

Boothby Guy

# In Strange Company: A Story of Chili and the Southern Seas



Guy Boothby

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# **Boothby Guy**

## **In Strange Company: A Story of Chili and the Southern Seas**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **IN WHICH IS SET FORTH HOW THE BOOK CAME TO BE WRITTEN**

First and foremost it should be stated how I, Luke Sanctuary, came to be connected with this most extraordinary and, to say the least of it, mysterious business. For my own part, I do not doubt but that when you have read a few pages you will have come to the conclusion that, personally, I had no share in its actual making, for I am a man of peaceful disposition, as much unaccustomed as I am unfitted to bear a hand in such adventurous concerns; and what is perhaps more to the point, one who has never been out of England in the whole course of his existence.

This preliminary having been set forth, and your mind disabused of any false impression, I am brought to the plain matter at issue, namely, the reason of, the facts which led to, and the people who induced my taking up the writing of this book. And as this again – for it seems I am not permitted to escape it – necessitates the narration of more concerning myself, let me, if I can be nothing else, be brief.

To begin with, my name is Luke Sanctuary; I am a bachelor; a man of regular and studious habits; the possessor of what is vaguely termed a comfortable income; and, as the result of such an income, a house, my friends tell me, of considerable attractions, situated in that Garden of all England, the Isle of Wight.

And truly enough it is, if the two terms be not synonymous, both a comfortable and pleasant home; for while I have endeavoured to make its internal accommodation what I imagine a dwelling-house in these enlightened days should be, its external advantages have not been unconsidered. From my windows, looking towards the north, I can command one of the most beautiful and extensive views along the whole length of the English coast; while straight before me, and as far as the eye can reach to right and left, stretches Spithead, glittering, as I write, a bright sapphire blue, in the warm sunshine of this September morning. Across its placid surface may be seen the forts and mast forest of Portsmouth, with Gosport on the near, and Southsea dim and distant on the far side; to all of which the hills of Portsdown form an effective background.

Of shipping there is no lack: a cruiser of the latest pattern, newly commissioned, lies at anchor immediately before me; a deep sea cable-steamer is in the act of entering the harbour; while torpedo-boats, ferry-steamers, colliers, mud-dredgers, yachts, and such-like small craft pass to and fro continually, as if for my peculiar and individual benefit.

It is a picture of which I never grow weary, and indeed I sometimes feel, were its attractions not so irresistible, my book, 'The First Fruits of the Renaissance,' upon which I have been engaged these eight years past, and which is as yet only in its fifty-second chapter, would long ago have been in print, delighting an appreciative public, or, what is more likely, cumbering the shelves of our second-hand dealers. And surely – for I am in the humour for philosophical reflection – no better view, or one more suited to the opening of this strange story, could possibly be chosen than Spithead on this pleasant autumn morning.

But it is easier, I find, to talk of beginning than actually to begin, for twice I have dipped my pen in the ink, and twice I have pulled my virgin foolscap towards me, but somehow I have not yet managed to commence. Now, however, I will sound the bugles and open the attack.

But it is of no use! Fate, in the form of a heavy footstep, is on the stairs, and a masculine voice is calling, "Cousin Luke, Cousin Luke, where on earth have you stowed yourself away?"

The voice is the voice of my sailor cousin by marriage, John Ramsay, who, with his bride, has been my guest this fortnight past. His bellow has something of the resonance of a fog-horn, and, partly for the safety of my roof and partly to gratify my own curiosity, I am induced to acquaint him of my whereabouts. Thereupon he rushes impulsively in, for he will never be aught but a boy in his manners, his face aglow with excitement, and brandishing a sheet of note-paper in his hand.

"Vast working, Cousin Luke," he cries, scattering my MSS. with the violence of his inrush; "pipe all hands, for here it is, just arrived by post from Sir Benjamin!"

"What is here?" I ask, looking up into his handsome sunburnt face with a smile. "What has Sir Benjamin been kind enough to send me? A brace of partridges perhaps, or –"

"A brace of horse-marines!" is the prompt reply, and thereupon my manuscripts are unceremoniously swept off the table, to make room for the sheet of note-paper I have mentioned above.

"Now, Cousin Luke, I'll have to trouble you for the loan of your best attention," he says, "for here is the mysterious letter of which I told you last night; here is the bit of paper which has caused four people to play hide-and-seek all round the world, occasioned the death of two, and done its best to kill half-a-dozen others. Oh! my dear departed grandmother, just fancy that innocent little slip of cream-laid having once been worth a couple of hundred thousand pounds!"

I am supposed to know intuitively to what he refers, for he waves his hand with a commanding gesture, forces me back into my seat, and then, smoothing the letter out, bids me read it aloud for his and my own information. This is what I read, and as upon it depends the whole point of this book, I beg that you will give it your best attention.

*"Valparaiso, Chili,  
"8th August, 1891.*

"To Sir Benjamin Plowden, Knt., etc., etc.,  
"East India Avenue, London.

"My worthy and respected Uncle Benjamin,

"I beg you will not suppose for an instant that I am unable to imagine with what apprehension and surprise you will receive this letter from one so unworthy as your nephew, written from such a place, and dated at such a serious time. And yet, both the place and the serious time are part and parcel of the reason which induces the communication.

"To lay my business properly before you, it is necessary that I should carry your memory back, let us say fifteen years, when, after a certain episode which it would become neither of us to recall, you were good enough to show me the front door of England, and the back entrance to the outside world, at the same time enriching me with much good advice, two trenchant sayings from the works of that priggish person Solomon, and last, but by no means least, Five Hundred Pounds sterling.

"Reflecting that all countries present equal possibilities to the possessor of five hundred pounds in hard cash, I came out here, with the result, that by ceaseless energy and thrift (of the possession of which latter virtue you have hitherto scarcely believed me capable) I have added to the five hundred pounds you advanced me, four hundred similar amounts.

"In other words, my revered relative, my adventures have prospered beyond my wildest expectations. My silver mines have achieved wonders. As for my Haciendas, by which name these ignorant foreigners denominate such farms as those of which I know you, my uncle, to be the possessor, I managed to dispose of them, prior to this unfortunate Revolution, for considerably more than twice their real value. Therefore, to all intents and purposes, I may be considered what you, in your absurd City jargon, would term a decidedly *warm* or rich man. So much by way of introduction.

"Now though I am, both by instinct and training, distrustful and suspicious, yet, strangely enough, I am about to forswear my principles so far as to repose in you, my father's brother, being perfectly assured of your probity and honour, such confidence as one man seldom places in another. In other words, having in my mind the perilous times now upon this unhappy country, I am remitting to your charge by the good ship *Culloden*, advised as leaving here on Thursday of next week, the entire amount of my fortune, amounting to *Two Hundred Thousand Pounds of English money, in specie*, securely packed in accordance with the steam-ship company's regulations, and addressed to you in London. The bill of lading accompanies this present letter, which will be conveyed to and posted in London by Captain Porson of H.M.S. *Chanticleer*, leaving Valparaiso to-morrow morning.

"That this extraordinary trust will occasion you some little surprise I do not doubt, but from what I know of your character, I feel certain that not only will you accept the charge, but that you will guard my interests as you would your own.

"Were it not that I consider it my duty to remain in this country until these troubles are overpast, I should certainly come home to guard my fortune personally. But such a thing being, for the present, impossible, I have, I believe, by placing it in your hands, done both what is wisest and best to secure its safety.

"One earnest piece of advice I would entreat you to remember. For the reason that I am successful, I have made many enemies here, who would not scruple to employ any means, however base, to bring about my ruin. I beg and implore, therefore, that you will pay no attention whatsoever to any person, male or female, who may approach you in my name, either by letter or otherwise, with the following exception.

"Should it be necessary for me to communicate with you, either personally or by messenger, you will do nothing, listen to no proposals, or even hint that you know anything of my existence or my fortune, until you have in your hand the following authority.

"Having carefully considered the matter in all its bearings, I have arrived at the conclusion that there is only one thing absolutely and wholly unforgeable and unmatchable within my reach, and that is, *the tear in an ordinary sheet of paper*.

"To apply this knowledge to my own purposes, I have obtained from a certain source a sample of quite unknown note-paper, and torn it in half in a peculiar manner. One portion I send to you herewith; the other I shall retain in my own keeping, until I desire to communicate with you. It is obviously impossible – no one having seen this paper in my possession – that any third party could so tear another as to match, fibre for fibre, the piece you hold, even could they obtain a similar description of paper, which I happen to know is out of the question.

"This being so, any person bringing to you a sample of the same water-mark, of the same texture, and, more important still, torn in such a manner as to exactly fit the piece you hold, must either have stolen it from me (which I can confidently

promise shall not happen), or be my *bonâ-fide* agent. I beg therefore that you will pay to him whatsoever sum, up to the entire amount, he shall ask of you. *But remember, on no consideration shall you pay even so much as one half-penny to any person whomsoever, even one representing himself to be your unworthy nephew, until this duplicate is in your possession.*

"For reasons which would not have the slightest interest for you, I am compelled to act in this mysterious fashion; and such is my absolute trust and confidence in your honour and integrity, that I go so far as to freely absolve you beforehand from any blame whatsoever, should the precautions I have enumerated here miscarry.

"Believe me, such warnings are not idle; attempts will certainly be made to obtain the money, and after careful consideration, I think I have hit upon the only safe way to guard myself against any such conspiracies.

"If by any chance no word shall reach you from me within the space of twenty-one years, day for day from this 8th of August, you may regard it as complete evidence of my death, and in that case I bequeath to your children, should you at that time have any living, or failing them to such members of my father's family as may then be alive, the entire amount of my fortune, with all interests and accumulations which may have become added thereto.

*"I am, my uncle,*

*"Your obliged and obedient nephew,*

*"Marmaduke Plowden."*

When I reached the signature, Ramsay, who had been listening with unabating interest, hit me a heavy thwack upon the shoulder, at the same time crying enthusiastically —

"There, my learned cousin, what is your opinion of that precious document?"

"I think," said I, with a gravity befitting such an important decision, "that it is the letter of a very unscrupulous, and I should say at the time he wrote it, very frightened, man."

"My idea exactly," Ramsay replied. "It is interesting to note how his impudence dies out as his letter progresses, and how its place is usurped by a good wholesome fear. One thing more, do you honestly believe that that vast sum of money, £200,000, came from the respectable sources to which he alludes — silver mines and farm properties, and such-like; all accumulated by his own thrift and industry?"

"How can I tell? But from what I know of the man, I should be rather inclined to guess —*not!*"

"Very good. And now, as we're agreed upon that point, let me ask you what recollections, if any, you have of this peculiar relative of yours? — for relative he certainly is."

"Of Marmaduke Plowden?"

"Exactly; *in Chili known as Marcos Veneda*. Surely you must have seen him often when he was a boy?"

"Not often, Jack — half-a-dozen times at most; certainly not more. He lived on the other side of the kingdom, you must remember; and then again, he was not the sort of youth of whom one would be anxious to see very much."

"What was he like?"

I hesitated before replying. The truth was, it was an awkward question, for upon the last occasion of my seeing him, he was sitting in the office of my kinsman, the Sir Benjamin Plowden before referred to, looking very frightened and miserable, and wondering how a certain interview which was being conducted in an adjoining room would end; that is, whether it would result in his being sent to gaol or abroad. As may be imagined, under these circumstances, he did not look his best. But then that was well-nigh twenty years ago.

So absorbed was I in recalling these recollections, that I had quite forgotten my companion's question. He brought me back to my senses with a start.

"Come, come, Cousin Luke, no day-dreams, if you please; you haven't answered my question yet."

"Well, Jack, as a young man, perhaps I cannot give you any better description of him than to say that he was, without doubt, the handsomest, and at the same time the most untrustworthy being, with whom I had ever come into contact. As old Darby, our coachman in those days, once put it, 'Young Master Marmaduke's as 'andsome as paint, but lor, there, it's all on top, like bad coach varnish!' In fact, there was something about the lad's good looks that repelled rather than attracted one."

"How do you mean – a sort of fierceness?"

"No; a something that was rather crafty than fierce, a something that betrayed cruelty as well as cunning. As a school-boy there was nobody more admired for his beauty or more despised for his moral character."

"Was he a plucky boy?"

"To an extraordinary degree, I believe, as far as personal bravery went; but somehow he was always at daggers drawn, not with his school-fellows alone, but with everybody with whom he came into contact."

"And when he left school?"

"As far as I remember he went first into some office in a country town, where he remained for a year; then Sir Benjamin took him in hand, and got him a situation in a large banking institution in London."

"And after that?"

"Commenced his downfall; he fell in with a low set, became a frequenter of second-rate race-courses, an admirer of ballet-girls and objectionable barmaids; finally, is said to have forged his benefactor's name, and to have come within an ace of standing in a felon's dock."

"A nice character truly! And Sir Benjamin honoured the signature?"

"For the sake of the lad's mother. And then it was, I suppose, that he gave him the £500 referred to in that letter, and shipped him out of England."

"And, as far as you know, he was never heard of again, until his letter and the £200,000 arrived?"

"Not to my knowledge; in fact, until you recalled it, I had almost forgotten his existence."

"Very well then. Now you'll just come for a walk with me, and, as we go, I'll tell you something of Marmaduke Plowden's – otherwise Marcos Veneda's – wonderful career, from the day he left England till I made his acquaintance, under such peculiar circumstances, six months ago. Then you shall take pens, paper, and ink, and write the first half of it. I'll do the last, and together we'll make it into a book for the information of the world. Here's a case full of first-class cigars; it's a perfect day for a tramp; so get your things and come along."

Resistance being useless, I collected hat and stick and went, and the result of that walk is the story – strange enough, goodness knows – which I now place before you.

## PART I

### CHAPTER I

#### SHOWING WHERE THE MONEY REALLY CAME FROM

So far we have seen, that shifty Marmaduke Plowden, in Chili known as Marcos Veneda, despatched to the care of his uncle, Sir Benjamin Plowden, of the East India Avenue, London, £200,000 in English gold, with the request that that gentleman would keep it for him until he could come home to look after it himself.

Now, to properly understand our story, we must hark back to the very beginning of things, and endeavour to discover where such an enormous fortune came from in the first instance; for the statement of its owner that he derived it from his silver mines and Hacienda properties is not worthy of a moment's credence. There is only one person who can elucidate the mystery for us, and his extraordinary adventures we must now proceed to consider.

You must understand that Michael Bradshaw, of 3 Parkington Terrace, South Kensington, was that sort of superlatively clever person who, after a life of grand *coups*, always comes to grief in some superlatively silly fashion. From the day on which he first entered the service of the Anglo-Kamtchatka Bank, to the evening of the dinner in his honour at the Whitehall Rooms as general manager, his career was one of exceptional brilliance. He it was who hit out the scheme which saved the Bank in the matter of the Bakell-Askern Syndicate; he it was who manipulated the Patagonian Bonds and the Golden Sunset Silver Mining Company to the Bank's ultimate advantage; he it was who – but there, his devices are matters of history, and beyond being corroborative evidences of his cleverness, are of little or no moment to this story. The following notice of the dinner above referred to appeared in the columns of the daily press the next morning, and is worth considering —

"At the Whitehall Rooms, last evening, Mr. Michael Bradshaw, the well-known and universally respected General Manager of the Anglo-Kamtchatka Banking Company, was entertained at dinner by the Directors of that institution, prior to his departure for a brief holiday in the South of France. Covers were laid for a hundred guests, the chair being taken by the Right Honourable Lord Burgoo, Chairman of the Company. In proposing the toast of 'Their Guest,' the noble Chairman eulogized Mr. Bradshaw's services to the Bank, and hoped that the holiday he was about to enjoy would enable him to devote many more years to the advancement of the institution he had served so well. Mr. Bradshaw replied in feeling terms."

After the dinner the manager drove back to his house in Kensington. Though it was well-nigh two o'clock, he did not think of going to bed, but went into his study and lit a cigar. As every one had noticed that evening, he certainly looked as if he needed a holiday; his face was woefully haggard, and his eyes had a peculiar brilliance that spoke, as plainly as any words, of sleepless nights and never-ceasing worry and anxiety.

For a long time he promenaded the room, his hands in his pockets and his face sternly set. Once he smiled sardonically as the recollection of the evening's speeches crossed his mind. Then, throwing himself into a chair before his writing-table, he began to unlock the drawers, and to destroy the papers they contained.

When this task was completed, the sun had been up some time, and a large pile of paper-ash lay inside the grate. He pulled back the curtains, unbarred the shutters, and opened the window, letting in a flood of sunshine. Then, dropping into a comfortable chair beside the fire, he fell asleep.

By eight o'clock he was at Charing Cross, his ticket was taken, and he was bidding good-bye to a large crowd of friends.

Next day, instead of busying himself with the enjoyments of Monte Carlo, as his friends supposed him, he was in reality at Dieppe, anxiously awaiting the arrival of a small brig, the *Florence Annie* of Teignmouth. As soon as she arrived he boarded her, and half-an-hour later, a course being set, she was bowling down Channel, bound for Buenos Ayres. It was peculiar that the captain invariably addressed his passenger as "Mr. Vincent." It was strange also that, for a voyage of such duration, he should have brought with him so small an amount of luggage. In the hold, however, were half-a-dozen barrels inscribed with his name, and labelled "Cement." Now cement, as everyone knows, is a staple article of export from Great Britain to the South American Republics.

A month later, all England was astounded by the news that Michael Bradshaw, the admired and universally respected, was *wanted* by the police on a charge of defrauding the Anglo-Kamtchatka Banking Company of £250,000. But so carefully had his plans been arranged, that not a trace of either the money or his whereabouts could be discovered. Being a cultivated person, he might have replied with Plautus, "*Doli non doli sunt, nisi astu colas.*"

On the arrival of the *Florence Annie* at her destination, Bradshaw, *alias* Vincent, went ashore with his barrels of cement, determining to settle himself down to the study of Argentine life and character, having pleasing knowledge of the fact, that at that time "on no condition was extradition allowed in Buenos Ayres." But careful though he was not to excite attention, before he had been a week in his new abode he began to have suspicions that his secret was discovered. He fought against the idea with all his strength. But the more he struggled, the stronger it grew, till at last, unable to support his anxiety any longer, he determined to cross the Andes into Chili, confident that in the Balmaceda turmoil his identity would never be discovered. A long and agonizing railway journey brought him to Mendoza. There, with prodigious care, he chose his muleteers, packed his barrels of cement, and plunged into the mountains.

At no time is that journey across the Andes one to be lightly undertaken. To Michael Bradshaw it was a nightmare, from which there seemed no awakening. Fear spurred him on behind; vague terrors of the Unknown beckoned him ahead; while treachery menaced him continually on either hand. When at last, more dead than alive, he arrived in Valparaiso, he paid off his team; and leasing an obscure residence in the Calle de San Pedro, prepared himself to wait, guarding his treasure night and day, until the war should be over.

But though he was not aware of it, his arrival in the town was already known, and plans were in active preparation for relieving him of his wealth. His enemies had failed before, they had altered their tactics now. Sooner or later, they must succeed.

One evening Michael Bradshaw sat in the only room he had made habitable, earnestly perusing a Guide to the Spanish language. He had been in Valparaiso nearly a week, and as he never ventured outside his own door, he found his time hang heavily on his hands. I am not quite certain that he had not already begun to regret his felony; not from any conscientious motives perhaps, but because he found himself in an awkward if not dangerous position. You see as far as his own personal feelings went he was still the respectable English banker, therefore to have assassination menacing him continually was a future he had certainly neither mapped out for himself nor was it one he would be likely to understand. He had been obliged to leave the Argentine because he believed his secret had been discovered, and now in Chili he was afraid to go very much abroad lest any of his former enemies might meet and recognize him. He had many regrets, but perhaps the most bitter was the fact that Valparaiso is an extradition port.

Since his arrival he had unpacked his barrels of cement, and with infinite trouble concealed the treasure they so cunningly contained under the floor of his room. This exertion, if it had served no other purpose, had at least afforded him some occupation.

After a while he looked at his watch and found it was growing late. Putting down his book, he was in the act of making up his bed, which, by the way, was not as luxurious as the one to which he had been accustomed in his old house at Kensington, when to his horror he heard stealthy footsteps in the corridor outside his room. Next moment the door opened, and a tall and singularly handsome man entered. He bowed politely, and said in excellent English —

"Mr. Bradshaw, I believe?"

The ex-banker was too terrified to reply.

"I have taken the liberty of calling upon you on a little matter of business. May I sit down?"

Without waiting for permission, he seated himself on the bed. Bradshaw sank back with a groan into his chair.

"You are lately from England, I believe?"

Bradshaw found his voice at last, and said the first thing that came into his head.

"What do you want with me? I cannot see you now; I'm not well."

"I am sorry, but what I have to say admits of no delay. You arrived in Buenos Ayres by the brig *Florence Annie* of Teignmouth — and oh, by the way, what have you done with that £250,000?"

"For mercy's take, tell me what you want with me?"

"All in good time, my friend. You're pretty comfortable here, but your floor needs repairing sadly — it looks as if you've been digging. You must be very dull all alone. Let me tell you a story."

"I don't want to hear it."

"I'm desolated, but you must. The business upon which I desire to consult you depends upon it, so here goes. Once upon a time, as they say in the fairy tales, there was a young man who was turned out of England, accused of a felony which he never committed. He was treated very badly and, being a youth of spirit, resented it. He came to Chili, where he has lived for the past fifteen years. Now, strangely enough, considering it has done everything for him, he detests Chili and the people with whom he has to associate, and he wants to return to England, where everybody hates him. What he would do if he got there I don't know, but he seems to think he might turn over a new leaf, marry, and settle down to a quiet country life. Perhaps he would; perhaps he wouldn't — there's no telling; at any rate, that has been his dream for fifteen years. You ask, and very naturally too, if he's so bitten with the notion, why doesn't he carry it out? And I reply, with an equal pretence to nature, because he can't; the poor fellow has no money. Some people have more than they know what to do with — £250,000 for instance — he has none!"

"Who are you, and what makes you tell me all this? Look here, if you don't leave me, I'll — "

"No, you won't," the stranger said, drawing a revolver from beneath his coat. "I see you've got a Smith and Wesson in that pocket. I'm sorry, but I'll just have to trouble you for it."

Thus menaced, Bradshaw surrendered his pistol, which the other coolly examined, and deposited in his own pocket.

"As I was going to say, and this is where the curious part of my story commences, that young man, who, after all, is not a bad sort of fellow, wants to give up his wild unchristian life out here, and get home to England. Possibly with six thousand a year he might become a credit to his family. It is his only chance in life, remember, and if he doesn't want to go under for ever, he has to make the most of it. Meanwhile he has not been idle. To assist his fortunes, he has joined a certain Society, whose object is the amassing of money, by fair means or foul, and which is perhaps the most powerful organization of its kind in the wide, wide world. Now pay particular attention to what I am about to say.

"News reaches this Society from London (their method of obtaining information, I may tell you, is little short of marvellous) that a certain well-known banker has absconded with £250,000. His destination, though he thinks no one aware of it, is Buenos Ayres. On arrival in that port, he is watched continually, and on two occasions attempts are made to procure his money. By a mischance they fail. Suspecting something of the sort, he crosses the mountains into Valparaiso, and takes a house in the Calle de San Pedro. The Society's spies have followed his movements with undeviating

attention; they shadow him day and night; they even take the houses on either hand of his in order that they may make quite sure of his safety. One night they will descend upon that unfortunate man and – well, I leave you to picture what the result will be!"

Bradshaw said not a word, but he looked as if he were about to have a fit.

"Now, look here, I'm not the sort of man to rob any one without giving him a run for his money. You've had your turn, and you've bungled it. Now I have mine, and I'm going to carry it through. I see my chance to a straight life in the best land under the sun if I can raise the money. You've robbed the fatherless and the widow to get here; why shouldn't I rob you to get there? You can't get out of this house alive, and if you remain in it they'll certainly kill you. There's a man watching you on the right, and just at present I'm supposed to be looking after you on the left. If you doubt me, go out into the street, and take a walk round the block; before you've gone fifty yards you'll find you're being shadowed by a man in a grey poncho. It strikes me you're between the devil and the deep sea. What do you think?"

Bradshaw only groaned feebly. His pluck, if he ever had any, had quite deserted him. His visitor took a pack of cards from his pocket, and threw them on the table.

"Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to sell my friends; in other words, I'm going to do business with you on my own account. It's been done before in the history of the world. We'll have a little gamble. But you must pull yourself together, or you won't be able to look after your own interests. The stakes shall be as follows. If I win, I take the lot, the whole £250,000, or what there is left of it, and find my own way to get it out of the house. If you win, I pledge myself solemnly to assist you to escape with it. You'll have to trust me, because you can't do anything else. Do you understand? Don't make a noise, or I assure you I'll shoot you where you sit. There shall be fair play between us, come what may. Now cut! The highest wins, remember!"

"I can't! I refuse! What right have you to make such a demand?"

"What right had you to betray your trust? Go on. I'll give you half a minute, and if you don't cut then, I solemnly swear I'll blow your brains out!"

"Have you no mercy?"

"Drop that and cut. Ah! you're going to, – that's right. Show!"

Trembling like a leaf, Bradshaw turned up a card.

"*Queen of Hearts!*"

"A splendid cut! My luck will have to be good to beat it. Great Jove, prosper me, you alone know for what a stake I'm playing!"

"*King of Spades!*"

"I'm afraid, Mr. Bradshaw, I've won by a point. I'm sorry it turned up King Death though – doesn't look as if I'm destined to get much good out of it, does it? If I'd lost, I should certainly have shot myself before daybreak; as it is, the money's mine. I suppose you've buried it under the floor here. Bring me a shovel!"

When the shovel was forthcoming, Veneda, for so we will, with your permission, henceforth call Marmaduke Plowden, set to work, and in ten minutes had Bradshaw's treasure unearthed. Having made sure of it, he turned to the unfortunate banker, and said —

"Now, my friend, I should advise you to make yourself particularly scarce. For if they find you here, and the money gone, they'll probably make things unpleasant for you. As for me, I've got to find a way to get this out of the house, and then out of the country. Confound the man, he's fainted."

That Veneda did manage to smuggle the money out of the house without attracting the attention of the watchers on the other side is evident from a letter written the next night (a copy of which we have already seen), and which, we know, left Chili by an English man-of-war. That a case of specie followed it a week later, and duly arrived in London, I have also ascertained by perusal of a certain Steamship Company's books.

It only remained now for Veneda to follow it himself, and this he was making arrangements to do. He was, however, compelled to exercise the greatest caution, for he was quite aware that the Society (whose name had so much frightened Bradshaw), of which he was one of the executive, did not regard him with any extraordinary trust; and to leave the country suddenly by one of the usual routes would, in all probability, result in his being met and knifed on arrival at his destination. This risk he had not the least desire to run.

As for Bradshaw, that unfortunate man, he was indeed in parlous case, so much so, that he dared not venture out lest he might be assassinated, while he dared not remain where he was for fear he might be murdered; he was in fact destitute of everything, even of the consolation of that time-worn maxim, "Virtue is its own reward."

## CHAPTER II

### A STRANGE NIGHT

Just a week, night for night, after the events recorded in the previous chapter, Marcos Veneda was making his way slowly along the Sea-Front, towards a distant portion of the city. The short winter day, made all the shorter by a thick pall of cloud stretched across the sky, was fast drawing to a close. Far out beyond the harbour a faint streak of silver light still lingered, as if loth to say farewell; but nearer the wharves the water lay black and sullen like the mantle of approaching night. In the streets, though the hour still wanted twenty minutes of six, but few people were abroad; for such was the lawless condition of Valparaiso at that time, that walking after nightfall had become not only an unpleasant, but in many districts an exceedingly dangerous undertaking.

But though, after he had proceeded a little way, Marcos Veneda stopped abruptly in his walk and stood for some moments gazing out to sea, there was nothing in his face to show that he was in any way conscious of either the atmospheric effects or the personal danger to which I have just alluded. It might rather have been inferred, from the frown that contracted his forehead and the expression which fixed itself round his mouth, that his thoughts were very far removed from any such minor matters. Certain was it that he was more than a little disturbed in his mind, and it was equally probable that, so far as he saw at present, he was no nearer a solution of his problem than he had been at any time during the previous twenty-four hours. Twice since he had come to a standstill his lips had moved in commencement of a sentence, and twice he had dug his stick impatiently into the ground before him, but the frown did not relax nor the expression change. The truth was he found himself in a very awkward predicament, one which will readily explain itself when I say that he had been summoned to, and was on his way to attend, a council meeting of the Society, to confer *as to the best means of obtaining possession of Bradshaw's treasure*. As he walked he was trying to arrange his course of action, for he was the victim of a natural delicacy, which he knew would prevent him from informing his colleagues of the fact that he had already appropriated and disposed of the money.

Presently, however, he seemed to have decided upon some course, for he pulled himself together, adjusted his hat, which had slipped somewhat out of its usual position, and resumed his walk with the air of a man who had only made up his mind after mature consideration. Just as he did so the clouds opened their store, and a heavy shower descended.

While he is passing along the Front, perhaps we may be excused if we seek to become better acquainted with one in whose company we are destined to travel many thousands of miles.

He is indeed a strange man, this Marcos Veneda, a man of such perplexing mixtures that I doubt very much whether his most intimate friend could, under any circumstances, properly describe him. Gifted by nature with such advantages, both personal and otherwise, as but seldom fall to the share of one man, it seemed the irony of Fate that he should be debarred from deriving the slightest real or lasting benefit from any one of them. Hated with a cordial and undisguised hatred by the Chicanos themselves, and barely tolerated by the English section of the community, he supported an existence in Chili that was as unique as his own individuality was complex and extraordinary. To any one more sensitive such a life would have been unendurable, but Marcos Veneda seemed to derive a positive enjoyment from his social ostracism, and to become more and more satisfied with his lot in life as the gulf which cut him off from his neighbours widened. Among other things, it was characteristic of the man that he treated every one, high and low, alike; he unbent to nobody; but if it could be said that he was more amiably disposed towards one class than another, it was to those who would be the least likely ever to repay his cordiality. How he lived – for he practised no profession, and he certainly served no trade or master – no one knew; he made it a boast that he had never received a remittance from the outside world, and yet he was well known to have no income of his own. On the other hand, though he owed nobody anything, he had always money to spend, while those who had

been privileged to see, reported that he occupied quarters in a semi-fashionable portion of the town that were very far removed from poverty-stricken.

Like most other people in Chili, in the year 1891, he had been drawn into the bitter civil war then proceeding, and he knew, if only on the score of party politics, the next twenty-four hours would decide much for him.

And not to Veneda alone, but to many other unfortunates compelled to remain in Valparaiso that night, was the question which the morrow would determine, of vital moment. The fierce struggle which for the better part of a year had been raging between the forces of the Dictator Balmaceda and those of the Opposition or Congressionalist Party, as they were more usually called, had at length reached such a pitch that it required but one more vigorous battle to find a termination.

From being spread over the land, the two opposing armies were now come face to face. The previous week had proved a deeply exciting one. Events had crowded thick and fast upon each other, beginning with the battle of Colmo; when, after a stubborn, hard-fought engagement, lasting something like five hours, the Opposition had gained a well-earned victory. Balmaceda's army had marched into battle 14,000 strong, and had been obliged to beat a retreat, having lost, besides 1000 men killed and many more than that number wounded, 18 field-guns, and 170 mules laden with stores and ammunition. So signal was the disaster that, on realizing it, no less than 1500 men of the Government forces threw down their arms and fled into the mountains, while twice that number changed their uniforms and went over *holus bolus* to the enemy.

Immediately this crushing news became known to him, Balmaceda reinforced the garrison of Valparaiso with troops from the south, and then, with an army of 8000 men, perched himself on the heights above the city, and prepared to fight the last and decisive battle of the campaign.

In Valparaiso the result of the impending engagement was, as may be imagined, anxiously awaited by every one, *Gobiernistas* and *Oppositores* alike. The former made no secret of their intention, in the event of victory crowning their arms, to wreak vengeance upon their enemies. But the *Oppositores*, on the other hand, though equally sanguine of success, wisely refrained from giving vent to their feelings, for not only were they located in the enemy's camp, so to speak, but they could not help foreseeing that even a victory for their cause would involve them in great risk, inasmuch as the Government troops would undoubtedly fall back upon the town, when they would in all probability commence to sack and burn Opposition property.

Such was the position of affairs on the evening described at the commencement of the chapter.

As I have said, Marcos Veneda appeared to have made up his mind. This might have been gathered from the set of his shoulders and his carriage of his body when he resumed his walk. There was also a new and singularly defiant look in his face as he passed into the Calle de Victoria which had not been there five minutes before.

Half-way down the street he paused to try and decipher a notice newly pasted on a wall. As he read, he became conscious that he was being watched. Looking up, he found himself confronted by one of the most respected English residents then remaining in the town. This gentleman, whose personal appearance would not have been out of place in a London board-room, had always shown himself one of Veneda's most inveterate foes, and for this reason the latter was inclined to cross over the road without a second glance at him. That, however, the elder man would not permit; he advanced and button-holed his victim before he had time to leave the pavement.

"I think you are going in my direction," he began, in order to give Veneda time to recover from his astonishment. "In that case I shall not be trespassing upon your time if I ask you to allow me to walk a little way with you. I have something I want to say to you."

"I object to being button-holed in this fashion," the other replied, an angry flush mantling his face.

"Not when it is to enable you to learn something to your advantage, I think," his companion said quietly. "However, don't let us quarrel, I simply stopped you because I want to do you a good turn. I know very well you dislike me."

"It may be bad policy to say so," Veneda sneered, "but I must own I do not exactly love you; you see, you have never given me an opportunity."

"Well, we won't discuss that now. What I want to say is, that I think in times like these we Englishmen ought to hang a bit closer together, don't you know; to try and help each other in any way we can."

The old gentleman, whose intentions were really most benevolent, gazed anxiously at his companion, to see how his speech would be taken. But Veneda's only answer was to laugh in a peculiarly grating fashion. It was an unpleasant performance, born of the remembrance of snubs and bitter discouragements received at the other's hands in by-gone days. For the space of thirty seconds neither spoke, and then it was the younger man, who said abruptly —

"Well?"

"You don't mind my going on?"

"I certainly should if I could prevent it," replied Veneda; "but you've got me at a disadvantage, you see. I must listen to you."

"Well, the long and the short of it is, I want to warn you."

"That's exceedingly good of you; and pray what of?"

"Of yourself. It is — forgive my saying so — an openly discussed subject in the town that you are playing a double game."

Veneda stopped suddenly, and leaning his back against a wall, faced his companion.

"A double game," he said slowly, as if weighing every word before he allowed himself to utter it; "and in what way is it supposed that I am playing a double game? Think carefully before you speak, for I may be compelled to hold you responsible."

The worthy merchant experienced a sensation of nervousness. His memory recalled several little episodes in Veneda's past, the remembrance of which, under the present circumstances, was not likely to contribute to his peace of mind.

"Now don't get angry, my dear fellow," he hastened to say, "I'm only telling you this for your own good. I mean that it is said you are endeavouring to stand with a leg in either camp; that while you pose among us as an active Oppositionist, you are in reality in communication with Balmaceda's leaders. In other words, that, while we have been trusting you, you have been selling our secrets to our foes."

"Well?"

Now it was a remarkable fact, that while the old gentleman expected and even dreaded an exhibition of wrath from his companion, he was in reality a good deal more frightened by this simple question than he would have been by the most violent outburst. And yet there was nothing startling in the word itself, nor in the manner in which it was uttered. Veneda still lounged in the same careless attitude against the wall, looking his companion up and down out of his half-closed eyes, as if to cause him any uneasiness would be the one thing furthest from his mind; but it was noticeable that his right hand had stopped fingering the trinkets on his watch-chain, and had passed into his coat-pocket, where a certain bulginess proclaimed the existence of a heavy object.

"Go on," he continued slowly, "since you seem to be so well informed; what else do my kind friends say?"

"Well, if you want it bluntly, Veneda, they say that if our side wins to-morrow, of which there seems to be little or no doubt, and you remain in the city, your life won't be worth five minutes' purchase."

"And — and your reason for telling me all this?"

"Simply because I want to warn you. And because, in spite of your Spanish name, which every one knows is assumed, you are an Englishman; and, as I said before, Englishmen ought to do what they can to help each other at such times as these. You don't think I've said too much?"

"By no means. I hope you'll understand how grateful I am to you for your trouble."

"No trouble; I only wish the warning may prove of some use to you. Look here, we haven't been very good friends in the past, but I do hope – "

"That in the future we may be David and Jonathan on a substantial New Jerusalem basis, I suppose. Do you hear those guns?"

The noise of cannonading came down the breeze. And as he heard it the merchant shuffled uneasily.

"What does it mean?"

"Well, I think it means that to-morrow will decide things more important than our friendship. That's all. You're not coming any farther my way? Then good-night!"

With a muttered apology for having so long detained him, the old gentleman continued his walk to the left hand. When he had quite disappeared, Veneda resumed *his* walk, saying softly to himself, "This is what comes of listening to the voice of woman. I was an idiot ever to have mixed myself up with Juanita. I might have known she would have given me away. Never mind, the money's gone to England, and if I can manage to stave Macklin off to-night, and Boulger comes to terms about his schooner, I shall beat them yet. But suppose Juanita *should* suspect? What on earth should I do then?"

This thought was evidently of an absorbing nature, for he walked briskly on, regarding no one, and turning neither to the right hand nor to the left, until he had gone about three hundred yards. Then finding himself face to face with a tall and narrow archway, guarded by a substantial iron gate, he paused irresolute. To all appearance he was endeavouring to make up his mind whether he should enter. Having decided in the affirmative, he knocked upon the iron-work of the gate. It was immediately opened, and an old man holding a lantern looked out, crying as he did so —

"Quién esté ahí?" ["Who is there?"]

Submitting his name, after a brief scrutiny he was admitted into the patio, or courtyard of the building, of which the gate formed the outer guard. The wet stones (for it was still raining), the dripping gutters, and the weird moaning of the wind round the corners and between the housetops, did not add to the cheerfulness of the place.

Half-way across the patio Veneda turned to his guide.

"Hold on, Domingo," he said, "in these matters it is just as well to be prepared. Whom have we here to-night?"

"Pablos Vargas, José Nunez, and the Englishman, John Macklin, senior."

"All three? Very good. Go on!"

They approached a small door in the wall on the left hand of the courtyard; between its chinks a bright light streaked forth. A subdued murmur came from within, which was hushed as if by magic when the old man rapped upon the panel. Next moment Veneda was inside the room, endeavouring to accustom his eyes to the bright light of a common tin lamp hanging upon the wall.

It was but a small apartment, destitute of any furniture save a rough table and a chair or two, and filthy to an indescribable degree. The three men, for whose presence Veneda had been prepared, were evidently awaiting his coming. It was doubtful, however, judging from their expressions, whether they were pleased or annoyed at his punctual appearance. Though the heads of that mysterious organization which had so much frightened Bradshaw, with one exception they were not interesting. Pablos Vargas and José Nunez were simply Chilanos of the middle class, but the Englishman, John Macklin, was altogether extraordinary.

Besides being in many other ways peculiar, he was an Albino of the most pronounced type, possessed of the smallest body and the largest head imaginable in a human being; his arms were those of a baboon, so long that his fingers, when he stood upright, could touch his legs below his knees.

His complexion was as delicate as the inside of a rosebud, his eyes were as pink as those of a white rabbit, while his hair was nothing more nor less than a mop of silkiest white floss. Added to these peculiarities, his voice was a strangely high falsetto, and when he became excited, he had a habit of cracking his finger-joints one after the other, a thing which in itself is apt to be a disconcerting trick.

His history, so far as could be gathered, was an eventful one, and would repay perusal. By his own statement he was a native of Exeter, England, in which city his father had at one time conducted a school for the sons of small tradesmen. At the age of ten, young Macklin became a choir boy in the Cathedral, but his personal appearance and moral character proving too much for his fellow-choristers, after a month some charge was preferred against him, and he was dismissed with ignominy. This circumstance, very naturally, was hardly of a kind calculated to straighten his already warped nature, and then and there, with a precocity beyond his years, he embarked upon a war against society, which, as I shall endeavour to prove later, had suffered no diminution when our history opens.

At the age of seventeen he became a lawyer's clerk in Bristol, following this vocation until his majority from which time until his thirtieth birthday nothing definite can be learnt of him. It is believed, however, that for the greater part of that period he served a sentence in one of her Majesty's convict prisons for fraud; and a semblance of truth is lent to the belief by the knowledge that directly he re-appeared in society he took ship for America.

The record of his doings across the Atlantic would form interesting reading, if only for its variety. For three years, from thirty to thirty-three, he followed many professions, including those of railway scalper, book fiend, and insurance tout, eventually figuring as "The Wild Man of New Guinea" in a dime museum in San Francisco, eating raw meat in a cage, and growling at the public from behind substantial iron bars. When this latter enterprise panned out unsatisfactorily, it left him no alternative but to migrate into Mexico, where he supported a chequered career as a money-lender, a lottery runner, keeper of a Monte hell, and suspected leader of a gang of most notorious thieves. Mexico no longer affording sufficient scope for his peculiar talents, he repaired to Brazil, thence drifting by easy stages into Chili, where, at the time of the Revolution, he had embarked on this new and exceedingly remunerative line of business.

Veneda looked from one to the other before he spoke, but his eyes rested longest on the face of the Albino and it was to him he addressed his opening salutation. It was a part of his policy to ignore Vargas and Nunez, as if they did not exist.

"Well," he said, by way of introduction, "gentlemen of the Executive, you're annoying, to say the least of it. What may be the reason of this unexpected meeting? I had more important business to-night."

"You always seem to – " Nunez commenced.

"Be silent," sneered the Albino, with truculent courtesy, "you're wasting the honourable gentleman's time. Can't you see he's in a hurry to attend the Council of the President? Ho! ho! Senor Veneda, you can't bluff me, so don't attempt it."

"Who wants to bluff you?" said Veneda. "Don't be a fool, Macklin. Tell me why this meeting has been called."

"Because there is a lot of important business to be got through, and by reason of the disturbances we may not be able to hold another for a week or two."

Veneda seated himself, and the meeting commenced.

"In the first place," said the Albino, who acted as chairman, "there is some important correspondence from the branches to be considered. I have here a letter from London, informing us that on the 13th May, Emanuel Bendalack, secretary of a well-known Building Society, absconded from England with £18,000. He left in the steamer *Royal Sceptre*, bound for Cape Town; he is disguised as a Wesleyan missionary, and booked his passage in the name of Blander. If you will allow me to make a suggestion, I would advise that our agents in South Africa be directed to meet Mr.

Blander on his arrival, and that the Greek, Manolake, be despatched from here as soon as possible to attend to the affair. Does that meet with your approval?"

Assent having been given, the Albino made an entry in a book, and took up another letter.

"This is a communication from Buda-Pesth. It is to the effect that the well-known merchant, Julius Karlinska, left that city on the 6th June, taking with him a sum equivalent to £22,000, the property of his creditors. He is believed to be making for Australia, and has been traced as far as Port Said. Photograph enclosed. What do you desire regarding Herr Karlinska?"

Nunez was the first to offer a suggestion.

"I would advise communicating with our agent in Melbourne, and sending some one at once to take over the affair."

"Who is at liberty just now?" asked Veneda.

"Emil Valdor, Shivaloff, and Maunders of the men, that is if Manolake goes to Cape Town; Marie Darnée and Juanita Valdorez of the women."

"Juanita? The very person; despatch her!"

"Impossible! She is wanted here."

Veneda gave a little sigh of disappointment.

"Where is the Italian, Automa?" asked Nunez.

"In New York, shadowing Clifford Blake-Ganon, who is expected to bolt at any moment," answered Macklin.

"Then send the Darnée," urged Vargas; "she will find him and do the business better than any."

"Is that your wish, senors?" the chairman asked.

They signified that it was.

"Very good, then the Darnée goes. And now we come to another matter, one nearer home."

Veneda gave a start, so small that it was unnoticed save by the Albino.

"What matter?"

The dwarf cast a look at him full of withering contempt.

"Now, see you," he said angrily, "it's not a bit of good your coming here and trying to make me believe that you want the whole story overhauled again. You know very well what I mean."

"That poor hunted devil of an English banker in the Calle de San Pedro, I suppose?"

"You suppose! Look here, Marcos Veneda, what the devil's the use of your wasting our time playing 'possum like that?"

"How was I to know to what you alluded? we've so many irons in the fire. But since we are on that subject, Macklin, I've got something to say about it. Don't you think we might give the poor cur a run for his miserable life? From all accounts he's pretty well frightened out of his senses already!"

The Albino, Vargas, and Nunez stared with astonishment; in all their experience of him, they had never known Marcos Veneda behave like this before. The Albino laughed suspiciously.

"I wonder what your little game is, my friend," he said. "This is a new line for you. Want us to spare him, do you? Very pretty, I'm sure; would look well in a tract, wouldn't it, with a devil dodger's head on the frontispiece!"

"Stow that, Macklin; I only want fair play for the wretch."

"Fair play, is it? Oh, I promise you he shall have *dead* loads of that."

The Albino laughed uproariously at his own vile joke. He was joined by Vargas and Nunez.

Veneda's face grew black as thunder.

"That's enough," he said, with a sudden outburst of passion. "Stop that! I'll not be laughed at by a set of greasy scattermouches like you."

The merriment ceased abruptly, and the Albino took the opportunity of re-commencing business.

"To-morrow, whichever way the fighting goes, there'll be rioting and sacking of houses. That's our opportunity."

"And who is to do the work?"

"We will decide that by lot."

"But how do you know that he hasn't taken flight, or that the information hasn't leaked out, and the *cache* been rifled already?"

"Because, my friend, as you're perfectly aware, the house has been watched day and night ever since he sneaked into the town. No, no, don't be afraid, we have taken very good care of ourselves; nobody has come out, not even the old mole himself; and certainly no one has gone in. You needn't be alarmed, the money is safe enough. He would be a clever and courageous man who managed to play false with us."

Veneda breathed again. It had been an anxious moment; but he flattered himself he had not betrayed his uneasiness, while at the same time he had learnt all he wanted to know. The questions he was about to ask were only intended to disarm any suspicions his manner might have aroused.

"And after the money is our property?"

"It will be divided here, on the capstan-head, so to speak; and when each man has received his share, he can up stakes, and go to the devil with it his own way."

"And how much do you say it will amount to? Remember the old man's had a good slice out of it himself."

"Lord grant me patience! How many more questions do you want to ask? Why, as near as we can fix it, Two Hundred and Twenty-five Thousand Pounds; isn't it enough for you?"

"Pretty near," Veneda answered, with a laugh; "and now, if you've got anything else to do, let's get to it at once. I've business down town."

At a signal from Albino, Vargas placed dice upon the table, and the gamble commenced. Luck was with Veneda, for finally Vargas and the Albino were elected to carry out the robbery. When that point had been decided, the hour for meeting on the following night, and a few other minor matters arranged, Veneda wished them a sneering "good luck" of their work, and started homewards as fast as his legs would carry him. As he went he laughed softly to himself, as one who enjoys a joke of extraordinary humour. He was decidedly in better spirits than when we accompanied him to the house. He even forgot himself so far as to whistle.

Considering the state of Valparaiso at the time, and the fact that there was no protective power at hand to quell disturbances, the city was wonderfully quiet. A great anxiety was upon everybody, a disquiet that was not at all attuned to noise.

Veneda strode briskly along, occupied with his own thoughts. But strange though it may seem, he was not thinking of the scene he had just left, nor of the impending battle of the morrow; he was recalling a certain box and letter he had despatched to a London merchant a week previous, and reflecting that by the time the Society could discover his treachery, he would in all probability be on the high seas, far beyond the reach of vengeance or defeat. There was only one thing; at any risk he must prevent the woman Juanita from suspecting his intentions.

So absorbed was he in his thoughts, that he had arrived at his house, let himself in, and ascended the stairs to his own peculiar sanctum before he was really conscious that he had done so. The staircase and the room were in total darkness. He crossed to a bracket where matches were usually kept, and striking one, turned to light a candle close at hand. As the flame caught, a low, musical laugh, distinctly feminine, greeted his ears. His nerves must have been overstrung, for he started violently, and came within an ace of dropping both candle-stick and match. Holding the light aloft, he glanced in the direction whence the sound proceeded. The room was big enough to contain many shadows, and the candle did not give a very good light.

"Juanita?"

"Yes, Juanita certainly; are you so surprised to see me?"

He paused to light two other candles before replying. His visitor did not fail to notice the trembling of his hand. Then the room being illuminated to his satisfaction, and the door carefully

closed, he remembered his duty as host, and bade her welcome in proper form. When she heard him say that he was glad to see her, she laughed very softly, and said —

"Marcos, I wonder when you will learn to tell a falsehood with an air of truth?"

Evidently he did not deem this question worthy of a reply, for he threw himself into a chair, and began to roll a cigarette, without vouchsafing one.

Now, when I say that Juanita Encarnación Valdores, whose name we have heard mentioned so many times before, was altogether an uncommon woman, I desire to imply that she was uncommon not only in a physical, but in several other senses besides. Her beauty alone was such as to arrest immediate attention. Of rather more than middle height, she carried herself with an erectness calculated to give one the idea that she was several inches taller than her real stature. Even for one owning Spanish blood, her complexion was dark almost to swarthinness, while her upper lip was not without a suspicion of what is irreverently termed a moustache. Yet it was strange that these two things, counted in other women serious defects, in Juanita not only failed to detract from the general effect, but in a great measure added to it. Her hands and feet were in keeping with the rest of her frame, neither too large nor too small; her manner could be anything she chose, from caressing to fiendish; and her voice and laugh, when she so desired, sounded on the ear like sweetest music. Like Marcos Veneda, she was all mysteriousness. Many curious stories were told of her past, and as a faithful chronicler, I must admit that they did not all redound to her credit. She had been in Chili nearly four years; but where she had hailed from before that I am not prepared to say. It only concerns us that, at the time of which I write, she was without a protector, and indeed it appeared as if she would be likely to remain so, for no man was careless enough of his reputation with the public to take such a position upon himself. It is possible that this may have been the reason why she drifted towards Veneda, whose predicament, as we have seen, was not altogether dissimilar to her own.

"Come, come, Marcos," she said, "I cannot say that you're the best of company to-night. Tell me, don't you think I'm a plucky woman to venture out on such a night, and to call on you of all people?"

"I am proportionately honoured," he replied gravely; "but I suppose you have some very good reason, or you wouldn't have run the risk."

She shrugged her shoulders, and made a little gesture with her hands, as one who would say, "who knows." Then her manner changed completely, and leaning forward, she placed one hand on his arm. He had been earnestly regarding her all this time, endeavouring to read in her face what was passing in her mind. Now he prepared himself for the struggle he felt was imminent.

"My Marcos," she said softly, and the name came very prettily from her lips, "I suppose you have heard that people call me a witch, because they say I turn men's heads. They also say — no, do not speak till I have done — that sometimes I can read men's thoughts, and not unfrequently foretell future events."

"Then, Juanita," he answered, as soon as he could get a word in, "you certainly could not have come at a better time. You shall read my fate, and advise me as to what course I should pursue regarding it."

Without another word she lifted his hand, which lay upon the arm of her chair, and examined it carefully. The flickering candle-light fell upon her bent head, and danced amid the luxuriant tangle of her hair.

"Shall I tell you everything I see?" she asked. He saw that her face had grown suddenly very serious.

"Why not?" he replied.

"Because I am frightened, Marcos," she answered, shuddering, "because there is something terrible written on your hand."

"In what way?"

"Treachery, Marcos, and for a large sum of money!"

He snatched his hand angrily away, and to cover his embarrassment affected entire disbelief.

"You are indeed a fortune-teller! You will accuse me of having assassinated the President directly. And pray what else did you see?"

"I had better not tell you, you will only be angry with me."

"Angry with you! Never!"

"Marcos, I saw on your hand more than you dream. Hush, listen to me; you are contemplating flight."

"That is not a difficult thing to see. If things do not improve here, many of us will be driven into clearing out. You must be smarter than that, Juanita."

"Oh, but that is not all. I see that you have sent great treasure away to a far country, and that you intend to follow it."

"This is beautiful! What – what else?"

"That your professed love for me is only lip service, for you intend to desert me."

"That is about as true as the rest. Have you anything further?"

"That your treasure amounts to over £200,000 of English money, and that it is directed to a – let me see," – here she pretended to study his hand again, – "Sir Benjamin Plowden (bah! your English names!) who lives in the East India Avenue of your great smoky London. Is that true? Ah! I see it is."

There was a ring of triumph in her voice. She had played a doubtful card, and scored a victory. For the moment Veneda was totally unnerved; his face, pale before, was now snow-white; large beads of perspiration covered his forehead.

"How did you learn all that nonsense?" he stammered.

"Why, from your hand, of course," came the mocking reply. "And is it such nonsense? Marcos, Marcos, I have always said you were a clever man, but you must be cleverer still to deceive me. Woman's wit – you know the proverb. Will you have more? Shall I tell you, for instance, what Macklin and the Society would say of it, and what key guards your treasure-chamber?"

"By all means, if there is such a thing," he cried, his nervousness lifting his voice almost to a falsetto. Meanwhile his eyes seemed to be attempting to read her very soul. Perhaps his scrutiny relieved him, for the expression on his face changed.

"I knew you couldn't do it," he said quietly. "I return your compliment; you're very clever, but you must be cleverer still to deceive me."

"How do you know that I don't understand it?" she inquired, with just a suspicion of nervousness now in *her* voice. "Since I can tell so much, how do you know that I can't tell all?"

"Because, my dear" – he had quite recovered himself by this time, and was bitterly regretting having betrayed his feelings so openly – "even if I had any such business on hand, I am certain you don't know what you pretend, otherwise you would have it in your eyes. Ah!"

His attention was attracted to a small writing-table standing in a corner of the room. The blotting-book lay upon it turned upside down. Seizing it, he fell to turning the leaves. One was missing.

"Ha! ha! my little sorceress!" he cried mockingly, "you are discovered. It is an old trick and a good one. I remember blotting the first two sides of the letter on a fresh page. To obtain your information, you have simply torn that out, and held it against the light. But the rest, the most important part, was not blotted at all. So you can do me no harm after all."

"Why should you think I wish to harm you?"

"I don't think you do; I only think you might. And you see, of £200,000, two hundred thousand pounds' worth of care must be taken. By the way, since you know so much, I doubt if it would be prudent to let you out of this house again."

Ignoring the threat entirely, she continued the conversation as if it had not been uttered.

"At least you might have trusted me, Marcos."

"Have I said that I do not?"

"You have not said so in so many words, but I know you don't. Besides, you are leaving Chili to-morrow night."

"How do you know that?"

"I forget, but it's true, isn't it, Marcos? – and you will take me with you, won't you? Even if you no longer love me, you will have pity on me? You will not leave me to their mercy? I am so tired of this life of spying and conspiracy, and I would be so faithful to you."

Her voice trembled. He stopped his restless pacing up and down the room, and looked at her. As far as he could see there was only a great love for himself shining in her eyes. She looked wondrously beautiful. It was a temptation and a danger; yet perhaps, all things considered, it was the safest course. A second later he had made up his mind, and as he did so a corresponding light came into his eyes. It would have been hard to tell which was more in earnest. Resuming his seat beside her, he said —

"Juanita, I do love you, and I believe I can trust you; come what may, we will go together."

"My own dear love!"

He took her hand and gravely kissed it. The crisis was past.

Both felt they had scored a victory, but both felt it would require very little to overthrow it. Five minutes later she was speeding home unaccompanied, for she would not hear of his being seen in the streets with her. In the security of her own room she regarded herself in her glass, and as she did so she said half aloud —

"He did his very best to put me off the scent, but I beat him in the end. One thing is certain, he carries the piece of paper that is to authorize the payment of the money about with him, in a large locket fastened round his neck with a double chain. I felt it when my head rested on his breast. Two hundred thousand pounds – it's the greatest stake I ever played for. With that I should be a free woman again. Come what may, my Marcos, I'll never desert you till I have shared it with you or relieved you of it."

When she had left him, Veneda threw up his window, and leant out into the night. The rain had ceased. He could see watch-fires gleaming all along the heights, and myriads of lights twinkling among the shipping in the harbour; but though he looked at them, I don't think he was conscious that he saw them. He was reviewing in his mind all he had passed through that evening, and wondering whether or not the balance stood in his favour.

From the consideration of his present position, his thoughts passed out across the open ocean to a mail-boat homeward bound. And so piercing was the gaze of his mind's eye, that it penetrated even through iron and timber to the vessel's bullion-room, where reposed a certain chest, with which his fortunes were not altogether unconnected. Then dropping the good ship behind it, as if she were standing still, on his fancy sped across the seas to the land he had not known for fifteen years. There in a smiling valley, nestling among beech woods, he found for himself a home, a life of honest independence, of love, of respect, and, above all things, of forgetfulness of Chili and the past! His imagination painted it for him with realistic touches, but would it ever come true? With Goethe he might very well have said, "When, how, and where? That is the question!"

After a while he drew in his head, and shut the window. Then from round his neck he took a locket. Opening it, a curious slip of ragged paper fell to the floor. Picking it up, he gazed at it for a few seconds, and then replaced it, saying to himself —

"Boulger's squared – the *Island Queen* is ready, and with to-morrow night's tide I bid good-bye to Chili for ever and a day. They'll never think of looking for me in the South Pacific, and I'll work my way home by Australia and the East. Confound Juanita! I ought to have anticipated this trick of hers. It's the deuce and all, but there's no other way out of it, I must take her with me. It would be madness to leave her behind to act with the Albino and the Society against me; but before I get to the other side, if I don't hit out some plan to rid myself of her, my name's not Marmaduke Plowden!"

## CHAPTER III

### A STRANGER DAY

Quite an hour before daybreak Veneda was awakened by sounds of excitement in the streets. Bitterly cold though the morning proved, almost every one was astir, listening for the cannonading which would proclaim the opening of the engagement on the heights. The booming of a few guns came with the breaking day, faintly at first, but growing louder as the light increased. Without doubt the long-expected battle had commenced.

Following the example of his neighbours, Veneda threw up his window and leant out to listen. Somehow or other, since his conversation with the English merchant in the Calle de Victoria the previous night, his confidence in a victory for the Government had been a little shaken; and now for the first time he began to experience twinges of real alarm for his own immediate safety. Supposing he should be arrested by the Congressionalist leaders for his treachery to them, where would his escape be then? In that case Boulger would not wait, and Juanita for her own safety would be certain to betray him. But he reflected that it was full early yet to be frightened, and moreover he had been in so many close things before, that one more or less could hardly matter.

The behaviour of the people in the streets was peculiar. In their excitement men no longer showed evidences of partisanship; all the thoughts and anxieties of *Gobiernistas* and *Oppositores* alike were centred on the battle then proceeding. It was as though they were spectators of a stage-play and nothing more. The time for individual animosity, they told themselves, would come later.

By breakfast-time the excitement had risen to fever heat. From the clearness with which the sounds could be distinguished, it was plain that the Government forces were being driven back, and this could have but one meaning, – the Opposition were advancing on Valparaiso. The noise grew louder every minute, and with its approach the turbulent element of the town began to make its presence felt in the streets. The peculiar ping of rifle-bullets sounded continually in the lower quarters; many business premises away from the main thoroughfares were looted; while in not one but several directions the smoke of incendiary fires rose on the clear morning air.

So certain had every one, by this time, become of the result of the fighting, that many Government supporters packed up their traps and quitted the town with as little ostentation as possible; either scurrying into the neighbouring mountains, or seeking refuge on board the foreign men-of-war at anchor in the harbour.

Towards ten o'clock the firing slackened off, and by half-past had ceased altogether. A victory had been won – but by whom? This question was in everybody's mouth.

News, however, was not long forthcoming. In all directions terrified camp-followers – men, women, and children, on foot and on horseback – might have been seen making for the town as fast as their own legs or those of their beasts could carry them. As they hurried along they announced in loud voices the absolute defeat of the Government forces, exaggerating the details with every repetition of the story. After a short interval they were followed by the vanquished and flying troops themselves, who corroborated what the others had so authoritatively proclaimed. There could be no doubt that the Opposition had won a signal victory. The reign of terror was over! The hated Dictator, Balmaceda, hitherto regardless of what lives he sacrificed to gain his ends, was now not only powerless, but an outcast and a suppliant for his own.

Hard upon the heels of the fugitive troops, amid an outburst of wildest excitement, came the advance guard of the victorious army, with bands playing and colours waving. Bells clashed and jangled from every steeple, continual *vivas* rent the air, and crackers by hundreds were exploded in the streets. Every one wore the red ribbon of the Opposition, and every face (for active *Gobiernistas* were wise enough not to parade theirs) testified to the relief and joy with which the result was hailed. There could not have been a more popular termination to the struggle.

As soon as the result of the battle had become known, the Intendente had delivered up the town to the admirals of the foreign war-ships, who now in their turn handed it over to the Congressionalist leaders. The place had thus practically changed hands from the Republic to the Republic; from one class to the other and more popular section of the community.

It may be imagined that Veneda took care to be well posted on all that occurred. With the entrance of the troops he saw the total destruction of his political hopes, and now his active mind was busily engaged working out the best possible means of securing his own safety, until the time should come for him to leave the country.

Reflecting that to all intents and purposes his life would depend on his personal appearance, he first turned his attention in that direction. In five minutes his close-cropped beard had disappeared; his heavy black moustache was twirled and twisted into quite a new and extraordinary shape; while his well-cut English clothes were discarded for a more Chilian garb, including a poncho and a broad-leafed sombrero. When thus equipped he paraded before his glass, he could not but admit that the effect was excellent. The odds were a thousand to one against any one recognizing in this typical Chilano the Marcos Veneda of half-an-hour before.

By the time he was dressed he had determined as to his next course of action. He saw that it would be impossible for him to remain where he was; therefore, until the hour for boarding the schooner should arrive, he must seek an asylum elsewhere. But before leaving the house many things had to be thought of. Glancing round the room with its host of familiar knick-knacks, he set himself to destroy what he did not desire should fall into other hands, concealing about his person such small articles of value or association as he wished to carry away. When this was accomplished he dropped a carefully-loaded revolver into the pocket of his poncho, and was ready to forsake the house.

That he might not be observed leaving by the front door, he lifted the window and swung himself from it down into the patio. For a moment he stopped to listen, then hearing nothing suspicious, passed without further ado into the street. No one was to be seen.

Where to go, or what to do with himself (it was not yet two o'clock), he had not made up his mind. Strange to say, considering the danger it would involve him in, he felt an intense desire to see all that was to be seen, and to participate, himself, in the general excitement. Of the latter there was no lack; the town was full of disbanded soldiery, and serious rioting had already occurred. The foreign war-ships had landed forces to protect foreign life, but in the lower quarters the mob ruled paramount.

So complete was his disguise that Veneda found himself, on more than one occasion, standing side by side with former acquaintances, unmolested and unrecognized. The knowledge of this security gave him fresh courage, and he followed the course of the day's events with additional interest and vigour. Yet a danger he had never anticipated was in store for him.

Leaving the Calle de Victoria, he passed down a side street in the direction of the harbour, but before he had proceeded fifty yards a sound he knew only too well greeted his ears; it was the noise of a crowd in hot pursuit of something or somebody.

Not wishing to run the risk of being mistaken for their quarry, he cast about him for a loophole of escape. But none presented itself. While he was looking, footsteps sounded close behind him. To his astonishment the runner was none other than John Macklin the Albino, chairman of the Society, his face livid with terror, and his breath coming from him in great spasmodic jerks. His clothes were in rags, and covered with a filth which reached even to his hair; his hat was gone, and long purple weals streaked his dainty cheeks. The agony expressed in his eyes lent an extraordinary effect to his face.

"Save me, save me!" he gasped, falling at Veneda's feet. "In the merciful name of God, I beseech you to save me!"

For the reason that Macklin did not recognize him, nothing would have been easier than for the other to have cast him off, and for the space of three breaths he was half inclined to do it. Then, for some reason which he was never afterwards able to explain (it must be understood that the dwarf's death would in a great measure have rescued him from his very awkward predicament), he

determined to do his best to help him. It was a foolish resolution, but it was only on a par with the man's extraordinarily complex character.

The noise of the mob, like that of hounds in full cry, was drawing closer; any second might bring them into view. Turning to the terrified creature beside him, he cried —

"I'll do my best for you. Pick up your heels and run."

Running appeared the last thing the Albino, in his present exhausted condition, would be capable of, but he nevertheless followed in the other's wake, panting horribly, and throwing his long arms about with windmill-like gesticulations. As they started the mob burst into view, and a second later a shot whisked in unpleasant proximity to Veneda's head. There is something chilling in the whine of a rifle-bullet, and as he heard it he began to repent having taken any share in the Albino's private concerns. Without turning his head, he cried —

"Faster, faster, round the next corner, and then follow me."

This was, however, easier said than done; the little man's strength, already taxed beyond straining pitch, was quite unequal to a fresh demand. He began to lag behind, and Veneda saw that if he reached the shelter of the street corner, about fifty yards distant, it would be as much as he could possibly accomplish.

Not a second was to be lost; their pursuers were barely more than a hundred and fifty yards behind. Stopping, he turned, and as his companion approached him, stooped and took him in his arms, throwing him up on to his shoulder as if his weight were the merest trifle. Then he resumed his flight.

Reaching the corner he flew round it, thankful to find no one in sight, and made for a row of deserted houses across the way. Into the patio of the third of these he dashed, and not until then did he place his burden on the ground.

"I can't carry you any further; we must hide!" he cried, vigorously attacking a door which opened on to the courtyard; "our lives depend upon getting into this house. Help me, help me!"

The Albino required no second bidding, and between them they burst in the door. They were only just in time, for as the lock gave way they heard the vanguard of the mob come howling round the corner. Veneda knew that when they could not see their game before them, it would be only a question of seconds before they would commence their search of the neighbourhood. Experience had taught him that a mob does not allow itself to be robbed of its prey without a struggle.

Once inside the house he led the way up-stairs. Unlike most Chilian residences, it was of three storeys, and built of stone — a bad speculation on the part of an English builder. Not until they had ascended to the garrets did they pause to listen. An angry murmur came up to them from the street, and when he heard it Veneda turned to his companion, who was lying on the floor endeavouring to regain his breath, and said —

"That means that they've tracked us down. How we're going to give them the slip now is more than I can see."

As he spoke, a crash came from the lower regions.

"That's the front door," he continued calmly. "We must be moving on again. Are you ready?"

The Albino's only answer was to spring to his feet.

Being already as high up as they could get without crawling on to the roof, where next to go became the question. A noise of voices told them that their pursuers were within the house itself. They were caught like rats in a trap! Apart from any other consideration, it would, in all probability, be a most unpleasant death they would die; and Veneda reflected that after so many narrow escapes it would be humiliating to perish at the hands of a lawless mob in somebody else's quarrel.

While these thoughts were flashing through his brain he was looking about him for some means of exit, but save for the door they had entered by, and the window which looked out at the back over some lower roofs, nothing worthy of his consideration presented itself. The door was clearly impracticable, unless they desired to meet their pursuers on the stairs, and as to the window, there

was a drop of fully fifteen feet from it on to the nearest roof, and at least twenty more on to the stones of the courtyard. By this time the foremost of the mob were in the room beneath them.

A heavy perspiration broke out on Veneda's forehead; the Albino shrank into a corner, and covered his face with his hands. But they could not meet their death without a struggle, so, come what might, they must try the window. Crossing to it Veneda threw it open, at the same time beckoning the dwarf to his side.

"Now," he said, "there is nothing for it but to get out on the roof, and crawl along the housetops till we can find a place to get down. Don't stand whimpering there, but pay attention to what I say. I'll swing myself up first, and when I'm ready I'll do my best to pull you after me. Stand by, or I swear I'll leave you to your fate!"

It was a useless warning; the Albino was ready to risk anything, even a tumble into the courtyard, rather than to allow himself to fall into the hands of those who were now on the staircase leading to their room.

With all the speed he could command Veneda crawled backwards out of the narrow window, and clutched the thin guttering of the roof above. What he was about to attempt was not only a difficult, but a horribly dangerous feat, for there was literally nothing to catch hold of that would permit of a grip. It was an athletic test that would have tried the nerve and endurance of the most accomplished gymnast. Bit by bit, with infinite pain, he drew himself up, till his shoulders were above the guttering. The muscles of his arms appeared as if they must snap under the strain they were called upon to endure. The suspense was awful; but if it seemed long to Veneda before he was lying stretched on the roof, what an eternity must it have been to the miserable Albino crouched in the room below!

Then the other's voice reached him, saying —

"Crawl backwards out of the window, and give me your hands. Be quick! I can't stay like this long!"

The shouts of the mob and the trampling on the staircase stimulated him. Crawling out of the window as he was ordered, he stretched his long arms upwards. His hands were clutched from above; then he felt himself lifted clear of the sill, and next moment he was swaying out into mid air. If the strain on Veneda's muscles had been great when he pulled himself up on to the roof, how much greater was it now that he had not only to retain his own position, but to lift this other man as well! The Albino looked up into his face and saw the veins standing out upon it as large as macaroni stems, and strange though it may appear, it was only then that he recognized his deliverer. A minute later he was stretched on the roof-top, just as the leaders of the mob entered the room they had so lately quitted.

It was a long time before either spoke. Then the Albino, leaning towards his preserver, whispered —

"Marcos, I owe you my life. I reckon I won't forget what you've done for me to-day."

"You had a close shave of it. What devil's game were you up to that they should chase you?"

"I met them in the Calle de Victoria, and some one cried 'Gobiernista'; next moment they started after me like bloodhounds. If I hadn't met you, I'd have been a dead man!"

Perhaps Veneda did not hear him. At any rate he made no reply. He was listening to the sounds in the street, and wondering, now that the mob found themselves outwitted, what their next move would be.

He was not to be kept long in suspense. That operations of some kind were being conducted he guessed from the sudden silence. Then a cry of "Fire!" went up, and next moment smoke burst from either end of the row. He understood exactly: not being able to find them, the mob intended to burn them out!

From the two farthest houses the flames spread with awful rapidity, and as they saw it their tormentors howled and shrieked with delight. Fortunately the house, on the rearmost roof of which Veneda and the Albino lay, was the centre one, and for this reason they would have some time to wait before they could experience any actual danger.

It may be imagined with what interest they watched the approaching flames, speculating how soon they would be obliged to move again. The heat was over-powering; but the conflagration was not speedy enough for the miscreants below, who thereupon set fire to the lower regions of the middle house.

This, Veneda told himself, was becoming too much of a good thing. The tiles were every moment growing hotter and hotter, and in a few minutes it would be impossible to remain upon them. The dense, choking smoke enveloped them in clouds.

With an eye ever on the look-out, he saw that the only cool spot was a tiny position on a parapet to their left, as yet a good distance from the flames. He moved towards it, thinking he had done quite enough for his companion. There was not room for more than one upon the place, and he secured it first.

Presently, overcome with heat and despair, the wretched Albino crawled along the roof, and endeavoured to find a foothold on it also. Veneda called upon him to go back, but he refused. It was impossible for both to remain – one must go, and a battle began for the position.

Partly owing to the situation of the outhouses below, partly to the fact that the mob was watching events from the street front, but more to the dense smoke which enveloped them, their struggle was unnoticed. It was of but short duration. How could one of the Albino's size hope to contend with a man so muscular as Veneda! For a few brief seconds they were locked in each other's arms; then Veneda's right hand seized upon the other's throat, and began to press his head further and further back. At last, to save himself from a broken neck, the Albino let go his hold, and fell with a yell from the roof into the smoke below. But though he had not succeeded in his attempt to remain upon the wall, he did not allow his companion to occupy it either, for as he fell he made a last feeble clutch at Veneda's legs. Slight though it was, it was sufficient to disturb the other's balance. He tottered, swayed, endeavoured to save himself, failed in the attempt, and finally fell, as his companion had done before him, into the Unknown. Such was the violence of his fall, that when he reached the bottom he lay stunned for some time.

On recovering his senses he found himself lying in the hollow between the roofs of the two outhouses before mentioned. Save for the spluttering flames of the smouldering *débris*, it was quite dark. The crowd had dispersed, and though he looked carefully about him, nothing was to be seen of the Albino. Whether he had fallen into the courtyard and been killed or captured by the mob, he could not of course tell, but at any rate he was relieved to find that he had departed elsewhere.

Having made sure of this, he rose and convinced himself that no bones were broken. He had experienced a miraculous escape, and he argued that it was a good omen for what lay before him. Clambering over the side of the roof, he lowered himself to the ground, and then skirting the ruins of the houses, proceeded into the street.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ALBINO IS DISAPPOINTED

When the Albino regained his senses, on the other side of the small outhouse, within five feet of where Veneda lay, his first idea was to find out if he had received any injury from his fall from the roof, and next to discover what had become of the man who had occasioned it.

He found that beyond a severe shaking and a few burns, he had sustained but trifling hurt, perhaps for the reason that by clutching at the parapet he had in some measure broken his fall. But though he searched diligently all round the patio, and even among the ruins of the houses hard by, not a trace of his late antagonist could he discover.

What a narrow escape had been his he realized when he looked about him, for on every side were heaped smouldering *débris* of the dwellings, while the conflagration was still proceeding, with unabated violence, only a few steps further along the street. Why he had not been killed by falling timber, found and despatched by the mob, or burnt up by the flames as he lay unconscious, he could not for the life of him understand.

The street being quiet, he settled it in his own mind that the mob had gone elsewhere, believing their prey to have perished. So giving himself a final shake to make quite certain that all was sound, he waited his opportunity, and, when no one was passing, struck out in the direction of the Calle de San Pedro. In spite of his recent adventures he had not forgotten his appointment with Vargas at the house of the fugitive English banker; and, as he hurried along, he reflected with a chuckle that if, as in all human probability was the case, Veneda had perished with the falling house, then would there be one less with whom to divide the spoil. He wished, however, that he had seen the body. That, he told himself, would have been altogether more satisfactory, for he knew Vargas and Nunez well enough to be aware that they would not accept his statement for truth, unless he could bring substantial proof of its authenticity.

As he turned into the Calle de San Pedro, a man crossed over the road and joined him. It was Pablos Vargas. Without a word they proceeded to the house, a ramshackle, old adobe structure of one storey, with a broad verandah running round three sides, and a commodious patio on the fourth, this latter protected by a heavy gate.

As the conspirators approached it they were joined by two other men from the premises on either side.

"Well, Miguel," said the Albino, addressing himself to the taller of the twain, "what have you to report? He has not escaped you?"

"No, señor. We have not seen a sign of him this week past, and we've watched day and night."

"Well, if he's gone you may pack your kits, and clear out of this country for ever. I promise you, you won't be able to live in it with me. You can go."

"We want our money," remarked the man who had not yet spoken.

"What? Want your money, do you, you longshore beach-comber – want your money before we've seen how you've done your work! Clear out of this. You'll be paid at the proper place, at ten."

"These are no times for promises. We want our money now," reiterated the man; "and what's more, we're going to have it!"

The Albino was not at all impressed by the man's determined attitude. Taking a step towards him, he whispered a sentence in his ear, with the result that next moment the fellow was scuttling down the street like one possessed, his companion after him.

Macklin turned to Vargas with a grin.

"There seems to be something in the old word after all. Now come; we've got our work cut out."

As he spoke he produced a key, and opened the door of the dwelling before which they stood, and which was to the right of that they designed to visit. Entering, they proceeded along the passage

to the small yard at the back. Once there only a low wall separated them from the other house. With an agility surprising in one so deformed, the Albino mounted it, and dropped on to the other side; Vargas followed him, and together they approached a window. Opening this, they crept through it into the dwelling; then, soft as cats, passed across the room towards the central passage. At a signal from Macklin, Vargas produced and lit a candle.

Having before they started made themselves familiar with that part of the house which contained the treasure of which they were in search, they were able to approach it without hesitation or delay. On reaching the room they paused to listen, at the same time taking the precaution of examining their arms. Then, stealthily opening the door, they entered, the Albino first and Vargas in the rear, shading the candle with his hand.

A half-starved, decrepit old man was pacing up and down at the further end. On seeing them he stopped his walk, and advanced towards them with a courtly bow.

"You are very welcome," he began in English. "I've been expecting you this week past. You must excuse the unprepared state of my surroundings; but I've only moved in here while my Kensington house is being redecorated. You will stay and take dinner with me, of course?"

"What does he say?" asked Vargas, who had no knowledge of English.

"He's mad! – stark, staring mad!" replied the Albino.

"Won't you sit down?" continued their host. "I will ring and have the wine put in ice. By the way, I don't think you told me your business; my memory is not what it was. I have had troubles – serious troubles."

"That's enough of that, my friend," Macklin interposed "Confound your memory! We want that money – the Two Hundred and Fifty Thousand you swindled the Kamtchatka Bank out of. If you want to save your skin, you'd better own up where it is, and save any bother."

The ex-banker continued to smile sweetly.

"Ah! there's a very good story connected with that. It's going the round of the clubs now. Lord Burgoon, our chairman, asked me about it this afternoon in Piccadilly. You must know that I took it out to Chili to invest on the Bank's behalf. One evening, I was sitting in my room in the Calle de San Pedro, when a singularly handsome man called to see me. 'Mr. Bradshaw,' said he, 'I'm sorry to trouble you, but I've come to play you a game of cards for that money.' I had no objection, of course, so down we sat. Eventually he won, and I paid him all that was left of the £250,000. It was a good stake, wasn't it?"

"You lie!" shrieked the Albino, dashing at him and clutching him by the throat. "That be hanged for a tale. It's only one of your damned dodges to put us off the scent. Where is it? Tell me, or I'll throttle you!"

"I assure you it's the truth," gasped the unfortunate banker, half strangled. "I will even tell you his name."

The Albino withdrew his hand.

"Now, what was it? Quick!"

"Let me think. I fancy it began with V – Veneda, or some such name. Of course I did not ask, but he allowed it to slip from him in his excitement. He was a most gentlemanly person, and interested me exceedingly."

"Nonsense! I won't believe it; he dared not do it. But, Marcos Veneda, you thieving traitorous hound, by God, if this be true it will prove the worst day's work you've ever done in your life."

Then in Spanish he explained what had happened to Vargas, whose rage was absurdly theatrical. He danced and swore, tore his hair and ground his teeth in an ecstasy of passion.

"Stop that nonsense," said the Albino. "We must search the house as quickly as possible, and if it's not here, find Veneda without a moment's delay. Now we see why he wanted us to spare him. It strikes me we've been sold, and badly too."

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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