SPANISH DOUBLOONS

By

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Jane Harding, respectable and conservative old spinster—but never too old to think of marriage—with more money than brains, is inveigled by a strong-minded spinster, Miss Higglesby-Browne, into financing an expedition to hunt for buried treasure on Leeward island. Her niece, Virginia Harding, undertaking to stop her, gets on the vessel engaged for the hunt, and in the confusion is unwillingly carried along.

CHAPTER II.—By no means concealing her distaste for the expedition and her contempt for its members, Virginia makes the acquaintance of the Honorable Cuthbert Vane, and is somewhat impressed.

CHAPTER III.—Talking with Dugald Shaw, the leader of the expedition, Virginia very frankly expresses her views, practically accusing Shaw and the other members of the party, including a somewhat uncertain personage, Captain Magnus, and a shady "financier," Hamilton H. Tubbs, of being in a conspiracy to defraud Miss Jane Harding. Their relations, naturally, are somewhat strained.

CHAPTER IV.—Landing on the island is a matter of some difficulty. Virginia being carried ashore in the arms of Cuthbert Vane, to her disquietude. The landing, however, is safely effected.

Among our earliest discoveries on the island was one regrettable from the point of view of romance, though rich in practical advantages; the woods were the abode of numerous wild pigs. You should have seen how clean, how seemly, how self-respecting were our Leeward island pigs to realize how profoundly the pig of Christian lands is a debased and slandered animal. These quadrupeds would have strengthened Jean Jacques' belief in the primitive virtue of man before civilization debauched him.

Aunt Jane had been dreadfully alarmed by the pigs, and wanted to keep me immured in the cabin o' nights so that I should not be eaten. But nothing less than a Bengal tiger would have driven me to such extremity.

"Though if a pig should eat me," I suggested, "you might mark him to avoid becoming a cannibal at second hand. I should hate to think of you, Aunt Jane, as the family tomb!"

"Virginia, you are most unfeeling," said Aunt Jane, getting pink about the eyelids.

"Ah, I didn't know you Americans went in much for family tombs," remarked the beautiful youth interestedly.

"No, we do our best to keep out of them," I assured him, and he walked off meditatively revolving this.

If the beautiful youth had been beautiful on shipboard, in the informal costume he affected on the island he was more splendid still. His white cotton shirt and trousers

"No, We Do Our Best to Keep Out of Them."

showed him lithe and lean and muscular. His bared arms and chest were like cream solidified into flesh. With his striped silk sash of red and blue about his waist, and his crown of ambrosial chestnut curls—a development due to the absence of a barber—the Honorable Cuthbert would certainly have been hailed by the natives, if there had been any, as the island's god.

Camp was made in the early hours of the day. Then came luncheon, prepared with skill by Cookie, and eaten from a table of packing cases laid in the shade. Afterward everyone, hot and weary, retired for a siesta. Always around the island blew the faint cooling breath of the sea. No marsh or stagnant water bred insect pests or fever. Every day while we were there the men worked hard, and grew lean and sun-browned, and thrived on it. Every afternoon with unfailing regularity a light shower fell, but in twenty minutes it was over and the sun shone again, greedily lapping up the moisture that glittered on the leaves.

On this first day we gathered in the cool of the afternoon about our table of packing-boxes for an event which even I, whose role was that of skeptic, found exciting. Miss Browne was at last to produce her map and reveal the secret of the island. So far, except in general terms, she had imparted it to no one. Everybody, in coming along, had been buying a pig in a poke—though to be sure Aunt Jane had paid for it. The Scotman, Cuthbert Vane had told me incidentally, had insured himself against loss by demanding a retaining fee beforehand. Somehow my opinion, both of his honesty and of his intelligence, had risen since I knew this. As to Cuthbert Vane, he had come purely in a spirit of adventure, and had paid his own expenses from the start.

However, now the great moment was at hand. But before it comes, I will here set down the treasure-story of Leeward island, as I gathered it later, a little here and there, and pieced it together into a coherent whole through many dreaming hours.

In 1820, the city of Lima, in Peru, being threatened by the revolutionaries under Bolivar and San Martin, cautious folk began to take thought for their possessions. To send them out upon the high seas under a foreign flag seemed to offer the best hope of safety, and soon there was more gold afloat on the Pacific than at any time since the sailing of the great plate-galleons of the Seventeenth century. Captain Sampson, of the brig Bonny Lass, found himself with a passenger for nowhere in particular in the shape of a certain Spanish merchant of great wealth, reputed custodian of the private funds of the bishop of Lima. This gentleman brought with him, besides some scanty personal baggage—for he took ship in haste—a great iron-bound chest. Four stout sailors of the Bonny Lass staggered under the weight of it.

The Bonny Lass cruised north along the coast, the passenger desiring to put in at Panama in the hope that word might reach him there of quieter times at home. But somewhere off Ecuador on a dark and starless night, the merchant of Lima vanished overboard—"and what could you expect?" asked Captain Sampson in effect, "when a lubber like him would stay on deck in a gale?" Strange to say, the merchant's body-servant met the fate of the heedless also.

Shrugging his shoulders at the carelessness of passengers, Captain Sampson bore away to Leeward island, perhaps from curiosity to see this old refuge of the buccaneers, where the spoils of the sack of Guayaquil were said to have been buried. Who knows but that he, too, was bent on treasure-seeking? Be that as it may, the little brig found her way into the bay on the northeast side of the island, where she anchored. Water was needed, and there is refreshment in tropic fruits after a diet of salt horse and hardtack. So all hands had a holiday ashore, where the captain did not disdain to join them. Only he went apart, and had other occupation than swarming up the palms for cocoanuts.

One fancies, then, a moonless night, a crew sleeping off double grog, generously allowed them by the captain; a boat putting off from the Bonny Lass, in which were captain, mate, and one Bill Halliwell, able seaman, a man of mighty muscle; and as freight an object large, angular and ponderous, so that the boat lagged heavily beneath the rowers' strokes.

Later, Bill, the able seaman, grows presumptuous on the strength of this excursion with his betters. It is a word and a blow with the captain of the Bonny Lass, and Bill is conveniently disposed of. Dead, as well as living, he serves the purpose of the captain, but of that later.

Away sailed the Bonny Lass, sailing once for all out of the story. As for Captain Sampson, there is a long gap in his history, hazily filled by the story of his having been lieutenant to Benito Bonito, and one of the two survivors when Bonito's black flag was brought down by the British frigate Espiegle. But sober history knows nothing of him until he reappears years later, an aged and broken man, in a back street of Bristol. Here was living a certain Hopperdown, who had been boatswain on the Bonny Lass at the time that she so regrettably lost her passengers overboard. He saw and recognized his old skipper hobbling along the Bristol quays, and perhaps from pity took the shabby creature home with him. Hopperdown dealt in sailors' slops, and had a snug room or two behind the shop. Here for a while the former Captain Sampson dwelt, and after a swift illness here he died. With the hand of death upon him, his grim lips at last gave up their secret. With stiffening fingers he traced a rough map, to refresh Hopperdown's memory after the lapse of time since either had seen the wave-beaten cliffs of Leeward island. For Captain Sampson had never been able to return to claim the treasure which he had left to Bill Halliwell's silent guardianship. If he had, indeed, sailed with Bonito, he had kept his secret from his formidable commander. Even as he had dealt with Bill Halliwell, so might Bonito deal by him—or at least the lion's share must be yielded to the pirate captain. And the passion of Captain Sampson's life had come to be his gold—his hidden hoard on far-off Leeward island. It was his, now, all his. The only other who knew its hiding place, his former mate, had been killed in Havana in a tavern brawl. The secret of the bright unattainable treasure was all the captain's own. He dreamed of the doubloons, gloated over them, longed for them with a ceaseless gnawing passion of desire. And in the end he died, in Hopperdown's little shop in the narrow Bristol by-street.

Hopperdown, an aging man himself, and in his humble way contented, fell straightway victim to the gold-virus. He sold all he had, and bought passage in a sailing ship for Valparaiso, trusting that once so far on the way he would find means to accomplish the rest. But the raging of the fever in his thin old blood brought him to his bed, and the ship sailed without him. Before she was midway in the Atlantic Hopperdown was dead.

The old man died in the house of a niece, to whom by way of legacy he left his map. For years the map lay among other papers in a drawer, and here it was at length discovered by her son, himself a sailor. He learned from her its history, and having been in the Pacific and heard the tales and rumors that cling about Leeward island like the everlasting surf of its encompassing seas, this grand-nephew of old Hopperdown's, by name David Jenkins, became for the rest of his days a follower of the ignis fatuus. All his restless, hungry life he spent in wandering up and down the seas, ever on the watch for some dimly imagined chance by which he might come at the treasure. And so at last he wandered into the London hospital where he died.

And to me the wildest feature of the whole wild tale was that at the last he should have parted with the cherished secret of a lifetime to Miss Higglesby-Browne.

In a general way, every one of us knew his history. Even I had had an outline of it from Cuthbert Vane. But so far nobody had seen the map. And now we were to see it; the time that intervened before that great event had already dwindled to minutes, to seconds—

But no; for Miss Browne arose and began to make a speech. The beginning of it dealt in a large and generalizing manner with comradeship and loyalty, and the necessity of the proper mental attitude in approaching the business we had in hand. I did not listen closely. The truth is, I wanted to see that map. Under the spell of the island, I had almost begun to believe in the chest of doubloons.

Suddenly I awoke with a start to the fact that Miss Brown was talking about me. Yes, I, indubitably, was the Young Person whose motives in attaching herself to the party were so at variance with the amity and mutual confidence which filled all other breasts. It was I who had uttered words that were painful and astounding to one conscious of unimpugnable motives. In the days of toil to come, we were reminded, the Young Person to wit, myself, would have no share. She would be but skeptic, critic, drone in the busy hive. Thus it was obvious that the Young Person could not with any trace of justice claim part or lot in the treasure. Were it not well, then, that the Young Person be required to make formal and written renunciation of all interest in the golden hoard soon to reward the faith and enterprise of the Harding-Browne expedition? Miss Browne requested the sense of the meeting on the matter.

Aunt Jane was quivering, her round eyes fixed on Miss Higglesby-Browne like a fascinated rabbit's on a serpent. Mr. Hamilton Tubbs had pursed his lips to an inaudible whistle, and alternately regarded the summits of the palms and stole swift ferret-glances at the faces of the company. Mr. Vane had remained for some time in happy unconsciousness of the significance of Miss Browne's oration. It was something to see it gradually penetrate to his perceptions, vexing the alabaster brow with a faint wrinkle of perplexity, then suffusing his cheeks with agonized and indignant blushes. "Oh, I say, really, you know!" hovered in unspoken protest on his tongue. He threw imploring looks at Mr. Shaw, who alone of all the party sat imperturbable, except for a viciously bitten lip.

Miss Higglesby-Browne had drawn a deep breath, preparatory to resuming her verbal ramble, but I sprang to my feet.

"Miss Browne," I said, in tones less coldly calm than I could have wished, "if you have thought it necessary to—to orate at this length merely to tell me that I am to have no share in this ridiculous treasure of yours, you have wasted a good deal of energy. In the first place, I don't be-

"I Don't Believe in Your Treasure."

lieve in your treasure." (Which, of course, despite my temporary lapse, I really didn't.) "I think you are—sillier than any grown-up people I ever saw. In the second place, anything you do find you are welcome to keep. Do you think I came along with people who didn't want me, and have turned my aunt against me, for the sake of filthy lucre? Did I come intentionally at all, or because I was shanghaied and couldn't help myself? Aunt Jane!" I demanded, turning to my stricken relative, who was gazing in anguish and doubt from Miss Browne to me, "haven't you one spark left of family pride—I don't talk of affection any longer—that you sit still and hear me made speeches at in this fashion? Have you grown so sordid and grasping that you can think of nothing but this blood-stained pirate gold?"

Aunt Jane burst into tears.

"Good gracious, Virginia," she wailed, "how shocking of you to say such things. I am sure we all got along very pleasantly until you came—and in that dreadfully sudden way. You might at least have been considerate enough to wire beforehand."

It was impossible to feel that these remarks helped greatly to clear the situation. I opened my mouth, but Miss Browne was beforehand with me.

(To Be Continued.)

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