

Godfrey Morgan

By

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GODFREY MORGAN.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE READER HAS THE OPPORTUNITY OF BUYING AN ISLAND
IN THE
PACIFIC OCEAN.

"An island to sell, for cash, to the highest bidder!" said Dean Felporg, the auctioneer, standing behind his rostrum in the room where the conditions of the singular sale were being noisily discussed.

"Island for sale! island for sale!" repeated in shrill tones again and again Gingrass, the crier, who was threading his way in and out of the excited crowd closely packed inside the largest saloon in the auction mart at No. 10, Sacramento Street.

The crowd consisted not only of a goodly number of Americans from the States of Utah, Oregon, and California, but also of a few Frenchmen, who form quite a sixth of the population.

Mexicans were there enveloped in their sarapes; Chinamen in their

large-sleeved tunics, pointed shoes, and conical hats; one or two Kanucks from the coast; and even a sprinkling of Black Feet, Grosventres, or Flatheads, from the banks of the Trinity river.

The scene is in San Francisco, the capital of California, but not at the period when the placer-mining fever was raging--from 1849 to 1852. San Francisco was no longer what it had been then, a caravanserai, a terminus, an inn, where for a night there slept the busy men who were hastening to the gold-fields west of the Sierra Nevada. At the end of some twenty years the old unknown Yerba-Buena had given place to a town unique of its kind, peopled by 100,000 inhabitants, built under the shelter of a couple of hills, away from the shore, but stretching off to the farthest heights in the background--a city in short which has dethroned Lima, Santiago, Valparaiso, and every other rival, and which the Americans have made the queen of the Pacific, the "glory of the western coast!"

It was the 15th of May, and the weather was still cold. In California, subject as it is to the direct action of the polar currents, the first weeks of this month are somewhat similar to the last weeks of March in Central Europe. But the cold was hardly noticeable in the thick of the auction crowd. The bell with its incessant clangour had brought together an enormous throng, and quite a summer temperature caused the drops of perspiration to glisten on the foreheads of the spectators which the cold outside would have soon solidified.

Do not imagine that all these folks had come to the auction-room with

the intention of buying. I might say that all of them had but come to see. Who was going to be mad enough, even if he were rich enough, to purchase an isle of the Pacific, which the government had in some eccentric moment decided to sell? Would the reserve price ever be reached? Could anybody be found to work up the bidding? If not, it would scarcely be the fault of the public crier, who tried his best to tempt buyers by his shoutings and gestures, and the flowery metaphors of his harangue. People laughed at him, but they did not seem much influenced by him.

"An island! an isle to sell!" repeated Gingrass.

"But not to buy!" answered an Irishman, whose pocket did not hold enough to pay for a single pebble.

"An island which at the valuation will not fetch six dollars an acre!" said the auctioneer.

"And which won't pay an eighth per cent.!" replied a big farmer, who was well acquainted with agricultural speculations.

"An isle which measures quite sixty-four miles round and has an area of two hundred and twenty-five thousand acres!"

"Is it solid on its foundation?" asked a Mexican, an old customer at the liquor-bars, whose personal solidity seemed rather doubtful at the moment.

"An isle with forests still virgin!" repeated the crier, "with prairies, hills, watercourses--"

"Warranted?" asked a Frenchman, who seemed rather inclined to nibble.

"Yes! warranted!" added Felporg, much too old at his trade to be moved by the chaff of the public.

"For two years?"

"To the end of the world!"

"Beyond that?"

"A freehold island!" repeated the crier, "an island without a single noxious animal, no wild beasts, no reptiles!--"

"No birds?" added a wag.

"No insects?" inquired another.

"An island for the highest bidder!" said Dean Felporg, beginning again.

"Come, gentlemen, come! Have a little courage in your pockets! Who wants an island in perfect state of repair, never been used, an island in the Pacific, that ocean of oceans? The valuation is a mere nothing! It is put at eleven hundred thousand dollars, is there any one will bid? Who

speaks first? You, sir?--you, over there nodding your head like a porcelain mandarin? Here is an island! a really good island! Who says an island?"

"Pass it round!" said a voice as if they were dealing with a picture or a vase.

And the room shouted with laughter, but not a half-dollar was bid.

However, if the lot could not be passed round, the map of the island was at the public disposal. The whereabouts of the portion of the globe under consideration could be accurately ascertained. There was neither surprise nor disappointment to be feared in that respect. Situation, orientation, outline, altitudes, levels, hydrography, climatology, lines of communication, all these were easily to be verified in advance.

People were not buying a pig in a poke, and most undoubtedly there could be no mistake as to the nature of the goods on sale. Moreover, the innumerable journals of the United States, especially those of California, with their dailies, bi-weeklies, weeklies, bi-monthlies, monthlies, their reviews, magazines, bulletins, &c., had been for several months directing constant attention to the island whose sale by auction had been authorized by Act of Congress.

The island was Spencer Island, which lies in the west-south-west of the Bay of San Francisco, about 460 miles from the Californian coast, in 32° 15' north latitude, and 145° 18' west longitude, reckoning from Greenwich. It would be impossible to imagine a more isolated position,

quite out of the way of all maritime or commercial traffic, although Spencer Island was relatively, not very far off, and situated practically in American waters. But thereabouts the regular currents diverging to the north and south have formed a kind of lake of calms, which is sometimes known as the "Whirlpool of Fleurieu."

It is in the centre of this enormous eddy, which has hardly an appreciable movement, that Spencer Island is situated. And so it is sighted by very few ships. The main routes of the Pacific, which join the new to the old continent, and lead away to China or Japan, run in a more southerly direction. Sailing-vessels would meet with endless calms in the Whirlpool of Fleurieu; and steamers, which always take the shortest road, would gain no advantage by crossing it. Hence ships of neither class know anything of Spencer Island, which rises above the waters like the isolated summit of one of the submarine mountains of the Pacific. Truly, for a man wishing to flee from the noise of the world, seeking quiet in solitude, what could be better than this island, lost within a few hundred miles of the coast? For a voluntary Robinson Crusoe, it would be the very ideal of its kind! Only of course he must pay for it.

And now, why did the United States desire to part with the island? Was it for some whim? No! A great nation cannot act on caprice in any matter, however simple. The truth was this: situated as it was, Spencer Island had for a long time been known as a station perfectly useless. There could be no practical result from settling there. In a military point of view it was of no importance, for it only commanded an

absolutely deserted portion of the Pacific. In a commercial point of view there was a similar want of importance, for the products would not pay the freight either inwards or outwards. For a criminal colony it was too far from the coast. And to occupy it in any way, would be a very expensive undertaking. So it had remained deserted from time immemorial, and Congress, composed of "eminently practical" men, had resolved to put it up for sale--on one condition only, and that was, that its purchaser should be a free American citizen. There was no intention of giving away the island for nothing, and so the reserve price had been fixed at \$1,100,000. This amount for a financial society dealing with such matters was a mere bagatelle, if the transaction could offer any advantages; but as we need hardly repeat, it offered none, and competent men attached no more value to this detached portion of the United States, than to one of the islands lost beneath the glaciers of the Pole.

In one sense, however, the amount was considerable. A man must be rich to pay for this hobby, for in any case it would not return him a halfpenny per cent. He would even have to be immensely rich for the transaction was to be a "cash" one, and even in the United States it is as yet rare to find citizens with \$1,100,000 in their pockets, who would care to throw them into the water without hope of return.

And Congress had decided not to sell the island under the price. Eleven hundred thousand dollars, not a cent less, or Spencer Island would remain the property of the Union.

It was hardly likely that any one would be mad enough to buy it on the terms.

Besides, it was expressly reserved that the proprietor, if one offered, should not become king of Spencer Island, but president of a republic. He would gain no right to have subjects, but only fellow-citizens, who could elect him for a fixed time, and would be free from re-electing him indefinitely. Under any circumstances he was forbidden to play at monarchy. The Union could never tolerate the foundation of a kingdom, no matter how small, in American waters.

This reservation was enough to keep off many an ambitious millionaire, many an aged nabob, who might like to compete with the kings of the Sandwich, the Marquesas, and the other archipelagoes of the Pacific.

In short, for one reason or other, nobody presented himself. Time was getting on, the crier was out of breath in his efforts to secure a buyer, the auctioneer orated without obtaining a single specimen of those nods which his estimable fraternity are so quick to discover; and the reserve price was not even mentioned.

However, if the hammer was not wearied with oscillating above the rostrum, the crowd was not wearied with waiting around it. The joking continued to increase, and the chaff never ceased for a moment. One individual offered two dollars for the island, costs included. Another said that a man ought to be paid that for taking it.

And all the time the crier was heard with,--

"An island to sell! an island for sale!"

And there was no one to buy it.

"Will you guarantee that there are flats there?" said Stumpy, the grocer of Merchant Street, alluding to the deposits so famous in alluvial gold-mining.

"No," answered the auctioneer, "but it is not impossible that there are, and the State abandons all its rights over the gold lands."

"Haven't you got a volcano?" asked Oakhurst, the bar-keeper of Montgomery Street.

"No volcanoes," replied Dean Felporg, "if there were, we could not sell at this price!"

An immense shout of laughter followed.

"An island to sell! an island for sale!" yelled Gingrass, whose lungs tired themselves out to no purpose.

"Only a dollar! only a half-dollar! only a cent above the reserve!" said the auctioneer for the last time, "and I will knock it down! Once! Twice!"

Perfect silence.

"If nobody bids we must put the lot back! Once! Twice!

"Twelve hundred thousand dollars!"

The four words rang through the room like four shots from a revolver.

The crowd, suddenly speechless, turned towards the bold man who had dared to bid.

It was William W. Kolderup, of San Francisco.