentials from the national government, if it were worth while."

"Then will you be good enough, Senor Honda, to tell me what you wish here."

"Don Luis, I am here because I believe this to be one of the central points in the investigation that I am about to hold. I will come to the point at once. You have sold your mining property here. One of my first acts will be to make sure that you do not draw the proceeds of the sale from any Mexican bank until after the national government is satisfied."

"That is a high-handed proceeding, Senor Honda!" cried Montez, a deadly glitter in his eyes.

"It is such a proceeding as a national government may take at need," replied Senor Honda, calmly. "Of course, Don Luis, if your conduct in selling the mine is found to be blameless, then you will soon be able to use your money in any way that you please. But, first of all, the government must be satisfied."

"Have you any further questions that you wish to ask me at present?"
Montez demanded, suddenly.

Though he had kept himself rather calm up to the present, the rascal felt that he must soon vent the spite and hate welling up within him, or explode from the pent-up force of his own emotions. The late mine owner, though he could not penetrate the mysteries of the present situation, was now sure that Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton must be in some way behind it. No matter what happened to him afterwards, Don Luis was now furiously bent on getting the young engineers off on the lonely mountain trail where Gato and his comrades were lying in wait for the two young Americans.

"I shall have no more questions for you, for the present," Senor Honda replied. "Just now I wish to have some conversation with these Americans."

"Then come, senores," cried Don Luis, with forced gayety, as he thrust a hand under the arms of Tom and Harry. "Come, we will have our ride and our talk. We will be back here in half an hour and then we shall hear this affair through. Come!"

Tom Reade threw off the fellow's arm, exclaiming, warningly:

"If you touch me again, you snake in the grass, I'll reduce you to powder with a fist that's fairly aching to hit you!"

The vehemence of Tom's declaration made every one within hearing gasp with astonishment.

"What does this mean, Reade?" gasped President Haynes, looking thunderstruck.

"It means, sir," reported Tom, wheeling about, "that this fellow, Montez, threatened us with death if we did not sign a glaringly false report concerning *El Sombrero* Mine. We were also to be killed if we did not stand by our report to the fullest degree after you and your friends arrived."

"Then *El Sombrero* Mine is worthless?" cried Mr. Haynes, his face turning a ghastly white.

"As far as I know, sir, or as far as Hazelton knows," Tom Reade made prompt answer. "*El Sombrero* isn't worth the cost even of filling up the shaft."

"And you, Reade—and you, Hazelton—the men we trusted implicitly—you stood by and saw us robbed!"

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION

"I don't blame you for being angry," Tom answered, quickly. "However, you may safely go a bit slow on the idea that we stood by to see you robbed, merely to save our lives. We had tried to escape from here. We even sent out two letters by secret messengers, these letters to be mailed at points distant from here. The letters would have told our friends in the United States what was up. But, in some way of his own, Don Luis managed to catch the messengers and get hold of the letters."

"Then," added Harry Hazelton, "we thought we were doomed if we didn't yield to Don Luis's commands. Even at that, we were prepared to accept death sooner than sell ourselves out. Death would have been the cheapest way out of the scrape. But at last we found a way of helping Don Luis in the way he wanted, and of getting square with the rascal at the same time. Tell them what I mean, Tom."

"Why, it was like this," said Tom, seating himself on the railing of the porch, and facing the assemblage. "Harry and I began to roam all over this property, as though to kill time. Out in Nevada, as it happens, we two and a friend of ours own a mine that seemed almost worthless. Almost by accident we discovered that we were working the mine just a little off from the real vein. Now, we didn't find that *El Sombrero* was being worked off the vein. What we did find was in that big strip of forest over to the east of *El Sombrero*—"

Tom turned, for an instant, to point to the forest that he meant.

"You will remember, Mr. Haynes, that we had Don Luis include that forest tract in the title of the *El Sombrero* purchase. That forest is really a jungle. One has the greatest time forcing his way through it. When you open it up on a big scale you'll have to send hundreds of men in there with machetes to chop paths through and clear off the tangled brush. We spent days in that jungle, at first because we had nothing better to do. Mr. Haynes, and gentlemen, if we know anything about mining, then that forest land is worth an immense fortune in the minerals it will yield. You paid two and a half millions of dollars for the entire property. That great forest stretch, in our opinion as engineers, is worth as much and perhaps more than that."

"That's right!" leered Don Luis. "Jest with them, Senor Reade, to your heart's content."

"I'm telling these countrymen of mine the truth, fellow," retorted Tom Reade, casting a look of withering scorn at Don Luis Montez. "Had you been square and decent with us, we would have told you of the mineral wealth in yonder forest. As it is, we've punished your conduct by beating you at your own game."

"If I believed you, Senor Reade—" began Don Luis, bending his head low as he thrust it forward and gazed piercingly at Tom's face.

"I don't care anything about your believing me," retorted Tom. "But Harry and I will prove to these real men every word that we've been saying."

"You have robbed me!" hissed Don Luis, now believing.

His hand flew to a rear pocket. He drew a pistol. But two soldiers had crept up behind Montez at a sign from Senor Honda. Now, one of the barefooted soldados struck the weapon down. It clattered on the porch, and the other soldier picked it up.

There was a struggle between Don Luis and the soldiers. Two other soldiers came to their aid, and—Click! snap! Montez was securely handcuffed.

"Take them off!" screamed Montez, paling like one about to die. "Senor Honda, this is an outrage, and you shall—"

"Peace, fellow! Hold your tongue!" ordered Honda. "Do you not understand? You are a prisoner, nor are you ever likely to be much better off than that. A complaint of the treatment of these Americans, Reade and Hazelton, was forwarded to our government by the American minister in Mexico City. The complaint mentioned that the governor of Bonista was a confederate of yours in more than one underhanded bit of business. On account of the urgings of the American minister to this country, I was despatched here to investigate, and with authority to arrest the governor of Bonista, if necessary, and any other rogues."

"That's a lie!" snarled Don Luis. "How could the American minister learn what was going on in this country? These mountains of Bonista have never told my secrets."

"They did, for this one time," Tom broke in, gleefully. "And I can tell you how it happened. Harry, do you remember the day that Nicolas was gone so long that you were uneasy about him? Well, I knew where Nicolas was, for I had sent him off. He thought he had found a messenger who would have more success in getting our letters mailed than had fallen to the lot of the messengers with our first two letters. Nicolas's messenger, from to-day's developments, must have got through. While I was sending one letter I thought it as well to send two. One letter was to our home offices, directing that the matter contained in my letter be taken on the jump to the government at Washington. The other letter, Mr. Haynes, was directed to you, sir, for I did not then know that you were one of the Americans expected here. I thought, Mr. Haynes, that your active hustling with the Washington government might help in rushing matters. For some unknown reason, my letter to our offices must have gotten through before the letter did that was sent to Arizona. Your private secretary, Mr. Haynes, must have opened my letter addressed to you. He realized that he could not with safety to us send you more than the telegraphic code warning to keep out of the deal. I never told Hazelton, until just now, in the presence of you all, that I had ordered Nicolas to send off more letters by a messenger whom Nicolas felt that he could trust. But you remember the day well enough, Harry?"

"I do," nodded Hazelton. "I was fussing about the long absence of Nicolas just before you turned up with that stranger whom we nursed."

"And speaking of strangers," muttered Reade, glancing off down the driveway, "there's the identical stranger, at this moment talking with the soldiers halted by the gate."

Almost as though he had heard himself called the stranger glanced up at the group on the porch, then came forward. He walked briskly, despite his lean, wasted frame.

"How? So this fellow is in irons?" queried the stranger, halting as he saw the handcuffs on Don Luis's wrists. "Justice is sometimes very tardy, though in this instance she has not failed. Handcuffs become this felon; they are his natural jewelry!"

"Then you know Don Luis?" questioned Tom, after an instant's silence.

"I should know Don Luis well," boasted the stranger, drawing himself up proudly. "Also I know this fellow!"

"My father!" cried a startled feminine voice from the doorway. Then Francesca, her eyes filled with fright, hastened across the porch. She would have thrown her arms around the neck of the manacled man had not the stranger caught her by one arm and held her back.

"How dare you, senor?" panted the girl, turning upon the stranger.
"And who are you?"

"Do not touch this felon with your clean hands," warned the stranger, with a sternness that was tempered with gentleness.

"Who are you, senor?" the girl insisted.

"Can't you guess?" broke out Tom Reade, wonderingly. "Senorita Francesca, I helped take care of this man while he was ill in our cook tent. In his fever I heard some words fall from his lips that started me to wondering. But the other day I beheld this gentleman gazing upon you from a distance. In his eyes, as he looked at you, Senorita, I saw a light that I had never seen in the eyes of this manacled brute. Then my guess was turned to knowledge!"

"Then, Senor Reade," begged the girl, "who is this man who would hold me back from my—"

"Tell her, sir," Tom urged the stranger.

"Child," said the latter, with wonderful gentleness and tenderness,
"I am the real Don Luis Montez—your father!"

"Then who is *he*?" cried Francesca, pointing to the handcuffed Mexican, who had sunk upon a chair looking more dead than alive.

"His true name," said the stranger, "is Paulo Rabasco. He was born of good family, but was always dissolute and criminal. Once he was my friend, I am ashamed to say; at least, I believed myself his. We traveled, once, in a part of Mexico in which we were both strangers. While there Rabasco became engaged in a budding revolution, that was quickly nipped by the central government. In my efforts to

shield my supposed friend from the consequences of supposed rebellion, I myself became suspected. In the night Rabasco stole my papers, putting his own in my pocket. When the police came they searched us both. I was believed to be Rabasco, and this scoundrel insisted that I was. The papers in our respective pockets seemed to prove it. The papers in mine connected me with the intended rebellion. A swift military trial, and within a few hours I was on my way to serve a life sentence of imprisonment in Yucatan.

"Rabasco, the self-asserted Don Luis, was turned loose. We looked not unlike in those days. Rabasco, as I have since learned, grew a beard. Then he went back to my home. My wife had died within a few days. Most of the old servants had gone. Rabasco, the unutterable scoundrel, set himself up as Don Luis Montez. He imposed on the nurse, and took her away with my infant child whom I had never seen after she was three months old. Rabasco went to the United States as soon as he had established a flimsy title to my modest property. In after years he returned, an older and more successful impostor. Yet he feared to live on my estate, dreading that some day his treachery might be discovered. So, still calling himself Don Luis Montez, this scoundrel sold my estate and took my child away to other parts of Mexico. My estate was a modest one. On that foundation this fellow has been building a larger fortune—but fate has overtaken him at last. There are still friends of mine alive who will help me to unmask this scoundrel and prove him Paulo Rabasco. He never would have been known, had I not, after many years, escaped from Yucatan. I did not dare proclaim myself at once, for fear of being arrested as Paulo Rabasco and sent back to Yucatan. But now I no longer fear. I am Don Luis Montez. I shall prove it without difficulty at last."

"Then, if this be so, we haven't bought this mining property of the rightful owner," interposed Mr. Haynes. "I imagine that the real Don Luis will establish full claim to a property that was founded on his stolen fortune. We shall recover our money from the sham Don Luis, but I fear we shall not be able to obtain this rich mineral property."

"Tell me the particulars," begged the real Don Luis.

Tom Reade stated the case fully, though in the fewest words that would accomplish the telling.

"You shall have the property by transferring the purchase price to me after I have recovered this estate at law," promised the real Don Luis simply.

"But, my dear sir," objected Mr. Haynes, honestly, "do you realize that we paid two and a half millions for the property, and that our trusted engineers assure us that it may be worth more."

"That makes no difference, Senor," replied the new Don Luis. "The money you were first willing to pay is far more money than I shall ever need. I crave only life and my child. If you journeyed down into Mexico, expecting to buy a property at a certain figure, and if you did do it, acting in perfectly good faith, then that is enough. I will ratify the bargain."

"But that would hardly be good business," smiled Mr. Haynes.

"Business is a word that will interest me but little after I have established my rights in the world," remarked Don Luis, mildly.

The true Don Luis Montez did establish his rights. He secured the estate built by Rabasco on the looted Montez fortune. The money paid Rabasco for the mining property was easily recovered through the courts and turned over to the rightful Don Luis. Then the Americans secured the property at the original figure. Don Luis soon won the affection of his daughter, and the two were wonderfully happy together.

Rabasco, the impostor, was sentenced to twenty years of penal servitude. On his way to begin serving his sentence he broke away from the military guard, and was shot to death.

Dr. Carlos Tisco died, of fever, within six months of the time of the real Don Luis's arrival. The governor of Bonista was discovered guilty of so much corruption in office that he died, while serving a sentence in prison.

Pedro Gato became an avowed outlaw. Senor Honda, while acting for the government in Bonista, sent the troops in pursuit of the outlaw. He was caught and shot by the soldiers.

As for Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton, they were happy indeed when they found themselves wholly reestablished in the respect of Mr. Haynes and his friends. The young engineers had played a most daring game throughout, and would have gone to their deaths at the hands of the sham Don Luis sooner than to have betrayed their own honor.

Tom and Harry spent days showing the American investors through that forest stretch. It proved an amazingly wonderful mineral claim, and has since paid enormous dividends.

"Mr. Haynes," Tom asked, anxiously, one day, "would you have done the same as we did, had you been in our place?"

"I don't know, my boy," replied the railway president, with a frank smile. "I'd hope that I would have done the same, but I don't know that I would have had the same magnificent courage that you two displayed throughout. It isn't every man who has the courage to back his conscience with his life."

Tom Reade and Harry Hazelton remained some three months longer in the mountains of Bonista. Finally, when they could be spared from the task of superintending the start of this rich mineral claim they returned to the United States.

"And what is to become of me, *caballeros*?" Nicolas mournfully inquired, the day before their departure.

"Do you think you could stand life with us, in the United States?" asked Tom.

"Could I?" exclaimed the poor fellow, clasping his hands. "Senor, do not jest with me! Can it be that you mean it?"

"I certainly do," nodded Tom.

Ambition's lure led the young engineers back to the home country. We shall speedily find them engaged again in the great fields of their calling, and we shall find them, too, in a setting of truly extraordinary adventure. All that happened to them will be stirringly told in the next volume of this series, which is published under the title, "*The Young Engineers On The Gulf; Or, The Dread Mystery of the Million-dollar Breakwater.*"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE YOUNG ENGINEERS IN MEXICO; OR,
FIGHTING THE MINE SWINDLERS ***

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