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El Boleto de Oro

Buenavista 1846

I can't recall how many days I suffered on that ferry. I know that on the first day out of Panama City my muscles had been unusually full of pain and the first night had been one where whatever had been inside my stomach had fought its way out using the most violent means from both ends. I had felt recovered on the second day and thought it no more than food poisoning but later that same morning my temperature soared. All I knew after that were intermittent bouts of lucidity, deep sleep during which I was visited by every demon imaginable, breathlessness and hour after hour of diarrhoea and vomiting.

Eventually I felt well enough to drink some water and eat a small quantity of dry bread. The shivering was gone but my limbs felt as though held down by anchors. I was too feeble to move. The next day the ferry found its way to the harbour at Buenavista and, that being the end of the journey unless I stayed on board and returned to Panama, I had no choice but disembarkation. It was only then that I discovered some wretch had filched my purse. Perhaps that fobsman the American who had shown too keen an interest in me? Whoever the footpad had been, they were long gone.

With no money save the three guinea notes which by a miracle remained sewn into my trousers I bundled up my clothes, wobbled on unsteady legs down the gang plank and found myself alone, disorientated and with a thirst as large as the sky in another strange land. I walked – limped – up the hill to the town's centre where I succeeded in finding a well. I had to wait my turn but having nothing else to wait for it was no matter. While I waited, I took in the town.

I fancied that it had been painted by a child. It was in the brightest colours: all blues and yellows, greens and pinks. A far cry from Croydon. What had these people to be so happy about? It was a question which would have to wait, as my turn had arrived at the well. I drank as though filling a bath.

When I was through, I handed the ladle to the young mestizo standing patiently behind me. He had lost his right eye, and wore no patch so that all I could see of him was a sickening scar. "Comer?" I said to him, miming to eat. He merely shrugged. "Dormir?" I tried, miming resting my head on a pillow. He chin-nodded in the direction of a run-down building across the plaza with a sign over its door, El Boletto de Oro. "Gracias." I trudged over and knocked on the door.

A minute passed. I was about to knock again when the door opened. In front of me stood the black-eyed, foul-mouthed enigma that was the man I would soon count as a friend, Alciabades.