

***GUY
BOOTHBY***

***IN STRANGE
COMPANY***

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In Strange Company

A Story of Chili and the Southern Seas

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IN STRANGE COMPANY.

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INTRODUCTION.

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

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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.

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CHAPTER I.

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SHOWING WHERE THE MONEY REALLY CAME FROM.

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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