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 I. 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 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.

CHAPTER XII.—Led by directions in "Peter's" diary, Virginia finds a highly important clue to the hidden treasure, and her courage fails when it comes to pushing her investigations.

CHAPTER XIII.—Interrupting a fervent declaration of love by Cuthbert Vane, Virginia is startled by the announcement of Mr. Tubbs that he has found the clew to the whereabouts of the treasure. He demands, as the price of his secret (as he supposes) a half of the wealth found. The party declines to accept his terms and decides to continue the search without his aid. During the excitement Captain Magnus disappears.

The group dissolved and moved rapidly toward us. Miss Browne, exultant, beaming, was in the van. She set her substantial feet down like a charger pawing the earth. You might almost have said that Violet pranced. Aunt Jane was round-eyed and twittering. Mr. Tubbs wore a look of suppressed astonishment, almost of perturbation. "What's his game?" was the question in the sophisticated eye of Mr. Tubbs. But the Scotchman had, when he chose, a perfect poker face. The great game of bluff would have suited him to a nicety.

Miss Browne advanced on Cuthbert Vane and seized both his hands in an ardent clasp.

"Mr. Vane," she said with solemnity, "I thank you—in the name of this expedition I thank you—for the influence you have exerted upon your friends."

And this seemed to be to the noble youth the most stunning of all the shocks of that eventful morning.

Now came the matter of drawing up the new agreement. It was a canny Scot indeed, who, acting on the hint I had just given him, finally settled its terms. In the first place, the previous agreement was declared null and void. In the second, Mr. Tubbs was to have his fourth only if the treasure were discovered through his direct agency. And it was under this condition and no other that Dugald Shaw bound himself to relinquish his original claim. Virginia Harding signed a new renunciatory clause, but it bore only on treasure discovered by Mr. Tubbs. Indeed, the entire contract was of force only if Mr. Tubbs fulfilled his part of it, and fell to pieces if he did not. Which was exactly what I wanted.

No difficulty was made of the absence of Captain Magnus, as his interests were unaffected by the change. Space was left for his signature. Mine came last of all, as that of a mere interloper and hanger-on.

My demonstrations of joy at this happy issue of my hopes had to be confined to a smile—in which for a startled instant Violet had seemed to sense the triumph. It was still on my lips as with a general movement we rose from the table about which we had been grouped during the absorbing business of drawing up the contract. Cookie had been clamoring for us to leave, that he might spread the table for lunch. I had opened my mouth to call him, "All right, Cookie!" when a shrill volley of barks from Crusoe shattered the stillness of the drowsy air. In the same instant the voice of Cookie, raised to a sharp note of alarm, rang through the camp:

"My Gawd, what all dis yere mean?"

I turned, to look into the muzzle of a rifle.

CHAPTER XV.

Like a Chapter From the Past.

Five men had emerged from the woods behind the clearing, so quietly that they were in the center of the camp before Crusoe's shrill bark, or the outcry of the cook, warned us of their presence. By that time they had us covered. Three of them carried rifles, the other two revolvers. One of these was Captain Magnus.

Advancing a step or two before the others, he ordered us to throw up our hands. Perhaps he meant only the men—but my hands and Aunt Jane's and Miss Higglesby-Browne's also went up with celerity. He grinned into our astounded faces with a wolfish baring of his yellow teeth.

"Never guessed I wasn't here jest to do the shovel work, but might have my own little side-show to bring off, hey?" he inquired of no one in particular. "Here, Slinker, help me truss 'em up."

The man addressed thrust his pistol in his belt and came forward, and with his help the hands of the Scotchman, Cuthbert Vane and Mr. Tubbs were securely tied. They were searched for arms, and the sheath-knives which Mr. Shaw and Cuthbert carried at their belts were taken away. The three prisoners were then ordered to seat themselves in a row on the trunk of a prostrate palm.

The whole thing had happened in the strangest silence. Except for a feeble moaning from Aunt Jane, like the bleating of a sheep, which broke forth at intervals, nobody spoke or made a sound. The three riflemen in the background, standing like images with their weapons raised, looked like a well-trained chorus in an opera.

And indeed it was all extraordinarily like something on a stage. Slinker, for instance. He had a prowling, sidelong fashion of moving about, and enormous yellow mustaches like a Viking. And the burly fellow in the background, with the black whiskers—too bad he'd forgotten his earrings.

But I awoke to the horrid reality of it all as Captain Magnus, smiling his wolfish smile, turned and approached me.

"Well, boys," he remarked to his followers, who had lowered their weapons and were standing about at ease, "here's the little pippin I was tellin' of. 'Fraid we give her a little scare bustin' in so sudden, so she ain't quite so bright and smilin' as I like to see. It's all right, girlie; you'll soon cheer up when you find out you're goin' to be the little queen o' this camp. Things will be all your own way now—so long as you treat me right." And the abominable creature thrust forth a hairy paw and deliberately chucked me under the chin.

I heard a roar from the log—and coincidentally from Captain Magnus. For with the instant response of an automaton—consciously I had nothing at all to do with it—I had reached up and briskly boxed the captain's ears.

Furiously he caught my wrist. "Ah, you red-headed little devil, you'll pay for this! I ain't pretty, oh, no! I

Furiously He Caught My Wrist.

ain't a handsome mooncalf like the Honorable; I ain't got a title, nor girly pink cheeks, nor fine gentlemanly ways. No walks with the likes o' me, no tatey-tates in the woods—oh, no! Well, it's goin' to be another story now, girlie. I guess you can learn to like my looks, with a little help from my fist now and then, jest as well as you done the Honorable's. I guess it won't be long before I have you crawlin' on your knees to me for a word o' kindness. I guess—"

"Aw, stow that soft stuff, Magnus," advised Slinker. "You can do your spoonin' with the gal later on. We're here to git that gold, and don't you forget it. Plenty of time afterward to spark the wimmen."

"That's the talk," chimed in Blackbeard. "Don't run us on a lee shore for the sake of a skirt. Skirts is thicker'n herring in every port, ain't they?"

"I got a score to settle with this one," growled Magnus sullenly, but his grasp loosened on my arm, and I slipped from him and fled to Aunt Jane—yes, to Aunt Jane—and clung to her convulsively. Miss Higglesby-Browne seemed to have petrified. Her skin had a withered look, and a fine network of lines showed on it, suddenly clear, like a tracery on parchment. Beyond her I saw the face of Dugald Shaw, gray with a steely wrath. A gun had been trained anew on him and Cuthbert, and the bearer thereof was arguing with them profanely. I suppose the prisoners had threatened outbreak at the spectacle of the chin-chucking.

No one had bothered to secure Cookie, and he knelt among the pots and pans of his open-air kitchen, pouring forth petitions in a steady stream. Blackbeard, who seemed a jovial brute, burst into a loud guffaw.

"Ha, ha! Look at old Soot-and-Cinders gittin' hisself ready for glory!" He approached the negro and aimed at him a kick which Cookie, arising with unexpected nimbleness, contrived to dodge. "Looky here, darky, git busy dishin' up the grub, will you? I could stand one good feed after the forecastle slops we been livin' on."

Blackbeard, whom his companions addressed indiscriminately as "Captain," or "Tony," seemed to exercise a certain authority. He went over to the prisoners on the log and inspected their bonds.

"You'll do; can't git loose nohow," he announced. Then, with a savage frown, "But no monkey business. First o' that I see, it's a dose o' cold lead for youse, savvy?"

He turned to us women.

"Well, chickabiddies, we ain't treated you harsh, I hope? Now I don't care about tyin' youse up, in case we can help it, so jest be good girls, and I'll let youse run around loose for a while."

But Magnus struck in with an oath.

"Loose? You're turnin' soft, I say. The future Mrs. M. there—which I mean to make her if she behaves right—she's a handful, she is. There ain't no low trick she won't play on us if she gets the chance. Better tie her up, I say."

"Magnus," responded Tony with severity, "it'd make a person think to hear you talk that you wasn't no gentleman. If you can't keep little Redtop in order without you tie her, why, then hand her over to a guy what can. I bet I wouldn't have a speck o' trouble with her—her and me would git along as sweet as two turtle-doves."

"You dry up, Tony," said Magnus, lowering. "I'll look after my own affairs of the heart. Anyway, here's them two old hens what have been makin' me sick with their jabber and nonsense all these weeks. Ain't I goin' to have a chance to get square?"

"Here, youse!" struck in Slinker, "quit your jawin'! Here's a feed we aint seen the like of in weeks."

Tony thereupon ordered the women to sit down on the ground in the shade and not move under penalty of "gettin' a wing clipped." We obeyed in silence and looked on while the pirates with wolfish voracity devoured the meal which had been meant for us. They had pocket-flasks with them, and as they attacked them with frequency the talk grew louder and wilder. By degrees it was possible to comprehend the extraordinary disaster which had befallen us, at least in a sketchy outline of which the detail was filled in later. Tony, it appeared, was the master of a small power schooner which had been fitting out in San Francisco for a filibustering trip to the Mexican coast, and his three hard companions were the crew. None was of the old hearty breed of sailors, but wharf-rats pure and simple, city-dregs whom chance had led to follow the sea. Tony, in whom one detected a certain rough force and ability, was an Italian, an outlaw specimen of the breed which mans the fishing fleet putting forth from the harbor of San Francisco. When and where he and Magnus had been friends I do not know. But no sooner had the wisdom of Miss Browne imparted the great secret to her chance acquaintance of the New York wharves, than he had communicated with his old pal, Tony. The power-schooner with her unlawful cargo stole out through the gate, made her delivery in the Mexican port, took on fresh supplies, and stood away for Leeward island. The western anchorage had received and snugly hidden her. Captain Magnus, meanwhile, by means of a mirror flashed from Lookout, had maintained communication with his friends, and even visited them under cover of the supposed shooting expedition. And now, while we had been striving to overcome the recalcitrancy of Mr. Tubbs, Captain Magnus had taken a short cut to the same end. You felt that the secret of Mr. Tubs would be extracted, if need be, by no delicate methods.

But Mr. Tubbs' character possessed none of that unreasonable obstinacy which would make harsh measures necessary under such conditions. His countenance, as the illuminating conversation of the pirates had proceeded, lost the speckled appearance which had characterized it at the height of his terrors. Something like his normal hue returned. He sat up straighter, moistened his dry lips, and looked around upon us, yes, even upon Aunt Jane and Miss Higglesby-Browne, with whom he had been so lately and so tenderly reconciled, with a side-long, calculating glance. After the pirates had eaten, the prisoners on the log were covered with a rifle and their hands untied, while Cookie, in a lugubrious silence made eloquent by his rolling eyes, passed around among us the remnants of the food. Yet under all the terror was a bedrock confidence that there was, there must be somehow in the essence of things, an eternal rightness which would keep me safe from Captain Magnus. And as I looked across at Dugald Shaw and met for an instant his steady, watchful eyes, I managed a swift little smile a rather wan smile, I dare say, but still a smile.

Cuthbert Vane caught, so to speak, the tail of it, and was electrified. I saw his lips form at Mr. Shaw's ear the words, "Wonderful little sport, by Jove!"

A curious stiffening had come over Cuthbert Vane. For the first time in my knowledge of him he showed the consciousness—instead of only the subconsciousness—of the difference between Norman blood and the ordinary sanguine fluid. His shoulders squared; he lost his habitual easy lounge and sat erect and tall. Something stern and aquiline showed through the smooth beauty of his face, so that you thought of effigies of crusading knights stretched on their ancient tombs in High Staunton church. He was their true descendant, after all, this slow, calm, gentle-mannered Cuthbert. It was a young lion that I had been playing with, and the claws were there, strong and terrible in their velvet sheath.

(To Be Continued.)

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