

*Brigid Amos*

## **Bag of Gold**

Joaquin de la Rosa caressed the buckskin bag in his hand with the tenderness of a lover. He bounced it up and down to test its weight, at one point sending it airborne, and then catching it deftly with a snap of his long, elegant fingers. He performed these maneuvers without once removing his eyes from the open door of the Winters Hotel.

If anyone had seen him there looking as he did, he would have been considered the most fantastic sight of the mountain metropolis of Coloma. His posture proud and erect, he was mounted on a Spanish mare of impeccable breeding, a far cry from the common mule of the average prospector. And as if such a horse were not enough, the beast was adorned with an elaborately tooled, silver studded saddle and bridle made by the finest saddlers of Texcoco, Mexico.

Although Joaquin had already been two months in the diggings, he was dressed in a dark blue velvet suit with a white braided trim and low-cut boots of soft brown leather. A flowing red silk necktie was tied around the collar of his white shirt. He still looked the part of a rich Californio with nothing of the prospector he had supposedly come here to be.

As it happened, the stunning effect he produced went to waste. Sadly, no one saw him there in the shadow of the tall pines across from the hotel. Dismounting with a flourish, he tied his horse to a tree without worry that anyone might interfere with the animal or its valuable saddle and bridle. Although Joaquin had occasional bad luck in cards, such a common annoyance as petty theft could never touch him. He was somehow above these run-of-the-mill misfortunes that seemed to plague average men. Having always led a favored life, he believed that any bad that might come to him would have to be exceptional, even dramatic in nature.

The illumination from the gas lamps spilled out of the hotel door, forming a puddle of yellow light on the ample porch. Several drunken miners lounged on the steps, while one pair, locked in an embrace, sashayed in and out of the glow to the sound of a concertina badly played inside the hotel. Joaquin observed that they were ever so slightly out of step. From the way the men bumped violently against each other, he guessed that they were also at odds over who was leading. The long, tangled beards on both of them did nothing to settle the dispute, and as neither wore an arm band to indicate his feminine

role in the dance, the twirling shoving match continued as they lost themselves in the halting music.

Watching them from the shadows, Joaquin felt a pitying smile spread over his face. He thought of the elegant parties his father held in the large adobe on Rancho Tres Pinos. For a moment, he heard the sweet song of violins and smelled the odor of camphor wafting off newly unpacked party clothes. He felt a slightly damp, lace-covered waist pressing against the palm of his hand. He wondered whose waist it was, and closed his eyes to peer into the lovely face before him. First he saw the round, soft features of Elena Pacheco Alvarado, but these quickly dissolved into the sharp and animated ones of Maria Teresa de la Guerra. A succession of the *señoritas* he had known in Monterey flashed through his imagination before he roused himself, realizing that the pressure in his hand was in fact the buckskin bag and not the body of one of these now unattainable women. The pity that gripped him was first for those pathetic men on the porch who would never know the dance partners Joaquin had known, then for those ladies he had left behind who must surely be pining away for him on their lonely verandas. Finally, it was for himself, for he believed he too deserved some pity. After all, who else would provide it if he did not?

Joaquin walked up the steps of the hotel, stepping gingerly around the lounging miners. These looked up at him in a speechless stupor, but as the dancing couple whirled toward him, the one who seemed to be currently leading let out a surprised howl.

"Dang, you're a pretty one! If you was a woman, I'd ask you to marry me."

"Then, being a man, I suppose I am in luck this evening," Joaquin returned evenly.

"Hey, *señor*," the other half of the dance team piped up, "couldn't you introduce us to your sister?"

"What did you say about my sister?" A cloud darkened Joaquin's face as he marched toward the pair with a menacing attitude.

The prospectors stopped dancing and backed up awkwardly. One stumbled and nearly fell when he got his foot caught up with the shin of the other. They looked frantically from Joaquin's grimace to the beautiful but deadly pistol with the mother of pearl inlaid handle that adorned his hip. The Californio's hand was moving toward that part of his anatomy, and they were nearly mesmerized by its progress.

"Beg your pardon, *señor*. I just meant that a good-looking fellow like you must have a beautiful sister."

"He didn't mean nothing by it. Look, we ain't armed. We was just out here dancing and having a little fun," the other said, trying to defend his drunken friend.

"I see," Joaquin said, visibly relaxing his trigger finger. "In the fu-

ture, keep my sister out of your conversations.”

Joaquin turned to enter the Winters Hotel. He desperately wanted to laugh, but it would have ruined the terror he had instilled in these stupid, filthy *americanos*. Although gratified, he had to wonder what compelled him to do these things. Joaquin had no sister and was, in fact, an only child. The casino of the Winters Hotel was much larger and more well-appointed than Joaquin had expected. The place buzzed with activity. Along one wall, an elaborately carved oak bar had been installed, and a motley collection of men loitered near it sipping overpriced whiskey and talking of the ounces they had taken that day. Every now and then one would dig into a bag like the one Joaquin himself carried and hand the bartender a pinch of gold dust for a drink of the inferior alcohol.

A pair of “Celestials,” Chinese men, with long pigtails spilling down their backs from under flat, tightly woven straw hats, shouted at each other over the general din. Their high-pitched singing language, as well as their appearance, attracted the attention of some bystanders. They stared at them and listened in an attempt to understand their conversation, perhaps trying to learn the secret of their success in the diggings, for the Chinese seemed to always clear more than their share. Joaquin had once sat down to rest near one of their claims and watched them work. The Chinese miners toiled endlessly, barely stopping to click their chopsticks to pluck a bit of rice from a bowl. If he had cared, he would have passed their secret on to these lazy, jealous *americanos*. He wanted no part of that back-breaking method of acquiring gold.

*“Buenas noches, señor.”*

Surprised to hear this greeting, Joaquin turned to see a small group of men in white cotton ponchos. They were amusing themselves by watching the miners who skipped about to the concertina, perhaps waiting for a chance to dance with one of the two genuine but worse for wear women who were pushed and pulled among them. By their dress, Joaquin took these Spanish speaking men for Peruvians.

*“¿Es usted de México?”* one asked innocently.

*“¡Soy de California!”* Joaquin shot back with the air of one who wanted to put an end to a conversation. He had nothing against them and, in fact, felt sorry for them. They were, after all, so far from home and probably thought he was a kindred spirit. In another situation, he might have welcomed the opportunity to converse in his own language, but not now. He had other business at the Winters Hotel, and it would go more smoothly if he didn’t involve himself too much with the clientele.

The Peruvians were taken aback but took the hint, turning their attention to the dance floor. Joaquin turned his to the monte tables covered with blue cloth. Silver dollars in stacks of sixteen stood wait-

ing on them. A wiry little waiter flitted about with free drinks for the gamblers, while the French monte bankers chanted like monks, "Deuce, seven, queen. Make your bets, gentlemen."

Joaquin watched the action for a while, and then sat down at a table next to two other men. To do so, he had to climb over a long bench and at first sat down on the dangling suspenders of an Irishman next to him.

"Are you looking to trap me?" the man asked, pushing his slouch hat away from his face and grinning at Joaquin.

"Excuse me?"

The man pointed down at his suspenders, and Joaquin stood up just enough for the man to free himself.

"They go over your shoulders, you know," Joaquin said, slightly irritated.

"Just wanted to be a little more comfortable," the man mumbled and turned his attention back to the monte banker.

The banker slapped a card face down in front of each of the players, then drew back and droned, "Come down, gents, and place your bets."

There wasn't much to bet on, just three cards lying face down. Still, Joaquin produced the buckskin bag, set it gently on the table, and said placidly, "Six ounces on my card."

The other two players looked at him in surprise. The Irishman with the suspenders quickly relinquished his card, saying, "I'm out. This game sure changed in a hurry." The other player did the same and stood up with the Irishman, but the two remained standing behind Joaquin to watch the outcome.

"I seem to have lost my competitors. I suppose I'll have to play the house," Joaquin said, looking up at the banker.

"*Oui, monsieur,*" the banker said, reaching for the buckskin bag.

Joaquin's hand shot out and grabbed the man's wrist. "What do you think you're doing? That gold still belongs to me."

"I only wanted to weigh it, *monsieur.*"

"Very well. Then let us continue the game."

Joaquin reached over and dropped the bag on the scale, saying, "The bag itself weighs half an ounce."

"There are eight ounces here," the banker said.

"Then my bet is eight ounces. Now please deal the cards."

The banker dealt himself a card face down, then one face up for each of them. He dealt himself the king of spades. Joaquin's was the two of clubs.

"Place your bets, gentlemen," said the banker.

A moment of silence ensued as the onlookers imagined the possibilities presented by the faced down cards. There was still too little to go on, so no bets were placed.

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In response to the banker's meaningful look at Joaquin, the Californio pointed at the buckskin bag and said without a trace of pathos, "That is all I have."

This statement produced quite an effect on the onlookers, whose sympathies now swung toward the elegant young gentleman. They had taken him at first for a careless youth with enough gold to throw every which way, never needing to worry where the next bag would come from. But without knowing much about him, they had to admire a man who would calmly bet his last eight ounces on a faced down card. He appealed to the gambler in all of them.

The banker dealt two more cards to complete the hand, the jack of spades for himself and the six of diamonds for Joaquin.

Though the group that had gathered around him sympathized with Joaquin, they were not so foolish as to bet with him. The banker was heading for a possible straight flush at best, high card at worst. Joaquin had what amounted to some pieces of cardboard with pretty designs printed on them. They hurried to place their bets on the banker's hand.

With a flourish, the banker turned over his third card, the five of clubs. He had neither a flush nor a straight. He would win with a high card.

Joaquin flipped over his own third card, the ace of hearts.

An impressed gasp rose from the onlookers, many forgetting that they had just lost some of their gold, while Joaquin had won one hundred and thirty dollars.

The banker started to try to cash him out, but Joaquin stopped him. "I'll put my winnings down on the next hand and keep my original eight ounces for luck." He slipped the buckskin bag into an inside pocket of his velvet jacket, and it was not seen again in the casino.

Joaquin won the next hand with a diamond flush, and the one after with three tens. He continued to bet his winnings, doubling them with each hand. A crowd had gathered, some betting with the lucky Californio, some betting against him under the assumption that his luck would soon run out. Others even tried to sway him to the side of caution, telling him to hold back some of his winnings.

By the fourth hand, Joaquin had won more than five hundred dollars. The banker gave him a pleading look, but Joaquin simply motioned to the empty spot on the blue tablecloth in front of him. The banker dealt two cards faced down. He had lost all of his former bravado in calling for bets, instead asking Joaquin in a choking voice, "How much?"

"All of it."

The banker hesitated and looked around as if for guidance.

"Can the bank cover it?" Joaquin asked in a condescending tone.

The banker, suddenly embarrassed by his hesitation, answered,

*"Oui, monsieur."* After another moment of mental calculation, he added, "For now, that is."

He dealt two cards. This time it was Joaquin who got the king of spades and the banker who got an ace. The banker fought off a supercilious smile that threatened his professional demeanor.

The banker lost a little of his confidence with the next two cards: the eight of hearts for himself and the queen of spades for Joaquin. "It can't be," he murmured.

But it was. When the cards were turned over, Joaquin was holding the jack of spades, and the dealer's last card was, of course, inconsequential.

Those who had hoped to see the Californio break the bank were sorely disappointed, for the angel that watched over Joaquin whispered in his ear that it was time to stop. He stood up abruptly and said to the banker, who still stared at the cards, "I'll take my winnings now. I hear this hotel serves a fine roasted pig. Which way to the dining room?"

The other men gathered around Joaquin like jolly minions, hoping that his luck or savvy would rub off on them. He rebuffed their advances and went to have his dinner alone. Later, he took a room in the hotel and lived there in style for a full month. Some nights he would appear in the casino, causing a sensation, for he was now well-known in Coloma. He always won more than he lost, staying ahead enough to continue to pay his bills for the exorbitant food and lodging.

Alone at night in his room on the second floor, Joaquin occasionally amused himself by carefully emptying the bags of gold dust and nuggets onto the dresser. When he really needed a laugh, he would take out the buckskin bag that he had carried into the hotel that night, the one that served as his first bet. He would turn it upside down near his gold pile (but not so close as to let it get mixed up with the precious metal) and watch the little pile of sand and duck shot form on the oak dresser top.