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 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.

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 there 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.

CHAPTER IX.—In idle curiosity Virginia, dabbling about the wreck of the Island Queen, finds a diary, identified only as having been kept by "Peter," a former seeker of the treasure. In it he tells of his finding of the hidden wealth and there her reading is interrupted.

CHAPTER X.—Opinions as to the proper methods of prosecuting the search for the treasure are divided, and a wide divergence is apparent in the councils of the little party. Virginia's interest in the leader of the expedition increases.

CHAPTER XI.—The diary which Virginia has found in the remains of the Island Queen reveals the fact that the existence of the gold was known to others, and an active and successful search for it carried on. The record tells of the finding of the treasure and its transference to the small boat, but it is evident the finder never left the island with his wealth. Virginia, of course, believes it to be on the Island Queen, and so within her reach. For various reasons she decides to say nothing of her discovery until she has investigated further.

"Brought back to earth and sanity, I rose and began to consider my surroundings. Somewhere close at hand was the mouth of the cave—but where? The cliffs, as I have already said, were too steep for descent. Nothing but a fly could have crawled down them. I turned to the craggy face of the mountain. There, surely, must be the entrance to the cave! For hours I clambered among the rocks, risking mangled limbs and sunstroke—and found no cave. I came back at last, wearily, to the grave. There lay the dust of the brain that had known all—and a wild impulse came to me to tear away the earth with my bare hands, to dig deep, deep—and then with listening ear wait for a whispered word.

"I put the delirious fancy from me and moved away to the edge of the cliffs. Looking down, I saw a narrow sloping shelf which dropped from the brink to a distance of ten or twelve feet below, where it met a slight projection of the rock. I had seen it before, of course, but it had carried no significance for my mind. Now I stepped down upon the ledge and followed it to its end in the angle of the rock.

"Snugly hidden in the angle was a low doorway leading into blackness.

"Now, of course I ought in prudence to have gone back to the hut and got matches and a lantern and a rope before I set foot in the darkness of that unknown place. But what had I to do today with prudence—Fortune had me by the hand! In I went boldly, Benjy at my heels. The passage turned sharply, and for a little way we walked in blackness. Then it veered again, and a faint and far-off light seemed to filter its way to us through a web woven of the very stuff of night. The floor sloped a little downward. I felt my way with my feet, and came to a step—another. I was going along a descending passage, cut at its steepest into rough, irregular stairs. With either hand I could touch the walls. All the while the light grew clearer. Presently, by another sharp turn, I found myself in a cave, some thirty feet in depth by eighteen across, with an opening on the narrow strip of beach I had seen from the top of the cliffs.

"The roof is high, with an effect of Gothic arches. Near the mouth is a tiny spring of ice-cold water, which has worn a clean rock channel for itself to the sea. Otherwise the cave is perfectly dry. There is no doubt in my mind that in the great buccaneering days of the Seventeenth century, and probably much later, the place was the haunt of pirates. One fancies that Captain Sampson of the Bonny Lass may have known of it before he brought the treasure to the island. There were queer folk to be met with in those days in the western ocean. Yes, the cave has seen many a fierce, sea-tanned face and tarry pigtail, and echoed to strange oaths and wild sea-songs. Men had carved those steps in the passage—thirty-two of them. In the sand of the floor, as I kicked it up with my feet, hoping rather childishly to strike the corner of the chest, I found the hilt and part of the blade of a rusty cutlass, and a chased silver shoe-buckle. I shall take the buckle home to Helen—and yet how trivial it will seem, with all else that I have to offer her! Nevertheless she will prize it as my gift, and because it comes from the place to which some kind angel led me for her sake.

"I left the cave and hurried back to the cabin for a spade, walking on air, breaking with snatches of song the terrible stillness of the woods, where one hears only the high fitful sighing of the wind, or the eternal mutter of the sea.

"Back in the cave, I set to work feverishly, making the light sand fly. At the end of half an hour, at a point close to the angle of the wall my spade struck a hard surface. It lay, I should judge, under about two feet of sand. Soon I had laid bare a patch of dark wood which rang under my knuckles almost like iron. A little more, and I had cleared away the sand from the top of a large chest with a convex lid, heavily bound in brass.

"Furiously I flung the sand aside until the chest stood free for half its depth—which is roughly three feet. It has handles at the ends, great hand-wrought loops of metal. I tugged my hardest, but the chest seemed fast in its place as the native rock. I laughed exultantly. The weight meant gold—gold! I had hammer and chisel with me, and with these I forced the massive ancient locks. There were three of them, one for each strip of brass which bound the chest. Then I flung up the lid.

"No glittering treasure dazzled me. I saw only a surface of stained canvas, tucked in carefully around the—eclipsing poor Benjy, who was a most interested spectator of my strange proceedings. Still no gleam of gold, merely demure rows of plump brown bags. With both hands I reached for them. Oh, to grasp them all! I had to be content with two, because they were so heavy, so blessedly heavy!

I Began at Once the Work of Removing the Bags.

"I spread the square of canvas on the sand, cut the strings from the bags and poured out—gold, gold! All fair shining golden coins they were, not a paltry silver piece among them! And they made a soft golden music as they fell in a glorious yellow heap.

"I don't know how long I sat there, playing with my gold, running it through my fingers, clinking the coins together in my palm. Benjy came and sniffed at them indifferently, unable to understand his master's preoccupation. He thrust his nose into my face and barked, and said as clearly as with words, 'Come, hunt pig!'

"'Benjy,' I said, 'we'll leave the pork alone just now. We have work enough to count our money. We're rich, old boy, rich, rich!'

"Of course, I don't yet know exactly what the value of the treasure is. I have counted the bags in the chest; there are one hundred and forty-eight. Each, so far as I have determined, contains one thousand doubloons, which makes a total of one hundred and forty-eight thousand. Estimating each coin, for the sake of even figures, at a value of seven dollars—a safe minimum—you get one million, thirty-six thousand dollars. And as many of the coins are ancient I ought to reap a harvest from collectors.

"Besides the coin, I found, rather surprisingly, laid between the upper layers of bags, a silver crucifix about nine inches long. It is of very quaint old workmanship, and badly tarnished. Its money value must be very trifling, compared to the same bulk of golden coins. I think it must have had some special character of sacredness which led to its preservation here. It is strange to find such a relic among a treasure so stained by blood and crime.

"And now I have to think about moving the gold. First of all I must get the chest itself aboard the Island Queen. This means that I shall have to empty it and leave the gold in the cave, while I get the chest out by sea. When the chest is safely in the cabin of the sloop—where it won't leave much room for Benjy and his master, I'm afraid—I will take the bags of coin out by the land entrance. I can't think of risking my precious doubloons in the voyage around the point.

"Of course I should have liked to get to the task today, but after the first mad thrill of the great event was over, I found myself as weak and unnerved as a woman. So by a great effort I came away and left my glorious golden hoard. Now I dream and gloat, playing with the idea that tomorrow I shall find it all a fantasy. The pleasure of this is, of course, that all the while I know this wildest of all Arabian fairy tales to be as real as the most drab and sober fact of my hitherto colorless life.

"After all, on the way back from the cave Benjy brought down a pig. So he is as well pleased with the day as I am. Now I am sitting in the doorway of my cabin, writing up my journal, and trying to calm down enough to go to bed. If it were not for the swift fading of daylight, I would go back to the cave for another peep into the chest. But all round the island the sea is moaning with that peculiarly melancholy note that comes with the falling of night. The sea-birds have risen from the cove and gone wheeling off in troops to their nests on the cliffs. Somehow a curious dislike, almost fear, of this wild, sea-girt, solitary place has come over me. I long for the sound of human voices, the touch of human hands. I think of the dead man lying there at the door of the cave, its silent guardian for so long. I suppose he brooded once on the thought of the gold as I do—perhaps he has been brooding so these ninety years! I wonder if he is pleased that I, a stranger, have come into possession of his secret hoard at last?

"Oh, Helen, turn your heavenly face on me—be my refuge from these shuddering unwholesome thoughts! The gold is for you—for you! Surely that must cleanse it of its stains, must loose the clutch of the dead hands that strive to hold it!

"February 11. This morning I was early at the cave. Yes, there it was, the same wonder-chest that I had dreamed of all night long. It was absurd how the tightness in my breast relaxed.

"I began at once the work of removing the bags from the chest and stacking them in the corner of the cave. It was a fatiguing job, I had to stoop so.

"I spent so much time unloading the chest that before I was ready to go for my boat the tide was up and pounding on the rocks below the cave. I find that only at certain stages of the tide is the cave approachable by sea. At the turn after high water, for instance, there is such a terrific undertow that it sets up a small maelstrom among the reefs lying off the island. At low tide is the time to come.

"February 12. Got the chest out of the cave, though it was a difficult job. Luckily there was no sea, and I had a smooth passage around the point. I laughed rather ruefully as I passed the Cave of the Two Arches. To think of the toil I wasted there! I wish Benjy had encountered the fateful pig a little sooner.

"Got the chest aboard the Island Queen and stowed in the cabin. Not room left to swing a kitten.

"In the afternoon began moving the gold. It's the deuce of a job.

"February 15. Been hard at it for three days. Most of the gold moved. Have to think, too, of provisions and water for the trip.

"February 16. On board the Island Queen. Have moved my traps from the hut and am sleeping on the sloop. Want to be near the gold. Tomorrow I have only to bring the last of the gold aboard—a trifling matter—and then go out with the ebb. I would have got all the bags on board today, but I noticed a worn stretch in the cable holding the sloop and stopped to repair it. I can't have the sloop going on the rocks in case a blow comes up tonight. There are only about a load and a half of bags left in the cave.

"A queer notion seized me today about the crucifix, when I was bringing it from the cave. It seemed to float into my brain—I can't say from what quarter—that I had better leave the crucifix for Bill. It wasn't more than he had a right to, really—and there is no virtue in a cross-bones to make a man sleep well.

"Of course I put the absurd idea from me, and brought the crucifix aboard along with the rest of the gold. I shall be glad when I know that the vines have again covered that lonely-looking gravestone from sight. I can't help feeling my own glorious good fortune to be somehow an affront to poor unlucky Bill.

"Tomorrow one last trip to the cave, and then hey, for home and Helen!"

The diary ended here.

I closed the book, and stared with unseeing eyes into the green shadows of the encompassing woods. What happened to the writer of the diary on that last trip to the cave? For he had never left the island. Crusoe was here to prove it, as well as the wreck of the Island Queen. And, in all human probability, under the sand which choked the cabin of the derelict was the long-sought chest of Spanish doubloons.

But what was the mysterious fate of Peter? Had he fallen overboard from the sloop and been drowned? Had he returned to the cave—and was he there still? It was all a mystery—but a mystery which I burned to solve.

Of course I might have solved it, very quickly, merely by communicating the extraordinary knowledge which had come to me to my companions. But for the present at least I meant to keep this astounding secret for my own. Somehow or other, by guile or lucky circumstance, I must bring it about that the document I had signed at Miss Browne's behest was canceled. Was I, who all unaided had discovered, or as good as discovered, the vainly sought for treasure, to disclose its whereabouts to those who would deny me the smallest claim upon its contents? Was I to see all those "fair, shining golden coins," parceled out between Miss Browne and Mr. Tubbs and Captain Magnus (the three who

(To Be Continued.)

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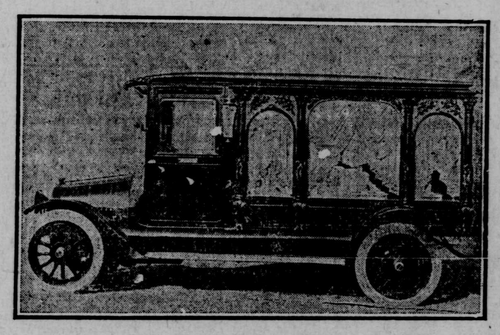

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