

II

A year before Mrs. Porter's dinner a tramp steamer on her way to the capital of Brazil had steered so close to the shores of Olancho that her solitary passenger could look into the caverns the waves had tunnelled in the limestone cliffs along the coast. The solitary passenger was Robert Clay, and he made a guess that the white palisades which fringed the base of the mountains along the shore had been forced up above the level of the sea many years before by some volcanic action. Olancho, as many people know, is situated on the northeastern coast of South America, and its shores are washed by the main equatorial current. From the deck of a passing vessel you can obtain but little idea of Olancho or of the abundance and tropical beauty which lies hidden away behind the rampart of mountains on her shore. You can see only their desolate dark-green front, and the white caves at their base, into which the waves rush with an echoing roar, and in and out of which fly continually thousands of frightened bats.

The mining engineer on the rail of the tramp steamer observed this peculiar formation of the coast with listless interest, until he noted, when the vessel stood some thirty miles north of the harbor of Valencia, that the limestone formation had disappeared, and that the waves now beat against the base of the mountains themselves. There were five of these mountains which jutted out into the ocean, and they suggested roughly the five knuckles of a giant hand clenched and lying flat upon the surface of the water. They extended for seven miles, and then the caverns in the palisades began again and continued on down the coast to the great cliffs that guard the harbor of Olancho's capital.

"The waves tunnelled their way easily enough until they ran up against those five mountains," mused the engineer, "and then they had to fall back." He walked to the captain's cabin and asked to look at a map of the coast line. "I believe I won't go to Rio," he said later in the day; "I think I will drop off here at Valencia."

So he left the tramp steamer at that place and disappeared into the interior with an ox-cart and a couple of pack-mules, and returned to write a lengthy letter from the Consul's office to a Mr. Langham in the United States, knowing he was largely interested in mines and in mining. "There are five mountains filled with ore," Clay wrote, "which should be extracted by open-faced workings. I saw great masses of red hematite lying exposed on the side of the mountain, only waiting a pick and shovel, and at one place there were five thousand tons in plain sight. I should call the stuff first-class Bessemer ore, running about sixty-three per cent metallic iron. The people know it is there, but have no knowledge of its value, and are too lazy to ever work it themselves. As to transportation, it would only be necessary to run a freight railroad twenty miles along the sea-coast to the harbor of Valencia and dump your ore from your own pier into your own vessels. It would not, I think, be possible to ship direct from the mines themselves, even though, as I say, the ore runs right down into the water, because there is no place at which it would be safe for a large vessel to touch. I will look into the political side of it and see what sort of a concession I can get for you. I should think ten per cent of the output would satisfy them, and they would, of course, admit machinery and plant free of duty."

Six months after this communication had arrived in New York City, the Valencia Mining Company was formally incorporated, and a man named Van Antwerp, with two hundred workmen and a half-dozen assistants, was sent South to lay out the freight railroad, to erect the dumping-pier, and to strip the five mountains of their forests and underbrush. It was not a task for a holiday, but a stern, difficult, and perplexing problem, and Van Antwerp was not quite the man to solve it. He was stubborn, self-confident, and indifferent by turns. He did not depend upon his lieutenants, but jealously guarded his own opinions from the least question or discussion, and at every step he antagonized the easy-going people among whom he had come to work. He had no patience with their habits of procrastination, and he was continually offending their lazy good-nature and their pride. He treated the rich planters, who owned the land between the mines and the harbor over which the freight railroad must run, with as little consideration as he showed the regiment of soldiers which the Government had farmed out to the company to serve as laborers in the mines. Six months after Van

Antwerp had taken charge at Valencia, Clay, who had finished the railroad in Mexico, of which King had spoken, was asked by telegraph to undertake the work of getting the ore out of the mountains he had discovered, and shipping it North. He accepted the offer and was given the title of General Manager and Resident Director, and an enormous salary, and was also given to understand that the rough work of preparation had been accomplished, and that the more important service of picking up the five mountains and putting them in fragments into tramp steamers would continue under his direction. He had a letter of recall for Van Antwerp, and a letter of introduction to the Minister of Mines and Agriculture. Further than that he knew nothing of the work before him, but he concluded, from the fact that he had been paid the almost prohibitive sum he had asked for his services, that it must be important, or that he had reached that place in his career when he could stop actual work and live easily, as an expert, on the work of others.

Clay rolled along the coast from Valencia to the mines in a paddle-wheeled steamer that had served its usefulness on the Mississippi, and which had been rotting at the levees in New Orleans, when Van Antwerp had chartered it to carry tools and machinery to the mines and to serve as a private launch for himself. It was a choice either of this steamer and landing in a small boat, or riding along the line of the unfinished railroad on horseback. Either route consumed six valuable hours, and Clay, who was anxious to see his new field of action, beat impatiently upon the rail of the rolling tub as it wallowed in the sea.

He spent the first three days after his arrival at the mines in the mountains, climbing them on foot and skirting their base on horseback, and sleeping where night overtook him. Van Antwerp did not accompany him on his tour of inspection through the mines, but delegated that duty to an engineer named MacWilliams, and to Weimer, the United States Consul at Valencia, who had served the company in many ways and who was in its closest confidence.

For three days the men toiled heavily over fallen trunks and trees, slippery with the moss of centuries, or slid backward on the rolling stones in the waterways, or clung to their ponies' backs to dodge the hanging creepers. At times for hours together they walked in single file, bent nearly double, and seeing nothing before them but the shining backs and shoulders of the negroes who hacked out the way for

them to go. And again they would come suddenly upon a precipice, and drink in the soft cool breath of the ocean, and look down thousands of feet upon the impenetrable green under which they had been crawling, out to where it met the sparkling surface of the Caribbean Sea. It was three days of unceasing activity while the sun shone, and of anxious questionings around the camp-fire when the darkness fell, and when there were no sounds on the mountain-side but that of falling water in a distant ravine or the calls of the night-birds.

On the morning of the fourth day Clay and his attendants returned to camp and rode to where the men had just begun to blast away the sloping surface of the mountain.

As Clay passed between the zinc sheds and palm huts of the soldier-workmen, they came running out to meet him, and one, who seemed to be a leader, touched his bridle, and with his straw sombrero in his hand begged for a word with el Senor the Director.

The news of Clay's return had reached the opening, and the throb of the dummy-engines and the roar of the blasting ceased as the assistant-engineers came down the valley to greet the new manager. They found him seated on his horse gazing ahead of him, and listening to the story of the soldier, whose fingers, as he spoke, trembled in the air, with all the grace and passion of his Southern nature, while back of him his companions stood humbly, in a silent chorus, with eager, supplicating eyes. Clay answered the man's speech curtly, with a few short words, in the Spanish patois in which he had been addressed, and then turned and smiled grimly upon the expectant group of engineers. He kept them waiting for some short space, while he looked them over carefully, as though he had never seen them before.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "I'm glad to have you here all together. I am only sorry you didn't come in time to hear what this fellow has had to say. I don't as a rule listen that long to complaints, but he told me what I have seen for myself and what has been told me by others. I have been here three days now, and I assure you, gentlemen, that my easiest course would be to pack up my things and go home on the next steamer. I was sent down here to take charge of a mine in active operation, and I find—what? I find that in six months you have done almost nothing, and that the little you have condescended to do has been done so badly that it will have to be done over again; that you have not only wasted a half year of time—and I can't tell how much money—but

that you have succeeded in antagonizing all the people on whose goodwill we are absolutely dependent; you have allowed your machinery to rust in the rain, and your workmen to rot with sickness. You have not only done nothing, but you haven't a blueprint to show me what you meant to do. I have never in my life come across laziness and mismanagement and incompetency upon such a magnificent and reckless scale. You have not built the pier, you have not opened the freight road, you have not taken out an ounce of ore. You know more of Valencia than you know of these mines; you know it from the Alameda to the Canal. You can tell me what night the band plays in the Plaza, but you can't give me the elevation of one of these hills. You have spent your days on the pavements in front of cafés, and your nights in dance-halls, and you have been drawing salaries every month. I've more respect for these half-breeds that you've allowed to starve in this fever-bed than I have for you. You have treated them worse than they'd treat a dog, and if any of them die, it's on your heads. You have put them in a fever-camp which you have not even taken the trouble to drain. Your commissariat is rotten, and you have let them drink all the rum they wanted. There is not one of you—"

The group of silent men broke, and one of them stepped forward and shook his forefinger at Clay.

"No man can talk to me like that," he said, warningly, "and think I'll work under him. I resign here and now."

"You what—" cried Clay, "you resign?"

He whirled his horse round with a dig of his spur and faced them.

"How dare you talk of resigning? I'll pack the whole lot of you back to New York on the first steamer, if I want to, and I'll give you such characters that you'll be glad to get a job carrying a transit. You're in no position to talk of resigning yet—not one of you. Yes," he added, interrupting himself, "one of you is MacWilliams, the man who had charge of the railroad. It's no fault of his that the road's not working. I understand that he couldn't get the right of way from the people who owned the land, but I have seen what he has done, and his plans, and I apologize to him—to MacWilliams. As for the rest of you, I'll give you a month's trial. It will be a month before the next steamer could get here anyway, and I'll give you that long to redeem yourselves. At the end of that time we will have another talk, but you are here now only on your good behavior and on my sufferance. Good-morning."

As Clay had boasted, he was not the man to throw up his position because he found the part he had to play was not that of leading man, but rather one of general utility, and although it had been several years since it had been part of his duties to oversee the setting up of machinery, and the policing of a mining camp, he threw himself as earnestly into the work before him as though to show his subordinates that it did not matter who did the work, so long as it was done. The men at first were sulky, resentful, and suspicious, but they could not long resist the fact that Clay was doing the work of five men and five different kinds of work, not only without grumbling, but apparently with the keenest pleasure.

He conciliated the rich coffee planters who owned the land which he wanted for the freight road by calls of the most formal state and dinners of much less formality, for he saw that the iron mine had its social as well as its political side. And with this fact in mind, he opened the railroad with great ceremony, and much music and feasting, and the first piece of ore taken out of the mine was presented to the wife of the Minister of the Interior in a cluster of diamonds, which made the wives of the other members of the Cabinet regret that their husbands had not chosen that portfolio. Six months followed of hard, unremitting work, during which time the great pier grew out into the bay from MacWilliams' railroad, and the face of the first mountain was scarred and torn of its green, and left in mangled nakedness, while the ringing of hammers and picks, and the racking blasts of dynamite, and the warning whistles of the dummy-engines drove away the accumulated silence of centuries.

It had been a long uphill fight, and Clay had enjoyed it mightily. Two unexpected events had contributed to help it. One was the arrival in Valencia of young Teddy Langham, who came ostensibly to learn the profession of which Clay was so conspicuous an example, and in reality to watch over his father's interests. He was put at Clay's elbow, and Clay made him learn in spite of himself, for he ruled him and MacWilliams of both of whom he was very fond, as though, so they complained, they were the laziest and the most rebellious members of his entire staff. The second event of importance was the announcement made one day by young Langham that his father's physician had ordered rest in a mild climate, and that he and his daughters were coming in a month to spend the winter in Valencia, and to see how the son

and heir had developed as a man of business.

The idea of Mr. Langham's coming to visit Olancho to inspect his new possessions was not a surprise to Clay. It had occurred to him as possible before, especially after the son had come to join them there. The place was interesting and beautiful enough in itself to justify a visit, and it was only a ten days' voyage from New York. But he had never considered the chance of Miss Langham's coming, and when that was now not only possible but a certainty, he dreamed of little else. He lived as earnestly and toiled as indefatigably as before, but the place was utterly transformed for him. He saw it now as she would see it when she came, even while at the same time his own eyes retained their point of view. It was as though he had lengthened the focus of a glass, and looked beyond at what was beautiful and picturesque, instead of what was near at hand and practicable. He found himself smiling with anticipation of her pleasure in the orchids hanging from the dead trees, high above the opening of the mine, and in the parrots hurling themselves like gayly colored missiles among the vines; and he considered the harbor at night with its colored lamps floating on the black water as a scene set for her eyes. He planned the dinners that he would give in her honor on the balcony of the great restaurant in the Plaza on those nights when the band played, and the señoritas circled in long lines between admiring rows of officers and caballeros. And he imagined how, when the ore-boats had been filled and his work had slackened, he would be free to ride with her along the rough mountain roads, between magnificent pillars of royal palms, or to venture forth in excursions down the bay, to explore the caves and to lunch on board the rolling paddle-wheel steamer, which he would have re painted and gilded for her coming. He pictured himself acting as her guide over the great mines, answering her simple questions about the strange machinery, and the crew of workmen, and the local government by which he ruled two thousand men. It was not on account of any personal pride in the mines that he wanted her to see them, it was not because he had discovered and planned and opened them that he wished to show them to her, but as a curious spectacle that he hoped would give her a moment's interest.

But his keenest pleasure was when young Langham suggested that they should build a house for his people on the edge of the hill that jutted out over the harbor and the great ore pier. If this were done,

Langham urged, it would be possible for him to see much more of his family than he would be able to do were they installed in the city, five miles away.

“We can still live in the office at this end of the railroad,” the boy said, “and then we shall have them within call at night when we get back from work; but if they are in Valencia, it will take the greater part of the evening going there and all of the night getting back, for I can’t pass that club under three hours. It will keep us out of temptation.”

“Yes, exactly,” said Clay, with a guilty smile, “it will keep us out of temptation.”

So they cleared away the underbrush, and put a double force of men to work on what was to be the most beautiful and comfortable bungalow on the edge of the harbor. It had blue and green and white tiles on the floors, and walls of bamboo, and a red roof of curved tiles to let in the air, and dragons’ heads for water-spouts, and verandas as broad as the house itself. There was an open court in the middle hung with balconies looking down upon a splashing fountain, and to decorate this patio, they levied upon people for miles around for tropical plants and colored mats and awnings. They cut down the trees that hid the view of the long harbor leading from the sea into Valencia, and planted a rampart of other trees to hide the iron-ore pier, and they sodded the raw spots where the men had been building, until the place was as completely transformed as though some fairy had waved her wand above it.

It was to be a great surprise, and they were all—Clay, MacWilliams, and Langham—as keenly interested in it as though each were preparing it for his honeymoon. They would be walking together in Valencia when one would say, “We ought to have that for the house,” and without question they would march into the shop together and order whatever they fancied to be sent out to the house of the president of the mines on the hill. They stocked it with wine and linens, and hired a volante and six horses, and fitted out the driver with a new pair of boots that reached above his knees, and a silver jacket and a sombrero that was so heavy with braid that it flashed like a halo about his head in the sunlight, and he was ordered not to wear it until the ladies came, under penalty of arrest. It delighted Clay to find that it was only the beautiful things and the fine things of his daily routine that suggested her to him, as though she could not be associated in his mind with

anything less worthy, and he kept saying to himself, "She will like this view from the end of the terrace," and "This will be her favorite walk," or "She will swing her hammock here," and "I know she will not fancy the rug that Weimer chose."

While this fairy palace was growing the three men lived as roughly as before in the wooden hut at the terminus of the freight road, three hundred yards below the house, and hidden from it by an impenetrable rampart of brush and Spanish bayonet. There was a rough road leading from it to the city, five miles away, which they had extended still farther up the hill to the Palms, which was the name Langham had selected for his father's house. And when it was finally finished, they continued to live under the corrugated zinc roof of their office building, and locking up the Palms, left it in charge of a gardener and a watchman until the coming of its rightful owners.

It had been a viciously hot, close day, and even now the air came in sickening waves, like a blast from the engine-room of a steamer, and the heat lightning played round the mountains over the harbor and showed the empty wharves, and the black outlines of the steamers, and the white front of the Custom-House, and the long half-circle of twinkling lamps along the quay. MacWilliams and Langham sat panting on the lower steps of the office-porch considering whether they were too lazy to clean themselves and be rowed over to the city, where, as it was Sunday night, was promised much entertainment. They had been for the last hour trying to make up their minds as to this, and appealing to Clay to stop work and decide for them. But he sat inside at a table figuring and writing under the green shade of a student's lamp and made no answer. The walls of Clay's office were of unplanned boards, bristling with splinters, and hung with blueprints and outline maps of the mine. A gaudily colored portrait of Madame la Presidenta, the noble and beautiful woman whom Alvarez, the President of Olancho, had lately married in Spain, was pinned to the wall above the table. This table, with its green oil-cloth top, and the lamp, about which winged insects beat noisily, and an earthen water-jar—from which the water dripped as regularly as the ticking of a clock—were the only articles of furniture in the office. On a shelf at one side of the door lay the men's machetes, a belt of cartridges, and a revolver in a holster.

Clay rose from the table and stood in the light of the open door, stretching himself gingerly, for his joints were sore and stiff with

fording streams and climbing the surfaces of rocks. The red ore and yellow mud of the mines were plastered over his boots and riding-breeches, where he had stood knee-deep in the water, and his shirt stuck to him like a wet bathing-suit, showing his ribs when he breathed and the curves of his broad chest. A ring of burning paper and hot ashes fell from his cigarette to his breast and burnt a hole through the cotton shirt, and he let it lie there and watched it burn with a grim smile.

“I wanted to see,” he explained, catching the look of listless curiosity in MacWilliams’s eye, “whether there was anything hotter than my blood. It’s racing around like boiling water in a pot.”

“Listen,” said Langham, holding up his hand. “There goes the call for prayers in the convent, and now it’s too late to go to town. I am glad, rather. I’m too tired to keep awake, and besides, they don’t know how to amuse themselves in a civilized way—at least not in my way. I wish I could just drop in at home about now; don’t you, MacWilliams? Just about this time up in God’s country all the people are at the theatre, or they’ve just finished dinner and are sitting around sipping cool green mint, trickling through little lumps of ice. What I’d like—” he stopped and shut one eye and gazed, with his head on one side, at the unimaginative MacWilliams—“what I’d like to do now,” he continued, thoughtfully, “would be to sit in the front row at a comic opera, ON THE AISLE. The prima donna must be very, very beautiful, and sing most of her songs at me, and there must be three comedians, all good, and a chorus entirely composed of girls. I never could see why they have men in the chorus, anyway. No one ever looks at them. Now that’s where I’d like to be. What would you like, MacWilliams?”

MacWilliams was a type with which Clay was intimately familiar, but to the college-bred Langham he was a revelation and a joy. He came from some little town in the West, and had learned what he knew of engineering at the transit’s mouth, after he had first served his apprenticeship by cutting sage-brush and driving stakes. His life had been spent in Mexico and Central America, and he spoke of the home he had not seen in ten years with the aggressive loyalty of the confirmed wanderer, and he was known to prefer and to import canned corn and canned tomatoes in preference to eating the wonderful fruits of the country, because the former came from the States and tasted to him of home. He had crowded into his young life experiences that would

have shattered the nerves of any other man with a more sensitive conscience and a less happy sense of humor; but these same experiences had only served to make him shrewd and self-confident and at his ease when the occasion or difficulty came.

He pulled meditatively on his pipe and considered Langham's question deeply, while Clay and the younger boy sat with their arms upon their knees and waited for his decision in thoughtful silence.

"I'd like to go to the theatre, too," said MacWilliams, with an air as though to show that he also was possessed of artistic tastes. "I'd like to see a comical chap I saw once in '80—oh, long ago—before I joined the P. Q. & M. He WAS funny. His name was Owens; that was his name, John E. Owens—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, MacWilliams," protested Langham, in dismay; "he's been dead for five years."

"Has he?" said MacWilliams, thoughtfully. "Well—" he concluded, unabashed, "I can't help that, he's the one I'd like to see best."

"You can have another wish, Mac, you know," urged Langham, "can't he, Clay?"

Clay nodded gravely, and MacWilliams frowned again in thought. "No," he said after an effort, "Owens, John E. Owens; that's the one I want to see."

"Well, now I want another wish, too," said Langham. "I move we can each have two wishes. I wish—"

"Wait until I've had mine," said Clay. "You've had one turn. I want to be in a place I know in Vienna. It's not hot like this, but cool and fresh. It's an open, out-of-door concert-garden, with hundreds of colored lights and trees, and there's always a breeze coming through. And Eduard Strauss, the son, you know, leads the orchestra there, and they play nothing but waltzes, and he stands in front of them, and begins by raising himself on his toes, and then he lifts his shoulders gently—and then sinks back again and raises his baton as though he were drawing the music out after it, and the whole place seems to rock and move. It's like being picked up and carried on the deck of a yacht over great waves; and all around you are the beautiful Viennese women and those tall Austrian officers in their long, blue coats and flat hats and silver swords. And there are cool drinks—" continued Clay, with his eyes fixed on the coming storm—"all sorts of cool drinks—in high, thin glasses, full of ice, all the ice you want—"

“Oh, drop it, will you?” cried Langham, with a shrug of his damp shoulders. “I can’t stand it. I’m parching.”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted MacWilliams, leaning forward and looking into the night. “Someone’s coming.” There was a sound down the road of hoofs and the rattle of the land-crabs as they scrambled off into the bushes, and two men on horseback came suddenly out of the darkness and drew rein in the light from the open door. The first was General Mendoza, the leader of the Opposition in the Senate, and the other, his orderly. The General dropped his Panama hat to his knee and bowed in the saddle three times.

“Good-evening, your Excellency,” said Clay, rising. “Tell that peon to get my coat, will you?” he added, turning to Langham. Langham clapped his hands, and the clanging of a guitar ceased, and their servant and cook came out from the back of the hut and held the General’s horse while he dismounted. “Wait until I get you a chair,” said Clay. “You’ll find those steps rather bad for white duck.”

“I am fortunate in finding you at home,” said the officer, smiling, and showing his white teeth. “The telephone is not working. I tried at the club, but I could not call you.”

“It’s the storm, I suppose,” Clay answered, as he struggled into his jacket. “Let me offer you something to drink.” He entered the house, and returned with several bottles on a tray and a bundle of cigars. The Spanish-American poured himself out a glass of water, mixing it with Jamaica rum, and said, smiling again, “It is a saying of your countrymen that when a man first comes to Olancho he puts a little rum into his water, and that when he is here some time he puts a little water in his rum.”

“Yes,” laughed Clay. “I’m afraid that’s true.”

There was a pause while the men sipped at their glasses, and looked at the horses and the orderly. The clanging of the guitar began again from the kitchen. “You have a very beautiful view here of the harbor, yes,” said Mendoza. He seemed to enjoy the pause after his ride, and to be in no haste to begin on the object of his errand. MacWilliams and Langham eyed each other covertly, and Clay examined the end of his cigar, and they all waited.

“And how are the mines progressing, eh?” asked the officer, genially. “You find much good iron in them, they tell me.”

“Yes, we are doing very well,” Clay assented; “it was difficult at first,