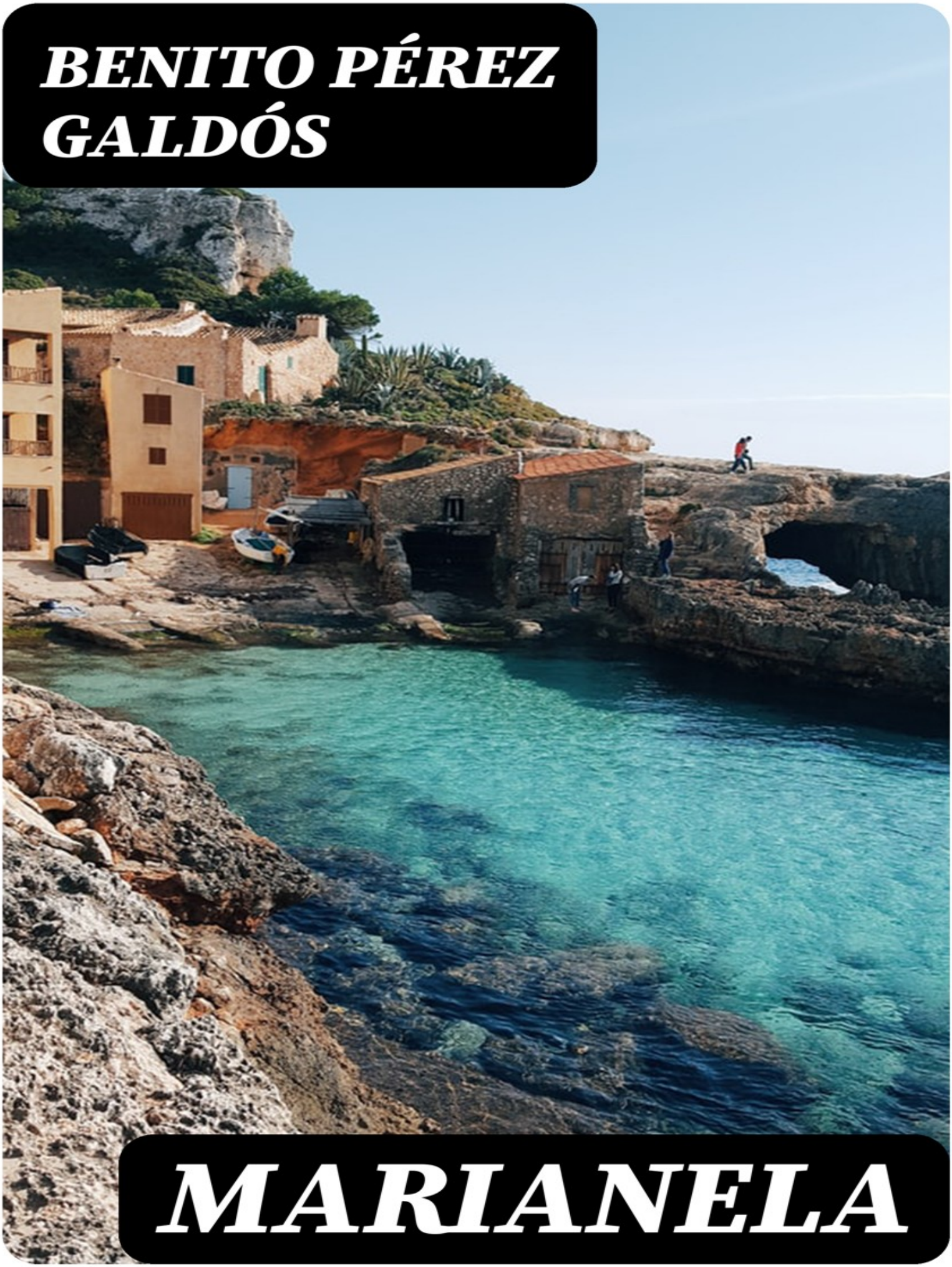
BENITO PÉREZ GALDÓS



MARIANELA

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CHAPTER I.
GONE ASTRAY.

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The sun had set. After the brief interval of twilight the night fell calm and dark, and in its gloomy bosom the last sounds of a sleepy world died gently away. The traveller went forward on his way, hastening his step as night came on; the path he followed was narrow and worn by the constant tread of men and beasts, and led gently up a hill on whose verdant slopes grew picturesque clumps of wild cherry trees, beeches and oaks.—The reader perceives that we are in the north of Spain.

Our traveller was a man of middle age, strongly built, tall and broad-shouldered; his movements were brisk and resolute, his step firm, his manner somewhat rugged, his eye bold and bright; his pace was nimble, considering that he was decidedly stout, and he was—the reader may at once be told, though somewhat prematurely—as good a soul as you may meet with anywhere. He was dressed, as a man in easy circumstances should be dressed for a journey in spring weather, with one of those round shady hats, which, from their ugly shape, have been nicknamed mushrooms (*hongo*), a pair of field-glasses hanging to a strap, and a knotted stick which, when he did not use it to support his steps, served to push aside the brambles when they flung their thorny branches across so as to catch his dress.

He presently stopped, and gazing round the dim horizon, he seemed vexed and puzzled. He evidently was not sure of

his way and was looking round for some passing native of the district who might give him such topographical information as might enable him to reach his destination.

"I cannot be mistaken," he said to himself. "They told me to cross the river by the stepping-stones—and I did so—then to walk on, straight on. And there, to my right, I do in fact, see that detestable town which I should call *Villafangosa* by reason of the enormous amount of mud that chokes the streets.—Well then, I can but go 'on, straight on'—I rather like the phrase, and if I bore arms, I would adopt it for my motto—in order to find myself at last at the famous mines of Socartes."

But before he had gone much farther, he added: "I have lost my way, beyond a doubt I have lost my way.—This, Teodoro Golfin, is the result of your 'on, straight on.' Bah! these blockheads do not know the meaning of words; either they meant to laugh at you or else they did not know the way to the mines of Socartes. A huge mining establishment must be evident to the senses, with its buildings and chimneys, its noise of hammers and snorting of furnaces, neighing of horses and clattering of machinery—and I neither see, nor hear, nor smell anything. I might be in a desert! How absolutely solitary! If I believed in witches, I could fancy that Fate intended me this night to have the honor of making acquaintance with some. Deuce take it! why is there no one to be seen in these parts? And it will be half an hour yet before the moon rises. Ah! treacherous Luna, it is you who are to blame for my misadventure.—If only I could see what sort of place I am in.—However, what could I expect?" and he shrugged his shoulders with the air

of a vigorous man who scorns danger. "What, Golfin, after having wandered all round the world are you going to give in now? The peasants were right after all: 'on, straight on.' The universal law of locomotion cannot fail me here."

And he bravely set out to test the law, and went on about a kilometre farther, following the paths which seemed to start from under his feet, crossing each other and breaking off at a short distance, in a thousand angles which puzzled and tired him. Stout as his resolution was, at last he grew weary of his vain efforts. The paths, which had at first all led upwards, began to slope downwards as they crossed each other, and at last he came to so steep a slope that he could only hope to get to the bottom by rolling down it.

"A pretty state of things!" he exclaimed, trying to console himself for this provoking situation by his sense of the ridiculous. "Where have you got to now my friend? This is a perfect abyss. Is anything to be seen at the bottom. No, nothing, absolutely nothing—the hill-side has disappeared, the earth has been dug away. There is nothing to be seen but stones and barren soil tinged red with iron. I have reached the mines, no doubt of that—and yet there is not a living soul to be seen, no smoky chimneys; no noise, not a train in the distance, not even a dog barking. What am I to do? Out there the path seems to slope up again.—Shall I follow that? Shall I leave the beaten track? Shall I go back again? Oh! this is absurd! Either I am not myself or I will reach Socartes to-night, and be welcomed by my worthy brother! 'On, straight on.'"

He took a step, and his foot sank in the soft and crumbling soil. "What next, ye ruling stars? Am I to be

swallowed up alive? If only that lazy moon would favor us with a little light we might see each other's faces—and, upon my soul, I can hardly expect to find Paradise at the bottom of this hole. It seems to be the crater of some extinct volcano.... Nothing could be easier than a slide down this beautiful precipice. What have we here? ... A stone; capital—a good seat while I smoke a cigar and wait for the moon to rise."

The philosophical Golfin seated himself as calmly as if it were a bench by a promenade, and was preparing for his smoke, when he heard a voice—yes, beyond a doubt, a human voice, at some little distance—a plaintive air, or to speak more accurately, a melancholy chant of a single phrase, of which the last cadence was prolonged into a "dying fall," and which at last sank into the silence of the night, so softly that the ear could not detect when it ceased.

"Come," said the listener, well pleased, "there are some human beings about. That was a girl's voice; yes, certainly a girl's, and a lovely voice too. I like the popular airs of this country-side. Now it has stopped.... Hark! it will soon begin again.... Yes, I hear it once more. What a beautiful voice, and what a pathetic air! You might believe that it rose from the bowels of the earth, and that Señor Golfin, the most matter-of-fact and least superstitious man in this world, was going to make acquaintance with sylphs, nymphs, gnomes, dryads, and all the rabble rout that obey the mysterious spirit of the place.—But, if I am not mistaken, the voice is going farther away—the fair singer is departing.... Hi, girl, child, stop—wait a minute!..."

The voice which had for a few minutes so charmed the lost wanderer with its enchanting strains was dying away in the dark void, and at the shouts of Golfin it was suddenly silent. Beyond a doubt the mysterious gnome, who was solacing its underground loneliness by singing its plaintive loves, had taken fright at this rough interruption by a human being, and fled to the deepest caverns of the earth, where precious gems lay hidden, jealous of their own splendor.

"This is a pleasant state of things—" muttered Golfin, thinking that after all he could do no better than light his cigar.—"There seems no reason why it should not go on for a hundred years. I can smoke and wait. It was a clever idea of mine that I could walk up alone to the mines of Socartes. My luggage will have got there before me—a signal proof of the advantages of 'on, straight on.'"

A light breeze at this instant sprang up, and Golfin fancied he heard the sound of footsteps at the bottom of the unknown—or imaginary—abyss before him; he listened sharply, and in a minute felt quite certain that some one was walking below. He stood up and shouted:

"Girl, man, or whoever you are, can I get to the mines of Socartes by this road?"

He had not done speaking when he heard a dog barking wildly, and then a manly voice saying: "Choto, Choto! come here!"

"Hi there!" cried the traveller. "My good friend—man, boy, demon, or whatever you are, call back your dog, for I am a man of peace."

"Choto, Choto!..."

Golfin could make out the form of a large, black dog coming towards him, but after sniffing round him it retired at its master's call; and at that moment the traveller could distinguish a figure, a man, standing as immovable as a stone image, at about ten paces below him, on a slanting pathway which seemed to cut across the steep incline. This path, and the human form standing there, became quite clear now to Golfin, who, looking up to the sky, exclaimed:

"Thank God! here is the mad moon at last; now we can see where we are. I had not the faintest notion that a path existed so close to me, why, it is quite a road. Tell me, my friend, do you know whether the mines of Socartes are hereabout?"

"Yes, Señor, these are the mines of Socartes; but we are at some distance from the works."

The voice which spoke thus was youthful and pleasant, with the attractive inflection that indicates a polite readiness to be of service. The doctor was well pleased at detecting this, and still better pleased at observing the soft light, which was spreading through the darkness and bringing resurrection to earth and sky, as though calling them forth from nothingness.

"*Fiat lux!*" he said, going forward down the slope. "I feel as if I had just emerged into existence from primeval chaos.... Indeed, my good friend, I am truly grateful to you for the information you have given me, and for the farther information you no doubt will give me. I left Villamojada as the sun was setting.—They told me to go on, straight on...."

"Are you going to the works?" asked the strange youth, without stirring from the spot or looking up towards the

doctor, who was now quite near him.

"Yes, Señor; but I have certainly lost my way."

"Well, this is not the entrance to the mines. The entrance is by the steps at Rabagones, from which the road runs and the tram-way that they are making. If you had gone that way you would have reached the works in ten minutes. From here it is a long way, and a very bad road. We are at the outer circle of the mining galleries, and shall have to go through passages and tunnels, down ladders, through cuttings, up slopes, and then down the inclined plane; in short, cross the mines from this side to the other, where the workshops are and the furnaces, the machines and the smelting-house."

"Well, I seem to have been uncommonly stupid," said Golfin, laughing.

"I will guide you with much pleasure, for I know every inch of the place."

Golfin, whose feet sank in the loose earth, slipping here and tottering there, had at last reached the solid ground of the path, and his first idea was to look closely at the good-natured lad who addressed him. For a minute or two he was speechless with surprise.

"You!" he said, in a low voice.

"I am blind, it is true, Señor," said the boy. "But I can run without seeing from one end to the other of the mines of Socartes. This stick I carry prevents my stumbling, and Choto is always with me, when I have not got Nela with me, who is my guide. So, follow me, Señor, and allow me to guide you."

CHAPTER II.
GUIDED RIGHT.

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"And were you born blind?" asked Golfin, with eager interest, arising not only from compassion.

"Yes, Señor, born blind," replied the lad, with perfect simplicity. "I only know the world by fancy, feeling and hearing. I have learned to understand that the most wonderful portion of the universe is that which is unknown to me. I know that the eyes of other people are not like mine, since they are able to distinguish things by them—but the power seems to me so extraordinary, that I cannot even imagine the possibility of its existence."

"Who knows ..." Golfin began. "But what strange scene is this, my friend? What a wonderful place we are in!"

The traveller, who had been walking by the side of his companion, stood still in astonishment at the weird view which lay before him. They were in a deep basin resembling the crater of a volcano; the ground at the bottom was broken and rough, and the

sloping sides still more so. Round the margin and in the middle of the vast caldron, which looked even larger than it was in the deceptive chiaroscuro of the moonlit night, stood colossal figures, deformed caricatures of humanity, monsters lying prone with their feet in the air, with arms spread in despair, stunted growths, distorted faces such as we see in the whimsical wreathing of floating clouds—but all still, silent, and turned to stone. In color they were mummy-like, a reddish bistre; their action suggested the delirium of fever arrested by sudden death. It was as though giant forms had petrified in the midst of some demoniacal orgy, and their gestures and the burlesque grimaces of the monstrous heads had been stricken into fixity, like the motionless attitudes of sculpture. The silence which prevailed in this volcanic-looking hollow was itself terrifying. One might fancy that the cries and shrieks of a thousand voices had been petrified too, and had been held there locked in stone for ages.

"Where are we, my young friend?" asked Golfin. "This place is like a nightmare."

"This part of the mine is called La Terrible," replied the blind boy, not appreciating his

companion's frame of mind. "It was worked till about two years ago when the ore was exhausted, and now the mining is carried on in other parts which are more profitable. The strange objects that surprise you so much are the blocks of stone which we call *cretácea*, and which consist of hardened ferruginous clay, after the ore has been extracted. I have been told that the effect is sublime, particularly in the moonlight; but I do not understand such things."

"A wonderful effect,—yes—" said the stranger, who still stood gazing at the scene, "but which to me is more terrible than pleasing, for it reminds me of the horrors of neuralgia.—Shall I tell you what it is like? It is as if I were standing inside a monstrous brain suffering from a fearful headache. Those figures are like the images which present themselves to the tortured brain, and become confounded with the hideous fancies and visions created by a fevered mind."

"Choto, Choto, here!" called the blind lad. "Take care now, Señor, how you walk; we are going into a gallery." And, in fact, Golfin saw that his guide, feeling with his stick, was

making his way towards a narrow entrance distinguished by three stout posts.

The dog went in first, snuffing at the black cavern; the blind boy followed him with the calm indifference of a man who dwells in perpetual darkness. Golfin followed, not without some instinctive trepidation and repugnance at an underground expedition.

"It is really wonderful," he said, "that you should go in and out of such a place without stumbling."

"I have lived all my life in these places, and know them as well as my own home. Here it is very cold; wrap yourself up if have you a cloak with you. We shall soon be out at the other end." He walked on, feeling his way with his hand along the wall, which was formed of upright beams, and saying:

"Mind you do not stumble over the ruts in the path; they bring the mineral along here from the diggings above. Are you cold?"

"Tell me," said the doctor, gaily. "Are you quite certain that the earth has not swallowed us up? This passage is the gullet of some monstrous insectivorous brute into whose stomach we miserable worms have

inadvertently crept.—Do you often take a walk in this delectable spot?"

"Yes, often, and at all hours, and I think the place delightful. Now we are in the most arid part—the ground here is pure sand—now we are on the stones again. Here there is a constant drip of sulphurous water, and down there we have a block of rock in which there are petrified shells. There are layers of slate over there. Do you hear that toad croaking? we are near the opening now; the rascal sits there every night; I know him quite well. He has a hoarse, slow voice."

"Who—the toad?"

"Yes, Señor; we are near the end now."

"So I see; it looks like an eye staring at us—that is the mouth of the corridor."

No sooner were they out in the air again, than the first thing that struck the doctor's ear was the same melancholy song as he had heard before. The blind boy heard it too; he turned round to his companion and said, smiling with pride and pleasure:

"Do you hear her?"

"I heard that voice before and it charmed me wonderfully. Who is the singer?"

Instead of answering, the blind boy stopped and shouted with all the force of his lungs: "Nela! Nela!" and the name was repeated by a hundred echoes, some quite close, others faint and distant. Then, putting his hands to his mouth for a speaking-trumpet, he called out:

"Do not come to me, I am going that way. Wait for me at the forge—at the forge!"

He turned to the doctor again and explained:

"Nela is a girl who goes about with me; she is my guide—my *Lazarillo*. When it was dusk we were coming home together from the great meadow—it was rather cool, so, as my father forbids my walking out at night without a cloak, I waited in Romolinos' cabin, and Nela ran home to fetch it for me. After staying some little time in the hut, I remembered that I had a friend coming to see me at home and I had not patience to wait for Nela, so I set out with Choto. I was just going down La Terrible when I met you. We shall soon be at the forge now and there we must part, for my father is not pleased when I go home late, and Nela will show you the way to the works."

"Many thanks, my little friend."

The tunnel had brought them out at a spot even more wonderful than that they had left. It

was an enormous gulf or chasm in the earth, looking like the result of an earthquake; but it had not been rent by the fierce throbs of planetary fires, but slowly wrought by the laborious pick of the miner. It looked like the interior of a huge shipwrecked vessel, stranded on the shore, and broken across the waist by the breakers, so as to bend it at an obtuse angle. You could fancy you saw its ribs laid bare, and their ends standing up in an irregular file on one side. Within the hollow hull lay huge stones, like the relics of a cargo tossed about by the waves, and the deceptive light of the moon lent so much aid to the fancy that Golfin could have believed that he saw among the relics of a ship's fittings, corpses half devoured by fishes, mummies, skeletons—all dead, silent, half-destroyed and still, as if they had long been lying in the infinite sepulchre of the ocean. And the illusion was perfect when he presently heard a sound of waters, and a regular splash like the dash of ripples in the hollow of a rock, or through the skeleton timbers of a wrecked vessel.

"There is water hereabouts," he said to his guide.

"The noise you hear,"—replied the other, stopping,—"and which sounds like—what shall I say—like the gurgle you make when you gargle your throat?..."

"Exactly—and where is that gurgle? Is it some rivulet that runs near here?"

"No, Señor; over there to the left there is a slope, and beyond it a wide mouth opens in the ground, a cavern, an abyss without any known bottom. La Trascava they call it. Some say that it runs down to the sea at Ficóbriga, and others think that a river flows at the bottom of it which goes round and round, like a wheel, and never comes out anywhere. I fancy it must be like a whirlpool. Some again say that down there is a constant gust of air coming out of the interior of the earth—as we blow when we whistle—and that this blast meets a current of water; then they quarrel, and struggle, and fight, and produce that noise that we hear up here."

"And has no one ever been down into this cavern?"

"It can only be got into in one way."

"How?"

"By jumping into it. Those who have gone in have never come out again; and it is a great

pity, for they might have told us what goes on in there. The other end of the cavern is a long way off from this, for two years ago, when some miners were working they came upon a rift in the rock where they heard the very same sound of water as you hear now. This rift must, no doubt, communicate with the inside galleries, out of which the blast blows and into which the water rushes. By daylight you can see it plainly, for you need only go a few steps to the left to reach the spot and there is a comfortable seat there. Some people are frightened to go there, but Nela and I sit there to listen to the voice down inside the cavern—for really, Señor, we can fancy we hear it talking. Nela declares and swears that she hears words, and can distinguish them quite plainly. I must confess I never heard any words; but it goes on murmuring like a soliloquy or a meditation, and sometimes it is sad and sometimes gay—sometimes angry, and sometimes good-humored and jolly."

"And yet I can make nothing of it but a gurgle," said the doctor laughing.

"It sounds so from this spot.—But we must not stop now, it is getting late. You must be prepared to go through another gallery."

"Another?"

"Yes—and this one branches off into two in the middle. Beyond that there is a labyrinth of turns and zigzags, because the miners have to make galleries which, when they are worked out, are deserted and left to their fate. Go on Choto."

Choto slipped into a little opening that looked scarcely bigger than a rabbit-hole, followed by the doctor and his guide, who felt his way along the dark, narrow, crooked passage with his stick. There could be no better evidence of the delicacy and subtlety of the sense of touch, extending beyond the skin of a human hand through a piece of senseless wood. They went forwards, at first in a curve, and then round corner after corner, and all the way between walls of damp, and half-rotten planking.

"Do you know what this reminds me of?" said the doctor, perceiving that his guide took pleasure in similes and comparisons. "Of nothing so much as the thoughts of perverse man. We represent the consciousness of evil, when he looks into his conscience and sees himself in all his vileness."

Golfin fancied that he had used a metaphor rather above his companion's comprehension; but the blind boy proved that he was mistaken, for he said at once:

"For those to whom that inner world looks dark and gloomy, these galleries must be dismal indeed; but I, who live in perpetual darkness, find here something which has an affinity with my own nature. I can walk here as you would in the broadest road. If it were not for the want of air in some parts and the excessive damp in others, I should prefer these subterranean passages to any place I know."

"That is an idea of brooding fancy."

"I feel as if there were in my brain a narrow passage—a rabbit-hole—like this that we are walking in, and there my ideas run riot grandly."

"Ah! what a pity that you should never have seen the azure vault of the sky at mid-day!" the doctor exclaimed involuntarily. "Tell me, does this dark hole—in which your ideas run riot so grandly—lead out anywhere?"

"Oh yes! we shall be outside quite soon now. The vault of the sky you said—I fancy it must be a perfect, equal curve, which looks as if we

could touch it with our hands, but we cannot really."

As he spoke they got out of the tunnel; Golfin drawing a deep breath of relief, like a man who has cast off a burthen, exclaimed as he looked up at the heavens:

"Thank God that I see you once more stars of the firmament. Never have you seemed to me more beautiful than at this moment."

"As I was going along," said the blind boy, holding out his hand which held a stone, "I picked up this piece of crystal—now do you mean to say that these crystals, which to my touch are so sharply cut, so smooth and so neatly packed side by side, are not a very beautiful thing? They seem so to me at any rate." And as he spoke he broke off some of the crystals.

"My dear fellow," said the doctor with great feeling and compassion, "it is sad indeed that you should not be able to know that this stone is hardly worth looking at, while over our heads there hang the myriads of marvellous lamps that sparkle in the heavens." The boy threw back his head and said in a voice of deep regret:

"Is it true that you are there, you little stars?"

"God is infinitely great and merciful," said Golfin, laying his hand on his young companion's shoulder. "Who knows—who can say—much stranger things have happened—are happening every day." As he spoke, he looked close into his face, trying to see the lad's eyes by the dim light; fixed and sightless, he turned them in the direction in which he heard the speaker's voice.

"There is no hope," Golfin muttered.

They had come out on an open space. The moon, rising higher and higher, illuminated undulating meadows and high slopes, which looked like the ramparts of some immense fortification.—To the left, on a level plateau, the doctor saw a group of white houses crowning the slope.

"There, to the left," said the boy, "is my home—up at the top. Do you know that those three houses are what remain of the village of Aldeacorba de Suso. All the rest has been pulled down at different times in order to dig mines; all the soil underneath is iron ore, and our fore-fathers lived over millions of wealth without knowing it."

He was still speaking when a girl came running to meet them, a tiny scrap of a child, swift of foot and slightly built.

"Nela, Nela!" cried the blind boy. "Have you brought me a cloak?"

"Here it is," said the girl, putting it over his shoulders.

"Is this the songstress? Do you know you have a lovely voice?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the boy, in a tone of innocent admiration, "she sings beautifully! Now, Mariquilla, you must show this gentleman the way to the works, and I must go home. I can hear my father's voice already; he is coming to look for me, and he will be sure to scold me.... I am here, I am coming!"

"Make haste in, my boy!" said Golfin, shaking hands with him. "The air is fresh, and you might take cold. Many thanks for your company. I hope we may be good friends, for I shall be here some little time. I am the brother of Cárlos Golfin, the engineer of the mines."

"Oh! indeed.... Don Cárlos is a great friend of my father's. He has been expecting you these two days."

"I arrived this evening at the station at Villamojada, and they told me that Socartes

was not far, and that I could come up on foot. So, as I like to see the country and get exercise, and as they told me it was 'on, straight on,' I set out, and sent my luggage in a cart. You saw how I had lost my way—but there is no evil out of which good does not come.... I have made your acquaintance, and we shall be friends, very good friends perhaps. Go in, good-bye; get home quickly, for the autumn evenings are not good for you. The little Señora here will be so good as to guide me."

"It is not more than a quarter of an hour's walk to the works, quite a short way. But take care not to stumble over the rails, and look out as you cross the inclined plane. There often are trucks on the road, and in this damp weather the ground is like soap.—Good-bye, Caballero, and my very good friend.—Good-night." He went up the slope by a narrow flight of steps cut in the soil and squared by beams of wood; Golfin went straight on, guided by Nela. Does what they said deserve a separate chapter? In case it should, I will give it one.

CHAPTER III.
A DIALOGUE WHICH EXPLAINS MUCH.

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"Wait a moment my child, do not go so fast," said Golfin, himself standing still. "I want to light a cigar."

The night was so still, that no precautions were needed in striking the light to guard it from the wind, and when the doctor had lighted his cigar he held the wax match in front of Nela, saying kindly:

"Show me your face, little one."

He looked in the child's face with astonishment; her black eyes shone with a red spot, like a spark, for the instant while the match lasted. She looked a child, for she was but a tiny creature, extremely thin and undeveloped; but she seemed like a little woman, for her eyes had not a childlike expression, and her face had the mature look of a nature which has gone through experience and acquired judgment—or will have acquired it soon. In spite of this anomaly, she was well-proportioned and her small head sat gracefully