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.

CHAPTER VI.—Wild pigs abound on the island, and "Cookie," the colored member of the party, insists he has seen "hant," in the form of a white pig. During a walk Virginia meets the "hant," a white bull terrier, and proudly brings him into camp.

Thus equipped, I was about to set off into the woods. I had turned my back on Cookie and the camp, when I was arrested by an exclamation:

"Miss Jinny!"

I turned to find Cookie gazing after me with an expression which, in the familiar phrase of fiction, I could not interpret, though among its ingredients were doubt and anguish. Cookie, too, looked pale. I don't in the least know how he managed it, but that was the impression he conveyed, dusky as he was.

"Miss Jinny, it mos' look lak yo' 'lout to go perambulatin' in dese yere woods?"

"I am, Cookie," I admitted.

The whites of Cookie's eyes became alarmingly conspicuous. Drawing near in a stealthy manner he whispered:

"Yo' bettah not, Miss Jinny!"

"Oh, nonsense, Cookie!" I said impatiently. "There's not a thing on the island but the pigs!"

"Miss Jinny," he solemnly replied, "dey's pigs and pigs."

"Yes, but pigs is pigs, you know," I answered, laughing.

"Dey's pigs and pigs, chile—live ones and—dead ones."

"Dead ones? Of course—haven't we been eating them?"

"Yo' won't nevah eat dis yere kind o' dead pig, Miss Jinny. It's—it's a ha'nt!"

The murder was out. Cookie leaned against a cocoa-palm and wiped his ebon brow.

Persistently questioned, he told at last how, today and yesterday, arising in the dim dawn to build his fire before the camp was stirring, he had seen lurking at the edge of the clearing a white four-footed shape. It was a pig, yet not a pig; its ghostly hue, its noiseless movements, divided it from all proper mundane porkers by the dreadful gulf which divides the living from the dead. The first morning Cookie, doubtful of his senses, had flung a stone and the spectral Thing had vanished like a shadow. On its second appearance, having had a day and a night for meditation, he had known better than to commit such an outrage upon the possessor of ghostly powers, and had resorted to prayer instead. This had answered quite as well, for the phantom pig had dissolved like the morning mists. While the sun blazed, what with his devotions and his rabbit's foot and a

"Yo' Bettah Not, Miss Jinny!"

cross of twigs nailed to a tree, Cookie felt a fair degree of security. But his teeth chattered in his head at the thought of approaching night. Meanwhile he could not in conscience permit me to venture forth into the path of this horror, which might, for all we knew, be lurking in the jungle shadows, even through the daylight hours. Also, though he did not avow this motive, I believe he found my company very reassuring. It is immensely easier to face a ghost in the sustaining presence of other flesh and blood.

For a moment I wavered in my determination. What if the island had its wild creatures after all? But neither lynx nor panther nor any other beast of prey is white, except a polar bear, and it would be unusual to meet one on a tropical island.

I decided that Cookie's pig was after all a pig, though still in the flesh. I thought I remembered having seen quite fair pigs, which would pass for white with a frightened negro in the dim light of dawn. I consoled Cookie as best I could by promising to cross my fingers if I heard or saw anything suspicious, and struck out into the woods.

For all my brave words to Cookie, I had no intention of going very far afield. From the shore of the cove I had observed that the ground behind the clearing rose to the summit of a low ridge, perhaps four hundred feet in height, which jutted from the base of the peak. From this ridge I thought I might see something more of the island than the limited environment of Lantern bay.

As the woods shut out the last glimpse of the white tents in the clearing, as even the familiar sound of the surf died down to a faint, half-imagined whisper mingling with the rustling of the palms overhead, I experienced a certain discomfort, which persons given to hard and unqualified terms might have called fear. It seemed to me as if a very strong cord at the rear of my belt were jerking me back toward the inglorious safety of the camp. I fingered my automatic and marched on up the hill, trying not to gasp when a leaf rustled or a coconut dropped in the woods.

I gained the summit of the ridge, and stood upon a bare rock platform, scantily sheltered by a few trees, large shrubs, rather, with a smooth, waxy leaf of vivid green. On the left rose the great mass of the peak. From far above among its crags a beautiful foamy waterfall came hurtling down.

I had not dreamed of getting a view so glorious from the little eminence of the ridge. Here was an item of news to take back to camp. Having with great originality christened the place Lookout, I turned to go. And as I turned I saw a shape vanish into the woods.

It was an animal, not a human shape. And it was white. It had, indeed, every distinguishing trait of Cookie's phantom pig. Only it was not a pig. My brief shadowy glimpse of it had told me that. I knew what it was not, but what it was I could not, as I stood there rooted, even guess.

Would it attack me, or should I only die of fright? I wondered if my heart were weak, and hoped it was, so that I should not live to feel the teeth of the unknown Thing sink in my flesh. I thought of my revolver and after an infinity of time managed to draw it from the case. My fingers seemed at once nervelessly limp and woodenly rigid. This was not at all the dauntless front with which I had dreamed of meeting danger. I had fancied myself with my automatic making a rather pretty picture as a young Amazon—but I had now a dreadful fear that my revolver might spasmodically go off and wound the Thing, and then, even if it had meditated letting me go, it would certainly attack me. Nevertheless I clung to my revolver as to my last hope.

I began to edge away crab-wise into the wood. Like a metronome I said to myself over and over monotonously, "Don't run, don't run!"

I did not run. Instead, I stepped on a smooth surface of rock and slid downhill like a human toboggan until I fetched up against a dead log after a confused interval during which I vaguely believed myself to have been swallowed by an alligator. While the alligator illusion endured I must have lain comatose and immovable. Indeed, when my senses began to come back I was still quite inert. I experienced that curious tranquillity which is said to visit those who are actually within the jaws of death. There I lay prone, absolutely at the mercy of the mysterious white prowler of the forest—and I did not care. The whole petty business of living seemed a long way behind me now.

Languidly at last I opened my eyes. Within three yards of me, in the open rock-paved glade where I had fallen, stood the Thing. Yes, there it was—only now it had put an ear back and was sniffing at me with a mingling of interest and apprehension.

The strange beast of the jungle was a white bull-terrier.

Abruptly I sat up. The terrier gave a startled sidewise bound, but paused again and stood regarding me.

"Here, pup! Here, pup! Nice doggums!" I said in soothing accents.

The dog gave a low whine and stood shivering, eager but afraid. I continued my blandishments. Little by little the forlorn creature drew nearer, until I put out a cautious hand and stroked his ears. He dodged affrightedly, but presently crept back again. Soon his head was against my knee, and he was devouring my hand with avid caresses. Some time, before his abandonment on the island, he had been a well-brought-up and petted animal. Months or years of wild life had estranged him from humanity, yet at the human touch the old devotion woke again.

The thing now was to lure him back to camp and restore him to the happy service of his gods. With another alluring, "Here, doggums!" I started on my way. He shrank, trembled, hesitated, then was after me with a bound. So I brought him triumphantly across the Rubicon of the little stream, and marched him into camp under the astounded eyes of Cookie.

At sight of the negro the dog growled softly and crouched against my skirt. Cookie stood like an effigy of amazement done in black and white.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake, Miss Jinny," he burst at last, "am dat de ghos'-pig?"

"It was, Cookie, but I changed him into a live dog by crossing my fingers. Mind your rabbit's foot. He might eat it, and then very likely we'd have a ghost on our hands again."

"Yo' go 'long, Miss Jinny," said Cookie valiantly. "Yo' think I scared of any ghos' what lower hisself to be a live white mongrel dog? Yere, yo' ki-yi, yo' bettah mek friends with ol' Cookie, 'cause he got charge o' de grub. Yere's a li'le fat ma'ow bone what mebbe come off'n yo' own grandchile, but yo' ain' goin' to mind dat now yo' is transformulated dis yere way." And evidently the reincarnated ghost-pig did not.

With the midday reunion my hour of distinction arrived. The tale of the ghost-pig was told from the beginning by Cookie, with high tributes to my courage in sallying forth in pursuit of the phantom. Even those holding other views of the genesis of the white dog were amazed at his presence on the island. In spite of Cookie's aspersions, the creature was no mongrel, but a thoroughbred of points. Not by any means a dog which some little South American coaster might have abandoned here when it put in for water. The most reasonable hypothesis seemed to be that he had belonged to the copra gatherer, and was for some reason left behind on his master's departure. But who that had loved a dog enough to make it the companion of his solitude would go away and leave it? The thing seemed to me incredible. Yet here, otherwise unaccounted for, was the corporeal presence of the dog.

I had named the terrier in the first ten minutes of our acquaintance. Crusoe was the designation by which he was presented to his new associates. Violet tolerated him, Aunt Jane called

The Strange Beast of the Jungle Was a White Bull-Terrier.

him a dear weefly pettums love, Captain Magnus kicked him when he thought I was not looking, Cuthbert Vane chummed with him in frankest comradship, and Mr. Shaw softened toward him to an extent which made me inly murmur, "Love me, love my dog"—only reversed. Not that I in the least wanted to be loved, only you feel it an impertinence in a person who so palpably does not love you to endeavor to engage the affections of your bull-terrier.

As to Cookie, he magnanimously consented to overlook Crusoe's dubious past as a ghost-pig, and fed him so liberally that the terrier's lean and graceful form threatened to assume the contours of a beer-keg.

CHAPTER VII.

An Excursion and an Alarm.

As the only person who had discovered anything on the island, I was now invested with a certain importance. Also, I had a playfellow and companion for future walks, in lieu of Cuthbert Vane, held down tight to the thankless toil of treasure-hunting by his stern taskmaster. But at the same time I was provided with an annoying, because unanswerable question which had lodged at the back of my mind like a crumb in the throat:

By what strange chance had the copra gatherer gone away and left Crusoe on the island?

One morning, instead of starting directly after breakfast for the cave, Mr. Shaw busied himself in front of the supply tent with certain explosives which were to be used in the digging operations later.

Having inquired of the Honorable Cuthbert and found that for an hour or two the boat would not be in requisition, I permitted the beautiful youth to understand that I would not decline an invitation to be rowed about the cove. Mr. Shaw had left his marine glasses lying about, and I had been doing some exploring with them. Under the great cliffs on the north shore of the bay I had seen an object that excited my curiosity. It seemed to be the hull of a small vessel, lying on the narrow strip of rocks and sand under the cliff. Now, wreckage anywhere fills me with sad and romantic thoughts, but on the shore of a desolate island even a barrel-hoop seems to suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange. I therefore commanded the b. y. to row me over to the spot where the derelict lay.

I lay back idly in the stern as the boat skimmed over the smooth water beneath the strokes of my splendid oarsman. More than ever he looked like the island god. Every day he grew more brown and brawny, more superb in his physical vigor.

The cliffs on the north shore of the cove were considerably higher than on the other side. The wreck lay close in, driven high upon the narrow shelf of rocks and sand at the base of the sheer ascent. Sand had heaped up around her hull and flung 'tself across her deck like a white winding-sheet. Surprisingly, the vessel was a very small one, a little sloop, indeed, much like the fragile pleasure-boats that cluster under the Sausalito shore at home. The single mast had been broken off short, and the stump of the bowsprit was visible, like a finger beckoning for rescue from the crawling sand.

"Poor forlorn little boat!" I said. "What in the world do you suppose brought such a mite of a thing to this unheard-of spot?"

"Perhaps she belonged to the copra chap. One man could handle her."

(To Be Continued.)

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