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.

CHAPTER V.—Led by Miss Higglesby-Browne, the party draws up an agreement whereby Virginia Harding is barred from participation in the profits of the expedition. Believing the whole thing to be a fraud, Virginia is not greatly worried. Cuthbert Vane alone votes against the exclusion of Virginia.

"Miss Virginia Harding has herself admitted that she has no just or equitable claim to participate in the profits of this expedition—I believe I give the gist of your words, Miss Harding?"

"Have it your own way," I said, shrugging.

"I move, then, Mr. Secretary"—Miss Browne inclined her head in a stately manner toward Mr. Tubbs—"that you offer for Miss Virginia Harding's signature the document prepared by you."

"Oh, I say!" broke out Mr. Vane suddenly, "I call this rotten, you know!"

"In case of objection by any person," said Miss Browne loftily, "the matter may be put to a vote. All those in favor say aye!"

An irregular fire of ayes followed. Mr. Shaw said briefly, "I think the distribution of the treasure, if any is recovered, should be that agreed upon by the original members of the party. Aye!"

Aunt Jane's assenting voice issued from the depths of her handkerchief, which was rapidly becoming so briny and inadequate that I passed her mine. From Cuthbert Vane alone there came a steadfast no—and the Scotchman put a hand on the boy's shoulder with a smile which was like sudden sunlight in a bleak sky.

Mr. Tubbs then produced a legal-looking document which I took to be the original agreement of the members of the expedition. Beneath their signatures he had inscribed a sort of codicil, by which I relinquished all claim on any treasure recovered by the party. I signed the clause in a bold and defiant hand, under the attentive eyes of the company. A sort of sigh went round, as though something of vast moment had been concluded. And indeed it had, for now the way was clear for Violet's map.

Covertly I watched the faces around me. Mr. Tubbs' eyes had grown bright; he licked his dry lips. His nose, tip-tilted and slightly bulbous, took on a more than usually roseate hue. Captain Magnus, who was of a restless and jerky habit at the best of times, was like a leashed animal scenting blood. Beneath his open shirt you saw the quick rise and fall of his hairy chest. His lips, drawn back wolfishly, displayed yellow, fang-like teeth. Under the raw crude greed of the man you seemed to glimpse something indescribably vulpine and ferocious.

The face of Dugald Shaw was controlled, but there was a slight rigidity in its quiet. A pulse beat rapidly in his cheek. All worldly good, all hope of place, power, independence, hung for him on the contents of the small flat package, wrapped in oil-silk, which Miss Browne was at this moment withdrawing from her pocket.

Only Cuthbert Vane, seated next to me, maintained without effort his serenity. For him the whole affair belonged in the category known as sporting, where a gentleman played his stake and accepted with equanimity the issue.

The dead sailor's legacy consisted of a single sheet of time-stained paper. Two-thirds of the sheet was covered by a roughly-drawn sketch in faded ink, giving the outline of the island shores as we had seen them from the Rufus Smith. Here was the cove, with the name it bears in the Admiralty charts—Lantern bay—written in, and a dotted line indicating the channel.

To all appearance the map was merely to give Hopperdown his directions for entering the cove. There was absolutely no mark upon it to show where the treasure had been buried.

Now for the writing on the sheet below the map. It was in another hand than that which had written Lantern bay across the face of the cove, and which, though labored, was precise and clear. This other was an uneven, wavering scrawl:

"He sed it is in a Cave with 2 mouths near by the grave of Bill Halliwell wich was cut down for he new to much. He sed you can bring a boat to the cave at the half Tide but beware the turn for the pull is strong. He sed to find the Grave again look for the stone at the head marked B. H. and a Cross Bones. In the Chist is gold Dubloons, a vast lot, also a silver Cross wich he sed leve for the Grave for he sed Bill walks and thats unlucky."

That was all. A fairly clear direction for any friend who had attended the obsequies of Bill and knew where to look for the stone marked B. H. and a cross-bones, but to perfect strangers it was vague.

A blank look crept into the intent faces about the table.

"It—it don't happen to say in more deetail jest precisely where that cave might be looked for?" inquired Mr. Tubbs hopefully.

"In more detail?" repeated Miss Browne, challengingly. "Pray, Mr. Tubbs, what further detail could be required?"

"A good deal more, I am afraid," remarked the Scotchman grimly.

Miss Browne whirled upon him. In her cold eye a spark had kindled. And suddenly I had a new vision of her. I saw her no longer as the deluder of Aunt Jane, but as herself the deluded. Her belief in the treasure was an obsession. This map was her talisman, her way of escape from an existence which had been drab and dull enough, I dare say.

"Mr. Shaw"—Miss Browne gave the effect of drawing herself up in line of battle—"I feel that I must give expression to the thought which comes to me at this moment. It is this—that if the members of this party are to be chilled by carping doubts, the wave of enthusiasm which has floated us thus far must inevitably recede, leaving us flotsam on a barren shore. What can one weak woman—pardon, my unfaltering Jane!—two women achieve against the thought of failure firmly held by him to whom we looked to lead us boldly in our forward dash? Mr. Shaw, this is no time for crawling earthworm tactics. It is with the bold and sweeping glance of the eagle that we must survey this island, until, the proper point discerned, we swoop with majestic flight upon our predestined goal!"

Miss Browne was somewhat exhausted by this effort, and paused for breath, whereupon Mr. Tubbs, anxious to retrieve his recent blunder, seized with dexterity the opportunity.

"I get you, Miss Browne, I get you," said Mr. Tubbs with conviction. "Victory ain't within the grasp of any individual that carries a heart like a cold pancake in his bosom. I may be rather a man of thought than action, ma'am, and at present far from my native heath, which is the financial centers of the country, but if I remember right, it was Ulysses done the dome-work for the Greeks, while certain persons that was depended on sulked in their tents. Miss Higglesby-Browne, you can count—count, I say—on old H. H.!"

"I thank you, Mr. Tubbs, I thank you!" replied Miss Browne with emotion. As for Aunt Jane, she gazed upon the noble countenance of Mr. Tubbs with such ecstatic admiration that her little nose quivered like a guinea-pig's.

CHAPTER VI.

The Cave With Two Mouths.

Obscure as were the directions which Hopperdown's niece had taken from his dying lips, one point at least was clear—the treasure-cave opened on the sea. This seemed an immense simplification of the problem, until you discovered that the great wall of cliffs was honeycombed with fissures.

One of the boats which had conveyed us from the Rufus Smith had been left with us, and in it Mr. Shaw, with the Honorable Cuthbert and Captain Magnus, made a preliminary voyage of discovery. This yielded the

Made a Preliminary Voyage of Discovery.

information above set down, plus, however, the thrilling and significant fact that a cave seemingly predestined to be the hiding place of treasure, and moreover a cave with the specified two openings, ran under the point which protected the anchorage on the south, connecting the cove with the sea. Only the Scotchman remained exasperatingly calm and declined to admit that the treasure was as good as found.

"I'll wait till I see the color of my money before I reckon the interest on it," he remarked. "It's true the cave would be a likely and convenient place for hiding the chest; the question is: Wouldn't it be too likely and convenient? Sampson would maybe not choose the spot of all others where the first comer who had got word of the story would be certain to look."

"Well, friends," remarked Mr. Tubbs, "there's them that sees nothin' but the hole in the doughnut, and there's them that see the doughnut that's around the hole. I ain't ashamed to say that old H. H. is in the doughnut class. Why, the Old Man himself used to remark—I guess it ain't news to some here about me bein' on the inside with most of the leadin' financial lights of the country—he used to remark, 'Tubbs has it in him to bull the market on a Black Friday.' Ladies, I ain't one that's inclined to boast, but I test want to warn you not to be too astonished when H. H. makes acquaintance with Bill Halliwell's tombstone, which I'm willin' to lay he does yet."

"Well, good luck to you," said the grim Scot, "and let me likewise warn all hands not to be too astonished if we find that the treasure is not in the cave. But I'll admit it is as good a place as any for beginning the search."

The cave which was now the center of our hopes—I say our, because somehow or other I found myself hoping and fearing along with the rest, though carefully concealing it—ran under the point at its farther end. The distance was about sixty feet from mouth to mouth, and back of this transverse passage a great vaulted chamber stretched far under the land. The walls of the chamber rose sheer to a height of fifteen feet or more, when a broad ledge broke their smoothness. At high water the sea flooded the cavern to its farthest extremity and beat upon the walls. Now and again, it was to prove, even the water-worn pavement between the two archways was left bare, and one could walk dry-shod along the rocks under the high land of the point from the beach to the cave. But this was at the very bottom of the ebb. Mostly the lower end of the cave was flooded, and the explorers went back and forth in the boat.

A certain drawback to boating in our island waters was the presence of hungry hordes of sharks. You might forget them for a moment and sit happily trailing your fingers overboard, and then a huge moving shadow would darken the water, and you saw the ripple cut by a darting fin and the flash of a livid belly as the monster rolled over, ready for his mouthful.

What with the genius of Cookie and the fruitfulness of our island, not to speak of supplies from the Army and Navy stores, we lived like sybarites. There were fish from stream and sea, coconuts and bananas and oranges from the trees in the clearing. I had hopes of yams and breadfruit also, but if they grew on Leeward none of us had a speaking acquaintance with them. Cookie did wonders with the pigs that were shot and brought in to him, though I never could sit down with appetite to a massacred infant served up on a platter, which is just what little pigs look like.

"Jes' yo' cas' yo' eye on dis yere innahcent," Cookie would request, as he placed the suckling before Mr. Tubbs. "Tendah as a new'bo'n babe, he am. Jes' lak he been tucked up to sleep by his mammy. Sho' now, how yo' got de heart to stick de knife in him, Mistah Tubbs?"

It was significant that Mr. Tubbs, after occupying for a day or two an undistinguished middle place at the board, had somehow slid into the carver's post at the head of the table. Flanking him were the two ladies. Everybody else had a sense of sitting in outer darkness, particularly I, whom fate had placed opposite Captain Magnus. Since landing on the island, Captain Magnus had forsworn the effeminacy of forks. Loaded to the hilt, his knife would approach his cavernous mouth and disappear in it. Yet when it emerged Captain Magnus was alive. Where did it go? This was a question that agitated me daily.

The history of Captain Magnus was obscure. It was certain that he had his captain's papers, though how he had mastered the science of navigation sufficiently to obtain them was a problem. Though he held a British navigator's license, he did not appear to be an Englishman.

The captain, as Mr. Vane had remarked, was Miss Browne's own find. Before the objections of Mr. Shaw—evidently a Negative Influence from the beginning—had caused her to abandon the scheme, Miss Browne had planned to charter a vessel in New York and sail around the Horn to the island. While nursing this project she had formed an extensive acquaintance with persons frequenting the New York water-front, among whom was Captain Magnus. As I heard her remark, he was the one nautical character whom she found sympathetic, by which I judge that the others were skeptical and rude. Being sympathetic, Captain Magnus found it an easy matter to attach himself to the expedition—or perhaps it was Violet who annexed him, I don't know which.

It was fortunate that Cookie knew nothing of the solitary grave somewhere on the island, with its stone marked with B. H. and a cross-bones, nor that the inhabitant thereof was supposed to walk. If he had, I think the strange spectacle of a lone negro in a small boat rowing lustily for the American continent might soon have been witnessed on the Pacific by any eyes that were there to see. And we could ill have spared either boat or cook.

Yet even though unvexed by this grewsome knowledge, after two or three days I noticed that Cookie was ill at ease. As the leisure member of the party, I enjoyed more of Cookie's society than the rest. On this occasion while the morning was still in its freshness he was permitting me to make fudge. But his usual joviality was gone. I saw that he glanced over his shoulder at intervals, muttering darkly to himself. Also that a rabbit's foot was slung conspicuously about his neck.

Having made my fudge and set the pan on a stone in the stream to cool, I was about to retire with a view to conducting a limited exploring expedition of my own. The assurances of Mr. Shaw—not personally directed to me, of course; the armed truce under which we lived did not permit of that—had convinced me that I had not to dread anything more ferocious than the pigs, and the wildest of them would retire before a stick or a stone. Besides, I boasted a little automatic, which I carried strapped to my waist in a businesslike manner. Mr. Vane had almost got me to the point where I could shoot it off without shutting my eyes.

(To Be Continued.)

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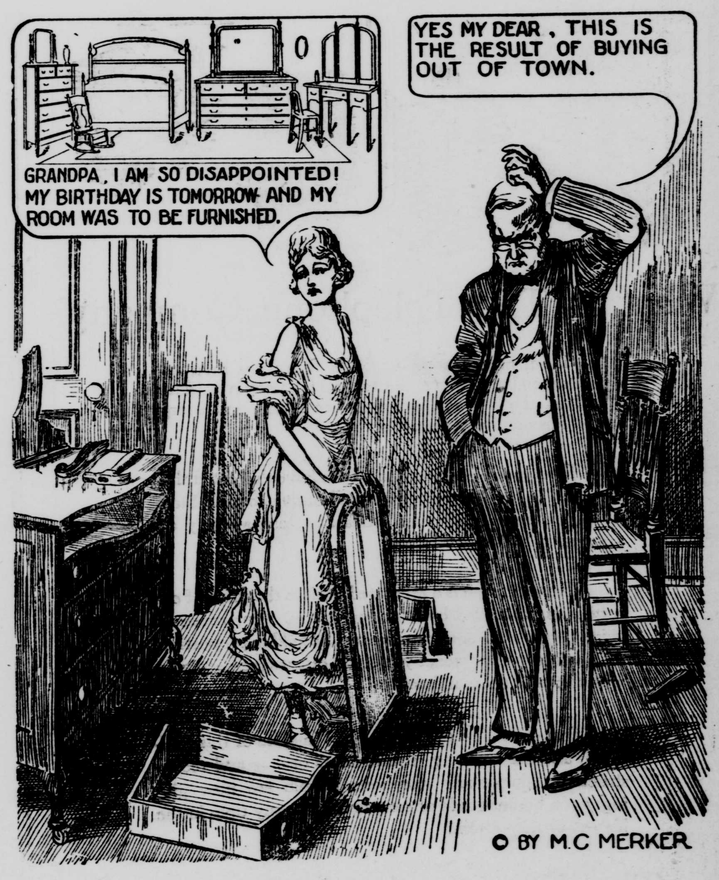

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