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."

CHAPTER VIII.—Fired with the idea of herself discovering the treasure, Virginia pays a visit to the cave which has been singled out as the most likely place in which it has been concealed, and here she is caught by the tide and rescued by Dugald Shaw, from certain death. Thinking her unconscious, Shaw whispers words of endearment, which she treasures.

How had I forgotten it, that deadly thing, muttering to itself out there, ready to spring back like an unleashed beast? Crusoe had warned me—and then he had forsaken me, and I was alone.

And yet at first, wild as my terror was, I had no thought but that somehow I could escape. That these waters were for me the very face of death, sure and relentless, terrible and slow, did not at once seize hold upon my heart.

Frantically I sprang for the entrance on the cove. The floor of the cave was sloping and the water deepened swiftly as I advanced. Soon I was floundering to my knees, and on the instant a great wave rushed in, drenching me to the waist, dazing me with its spray and uproar, and driving me back to the far end of the cave.

With a dreadful hollow sucking sound the surge retreated. I staggered toward the archway that was my only door to life. The water was deeper now, and swiftly came another fierce inrush of the sea that drove me back.

I fled to the far end of the cave, but the sea pursued me. Swiftly the water climbed—it flung me against the wall, then dragged me back. I clutched at the naked rock with bleeding fingers.

Again, after a paroxysm during which I had seemed to stand a great way off and listen to my own shrieks, there came to me a moment of calm. I knew that my one tenuous thread of hope lay in launching myself into that wild flood that was tearing through the cove. I was not a strong swimmer, but a buoyant one. I might find refuge on some half-submerged rock on the shores of the cove—at least I should perish in the open, in the sunlight, not trapped like a desperate rat. And I began to fight my way toward the opening.

And then a dreadful vision flashed across my mind, weighted down my feet like lead, choked back even the cry from my frozen lips. Sharks! The black cutting fin, the livid belly, the dreadful jaws opening—no, no, better to die here, better the clean embrace of the waters—if indeed the sharks did not come into the cave.

And then I think I went quite mad. I remember trying to climb up to the ledge which hung beetling fifteen feet above. Afterward my poor hands showed how desperately. And I remember that once I slipped and went clear under, and how I choked and strangled in the salt water. For my mouth was always open, screaming, screaming continually.

And when I saw the boat fighting its way inch by inch into the cave I was sure that it was a vision, and that only my own wild beseeching of him to save me had made the face of Dugald Shaw arise before my dying eyes. Dugald Shaw was still mending the boat on the shore of the cove, and this was a mocking phantom.

Only the warm human clasp of the arms that drew me into the boat made me believe in him.

The boat bobbed quietly in the eddy at the far end of the cave, while a wet, sobbing, choking heap clung to Dugald Shaw. I clasped him about the neck and would not let him go, for fear that I should find myself alone again, perishing in the dark water. My head was on his breast, and he was pressing back my wet hair with strong and tender hands.

What was this he was saying? "My lassie, my little, little lassie!"

And no less incredible than this it was to feel his cheek pressed, very gently, against my hair—

After a little my self-control came back to me. I stopped my [illegible] childish crying, lifted my head and tried to speak. I could only whisper. "You came, you came!"

"Of course I came!" he said briskly. "There, don't tremble so—you are safe—safe in my arms!"

After a while he lifted [illegible] stern and began to man[illegible] out of the cave. I s[illegible] time I should have [illegible] of it. The fierce [illegible] archway all but sw[illegible] rent threatened to [illegible] rocks, but I felt [illegible] come to save me [illegible] at once the de[illegible] cavern was left [illegible] shine immersed [illegible] a draught of [illegible] the stern my [illegible] as he rowed s[illegible] drove the [illegible]

Everyl[illegible] Crusoe it [illegible] of my d[illegible] when I [illegible] run home. [illegible] trouble[illegible]

Once or tw[illegible] by his f[illegible]

A Shriek Echoed Through the Cave.

Aunt Jane Shrieked and Fell Into the Arms of Mr. Tubbs.

away. Then across his preoccupied mind there flashed a doubt. He laid down his tools and spoke to the animal. Instantly Crusoe dashed for the rocks, barking and crying with eagerness.

Then Mr. Shaw understood. He snatched the painter of the boat and dragged it down the beach. He was shoving off as Cookie, roused by Crusoe's barking, appeared from the seclusion of his afternoon siesta. To him were borne the Scotchman's parting words:

"Virginia Harding—in the cave—hot blankets—may be drowning—"

"And at dat," said Cookie, relating his part in the near tragedy with unction, "I jes' natchully plumped right down on mah bones and wrestled with de Lawd in prayah."

This unique proceeding on Cookie's part necessarily awoke the interest both of the recovered Cuthbert Vane, just emerging after his prolonged slumbers, and of the trio who had at that moment returned from the woods.

Importuned for an explanation, Cookie arose from his devotional posture and put the portentous query:

"Mistah Vane, sah, be dey any propah coffin-wood on dis yere island?"

Instantly connecting my absence with this terrible question, Aunt Jane shrieked and fell into the arms of Mr. Tubbs. I got the story from Cuthbert Vane, and I must say I was unpleasantly struck by the facility with which my aunt seemed to have fallen into Mr. Tubbs' embrace—as if with the ease of habit. Mr. Tubbs, it appeared, had staggered a little under his fair burden, which was not to be wondered at, for Aunt Jane is of an overflowing style of figure and Mr. Tubbs more remarkable for brain than brawn. Violet, however, remained admirably calm, and exhorted Aunt Jane to remember that whatever happened it was all for the best.

"Poor Violet," I commented. "To think that, after all, it didn't happen!"

A slow flush rose to the cheeks of the beautiful youth. He was sitting beside the hammock, where I was supposed to be recuperating.

"It would have happened, though," said the Honorable Cuthbert solemnly, "if it hadn't been for old Shaw. I can't get over it, Vir—Miss Virginia, that I wasn't on deck myself, you know. Here's old Dugald been doing the heroic all his life, and now he gets his chance again while I'm sleeping on those bally coconuts. It's hard on a chap. I—I wish it had been me."

However dubious his grammar, there was no mistaking the look that brightened like the dawn in the depths of his clear eyes. My breath went from me suddenly.

"Oh," I cried excitedly, "isn't that—yes, I thought it was the dinner gong!"

For, as if in response to my dire [illegible] the clang of Cookie's gong echoed through the island silences.

CHAPTER IX.

[illegible] Crusoe and I Found.

[illegible] those moment[illegible] moments [illegible] Sha[illegible] in [illegible] table, a [illegible] unprece[illegible] sat look[illegible] with the [illegible] asked [illegible] good [illegible] stand. [illegible] seemed [illegible]

plained that though he had taken a rifle he had carried along pistol cartridges, so had come home with an empty bag.

At this moment I happened to be looking at Cookie, who was setting down a dish before Mr. Tubbs. The negro started visibly, and rolled his eyes at Captain Magnus with astonishment depicted in every dusky feature. He said nothing, although wont to take part in our conversation as it suited him, but I saw him shake his great grizzled head in a disturbed and puzzled fashion as he turned away.

After this a chill settled on the table. You felt a disturbance in the air, as though wireless currents were crossing and recrossing in general confusion.

As I passed Cookie at his dishpan, after dinner, a sudden thought struck me.

"Cookie," I remarked, "you had a frightfully queer look just now when Captain Magnus told about having taken the wrong cartridges. What was the matter?"

Cookie took his hands out of the water and wiped off the suds, casting about stealthy and mysterious glances. Then he rolled a dubious eye at me.

"What was it, Cookie?" I urged.

"War am Cap'n now?"

"Down on the beach; he can't possibly hear you."

"You won't say nothin' to git Cookie in a rumpus?"

"Cross my heart to die, Cookie."

"Well, den"—Cookie spoke in a hoarse whisper—"Cap'n say he forgit to take his gun ca'tridges. Miss Jinny, when he come back, I see him empty his gun ca'tridges out'n his belt and put back his pistol cartridges. So dere now!"

I turned from Cookie, too surprised to speak. Why had Captain Magnus been at pains to invent a lie about so trivial a matter? I recalled, too, that Mr. Shaw's question had confused him, that he had hesitated and stammered before answering it. Why? Was he a bad shot and ashamed of it? Had he preferred to say that he had taken the wrong ammunition rather than admit that he could get no bag? That must be the explanation, because there was no other. Certainly no imaginable errand but the one assigned could have taken the captain to the other side of the island.

Several days went by, and still the treasure was unfound. Of course, as the unexplored space in the cave contracted, so daily the probability grew stronger that Fortune would shed her golden smile upon us before night. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that the optimistic spirits of most were beginning to flag a little. Only Mr. Shaw, though banned as a confirmed doubter and pessimist, now by the exercise of will kept the others to their task. As for Captain Magnus, his restlessness was manifest. Several times he had suggested blowing the lid off the island with dynamite as the shortest method of getting at the gold. He was always vanishing on solitary excursions inland.

Mr. Tubbs remarked, scornfully, that a man with a nose for money ought to have smelled out the chest before this, but if his own nasal powers were of that character he did not offer to employ them in the service of the expedition. Miss Higglesby-Browne, however, had taken to retiring to the hut for long private sessions with herself. My aunt reverentially explained their purpose. The hiding-place of the chest being of course known to the Universal Wisdom, all Violet had to do was to put herself in harmony and the knowledge would be hers. The difficulty was that you had first to overcome your Mundane Consciousness. To accomplish this Violet was struggling in the hut.

After my meeting with Captain Magnus in the forest, Lookout ridge was barred to me. Crusoe and I must do our rambling in other directions. This being so, I bethought me again of the wrecked sloop lying under the cliffs on the north shore of the cove. I remembered that there had seemed to be a way down the cliffs. I resolved to visit the sloop again. The terrible practicability of the beautiful youth made it difficult to indulge in romantic musings in his presence. And to me a derelict brings a keener tang of romance than any other relic of man's multitudinous and futile strivings.

To Be Continued

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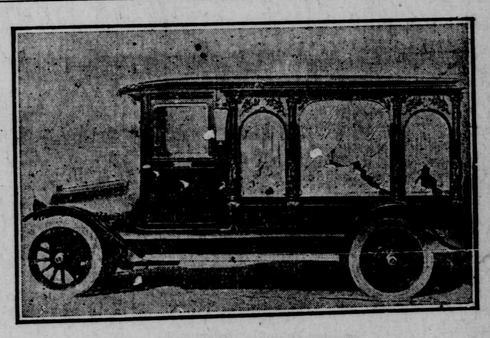

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