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 a "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.

CHAPTER VII.—On the island is the hut of a copra gatherer, and the presence of the dog, named "Crusoe" by Virginia, is thus accounted for. Rambling about, and feeling herself not to be a regular member of the expedition, Virginia comes upon a sand-imbedded sloop, the Island Queen. Returning to the camp, she is intercepted by Captain Magnus, who accosts her unpleasantly. She escapes him, with the aid of "Crusoe."

"What would he want with her? A small boat like this is better for fishing and rowing about the cove."

"Perhaps she brought him here from Panama, though he couldn't have counted on taking back a very bulky cargo."

"Then why leave her strewn about on the rocks? And besides"—here the puzzle of Crusoe recurred to me and seemed to link itself with this—"then how did he get away himself?"

We rowed in close under the port bow of the sloop, and on the rail I made out a string of faded letters. I began excitedly to spell them out.

"I—s—l—oh, Island Queen! You see she did belong here. Probably she brought the original porcine Adam and Eve to the island."

"Luckily forgot the snake, though!" remarked the Honorable Bertie with unlooked-for vivacity. For so far Aunt Jane's trembling anticipations had been unfulfilled by the sight of a single snake, a fact laid by me to the credit of St. Patrick and by Cookie to that of the pigs.

"Snakes 'd jes' be oysters on de half shell to dem pigs," declared Cookie.

As we rowed away from the melancholy little derelict I saw that nearby a narrow gully gave access to the top of the cliff, and I resolved that I would avail myself of this path to visit the Island Queen again. My mind continued to dwell upon the unknown figure of the copra gatherer. Perhaps the loss of his sloop had condemned him to weary months or years of solitude upon the island, before the rare glimmer of a sail or the trail of a steamer's smoke upon the horizon gladdened his longing eyes.

Suddenly I turned to Cuthbert Vane.

"How do you know, really, that he ever did leave the island?" I demanded.

"Who—the copra chap? Well, why else was the cabin cleared out so carefully—no clothes left about or anything?"

"That's true," I acknowledged. The last occupant of the hut had evidently made a very deliberate and orderly business of packing up to go.

We drifted about the cove for a while, then steered into the dim murmuring shadow of the treasure-cavern. Mr. Vane indicated the point at which they had arrived in their exploration among the fissures opening from the ledge.

The place held me with its fascination, but we dared not linger long, for as the tide turned one man would have much ado to manage the boat. So we slid through the archway into the bright sunshine of the cove, and headed for the camp.

As we neared the beach we saw a figure pacing it. It was Dugald Shaw. And quite unexpectedly my heart began to beat with staccato quickness. Dugald Shaw, who didn't like me and who never looked at me—except just sometimes, when he was perfectly sure I didn't know it—there he was, waiting for us, and splashing into the foam to help Cuthbert beach the boat—he for whom a thousand years ago the skalds would have made a saga—

The b. y. hailed him cheerfully as we sprang out upon the sand. But the Scotchman was unsmiling.

"Make haste after your tools, lad," he ordered. "We'll have fine work now to get inside the cave before the turn."

Those were his words; his tone and his grim look meant, "So in spite of all my care you are being beguiled by a minx—"

It was his tone that I answered.

"Oh, don't scold Mr. Vane!" I implored. "Every paradise has its serpent, and as there are no others here I suppose I am it. Of course all lady serpents who know their business have red hair. Don't blame Mr. Vane for what was naturally all my fault."

Not a line of his face changed. Indeed, before my most vicious stabs it never did change.

"To be sure it seems unreasonable to blame the lad," he agreed soberly, "but then he happens to be under my authority."

"Meaning, I suppose, that you would much prefer to blame me," I choked.

"There's logic, no doubt, in striking at the root of the trouble," he admitted with an air of calm detachment.

"Then strike," I said furiously; "strike, why don't you, and not beat about the bush so!" Because then he would be quite hopelessly in the wrong, and I could adopt any of several roles—the coldly haughty, the wounded but forgiving, etc., with great enjoyment.

But without a change in his glacial manner he quite casually remarked:

"It would seem I had struck—home."

I walked away.

Fortunately nobody undertook to exercise any guardianship over Crusoe, and the little white dog bore me faithful company in my rambles. Mostly these were confined to the neighborhood of the cove. I never ventured beyond Lookout ridge, but there I went often with Crusoe, and we would sit upon a rock and talk to each other about our first encounter there, and the fright he had given me. Everybody else had gone, gazed and admired. But the only constant pilgrim, besides myself, was, of all people, Captain Magnus. The captain's unexpected ardor for scenery carried him thither whenever he had half an hour to spare from the wo[illegible] in the cave. Needless to say, Crusoe and I timed our visits so as not to conflict with his.

One day, as Crusoe and I came down from the ridge, we met Captain Magnus ascending. I had in my hand a small metal-backed mirror, which I had found, surprisingly, lying in a mossy cleft between the rocks. It was a thing such as a man might carry in his pocket, though on the island it seemed unlikely that anyone would do so. I at once attributed the mirror to Captain Magnus, for I knew that no one else had been on the ridge for days. I was wondering as I walked along whether by some sublime law of compensation the captain really thought himself beautiful, and sought this retired spot to admire not the view but his own physiognomy.

When the captain saw me he stopped full in the path. There was a growth of fern on either side. I approached slowly, and, as he did not move, paused, and held out the mirror

"I think you must have dropped this, Captain Magnus. I found it on the rocks."

For an instant his face changed. His evasive eyes were turned to me searchingly and sharply. He took the glass from my hand and slipped it into his pocket. I made a movement to pass on, then stopped, with a faint dawning of discomfort. For the heavy figure of the captain still blocked the path.

A dark flush had come into the man's face. His yellow teeth showed between his parted lips. His eyes had a swimming brightness.

"What's your hurry?" he remarked, with a certain insinuating emphasis.

I began to tremble.

"I am on my way back to camp, Captain Magnus. Please let me pass."

"It won't do you no harm if you're a little late. There ain't no one there keepin' tab. Ain't you always astrayin' off with the Honorable? I ain't so pretty, but—"

"You are impertinent. Let me pass."

"Oh, I'm impertinent, am I? That means fresh, maybe. I'm a plain man and don't use frills on my langwidge. Well, when I meets a little skirt that takes my eyes there ain't no harm in lettin' her know it, is there? Maybe the Honorable could say it nicer—"

With a forward stride he laid a hand upon my arm. I shook him off and stepped back. Fear clutched my throat. I had left my revolver in my quarters. Oh, the dreadful denseness of these woods, the certainty that no wildest cry of mine could pierce them!

And then Crusoe, who had been waiting quietly behind me in the path, slipped in between us. Every hair on his neck was bristling. The lifted upper lip snarled unmistakably. He gave me a swift glance which said, "Shall I spring?"

Quite suddenly the gorilla blandishments of Captain Magnus came to an end.

"Say," he said harshly, "hold back that dog, will you? I don't want to kill the cur."

"You had better not," I returned coldly. "I should have to explain how it happened, you know. As it is I shall say nothing. But I shall not forget my revolver again when I go to walk."

"What's Your Hurry?" He Remarked.

And Crusoe and I went swiftly down the path which the captain no longer disputed.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Lassie, Lassie . . ."

Two or three days later occurred a painful episode. The small unsuspected germ of it had lain ambushed in a discourse of Mr. Shaw's, delivered shortly after our arrival on the island, on the multifarious uses of the cocoa-palm. He told how the juice from the unexpanded flower-spathes is drawn off to form a potent toddy, so that where every prospect pleases man may still be vile. Cookie, experimentally disposed, set to work. Mr. Vane, also experimentally, sampled the results of Cookie's efforts. The liquor had merely been allowed to ferment, whereas a complicated process is necessary for the manufacture of the true arrack, but enough had been achieved to bring about dire consequences for Cuthbert Vane, who had found the liquid cool and refreshing, and was skeptical about its potency.

Aunt Jane took the matter very hard, and rebuked the ribald mirth of Mr. Tubbs. He had to shed tears over a devastating poem called "The Drunkard's Home," before she would forgive him. Cookie made his peace by engaging to vote the prohibition ticket at the next election.

Mr. Shaw was disturbed over Cuthbert, who was not at all bad, only queer and sleepy, and had to be led away to slumber in retirement. Also, it was exceptionally low tide and Mr. Shaw had counted on taking advantage of it to work in the cave. Now Cuthbert was laid up—

"You and I will have to manage by ourselves, Magnus."

"Nothing doing—boat got to be patched up—go out there without it and get caught!" growled the captain.

"Well, lend a hand, then. We can be ready with the boat inside an hour."

The captain hesitated queerly. His wandering eyes seemed to be searching in every quarter for something they did not find. At last he mumbled that he thought he felt a touch of the sun, and had decided to lay off for the afternoon and make his way across the island. He said he wanted to shoot water-fowl and that they had all been frightened away from the cove, but that with the glass he had seen them from Lookout thickly about the other bay.

"Very well," said the Scotchman coldly. "I suppose you must suit yourself. I can get the boat in shape without help, I dare say." I saw him presently looking in an annoyed and puzzled fashion after the vanishing figure of the sailor.

Mr. Tubbs and the umbrellas soon disappeared into the woods. I believe the search for Bill Halliwell's tombstone was no longer very actively pursued, and that he and Aunt Jane and Violet spent their time ensconced in a snug little nook with hammocks and cushions. I more than suspected Mr. Tubbs of feeling that such a bird in the hand as Aunt Jane was worth many doubloons in the bush. But in spite of uneasiness about the future, for the present I rested secure in the certainty that they could not elope from the island, and that there was no one on it with authority to metamorphose Aunt Jane into Mrs. Hamilton H. Tubbs.

The waters of the cove had receded until a fringe of rocks under the high land of the point, usually covered, had been left bare. I had watched the emergence of their black jagged surfaces for some time before it occurred to me that they offered a means of access to the cave. The cave—place of fascination and mystery! Here was the opportunity of all others to explore it, unhampered by any one, just Crusoe and I alone, in the fashion that left me freest to indulge my dreams.

I waited until the Scotchman's back was safely turned, because if he saw me setting forth on this excursion he was quite certain to command me to return, and I had no intention of submitting to his dictatorial ways and yet was not quite sure how I was successfully to defy him.

The retreating tide had left deep pools behind, each a little cosmos of fairy seaweeds and tiny scuttling crabs and rich and wonderful forms of life which were strange to me. Crusoe and I were very much interested, and lingered a good deal on the way. But at last we reached the great archway, and passed with a suddenness which was like a plunge into cool water from the hot glare of the tropic sunshine into the green shadow of the cavern.

At the lower end, between two arches, a black, water-worn rock paving rang under one's feet. Further in under the point the floor of the cave was covered with white sand. All the great shadowy place was murmuring like a vast sea-shell.

I wished I could visit the place in darkness. It would be thrice as mysterious, filled with its hollow whispering echoes, as in the day. From the ledge far above my head led off those narrow, teasing crevices in which the three explorers did their unrewarded burrowing. I could see the strands of a rope ladder lying coiled at the edge of the shelf, where it was secured by spikes. The men dragged down the ladder with a boat-hook when they wanted to ascend. I looked about with a hope that perhaps they had left the boat-hook somewhere.

I found no boat-hook, but instead a spade, which had been driven deep into the sand and left, too firmly imbedded for the tide to bear away. At once a burning hope that I, alone and unassisted, might bring to light the treasure of the Bonny Lass seethed in my veins. I jerked the spade loose and fell to.

I now discovered the great truth that digging for treasure is the most thrilling and absorbing occupation known to man. Time ceased to be, and the weight of the damp and close-packed sand seemed that of feathers. This temporary state of exaltation passed, to be sure, and the sand got very heavy, and my back ached, but still I dug. Crusoe began to fuss about and bark. He came and tugged at my skirt, uttering an uneasy whine.

"Be quiet, Crusoe!" I commanded, threatening him with my spade. The madness of the treasure-lust possessed me. I was panting now, and my hands began to feel like baseball mitts, but still I dug. Crusoe had ceased to importune me; vaguely I was aware that he had got tired and run off. I toiled on, pausing now and then for breath. I was leaning on my spade, rather dejectedly considering the modest excavation I had achieved, when I felt a little cool splash at my feet. Dropping my spade I whirled around—and a shriek echoed through the cave as I saw pouring into it the dark insidious torrent of the returning tide.

(To Be Continued.)

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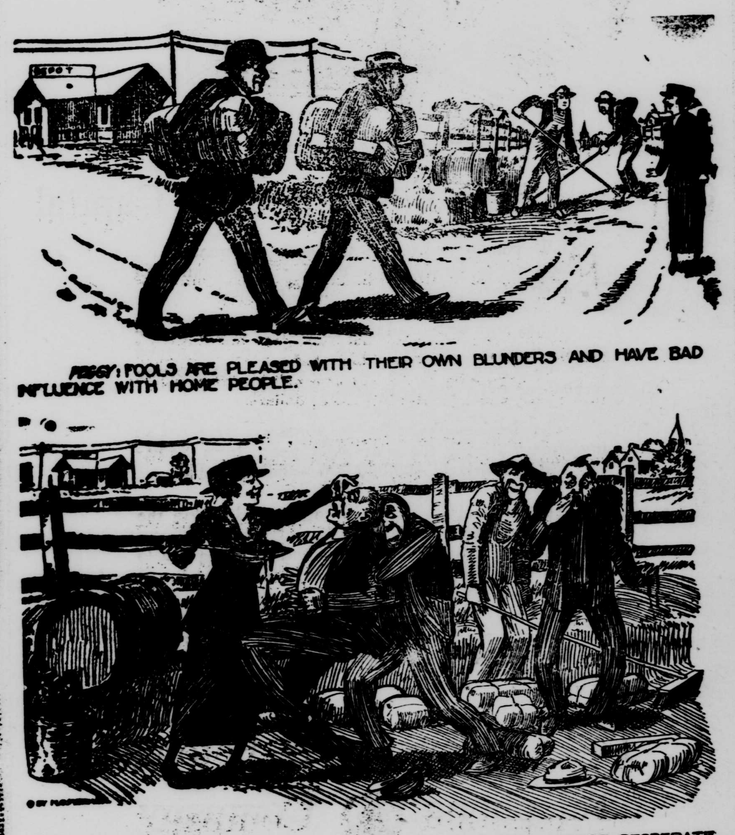

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