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 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 T. 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, 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 the 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.

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loomed large in my indignant thoughts), and not possess a single one myself? Or perhaps accept a little stingy present of a few? I really wasn't very covetous about the money, taken just as money; but considered as buried treasure it made my mouth water.

And then there was Dugald Shaw, who had saved my life, and who seemed to have forgotten it, and that I had ever had my arms about his neck—and who was poor—and brave—

Yes, decidedly, I should keep my secret yet a while, till I saw how the cards were going to fall.

CHAPTER XII.

I Bring to Light a Clue.

My first and all but overpowering impulse was to possess myself of a spade and dash for the wreck of the Island Queen. Sober second thought restrained me. To dig through the damp, close-packed sand of the cabin would be no trifling task, for I should be hampered by the need of throwing out the excavated sand behind me through the narrow companionway. I could achieve my end, no doubt, by patient burrowing, but it would require much more time than I had at my command before the noon-day sounding of Cookie's gong. I must not be seen departing or returning with a spade, but make off with the implement in a stealthy and burglarious manner. Above all, I must not risk betraying my secret through impatience.

But there was nothing to forbid an immediate pilgrimage to the much-sought grave-stone with its sinister symbol. The account in Peter's diary of his adventure with the pig placed the grave with such exactness that I had no doubt of finding it easily. That done, I would know very nearly where to look for the cave—and in order to bid defiance to a certain chill sense of reluctance which beset me at the thought of the cave, I started out at once, skirting the clearing with much circumspection, for it seemed to me that even the sight of my vanishing back must shout of mystery to Cookie droning hymns among his pots and pans. Crusoe, of course, came with me, happily unconscious of his own strange relation to our quest.

Somewhere in the angle between the ragged margin of the cliffs and the abrupt rise of the craggy mountainside, according to Peter's journal, lay the grave. I began systematically to poke with a stick I carried into every low-growing mass of vines or bushes. Quite suddenly I found it. My proddings had displaced a matted mass of ground-creeper. Beneath, looking raw and naked without its leafy covering, was the "curiously regular little patch of ground, outlined at intervals with small stones."

At the head of the grave lay a large, smoothly rounded stone. I knelt and brushed away some obstinate vine-tendrils, and the letters "B. H." revealed themselves, cut deeply and irregularly into the sloping face of the stone. Below was the half-intelligible symbol of the crossed bones.

There was something in the utter loneliness of the place that caught my breath sharply. At once I had the feeling of a marauder. Here slept the guardian of the treasure—and yet in defiance of him I meant to have it. So, too, had Peter—and I didn't know yet what he had managed to do to Peter.

With an impatient shiver I got up quickly from my knees. I whistled to Crusoe, who was trotting busily about on mysterious intelligence conveyed to him by his nose. He ran to me joyfully, and I stooped and patted his warm vigorous body.

"Let Bill walk, Crusoe," I remarked, "let him! He needn't be a dog in the manger about the treasure, anyhow."

Now came the moment which I had been trying not to think about. I had to find the entrance to the cave, and then go into it or part with my own esteem forever. I went and peered over the cliff. The ledge was there—not an inviting ledge, nor one on which the unacrobatically inclined would have any impulse to saunter, but a perfectly good ledge, on which I had not the slightest excuse for declining to venture.

There was truly nothing dangerous about the ledge. It was nearly three feet wide, and had an easy downward trend. Yet you heard the hungry roar of the surf below, and try as you would not to, caught glimpses of the white swirl of it. I moved cautiously, keeping close to the face of the cliff. Crusoe, to my annoyance, sprang down upon the ledge after me. I had a feeling that he must certainly trip me as I picked my way gingerly along.

An angle in the rock—a low dark entrance-way—it was all as Peter had described it. I peered in—nothing but impenetrable blackness. I took a hesitating step. The passage receded sharply, as the diary had recorded. Once around the corner, there would be nothing but darkness anywhere. Suddenly portentous and overwhelming, there rose before me the unanswered question of what had become of Peter on that last visit to the cave. Unanswered—and unanswerable except in one way: by going in to see.

Whereas I had so far thought principally of the treasure, I now began to think with intensity of Peter. What ironic stroke of fate had cut him down in the very moment of his triumph? Had he ever reached the cave to bring away the last of the doubloons? Were they still waiting there unclaimed? Had a storm come up on that last night, and the weakened cable parted, and the Island Queen gone on the rocks, drowning Peter in the cabin with his gold. Then how had Crusoe got away, Crusoe, who feared the waves so, and would bark at them and then turn tail and run?

Speaking of Crusoe, where was he? I realized that a moment ago he had plunged into the passage. I heard the patter of his feet—a pause. A queer, dismal little whine echoed along the passage. I heard Crusoe returning—but before his nose appeared around the angle of the tunnel his mistress had reached the top of the cliff at a bound and was vanishing at a brisk pace into the woods.

With bitterness, as I pursued my way to camp, I realized that I was not a heroine. Here was a mystery—it was the business of a heroine to solve it. Now that I was safely away from the cave, I began to feel the itch of a torturing curiosity. How, without going into the terrifying place alone, should I find out what was there? Should I pretend to have accidentally discovered the grave, lead the party to it, and then—again accidentally—discover the tunnel? This plan had its merits—but I discarded it, for fear that something would be found in the cave to direct attention to the Island Queen. Then I reflected that very likely the explorers would work round the island far enough to find the sea-mouth of the cave. This would take matters entirely out of my hands. I should perhaps be enlightened as to the fate of Peter and the last remaining bags of doubloons, but might also have to share the secret of the derelict with the rest. And then all my dreams of playing fairy godmother and showering down on certain heads—like coals of fire—torrents of beautiful golden doubloons, would be over.

On the whole I could not tell whether I burned with impatience to have the cave discovered, or was cold with the fear of it.

And then, so vigorous is the instinct to see one's self in heroic postures, I found I was trying to cheat myself with the pretense that I meant presently to abstract Aunt Jane's electric torch and, returning to the tunnel-mouth, plunge in dauntlessly.

CHAPTER XIII.

Mr. Tubbs Interrupts.

I had determined as an offset to my pusillanimous behavior about the cave to show a dogged industry in the matter of the Island Queen. It would take me a long while to get down through the sand to the chest, but I resolved to accomplish it, and borrowed of Cookie, without his knowledge, a large iron spoon which I thought I could wield more easily than a heavy spade.

But that afternoon I was tired and hot—it really called for a grimmer resolve than mine to shovel sand through the languor of a Leeward island afternoon. Instead, I slept in my hammock, and dreamed that I was queen of a cannibal island, draped in necklaces made of the doubloons now hidden under the sand in the cabin of the derelict.

Later, the wailing of Cookie was heard in the land, and I had to restore the spoon to free Crusoe of the charge of having stolen it. I said I had wanted to dig with it. But of course it occurred to no one that it was the treasure I had expected to dig up with Cookie's spoon.

A more serious obstacle to my explorations on the Island Queen presented itself next day. Instead of putting to sea, Mr. Shaw and Captain Magnus hauled the boat up on the beach and set to work to repair it. The preceding day had been filled with hardship and danger—so much so that my heart sank a little at the recountal of it. You saw the little boat threading its way among the reefs, tossed like seaweed by the white teeth of gnawing waves, screamed at by angry gulls whose homes were those clefts and caves which the boat invaded. And all this, poor little boat, on a hopeless quest—for no reward but peril and wounds. Cuthbert Vane had a sprained thumb which could not be ignored, and on the strength of which he was dismissed from the boat-repairing contingent, and thrown on my hands to entertain. So of course I had to renounce all thoughts of visiting the sloop. I should not have dared to go there anyway, with Mr. Shaw and the captain able more or less to overlook my motions from the beach, for I was quite morbidly afraid of attracting attention to the derelict. It seemed to me a happy miracle that no one but myself had taken any interest in her, or been inspired to ask by what chance so small a boat had come to be wrecked upon these desolate shores. Fortunately in her position in the shadow of the cliff she was inconspicuous, so that she might easily have been taken for the half of a large boat instead of the whole of a small one, or she must before this have drawn the questioning notice of the Scotchman. As to the captain, his attention was all set on the effort to discover the cave, and his intelligence was not lively enough to start on an entirely new tack by itself. And the Honorable Cuthbert viewed derelicts as he viewed the planetary bodies; somehow in the course of nature they happened.

So, dissembling my excitements and anxieties, I swung placidly in my hammock, and nearby sat the beautiful youth with his thumb carried tenderly in a bandage. Was it merely my being so distrait, or was it quite another reason that led him to open up so suddenly about his Kentish home? Strange to say, instead of panting for the title, Cuthbert wanted his brother to go on living, though there was something queer about his spine, poor fellow, and the doctors said he couldn't possibly— Of course I was surprised at Cuthbert's views, for I had always thought that if there were a title in your family your sentiments toward those who kept you out of it were necessarily murderous, and your tears crocodile when you pretended to weep over their biers. But Cuthbert's feelings were so human that I mentally apologized to the nobility. As to High Staunton manor, I adored it. It is mostly Jacobean, but with an ancient Tudor wing, and it has a chapel and a ghost and a secret staircase and a frightfully beautiful and wicked ancestress hanging in the hall—I mean a portrait of her—and quantities of oak paneling quite black with age, and silver that was hidden in the family tombs when Cromwell's soldiers came, and a chamber where Elizabeth once slept, and other romantic details too numerous to mention. It is a little bit run down and shabby, for lack of money to keep it up, and of course on that account all the more entrancing.

The present Lord Grasmere lived up to his position so completely that he had the gout and sat with his foot on a cushion exactly like all the elderly aristocrats you ever heard of, only when I inquired if his lordship cursed his valet and flung plates at the footmen when his foot hurt him, his son was much shocked and pained. He did not realize so well as I—from an extensive course of novel-reading—that such is the usual behavior of titled persons.

It was delightful, there in the hot stillness of the island, with the palms rustling faintly overhead, to hear of that cool, mossy, ancient place. I asked eager questions—I repeated gloatingly fragments of description—I wondered enviously what it would be like to have anything so old and proud and beautiful in your very blood—when suddenly I realized that, misled by my enthusiasm, Cuthbert was saying something which must not be said—that he was about to offer the shelter of that ancient roof to me. To me, whose heart could never nest there, but must be ever on the wing, a wild bird of passage in the track of a ship—

I sat up with a galvanic start. "Oh—listen—didn't you hear something?" I desperately broke in. For somehow I must stop him. I didn't want our nice jolly friendship spoiled—and besides, fancy being cooped up on an island with a man you have refused! Especially when all the while you'd be wanting so to pet and console him!

But with his calm doggedness Cuthbert began again—"I was a bit afraid the old place would have seemed too quiet and dull to you—" when the day was saved and my interruption strangely justified by a shrill outcry from the camp. I knew that high falsetto tone. It was the voice of Mr. Tubbs, but pitched on a key of quite insane excitement. I sprang up and ran, Crusoe and the Honorable Cuthbert at my heels. There in the midst of the camp Mr. Tubbs stood, the center of a group who were regarding him with astonished looks. Mr. Shaw and the captain had left their tinkering, Cookie his saucepans, and Aunt Jane and Violet had come hurrying from the hut. Among us all stood Mr. Tubbs with folded arms, looking round upon the company with an extraordinary air of complacency and triumph.

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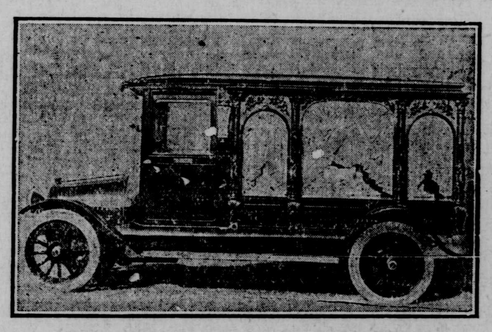

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