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EDITORS' PREFACE

The Mexican mountains that form the setting for *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* are a mighty link in the great barrier range that stretches down the length of the Western Hemisphere from Alaska to Patagonia. For many years they divided Mexico into three isolated regions. Until the time of the airplane, the men of the *Altiplano,* the high central plateau between the two arms of the range, lived in almost complete separation from their brothers on the tropical coasts.

The name "Sierra Madre" means "Mother Mountains," but there is very little about them that suggests maternal tenderness. They are stony, snow-crowned and forbidding. Nevertheless, the Sierra Madre have always held out a lure to certain adventurous men. Within their rocky exterior lies a glittering underworld of precious minerals: iron, lead, copper, tungsten and, above all, silver and gold.

There was a time when the Sierra Madre comprised the world's principal sources of gold; the range is still the greatest supplier of silver to the world. Over the years, the treasure of the Sierra Madre has adorned the palaces of Aztec emperors, enriched the kings and bishops of Spain, made millionaires out of paupers, and murderers and

thieves out of honest men. Much good, and even greatness, has been smelted from the riches.

Don José de la Borda, a French-born mining engineer of the 18th Century, made a fortune from the silver mines of Taxco. He passed his prosperity on to the Indian miners of the region, thereby reviving the delicate crafts of their silversmith ancestors and enabling them to erect, in gratitude to God, the most beautiful cathedral in the world in the Spanish baroque style known as Churrigueresque. But for every Borda, there were a dozen selfish, venal men who were willing to commit any crime to get their fingers on the treasure of the Sierra Madre. The peaks and the deep barrancas and the trails through the mountains are studded with rude crosses, silent witnesses to the sin of greed. In every man there is a touch of Midas, if not a Midas touch; the scent of gold is the most corrupting odor that exists.

It is the theme of greed and gold that dominates the story of B. Traven's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,* a story of the inexorable moral disintegration of three men infected by the lust for easy riches. It is a book with certain small quirks, its dialogue sometimes stilted, its author's philosophy—antibourgeois, anticlerical, antibureaucratic—slanted and narrow. But the novel overcomes these tendencies; B. Traven is too good a writer to be sidetracked by idiosyncracies. The characterizations of the three men and the skillful depiction of the mounting tension among them are the work of a major writer.

So are the descriptions of the country. In setting his scene in Mexico, Traven ventured into a tanglewood that has tripped many another author. Mexico is a land that haunts and beguiles the traveler, yet its charm is elusive,

and only a few writers have succeeded in capturing it. Madame Calderón de la Barca, Scottish-American wife of the Spanish Ambassador to Mexico, managed it brilliantly in the early days of the republic, and her classic memoir, *Life in Mexico,* is just as vividly right and as pertinent today as it was a century ago. In novels, the American Malcolm Lowry and the Englishman D. H. Lawrence caught some of the essence of Mexico; so, in a travel book, did Sybille Bedford. And so, too, does Traven. When Traven describes an Indian village, or a Tampico oilfield, or a waterfront plaza with the arcades and the sidewalk coffee drinkers and the flies and the pigeons, the reader is there with him, breathing the air, smelling the odors, watching the passing show. As a descriptive narrative, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is in a small, select company.

The reason, perhaps, is that no outsider knows Mexico better than the mysterious B. Traven. For years the true identity of this man was a puzzle that tantalized the literary world. A few facts were known: He was a recluse who lived in Acapulco, where he operated a small restaurant for a while; he had published a half-dozen books, some of them bestsellers, with total sales in excess of three million copies. Traven wrote in English, but his first book, *Land of Spring,* a nonfictional account of a trip among the primitive Indians of Chiapas, was first printed in German, and the impression spread that he was a German exile. His far-left political philosophy, apparent in all of his books, led many readers to conclude that Traven must be a Communist; from there it was just a short step to the conclusion that he was a Communist refugee from Hitler's Germany, living in remote anonymity in fear of his life.

When this supposition proved false—it turned out that Traven had arrived in Mexico years before the rise of the Nazis—the literary sleuths seized on another easy solution to the mystery. Traven's royalty checks were collected by a pretty blond Mexican girl; could she actually *be* Traven? The lady, Señorita Esperanza López Mateos, soon disabused the theorists. She was merely Traven's local agent and Spanish translator. Later, Esperanza's brother Adolfo was elected President of Mexico, and the Traven-seekers announced that *he* must be Traven. But alas, both the President and his sister were much too young to have been writing books in the 1920s.

Then in 1948 John Huston made his memorable film of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,* and a small, quiet man who identified himself as Hal Croves, Traven's agent, was hired as a technical advisor. Huston quickly became convinced that Croves was Traven. He was probably right, although Croves indignantly denied it. In the years that followed, the trail became further obscured. In Yugoslavia, one Martin Traven solemnly identified the mystery man as his brother Branke. Some said Traven was Ambrose Bierce, who had disappeared in Mexico in 1913 at the age of 71. One school held that Traven was actually half a dozen people, including Señorita López Mateos, who were engaged in an exercise in group fiction.

At last a resourceful young Mexican reporter decided to put all the rumors to rest. After four years of investigation he tracked Traven down, dug up his American passport and other documents, and proved beyond all reasonable doubt that he was Berick Traven Torsvan, a native of Chicago, the son of Norwegian immigrants. Torsvan had moved to Mexico as a young man and had worked in

the oilfields and at various other odd jobs, traveling all over the republic. For obscure reasons of his own, in the 1930s, he retreated to Acapulco and anonymity to write his stories.

Traven's novels have had a steady success in Europe and Latin America. But not until 1935, when *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* first appeared in English, did he find an audience in the United States. With his other novels—*The Death Ship, The Bridge in the Jungle* and *The Rebellion of the Hanged*—he has had a moderate success in his homeland, but his themes have recently veered more and more toward the quagmire of doctrinaire Communism and less and less to the *cordillera* of high adventure and descriptive reporting that gave life to his earlier works. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is not only Traven's best-known book; it is certainly his best.

—The Editors of Time

THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE

1

The bench on which Dobbs was sitting was not so good. One of the slats was broken; the one next to it was bent so that to have to sit on it was a sort of punishment. If Dobbs deserved punishment, or if this punishment was being inflicted upon him unjustly, as most punishments are, such a thought did not enter his head at this moment. He would have noticed that he was sitting uncomfortably only if somebody had asked him if he was comfortable. Nobody, of course, bothered to question him.

Dobbs was too much occupied with other thoughts to take any account of how he was sitting. Just then he was looking for a solution to that age-old problem which makes so many people forget all other thoughts and things. He worked his mind to answer the question: How can I get some money right now?

If you already have some money, then it is easier to make more, because you can invest the little you have in some sort of business that looks promising. Without a cent to call yours, it is difficult to make any money at all.

Dobbs had nothing. In fact, he had less than nothing, for even his clothes were neither good nor complete. Good clothes may sometimes be considered a modest fund to begin some enterprise with.

Anyone who is willing to work and is serious about it will certainly find a job. Only you must not go to the man who tells you this, for he has no job to offer and doesn't know anyone who knows of a vacancy. This is exactly the reason why he gives you such generous advice, out of brotherly love, and to demonstrate how little he knows the world.

Dobbs would have carried heavy stones in a wheelbarrow ten hours a day if someone had offered him the job, but even had the job been open, he would have been the last to land it, because there already would be hundreds waiting and the natives of the country come first and a foreigner afterwards, if ever.

He shot a look at the bootblack on the plaza to see how his business was going. This bootblack owned a high iron stand with one seat. It looked rather swell, though there was no customer sitting on the comfortable seat. Competition was strong in this business, too. A dozen or more youngsters who couldn't afford to own stands were running like weasels about the plaza looking for customers. Whenever they caught one whose shoes were not perfectly polished, they were after him until, to get rid of them, he gave in and had his shoes polished once more. Usually two of these agile boys went about the job, each taking one of the customer's shoes and then dividing the pay. These boys carried small boxes with them, and a little bench, hardly bigger than a hand, to sit on while they worked. Such an outfit, Dobbs calculated, might cost three pesos. So, compared with Dobbs, they were capitalists, they had money invested. Anyway, seeing them chasing customers

the way they did was proof enough that living was not so easy.

Even if Dobbs had had three pesos to buy the outfit, bootblacking was out, for he could not be a bootblack here among the natives. No white has ever tried to run around here shouting: "Shine, mister?" He would rather die. A white may sit on a bench on the plaza in rags, three-fourths starved; he may beg and humiliate himself before another white; he may even commit burglary or other crimes; for that the other whites will not loathe him; he will still be considered one of them. But should he happen to shine shoes in the street, or beg from a native anything but water, or carry around iced lemonade in buckets for sale by the glass, then he would sink below the lowest native and would die from starvation. No white would ever again give him a job, and the natives would consider him the most undesirable competitor. Native boys would kick his buckets and spill the lemonade, and should he find a pair of shoes to shine, all the native bootblacks would surround him and pester him with practical jokes and filthy language, so that the customer would leave before his shine was finished.

A man dressed in white strolled up to the bootblack's stand and sat down. The bootblack got busy on the tan shoes before him.

Dobbs rose from his bench, walked slowly over to the stand, and said a few words to the man in white, who, hardly looking up, put his hand in his pocket, brought out a peso, and handed it to Dobbs.

For a moment Dobbs stood bewildered, not trusting his

eyes. Then he walked back to his bench. He had not counted on anything, or at least not on more than ten centavos. He caressed the peso in his pocket. What should he do with this treasure? One dinner and one supper? Or two dinners? Or ten packages of cigarettes Artistas? Or five cups of coffee, each with a roll, or what they called here "pan francés"?

After some heavy thinking he left the bench and walked down a few blocks to the Hotel Oso Negro, the Black Bear Hotel.

TWO

The Hotel Oso Negro would not have been much of a hotel back home. Even here, in the republic, where good hotels are rare, it would not be classed among the decent ones. Just a kind of a cheap lodging-house, it was.

The boom was at its peak, so good hotels were expensive. As the boom had come a thousand times quicker than good hotels could be built, there were few worthy of the name, and the owners of these could ask anywhere from ten to fifty dollars for a shabby room with a simple cot, a squeaking chair, and a shattered table as the entire furnishings. All a guest could hope for was that the cot would be well covered by a tight mosquito-netting and that the hotel could offer cold showers any time of the day or night.

On the ground floor of the Hotel Oso Negro at the left there was a store, run by an Arab, which carried shoes, boots, shirts, soap, perfumes, ladies' underwear, and all kinds of musical instruments. To the right there was an-

other which had for sale deck-chairs, elaborate brass beds, mattresses, cameras, guns, rifles, ammunition, books on finding and drilling for oil, tennis-rackets, watches, American papers and magazines, automobile parts, and flashlights. The owner of this store was a Mexican who spoke English fairly well and who advertised this fact all over the window.

Between these two stores a long corridor led into the patio of the hotel. This corridor could be shut off from the street by a very heavy door, which was kept open day and night.

On the upper floor of the building there were four rooms looking toward the street and four rooms looking into the patio. One could hardly picture poorer hotel rooms than these, yet none could be had for less than twelve dollars for the night—without bath, of course. The hotel had only two shower-baths with cold water. Hot water was unknown. The two cold showers had to serve for all guests of the hotel. Often there was no water at all for the showers, as the water-supply was limited, most of it being bought from street venders who carried it in five-gallon gasoline-cans on the backs of burros.

Only two outside and two inside rooms on the second floor were rented to guests; the other four rooms were occupied by the owner of the hotel and his family. The owner, a Spaniard, was practically never seen; he left all work and the care of his business to his employees.

The real business of the hotel did not come from these rooms, which stood empty often for weeks, since the price, despite the boom, was considered robbery on account of

the fact that the guests could not stand the bedbugs for more than two hours and then had to go to another place for the rest of the night. The owner did not lower the price, and only occasionally did he do something about the bugs. After his warfare on them ninety out of a hundred felt happier than before.

The bulk of the business for the hotel came from the patio, where the patrons did not care about bedbugs or furniture and where the only thing that counted was the price of a cot.

The whole patio was surrounded by shacks made of boards of the cheapest sort, which were weather-beaten, cracked, and rotten. The roofs were partly corrugated sheet-iron, partly roofing paper, all leaky. Most of the doors were hanging on only one hinge, and none could be closed firmly. There could be no privacy in any of these shacks. Above each door a figure was written in black paint so that each shack could be identified.

Inside of these shacks cots were set up closer than in a field hospital during the war, damn it. On each cot a label was nailed telling its number. Every cot had two bedsheets, supposed to be white, clean, and without holes. Supposed to be. Then there was to every cot a thin blanket. Hardly one blanket could be found with more square inches of goods than square inches of holes. As the blankets were all of a dark color, it could not be seen whether they had been washed once since they had left the factory. A small, hard pillow was on every cot—hard like a chunk of wood.

All light and air entered by the doors and by the many

cracks in the boards. Nevertheless the air in these rooms was always thick, smelling none too good. The wooden floor was broken through almost everywhere, and right beneath was earth, sometimes muddy, sometimes dry, but always infested with rats, scorpions, little venomous black spiders, and centipedes.

The patio was closed in by buildings on all sides, so there was no ventilation of any kind, and the sun, even when directly above the patio, could not penetrate. The privies were only slightly better than those in the trenches, damn them.

To this unpleasant atmosphere was added the thick smoke from a fire which burned in the middle of the patio all day long and until late into the night. For fuel anything under heaven that might burn was used, including old shoes and dried dung. Over this fire a Chinaman boiled his laundry in old gas-cans. He had rented a small extra shack, set up in the farthest corner of the patio, where, together with four compatriots, he ran his laundry. This, under the conditions of the boom, paid a high profit, from which the hotel-owner collected a certain cut.

The hall of the hotel, serving as the lobby, was identical with the corridor leading from the street to the patio. At the left, just before entering the patio, the manager had his office. He conducted his business through a small window in the corridor. Another window allowed him to watch all that was going on in the patio and to see that no guest took a better cot than he had paid for.

The greater part of his office was occupied by huge shelves on which, behind chicken-wire, in compartments,

trunks, boxes, bags, suitcases, packages, and sacks were piled up to the ceiling. In another small room behind the office, and connected by a door never closed, there were still more shelves, all filled with guests' belongings. No guest took the risk of having his bags or boxes or trunks in the sleeping-quarters.

Here on these shelves, well guarded by the clerk, were kept belongings not only of guests, but of patrons who had not had money to pay for their lodging more than one night, and who after that one night had slept on benches or in some nook near the docks or under trees on the river-banks, where no manager asked for payments, but where it sometimes happened that they were murdered for the thirty centavos in their possession.

Having paid at least for one night, a guest considered it his right to leave his belongings in the care of the hotel. If he needed a shirt or a pair of pants or whatever it might be, he came to the hotel, asked for his bag or package, took out what he needed, and returned the bag to the care of the manager. The manager could never tell whether the man was still a guest or not, and he was too polite or too indifferent to ask. There came a day when the man needed badly a quick change of climate for some reason or other. He had no money for train or for boat, so he had to rely on the means of transportation given him free of charge when he was born. Walking, he could not carry his bag or trunk—not here in the tropics, where there is no hitch-hiking. Today he is perhaps in Brazil, or in the Argentine, or in Hongkong, or his bones are bleaching in the sun somewhere near Venezuela or Ecuador. Who the devil

cares? Perhaps slain, or dead of thirst, or eaten by a tiger, or bitten by a snake. His bag, regardless of what has happened to its owner, is still well taken care of by the hotel.

There came a day when the shelves could no longer hold all the bags, boxes, sacks, and grips of former guests, and there was not an inch of space left for the bags of newcomers. The owner of the hotel then ordered a general cleaning out.

Checks had never been given; such a luxury was not expected in this hotel. Some bags bore a label with the name of the owner. Others carried labels of the express companies, or a ship, or a hotel in Spain or Morocco, or Peru, by which its owner recognized it. Other bags had the name of the guest written on them in chalk or in pencil. It often happened that the owner could not get his package, which he recognized by its appearance, because he had forgotten the name he had given when he had handed his bag to the manager, having in the meantime changed his name several times for the sake of convenience.

From many suitcases and boxes the labels had dropped off or been torn off, or, if they were greasy, eaten by rats. Names written in chalk or pencil had disappeared. Often the clerk had forgotten to ask for the name of the owner, or the man had come in drunk and unable to remember his name. The clerk then wrote on the bag only the number of the cot which had been assigned to the guest, who, of course, forgot this number at once, if he ever knew it.

It was difficult to say how long certain things had been stored. The manager or the hotel-owner estimated the number of months things had been kept by the thickness