

PAUL VARGAS; A MYSTERY

Part I.

(IN TWO PARTS)

By Hugh Conway

Illustrated by R. Tandler.



URING the course of my professional career I have met with many strange things. The strangest, the most in comprehensible of all, I am about to narrate. Its effect upon me was such that, without pausing for investigation or inquiry, I turned and fled from the town—even from the country in which I witnessed it. It was only when I was some thousands of miles away that I recovered from my terror sufficiently to think calmly over what had happened. Then I vowed a self-imposed vow that for many, many years I would mention the matter to no one. My reasons for secrecy were these:

In the first place I was, as I am now, a doctor. Now I am fairly well to do, and have little anxiety about the future. Then I was struggling hard to make a living. Such being the case, I argued that the telling of an incredible, monstrous tale—the truth of which, however, I should be bound to uphold in spite of everything and everybody—would do little toward enhancing my reputation for common sense, or improving my professional prospects.

In the second place, I determined to wait, in the hope that, some time or another, matters might be explained to my satisfaction.

So it is that for twenty years I have kept my own counsel. My first reason for silence no longer exists; while as to the second, I have now given up hoping for an elucidation. The one person who might make things clear I have never seen since.

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Although nearly a third of a man's allotted years has passed, there need be no fear of my magnifying or mystifying anything. The circumstances are still fresh in my mind; moreover, in the fear that memory should play me false, I wrote down at the time all that happened—wrote it with a minuteness and technical detail which would be out of my place here.

My story concerns a man whom I saw but thrice in my lifetime; or, I should rather say, saw during three brief periods of my lifetime. We were medical students together. His name—I do not change it—was Paul Vargas.

He was a tall, dark-haired, pale-faced young man; strikingly handsome in his own peculiar style. His nose was aquiline and well formed; the broad forehead betokened great intellectual power, and the mouth, chin, and strong, square jaw all spoke of strength of will and resolution. But had all these features been irregular and unpleasing, the eye alone would have redeemed the face from plainness. More luminous, eloquent, expressive eyes I have never seen. Their dark beauty was enhanced by a distension of the pupil, seldom met with when the sight is perfect, as was Vargas'. They possessed in a remarkable degree the power of reflecting the owner's emotions. Bright as they always were, they sparkled with his mirth, they glittered with his scorn, and when he seemed trying to read the very soul of the man he looked at, their concentrated gaze was such as few could bear with perfect ease.

This is a description of Paul Vargas as I remember him when we first met. I may add that in age he was two years my senior; in intellect, a hundred.

Of Vargas' family and antecedents his fellow students knew nothing. That he was of foreign extraction was clearly shown by his name and general appearance. It was supposed that Jewish blood ran in his veins, but this was pure conjecture; for the young man was as reticent concerning his religious opinions as he was about everything else connected with his private history.

I cannot say he was my friend. In-

deed, I believe he had no friends, and I least expressed his opinions on the world think I may add, no enemies. He was too in general openly and freely. He had resolved to become a specialist. He poured out the vials of his scorn on the ordinary general practitioner—the

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rather nettled such an unlicked lot of cubbs as most of us were in those days.

Yet, if we were not bosom friends, for some months I saw a great deal of Paul Vargas. He was an indefatigable student, and, as if the prescribed course of study was not enough for him, was engaged during his leisure hours on some original and delicate experiments, conducted simply for his own pleasure. Wanting some one to assist him, he was good enough to choose me. Why, I never knew. I flattered myself it was because he thought me cleverer than my fellows; but it may have been that he thought me duller and less likely to anticipate or forestall his discoveries.

Under this arrangement I found myself two or three nights in every week at his rooms. From his lavish expenditure in furniture and scientific apparatus it was clear that Vargas had means of his own. His surroundings were very different from those with which the ordinary medical student must be contented.

All our fraternity looked upon Paul Vargas as abnormally clever; and when the closer intercourse began between us I found at first no reason to differ from the general opinion. He seemed to have all the works of medical and surgical authorities at his finger ends. He acquired fresh knowledge without effort. He was an accomplished linguist. Let the book or pamphlet be English, French or German, he read it with equal ease, and, moreover, had the valuable knack of extracting the gist of the matter, while throwing aside any worthless lumber which surrounded it. From my average intellectual station I could but admire and envy his rapid and brilliant flights.

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He made my visits to him pleasant ones. Our work over for the evening, it was his custom to keep me for an hour or two smoking and chatting; but our talk was not the confidences between two friends. Indeed, it was little more than scientific gossip, and the occasional airing of certain theories; for Vargas, if silent about himself and his private affairs, at

marvelous being who, with equal confidence, is ready to grapple with fever, gout, consumption, blindness, deafness, broken bones, and all the other ills and accidents which afflict mankind.

"It is absurd!" he said. "As well expect the man who made the lenses for that microscope to make the brass work also—as well ask the author of this treatise to print and bind it! I tell you one organ, one bit of the microcosm called man, demands a life's study before the cleverest dare to say he understands it."

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Certainly the organ selected by Vargas for his special study was the most complex and unsatisfactory of all—the brain. Any work, new or obsolete, which treated upon it—anything which seemed to demonstrate the connection between mind and body, he examined with intense eagerness. The writing and speculation of the veriest old charlatans were not beneath his notice. The series of experiments we were conducting were to the same end. I need not describe them, but something of their nature may be guessed at when I say it was long before the time when certain persons endeavored to persuade the world that scientists were fiends in human shape, who inflicted unheard of tortures on the lower orders of animals solely to gratify a lust for cruelty.

We had been engaged on our researches for some weeks—Vargas' researches, I should call them, as by this time my conjectures as to what he aimed at had come to an end. I grew tired of groping in the dark, and was making up my mind to tell him he must enlighten me or seek other assistance. Besides, I began to think that, after all, my first estimate of his ability was not quite correct.

He certainly talked at times in the strangest and most erratic way. Some of his speculations and theories were enough, if true, to upset all the recognized canons of science. So wild, indeed, that at times I wondered if, like many others, his genius was allied to madness.

At this time a wave of superstition

crossed the country—one of those periodical waves which, whether called mesmerism, clairvoyance, electro-biology, spiritualism or thought-reading, rise, culminate and fall in precisely the same manner.

Paul Vargas, although ridiculing the new craze, read everything that touched upon it, even down to the penny-a-liner's accounts of mysterious occurrences.

"The truth may be found anywhere," he said; "if there is a diamond in the ground the most ignorant poor may, unwittingly, dig it out."

One night I found him in a strange, preoccupied mood. He did his work mechanically, and I could see that his thoughts kept straying away. We finished earlier than usual, and for a while he sat opposite to me in silence. Then he raised his eyes and asked me a question.

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What that question was I have never been able to remember. I have racked my brain again and again, but have never recalled the purport of it. All I know is, it was, from a scientific point of view, so supremely ridiculous that I burst into a peal of laughter.

For a moment Paul Vargas' eyes positively flamed. Feeling that our relations were not friendly enough to excuse the indiscretion on my part, I hastened to apologize. He was himself again directly, and, with his calm, superior smile on his lips, assured me I had done nothing which demanded an apology. He then changed the conversation, and during the remainder of the day talked as rationally and instructively as the most methodical old lecturer in the schools.

He bade me good night with his usual politeness, and sent me away glad that my ill-timed mirth had not offended him. Yet the next morning I received a note saying he had decided to discontinue that particular series of researches in which I had given him such invaluable assistance.

I was somewhat nettled at this summary dismissal. Vargas asked me to his rooms no more, and he was not the man to call upon uninvited. So, except in the school and in the street, I saw nothing more of him.

It was predicted by those who should know best that Paul Vargas would be the scholar of the year. I alone dared to doubt it. In spite of his great talents and capacity for work, I fancied there was that in his nature which would defeat these high hopes. There was something wrong—something eccentric about him. In plain English, I believed, if not mad now, Vargas would end his days in a madhouse.

However, he never went up for his last examination. He had a surprise in store for us. Just before the final trial in which he was to reap such laurels, he vanished. He went without a word of warning—went bag and baggage. He left no debts behind him. He defrauded no one. He simply, without giving a reason for his departure, went away and left no trace behind him. Some time afterward it was reported that he had come into a large fortune. This explanation of his conduct was a plausible one, and was generally accepted as correct.

After the nine days' wonder had died away I, like others, ceased to think about the missing man. The years went by; I passed my examination creditably, and was very proud and hopeful when duly authorized to place M. D. after my name.

I have narrated how I first met Paul Vargas. I had no expectation of again seeing him, nor any great wish to do so. But we met a second time—it was in this wise:

When I took my medical degree I was far from being the staid, sober man I now am. Having a little money of my own, I resolved to see something of the world before I settled down. I was not rich enough to be quite idle, so I began by making one or two voyages as doctor to