CLASSICS TO GO

# THE RETURN OF CLUBFOOT

VALENTINE WILLIAMS

# The Return of Clubfoot

**Valentine Williams**

# CHAPTER 1

## DOÑA LUISA

As I was sitting on the verandah of John Bard's bungalow, glancing through a two-month old copy of *The Sketch*, I heard the clang of the iron gate below where I sat. I raised my eyes from the paper and looked down the gardens. At my feet was stretched a dark tangle of palms and luxuriant tropical verdure, beyond them in the distance the glass-like surface of the sea, on which a great lucent moon threw a gleaming path of light.

The night was very tranquil. From the port at the foot of the hill, on which my old friend, John Bard, had built his bungalow in this earthly paradise, the occasional screech of a winch was wafted with astonishing clearness over the warm air. Somewhere in the distance there was the faint monotonous thrumming of guitars. To these night noises of the little Central American port the sea murmured faintly a ceaseless accompaniment.

I heard voices in the garden. Within the house a door swung to with a thud; there was the patter of slippered feet over the matting in the living-room and Akawa, Bard's Japanese servant, was at my elbow. His snow-white drill stood out against the black shadows which the moon cast at the back of the verandah. He did not speak; but his mask-like face waited for me to notice him.

"Well, Akawa?" said I; "what is it?"

"Doña Luisa ask for the Señor Commandante, excuse me!" announced the Jap stolidly.

Comfortably stretched out in a cane chair, a cold drink frosting its long glass in the trough at my side, I turned and stared at the butler. I was undoubtedly the Señor Commandante, for thus, in the course of a lazy, aimless sort of holiday on the shores of the Pacific, had my rank of Major been hispaniolised.

But what lady wanted me? Who could possibly know me here, seeing that only the day before one of John Bard's fruit ships had landed me from San Salvador?

Doña Luisa! The name had an alluring, romantic ring, especially on this gorgeous night, the velvety sky powdered with glittering stars, the air heavy with perfumes exhaled from the scented gardens. That broad strain of romance in me (which makes so much trouble for us Celts) responded strongly to the appeal of my environment. Doña Luisa! The distant strains of music seemed to thrum that soft name into my brain.

I swung my feet to the ground, stood up and stretched myself.

"Where is the lady?" I demanded. "In the sitting-room?"

"No, sir," replied the Japanese. "In the garden!"

More and more romantic! Had some lovely señorita, in high comb and mantilla, been inflamed by a chance sight of the Inglez as I had walked through the grass-grown streets of the city with John Bard that morning, and pursued me to my host's gardens to declare her love? The thought amused me and I smiled. Yet I don't mind admitting that, on my way through the sitting-room in Akawa's wake, I glanced at a mirror and noted with satisfaction that my white drill was spotless, and my hair smooth. I adjusted my tie and with that little touch of swagger which the prospect of a

romantic rendezvous imparts to the gait of the most modest of us men, I passed out of the room to the corridor which led to the door into the gardens.

The passage was brightly lit so that, on emerging into the darkness again, my eyes were dazzled. At first I could only discern a vast black shape. But presently I made out the generous proportions of an enormously stout, coal-black negress.

She was wearing a torn and filthy cotton dress and about her head was bound a spotted pink and white handkerchief. With her vast bosom and ample span of hip she looked almost as broad as she was long. On seeing me she bobbed.

"You'm *Señor Commandante*?" she asked in English in her soft negro voice.

"Yes," I replied, rather taken aback by this droll apparition. "What did you want with me?"

"I has a letter for you, suh!"

She plunged a brown hand into the unfathomable depths of her opulent corsage.

"From Doña Luisa?" I asked expectantly.

The negress stopped her groping and grinned up at me with flashing teeth. Her eyeballs glistened white as her face lit up with a broad smile. Then she tapped herself with a grimy paw.

"*I* is Doña Luisa!" she announced with pride.

I staggered beneath the shock of this revelation. My vision of a sloe-eyed damsel in a mantilla vanished in smoke.

"I has a fine Spanish name," remarked the lady resuming her spasmodic searchings of her person, "but I wus riz in N'Awleans. That's how I talks English so good! Ah!"

With a grunt she fished out a folded sheet of dirty note-paper and handed it to me.

"You're certain this is meant for me?" I asked, racking my brains to recall who was likely to send me messages by such an intermediary and at such an hour.

"I sure is!" responded Doña Luisa with authority.

Stepping back into the lighted corridor I unfolded the note and read:—

> "To Major Desmond Okewood, D.S.O.
>
> "Do you remember the beach-comber to whom you did a good turn at San Salvador a few weeks back? I now believe I am in a position to repay it if you will accompany the bearer of this note. I wish to see you *most urgently* but I am too ill to come to you. Don't dismiss this note as merely an ingenious attempt on my part to raise the wind. Perhaps, by the time you have received it, I shall have already escaped from the disgrace and infamy of my present existence. Therefore come at once, I beg you.
>
> "And *make haste*."

The note was written in pencil in rather a shaky hand. There was no signature. But I remembered the writer perfectly and his signature would have availed me nothing; for I never knew his name.

Our meeting happened thus. I was visiting the jail at San Salvador and in the prison-yard I remarked among the shambling gang of prisoners taking exercise a pallid, hollow-eyed creature whose twitching mouth and fluttering hands betrayed the habitual drunkard recovering from a bout. I should have dismissed this scarecrow figure from my mind only that, suddenly evading the little brown warder, he plucked me by the coat and cried:—

"If you're a *sahib*, man, you'll get me out of this hell!"

He spoke in English and there was a refined note in his voice which, coupled with the haggard expression of his face, decided me to inquire into his case. I discovered that the man, as, indeed, he had avowed himself in the letter, was a beach-comber, a drunken wastrel, a dope fiend. In short, he was one of the unemployable, and every Consulate in the Central Americas was closed to him. But he was an Englishman; more, by birth an English gentleman. One of the officials at our Consulate told me that he was, undoubtedly, of good family.

Well, one doesn't like to think of one of one's own kith and kin locked up with a lot of coffee-coloured cut-throats among the cockchafers and less amiable insects of a Dago calaboose. So I interested myself in Friend Beach-comber and he was set free. His incarceration was the result of a tradesman's plaint and a few dollars secured his release. A few more, as it appeared in the upshot, had ensured his lasting gratitude; for I gave him a ten dollar bill to see him on his way, the State stipulating, as a condition of his liberation, that he should leave the city forthwith.

The outcast's letter was in my hand. I looked at Doña Luisa and hesitated. Would it not be simpler to give the woman a couple of dollars and send her about her business? Surely

this note was nothing more than a subterfuge to obtain a further "loan" with which to buy drink or drugs—the dividing line between the two is none too clearly defined in the Central Americas.

But I found myself thinking of the beachcomber's eyes. I recalled a certain wistfulness, a sort of lonely dignity, in their mute appeal. I glanced through the note a second time. I rather liked its independent tone. So in the end I bade the woman wait while I fetched my hat. But as I took down my panama from its peg I paused an instant, then, running into my room, picked my old automatic out of my dressing-case and slid it into my jacket pocket. I had long since learnt the lesson of the Secret Service that a man may only once forget to carry arms.

As soon as I stepped out into the gardens the old negress waddled off down the path, her bare feet pattering almost noiselessly on the hard earth. She made no further effort at conversation; but, with a swiftness surprising in one of her prodigious bulk, paddled rapidly through the scented night down the hill towards the winking lights of the port. As we left the pleasant height on which John Bard's bungalow stood, I missed the cooling night breeze off the Pacific. The air grew closer. It was steamy and soon I was drenched in perspiration.

Doña Luisa skirted the quays softly lapped by the sluggish, phosphorescent water, and plunged into a network of small streets fringed by the little yellow houses. Most of them were in darkness; for it was getting late, but here and there a shaft of golden light, shining through a heart-shaped opening cut in the shutters, fell athwart the cobbled roadway. There was something subtly evil, something *louche*, about the quarter. From behind the barred and bolted windows of one such shuttered house came strains

of music, fast and furious, endlessly repeated accompanied by the rhythmic stamp of a Spanish dance and the smart click of castanettes. Over the door a red light glowed dully....

But presently we left the purlieus of the port and after passing a long block of warehouses, black and forbidding, came upon a kind of township of tumbledown wooden cabins on the outskirts of the city. The stifling air was now heavy with all manner of evil odours; and heaps of refuse, dumped in the broken roadway, reeked in the hot night. The houses were the merest shanties, most of them in a dilapidated condition.

But the place swarmed with life. Black faces grinned at the unglazed casements; dark figures hurried to and fro; while from many cabins came chattering voices raised high in laughter or dispute. In the distance a native drum throbbed incessantly. To me it was like entering an African village. I knew we were in the negro quarter of the city.

Suddenly Doña Luisa stopped and when I was beside her said in a low voice:—

"We'm mos' there!"—and struck off down a narrow lane.

Somewhere behind one of the shacks, in a full, mellow tenor, a man, hidden by the night, was singing to the soft tinkling accompaniment of a guitar. He sang in Spanish and I caught a snatch of the haunting refrain:—

> "*Se murio, y sobre su cara*
> *"Un panuelito le heche....*"

But the next moment the negress, after fumbling with a key, pushed me through a big door and the rest of the song was lost in the slamming of a great beam she fixed across

it. The door gave access to a little square yard with adobe walls, an open shed along one side, a low shanty along the other. Doña Luisa pushed at a small wooden door in the wall of the shanty. Instantly a thin, quavering voice called out in English:—

"Have you brought him?"

The woman murmured some inaudible reply and the voice went on:—

"Have you barred the door? Then send him in! And you, get out and leave us alone!"

With a little resigned shrug of the shoulders the negress stepped back into the yard and pushed me into the cabin.

# CHAPTER II

## IN WHICH A GENTLEMAN PAYS HIS DEBT

The first thing I saw on entering the room was my beach-comber. For the rushlight, which was the cabin's sole illuminant, stood on a soap-box beside the couch on which the outcast lay. Dressed in a shrunken and dirty cotton suit, he was propped up against the rough mud wall, a grimy and threadbare wrap thrown across his knees. Despite the awful stuffiness of the place, he shivered beneath this ragged coverlet, although his face and chest glistened with perspiration.

Once upon a time, I judged as I measured him with my eye, he must have been a fine figure of a man. Though now coarse and bloated, with white and flabby flesh, it would easily be seen that he was tall beyond the ordinary with the narrow hips of the athlete. His eyes were deeply sunk in his head; and in them flickered wanly that strange, restless light which one sees so often in the faces of those whom Death is soon to claim. Even amid the ravages which under-nourishment, drink and drugs had made in his features, the influence of gentle birth might yet be marked in the straight, firm pencilling of the eyebrows and the well-shaped aquiline nose. I thought the man looked dreadfully ill and I noted about nose and mouth that pinched look which can never deceive.

The whole shack appeared to consist of the one room in which I found myself. It was pitiably bare. A table on which stood some unappetising remnants of food was set against the wall beneath the unglazed window which faced the sick man's couch. A broken stool and a couple of soap-boxes,

one furnished with a tin basin and a petrol can of water, completed the furniture.

"There's a bar to go across the door," said a weak voice from the corner where the sick man lay; "would you be good enough to put it down? I don't want us to be disturbed...."

He cast an apprehensive glance at the window. I fitted the rough beam across the door and approached the couch. It was merely a bed of maize stalks.

"You're very ill, I'm afraid," I said pulling over one of the boxes and seating myself by the Englishman. "Have you seen a doctor?"

The vagrant waved his hand in a deprecatory manner.

"My dear fellow," he said—and again I noted the refinement in his voice,—"no sawbones can help *me*. I never held with them much anyway. Luisa got paid to-day—she washes at Bard's, you know (it was she who told me you were here)—and so I've got some medicine...."—he touched a little pannikin which stood on the floor at his side—"it's all that keeps me alive now that I can't get the 'snow!'"

I recognised the name which the drug traffic gives to cocaine.

The sick man was rent by a spasm of coughing.

"It's paradoxical," he gasped out presently, "but the more I take of my life-giving elixir here the quicker the end will come. All I live for now, it seems to me, is to shorten as much as possible the intervals between the bouts."

I've seen something in my time of the cynical resignation of your chronic drunkard. So I wasted no good advice on the poor devil, but held my peace while he swallowed a mouthful from the pannikin at his elbow.

"You went out of your way to do me a good turn once, Okewood," he said, setting the vessel down and wiping his mouth on his soiled sleeve. "I know your name, you see. I made some inquiries about you before they ran me out of San Salvador. You got a D.S.O. in the war, I think?"

"They gave away so many!" I said idiotically. But that sort of remark always engenders an idiotic reply.

"No, no," he insisted. "Yours was one of the right ones, Okewood; I can see that by looking at you. You're the real type of British officer. And, although you may not think it to see me now, I know what I'm talking about. You fellows had your chance in the war and by Gad, sir, some of you took it...."

I knew he was an army man and said so.

He nodded.

"Cavalry," he answered. "You might be in the cavalry, too, by your build!"

I told him I was a field-gunner—or used to be, and then I asked him his name.

He smiled wanly at that.

"No names, no court-martials!" he quoted.

He drank from his pannikin again.

"Call me Adams!" he said.

There was a moment's silence. The sick man moved restlessly on his rustling couch and I heard his teeth rattle in his head. Outside, the pulsating life of the negro quarter shattered the brooding stillness of the tropical night. The sound of low, full-throated laughter, mingling with the jangling of guitars, drifted up from the lane.

"Broken as a major," the sick man said abruptly. "A bad business, very. Yes, they jailed me over it. And when I came out it was to find every man's hand against me. It's been against me ever since! Ah, it's a bad thing to make an enemy of England! When I think of the humble pie I've eaten from some of these blasted counter-jumping finnicking consuls of ours along this coast only to be thrown out of doors at last by their Dago servants! Once go down and out in England, and God help you! You'll never come back! Ah! it's not your own folk who'll lend you a hand then. It's the humble people, like Luisa here on whom I sponge, who keeps me, Okewood, who is proud to keep me...."

His voice quavered and broke. Tears welled up in his sunken eyes. One hates to see a man break down, so I looked away. And the beachcomber went to his pannikin for solace.

"That day at the calaboose at San Salvador," he said presently, "I wanted to tell you who I was. Twenty-five years ago I buried my real name. But what you did for me.... well, it was a white thing to do. I wanted to say to you: 'Race tells, sir! You have helped one of your own breed and upbringing.' It shall be written in our family records that 'Such-a-one (meaning myself) of Blank in the County of So-and-So, being in sore distress in the hands of the foreigner,

was succoured by the chivalrous intervention of Major Desmond Okewood.'"

He sighed, then added:—

"But I doubt if you would have understood my meaning!"

I found myself becoming extraordinarily interested in this grotesque wastrel who, though sunk to the lowest depths a man may touch, managed to cling so desperately to his pride of birth.

The outcast spoke again.

"I mustn't waste your time. But it's so rare to find one of my own world to talk to. Listen to me, now! You stood up for me at San Salvador and in return.... You're not a rich man, Okewood?"

I laughed.

"I have to work for my living, Adams," I answered.

"Good, good! Then you will appreciate the more the fortune I am going to put in your way. An Eldorado to make you rich beyond the dreams of...."

He broke off, racked by a terrible fit of coughing. The spasm left him weak and gasping.

His talk about fortunes and the rest made me think he was a trifle light-headed. So I made to rise from my seat.

"You're talking too much," I said soothingly. "I think I'll leave you now and come back another day!"

But the beach-comber thrust out a hand—such a thin and wasted hand!—and clutched my sleeve. He could not speak

for the moment, but he cast me a despairing look eloquent in its appeal to me to stay.

"A fortune," he gasped out when his breath began to come back to him. "I'll make you rich! I want to show my gratitude to the man who knows what is due to a.... a.... a gentleman!"

He fell back with livid face. I raised his head and held the pannikin to his lips. It was half full of some terrible-looking, dark-brown liquor. He drank a little, then lay back with closed eyes. He lay so still that, with his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks, you might have taken him for a corpse.

In a little while he was better and spoke again.

"Okewood," he said—and this time his voice was hardly above a whisper, "I believe I know where treasure's hid. For more than a year now I've carried my secret round with me, for the chance to get back there, waiting to find the partner I could trust. And now Fate (with whom I've quarrelled all my life) has played me a dirty trick to finish up. I've found my partner when it's too late for me to share!"

He relapsed into silence again. His head drooped and his eyes were closed so that for the moment, I thought he had fainted. But presently he asked abruptly:—

"Have you ever heard of Cock Island?"

"Cock Island?" I repeated. "No, I don't think so. Where is it?"

"In the Pacific, about 400 miles out at sea. Many months ago—the summer after the Armistice it was—I was serving before the mast in a Dutch schooner—the *Huis-ten-Bosch*,

her name was. I signed on at Papeete to run to Callao with a cargo of copra. The crew were all Kanakas, natives, you know, except for one other man who signed on with me—Dutchey, they called him. We were on the beach together in Tahiti...."

His fit of weakness seemed to have passed and his voice grew stronger and his eyes brighter as he proceeded with his tale.

"Well, something went amiss with our fresh water supply," he went on, "so we laid off at Cock Island to replenish our casks. It was a jolly little place—you know the sort of thing, all wavy coconut palms and wooded peaks running up steeply from the fore-shore. And, of course, the very dickens of a surf bar. The skipper sent me and Dutchey with a gang of Kanakas to fill up with water. We found a way in through the bar and having landed, set the Kanakas to work to fill the casks at a fine spring of water, cold and clear, which fell from the hillside. Then Dutchey and I had a look round.

"I had asked our old man—the captain, you know—about Cock Island. He had told me that, according to the Sailing Directions, it was uninhabited. Therefore, as Dutchey and I were pushing our way through the undergrowth to get to the high central upland, we were a bit taken aback to come upon a grave in a clearing.

"It was a regular grave cut out of the rough grass with a mound and a cross all shipshape and proper. The cross, which was merely two bits of stout deal lashed together with wire, was a bit weatherbeaten and polished smooth by the sand blown against it. It had no inscription. Against the cross a small mirror was propped up, while in front of it

stood a bottle half embedded in the earth. The bottle contained some writing on a piece of folded oil-silk."

"We used to bury fellows that way in France," I remarked. "One stuck the name and particulars on a piece of paper and shoved it in a bottle until they had time to put a cross up, don't you know?"

"I had no idea what this was," said the beach-comber, "the writing was a fearful scrawl and rather faint at that. I couldn't make head or tail of it. I just slipped it into my pocket, meaning to have a look at it another time. While I had been examining the grave, the fellow with me, the man we called Dutchey, had been rooting about in the clearing. Presently he emerged from behind a bush with a whole collection of junk which he laid on the ground at my feet. There was an old newspaper, a piece of dirty packing paper and a cigar-box.

"He was a queer chap, this Dutchey. We never could quite make him out. Personally, I thought he wasn't all there. He spoke very rarely but, when he opened his lips, he talked some kind of German-American double Dutch. He was very taciturn; the sort of man you know, who gives no confidences and invites none. That was really what attracted him to me when we chummed up on the beach at Papeete. We went through a rough time there together, too!...."

The sick man broke off musingly. Then the cough took him again and it was some minutes before he resumed speaking.

"Dutchey laid all this junk out in front of me rather like a dog bringing you a stick you've thrown it. Then he said:—

"'Dat bunch o' toughs from San Salvador bin here!'

"Dutchey's conversational bursts generally opened enigmatically and I knew from experience that it was no use interrupting him to ask for enlightenment. One could only hope it might come in due course.

"Dutchey lifted up the newspaper.

"'De *Heraldo* of San Salvador of nineteen eighteen—you see de date March Seventeen?'

"He raised up the piece of wrapping paper.

"'You savvy Jose Garcia's store at San Salvador?'

"(I should say I did, Okewood. He was the swine that jugged me over his rotten bill!)

"'Dis from Garcia's store! You see de name printed on it?'

"Finally he picked up the cigar-box and opening it displayed a row of mouldy cigars with a yellow band.

"'Black Pablo!' he said.

"'How do you mean, Dutchey?' I asked.

"'Dere ain't but the one man in San Salvador smoke dese ceegyars,' he answered, 'and dat's Black Pablo. Jose Garcia smuggles dem in express for him. Dis sure is fonny!'

"He broke into a fit of laughter, dribbling a good deal.

"'Dis um de l'il island!' he exclaimed and went off again.

"'But who is Black Pablo?' I demanded. 'Is he the head of this gang?'

"'Is he.... hell?' cried Dutchey. 'Dere ain't no one amounts to a row o' beans since El Cojo come along. Black Pablo, Neque, Mahon.... dere's not one of them dawg-gorn four-flushers dare open deir face when El Cojo's round. Dey shoot off deir mouth to me 'bout deir l'il island. Pretty goddam mysterious 'bout it, too. No blab to Dutchey, dey say. El Cojo won't have it. But Dutchey knows. Blarst me sowl....'

"Dutchey had a great flow of language. And he let it rip as he told me the way he meant to crow over El Cojo and his gang when he got back to San Salvador."

Adams had warmed to his story and a little red had crept into his cheeks. He was an excellent *raconteur* and he seemed to enjoy reproducing the extraordinary lingo of his friend Dutchey.

"We rowed over to the ship again," he resumed, "and as soon as I had a moment alone I had another look at the writing on the oilsilk. But I could make nothing of it. I thought I'd keep it, though, just for luck, so I strung it round my neck and forgot all about it until one day in the calaboose at San Salvador I overheard a very curious conversation. Can you reach the pannikin? Thanks!"

The outcast drank and wiped his mouth on the back of his dirty white cuff.

"You know the way they lock one up in these Dago jails—all in a common room together. Well, a day or two after I got in I was sitting on the floor with my back against the wall taking a bit of a siesta when suddenly I heard the name 'Neque.' I recollected at once that Dutchey had spoken of 'Neque' as one of El Cojo's gang because once, years ago, I had a Spanish pal whose nickname was 'Neque'—I used to

play polo with him in Madrid—and the name was familiar to me.

"I opened my eyes and saw two of the prisoners sitting on the floor within a yard of me talking together in Spanish. Everybody else was asleep. The one whom I discovered to be Neque was a young fellow of about twenty-five, very slim and wiry. His companion was a dark man with a yellow face, a broken nose, and a patch over one eye. I closed my eyes quickly again and pretended to be asleep.

"'Such accursed luck!' the younger man said, 'five hundred thousand dollars in gold and you and I will not be there to share it!'

"'*Caraco*!' replied the fat man, 'but who shall say it is there?'

"'Imbecile!' exclaimed Neque. 'I was with El Cojo when he examined the Kanaka. Did not this Kanaka sail in the ship which brought the foreigner and the gold to Cock Island? He was one of those, this Kanaka, who survived the influenza sickness that swept the vessel. He told El Cojo—I, Neque, heard it with my own ears—how the foreigner was landed alone with the gold, how he remained by himself on the island for two days and how, when the Kanakas rowed in from the ship to fetch him, they found him with death on his face—the mauve death, you and I have seen it, per Dios, eh? And the boxes of gold gone! The foreigner gave them a bottle with a writing in it, bidding them swear that they would put it on his grave or he would haunt them. Then he died and the Kanakas buried him and having placed this object on the grave as he had ordered, fled from the island in the ship!'

"The fat man spat.

"'Who shall believe a Kanaka?' he said contemptuously.

"'The foreigner was the only white man with these natives,' argued Neque. 'They feared him and they did as he bade them lest his spirit should torment them. Besides the grave has been seen on the island since....'

"At that the fat man woke up and became interested.

"'Never!' he exclaimed in astonishment.

"And then Neque told him of a conversation El Cojo had had with a 'mad seaman,' in whom it was not difficult to recognise Dutchey, who had landed with a companion from a Dutch schooner and had seen the grave and on it a bottle. The other man, the 'loco' (madman) had said, had taken out of the bottle a piece of writing.

"'This other man,' questioned his companion. 'Who was he?'

"'An Inglez,' replied Neque, 'but the mad seaman did not know his name and had not seen him since they had landed.'

"At that the fat man spat again.

"'Bah!' he said, 'these *locitos* are cunning. There was no *Inglez*. The mad seaman has that writing which tells where the gold lies as sure as men call me Black Pablo....'

"The name brought back to me Cock Island in a flash; I seemed to see Dutchey, with his puzzled, woe-begone expression, holding a handful of mouldy cigars, the cigars that Jose Garcia imported for Black Pablo. And looking at the fellow with his single eye and his hideous twisted nose I couldn't help feeling glad, my friend, that he doubted my existence...."

The beach-comber stopped and looked at me. Then he thrust a lean hand inside the bosom of his ragged jacket.

"You've now heard the tale for what it's worth, Okewood," said he, "and here's that dead man's message! Take good care of it! It may mean a fortune for you!...."

He pulled out a greasy package which hung on a cord round his neck. He unfastened the cord and handed me a flat, narrow parcel. I was going to open it; but he stayed my hand.

"Not here," he enjoined in a low whisper. Then, with a wistful smile, he added:—

"I'm afraid it's a dangerous present I'm making you, old man!"

"Why do you say that?" I demanded.

The sick man turned his head and looked at the unglazed window protected only by a pair of rough-carpentered wooden shutters. In the street outside someone was lightly thrumming a guitar. Now and then came the sound of soft laughter. Otherwise the negro village had sunk to rest. All was still without and the plaintive chords resounded distinctly through the hot night.

"A week after I was shipped from San Salvador," he said, "they found Dutchey's body in the dock with a noose round his neck. Poor old Dutchey who never harmed anybody! Listen!"

The rich, full-throated tenor voice, which I had heard as I was following Doña Luisa through the negro quarter, suddenly burst into song quite close at hand. On a sad and

plaintive melody it sang with a liquid enunciation which made every chord distinct:—

"*Se murio, y sobre su cara*
*"Un panuelito le heche*
*"For que no toque la tierra*
*"Esa bocca que yo bese!*"

The beach-comber held up his hand as the melody died away on a minor key.

"It is time for you to go!" he whispered. "The door over there, opposite the one by which you came in, leads to the yard at the back. Cross the yard, take the path through the plantation, bear always to the right and you will strike the main road to the docks. Go as quietly as you can and don't dawdle on the way.... Ah!"

Again the singer in the lane sent his plaintive melody soaring to the stars. He chanted his little verse through once more. Feebly, the sick man beat time with his hand.

"He's been singing on and off all the evening, Okewood," he murmured. "Always the same song. I Englished it while I was waiting for you. Listen!"

In a soft, quavering voice he whispered rather than sang:—

"*She died and on her face*
*I laid a napkin fine*
*Lest the cold earth should touch*
*Those lips I pressed to mine....*"

"Ah!" he sighed as the song died away and silence fell on us once more; "when the hour strikes for me, Okewood, there'll be no one, except, maybe, old Mammie Luisa there, to lay a pretty thought like that in my coffin!"

He held out his hand.

"Now go!" he bade me. "And good luck go with you!"

I took his proffered hand.

"I will come again and see you, Adams," said I. "I expect you'll want to hear what I've made of the message!"

He was looking at me whimsically.

"No, Okewood," he said, shaking his head, "I'm thinking we shan't meet again!"

I was thinking the same; for, in truth, the man looked at death's door.

The unseen singer had attacked another verse.

"*Mir a si seria bella....*"

The opening words came resonantly to me as I quietly stole from the room. At the door I turned for a last look at the beachcomber. The candle was guttering away and its trembling light illuminated only the pinched, worn features and the sombre, suffering eyes. The grossness of that broken body was mercifully swallowed up in the shadows. To and fro across the candle's feeble gleam the hands moved in cadence with the song....