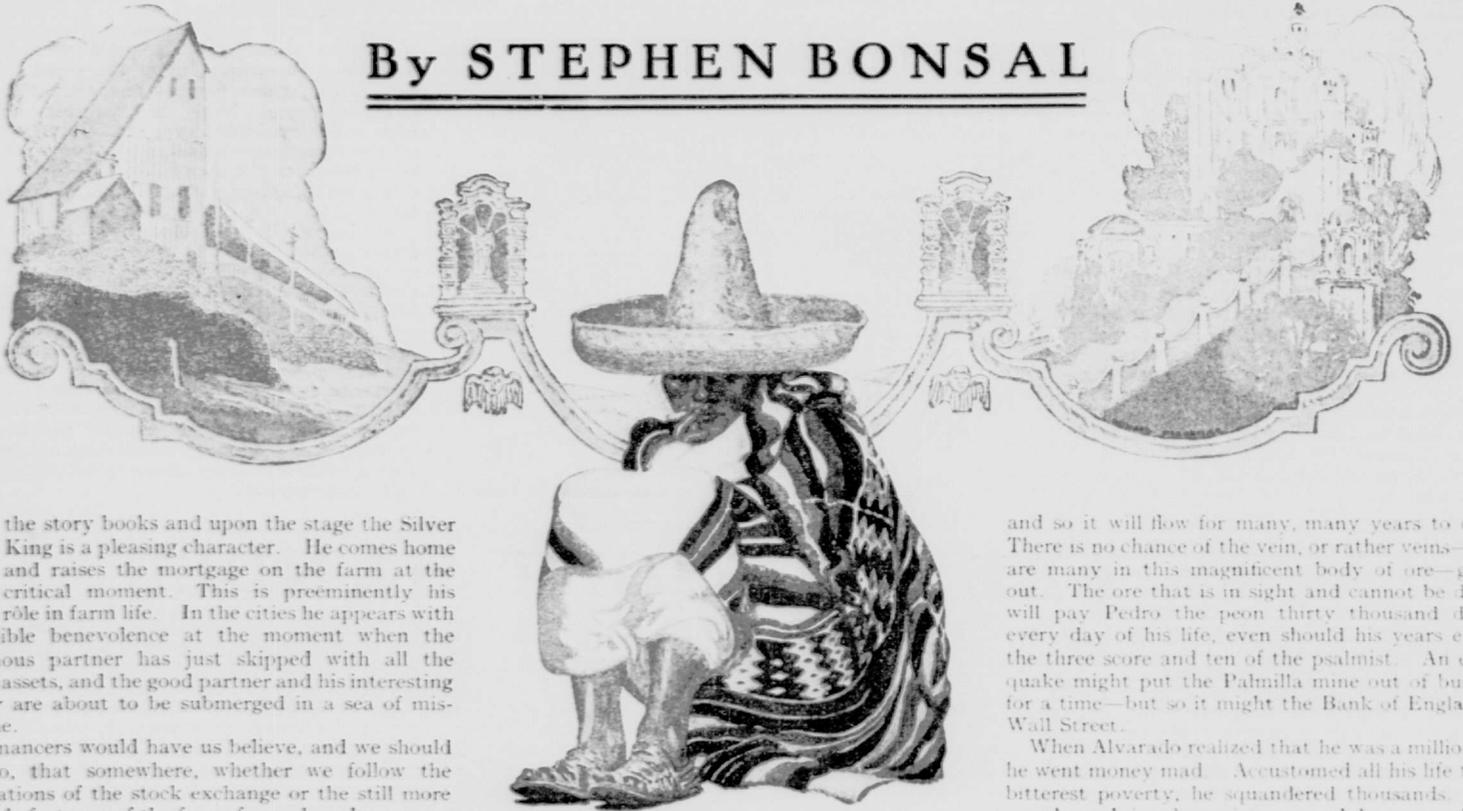


THE KING OF SILVER KINGS

By STEPHEN BONSAI



IN the story books and upon the stage the Silver King is a pleasing character. He comes home and raises the mortgage on the farm at the critical moment. This is preeminently his rôle in farm life. In the cities he appears with incredible benevolence at the moment when the villainous partner has just skipped with all the firm's assets, and the good partner and his interesting family are about to be submerged in a sea of misfortune.

Romancers would have us believe, and we should like to, that somewhere, whether we follow the fluctuations of the stock exchange or the still more unstable fortunes of the farm, for each and everyone of us a Silver King is working. Recent events show that in Mexico at least the romancer is eternally right, and the realists must take a back seat. Our own personal and particular Silver King may have petered out as did the argent genius of Artemus Ward who asked to be met by his friends at the railway station with a blanket, he having a hat, as he arrogantly asserted; but down in Mexico there lives a man who is ready and willing not only to raise the mortgage on the family farm, but who practically promises to pay the national debt, and President Diaz won't let him.

It is a tidy sum, this national debt (about two hundred million gold dollars in all) which Pedro Alvarado, the peon millionaire of Chihuahua, wants to wipe off the slate. Half the taxes that are annually raised in Mexico are used to pay the interest. In other words, Pedro offers to reduce the taxes of everyone of his fellow countrymen by half; but Diaz believes that a national debt is a valuable asset,—that it is well to have a large number of people at home and abroad who wish you well and will work for your prosperity because they have their savings bound up in it. We have all known what a great hold Diaz has over his remarkable people; but to-day, when he stands between them and two hundred millions of dollars, and not a shot is fired, the illustration is overwhelming.

Made a Vow to Die Poor

TEN or twelve years ago, Pedro Alvarado was a poor peon who had to carry a pack whenever his donkey's back was sore, which, after the manner of donkeys, was almost all the time. To-day he is eating his heart out because he has made a vow to Our Lady that he will die poor, and the political and other powers that be seem determined to defeat his purpose. Into the treasury of the peon the Palmilla mine pours thirty thousand dollars every day, and then the output is swelled by the discovery of a gigantic nugget.

It is a pity, but nevertheless true, that the story of this tremendously rich man is a story of dumb luck. Pedro Alvarado did not go far afield in search of fortune; its foundation was not laid by some act of courage or of sublime self denial. Alvarado never denied himself anything he could buy; unlike Pullman, who told me with evident sincerity that he achieved fortune the day he determined to do without his daily cigar. In a word, unlike so many other millionaires, Pedro was fortunate in his father. Financially speaking, he was the most fortunate man in his father I have ever read about, and the honors of this wealth story should all go to Pedro, senior, who made this mountain of money possible, though never a peso of it lodged in his pocket.

When the great railroad came to Parral, and the great wealth of the Palmilla mine could no longer be concealed, the scouts of syndicates and the advance

agents of mining trusts flocked about young Pedro. They tempted him with thousands, with hundreds of thousands, and at last with millions, but all to no purpose.

"Why, your father bought the mine for a mere song," expostulated a prospector, who had looked the veins over and found them to be surpassingly good.

"A mere song," repeated the young peon, who had awakened to find himself King of all the Silver Kings; "but it was a bitter song for my father." In money it cost him only one hundred dollars, but to get that hundred dollars he toiled early and late. He gave up twenty years of his life to accumulate those few pesos, and you may be sure that I will not sell the result of his labors."

The Father's Ambition

THE gossips in Parral love to talk of Pedro Alvarado, senior, to-day, now that all the world is agog over the result of his wonderful investment. Unlike others of his class, he was not content to earn a mere livelihood, which is the easily satisfied ambition of most of his race. When the work of the day was over, he worked on, delving with pick and shovel for an hour or two longer. He wanted, he said, to leave his adored son a little land. Some people suspect that the shrewd old peon knew of the silver lode in the gray, gaunt hillside, but they have no proof of this. Indeed, there is much evidence to prove that as the old man sweated and toiled he did not dream that he was laying the foundation of a great fortune. Those who knew him best assert that his ambitions went no further than a simple goat ranch or a pulque farm.

It is pretty hard to rank Pedro, junior, with the other founders of great fortunes the world over, with the Honest Money Changer of Frankfort, with the Ferryman of Staten Island, and the Fur Trader of Oregon who put his money in New York real estate. The only time that Pedro did anything that apparently might not have been done quite so well by a bump on a log was when the mining kings surrounded him and tempted him with dazzling offers. Here he might have fumbled his bonanza away for a few paltry millions; but he didn't. He would have nothing to do with the dangerous big fish who swim in the mineral pond. He himself had not enough money to buy half a dozen shovels, much less to purchase mining machinery.

Leased the Mine to Buy Shovels

HE turned to a neighbor, a miner in a very small way, and said, "I will lease the mine to you, Miguel, for a year, and you give me in return one-third of the profits."

At the end of twelve months Pedro Alvarado had enough money to develop the Palmilla mine and a dozen more besides.

And so the silver stream flows into his treasury,

and so it will flow for many, many years to come. There is no chance of the vein, or rather veins—they are many in this magnificent body of ore—giving out. The ore that is in sight and cannot be denied will pay Pedro the peon thirty thousand dollars every day of his life, even should his years exceed the three score and ten of the psalmist. An earthquake might put the Palmilla mine out of business for a time—but so it might the Bank of England or Wall Street.

When Alvarado realized that he was a millionaire, he went money mad. Accustomed all his life to the bitterest poverty, he squandered thousands. Diamonds and jewelry, pictures and horses and carriages, and gowns galore for his beautiful wife Virginia, who had never had more than one change of clothing before! He gambled, and then he built a palace which is a revelation. By the very few who have visited the place these facts are vouchsafed for.

It had been the abiding ambition of Virginia's life all through their poverty some day to have a piano; and so, when the faithful husband got his millions, one of his first acts was to buy a thousand pianos, one for each of the thousand rooms in the palace. In each room there is also an aviary containing at least a hundred canary birds. Throughout the palace the woodwork is of mahogany, hand carved. Almost every suite of apartments opens out into its own private patio, where a fountain plays at night when the canary birds are resting. On saints' days and holidays the fountains are said to run with the most stylish perfumery from the Rue de la Paix, but this statement I have always regarded as a tropical exaggeration.

For some years Alvarado had agents in Persia on the lookout for the rare Daghestan rugs; in Arabia to bribe sheiks and pashas for permission to export famous mares of the Yemen breed; in the Orient for rare curios. Indeed, all that is rare in the world and might come in the dreams of a suddenly made Croesus, that has this rich son of the soil sought; and furthermore he has succeeded in getting most of the worldly things he desired.

Tired of His Extravagances

BUT in the last year or two the delights of extravagance seem to have palled upon Alvarado. He lives quietly and unostentatiously. While he has everything that money can buy, his personal expenditure is not greater than that of hundreds of his dependents. Down in the heart of his mine he has erected a shrine to the Virgin, the walls of which are of onyx and the supporting pillars of alabaster, and here day and night a thousand candles burn in honor of Our Lady of the Mine.

Pedro Alvarado has many children; but in the disposition of his wealth, which seems to have brought him no greater happiness than was his when he worked as a penniless peon, he is said to have no more thought of them than of the children of his neighbors. When President Diaz refused to have the national debt of Mexico wiped out, Alvarado is said to have acted as a man bereft of reason for a few days. Perhaps the fear, the dread, of the silver flood engulfing him, is working upon the nerves of this favorite of fortune. Undaunted, however, he is planning another outlet for his gigantic wealth. He is gathering the statistics of every father of a family throughout Mexico. When the list is ready, he intends, it is said, to divide with his fellow countrymen the output of the Palmilla mine. The Mexican Government is also said to be perturbed over these colossal relief