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LOST—On Monday, gold friendship circle. Return to American Union office and receive reward.

MONEY TO LOAN on mortgages. Fred R. Owens, Attorney-at-Law, Denton, Md.,

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED — The American Union desires correspondents in all sections of Caroline County. Write for further information. tf

CLEAN RAGS WANTED—The American Union wants 20 pounds of clean rags of fair size. 2c per pound.

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Captain Tony, having finished his pipe, knocked the ashes out against the heel of his boot and put the pipe in his pocket.

"Well," he said, stretching, "I'd ruther have a nap, but business is business, so let's get down to it. Which o' them guys has the line on the stuff, Magnus?"

"Old Baldy, here," returned Magnus, with a nod at Mr. Tubbs. "Old Washtubs I call him generally; ha, ha!"

"Then looky here, Washtubs," said Tony, addressing Mr. Tubbs with sudden sternness, "maybe you could bluff these here soft guys, but we're a different breed o' cats, we are. Whatever you know, you'll come through with it, and come quick, or it'll be the worse for your hide, see?"

Mr. Tubbs rose from the log with promptness.

"Captain," he said earnestly, "from long experience in the financial centers of the country, I have got to be a man what understands human nature. The minute I looked at you, I seen it in your eye that there wasn't no use in tryin' to bluff you. You are a congenial crowd, you boys—gosh, but you do look good to me after the bunch o' stiffs I been playin' up to here! All I ask is, to let me in on it with you, and I'll be glad to put you wise to the best tricks of a sly old fox who ain't ever been caught yet without two holes to his burrow. I won't ask no half, nor no quarter, either, though I just signed up for that amount with the old girl here. But give me freedom, and a bunch o' live wires like you boys! I've near froze into a plaster figure o' Virtue, what with talkin' like a Sunday school class, and sparkin' one old maid and makin' out like I wouldn't melt butter with the other. So H. H. will ship along of you, mates, and we'll off to the China coast somewheres where the spendin' is good and the police not too noisy, and try how far a trunkful of doubloons will go!"

With a choky little gurgle in her throat Aunt Jane fell limply against me. It was too much. All day long she had been tossed back and forth like a shuttlecock by the battledore of emotion. She had borne the shock of Mr. Tubbs' sordid greed for gold, his disloyalty to the expedition, his coldness to herself; she had been shaken by the tender stress of the reconciliation, had been captured by pirates, and now suffered the supreme blow of this final revelation of the treachery of Tubbs. To hear her romance described as the sparking of an old maid—and by the sparker! From Miss Higglesby-Browne had come a snort of fury, but she said nothing, having apparently no confidence in the effect of oratory on pirates. She did not even exhort Aunt Jane, but left it to me to sustain my drooping aunt as best I could.

As Mr. Tubbs made his whole-hearted and magnanimous proposal Captain Tony opened his small black eyes and contemplated him with attention. Then he glanced round upon his fellows.

"What say, boys? Shall we ship old Washtubs on the schooner and let him have his fling along with us? Eh?" And as Captain Tony uttered these words the lid of his left eye eclipsed for an instant that intelligent optic.

From the pirates came a scattering volley of assents. "All right—hooray for old Washtubs—sure, close the deal."

"All right, Washtubs, the boys are willing. So I guess we better be moving toward that chest of doubloons."

It was arranged that Slinker and a cross-eyed man named Horny should remain at the camp on guard. As a measure of precaution Cookie, too, was bound, and Aunt Jane, Miss Browne and I ordered into the cabin. The three remaining pirates, armed with our spades and picks and dispensing a great deal of jocular profanity, set out for the cave under the guidance of Mr. Tubbs.

Thankful as I was for the departure of Captain Magnus, I underwent torments in the stifling interior of the cabin. Aunt Jane wept piteously. At last I heard a faint moan:

"Virginia!"

I went to her. "Yes, auntie?"

"Virginia," she murmured, "I think I shall not live to leave the island, even if I am not—not executed. In fact, I have a feeling now as though the end were approaching. I have always known that my heart was not strong, even if your Aunt Susan did call it indigestion. But oh, my dear child, it is not my digestion—it is my heart that has been wounded! To have reposed such confidence in a serpent! To realize that I might have been impaled upon its fangs! Oh, my dear, faithful child, what would I have done if you had not clung to me although I permitted serpents to turn me from you! But I am cruelly punished. All I ask is that some day—when you are married and happy, dear—you will remove from this desolate spot the poor remains of her who—of her who—" Sobs choked Aunt Jane's utterance.

"Jane—" began Miss Higglesby-Browne.

"I was speaking to my niece," replied Aunt Jane with unutterable dignity from her corner. Her small features had all but disappeared in her swollen face, and her hair had slipped down at a rakish angle over one eye. But, of course, being Aunt Jane, she must choose this moment to be queenly.

"There, there, auntie," I said soothingly, "of course you are not going to leave your bones on this island. If you did you know, you and Bill Halliwell might ha'nt around together—think how cozy! (Here Aunt Jane gave a convulsive shudder.) As to my being married, if you were betting just now on anybody's chances, they would have to be Captain Magnus', wouldn't they?"

"Good gracious, Virginia!" shrieked Aunt Jane faintly. But I went on relentlessly, determined to distract her mind from thoughts of her approaching end.

"All things considered, I suppose I really ought to ask you to put my affairs in order when you get back. If I am carried off by the pirates, naturally I shall have to jump overboard at once, though I dislike the idea of drowning, and especially of being eaten by sharks. Would you mind putting up a little headstone—it needn't cost much—in the family plot, with just 'Virginia' on it? And anything of mine that you don't want yourself I'd like Bess to have for the baby, please. Ask her when the little duck is old enough to tell her my sad story—"

By this time Aunt Jane was sobbing loudly and waving her little hands about in wild beseeching.

"Jane!" broke in Miss Browne again in awful tones. But at that moment the door of the cabin opened and the face of Slinker peered in.

"Say," he remarked, "there ain't no sense in you girls stayin' cooped up here that I see. I guess me and Horney can stand you off if you try to rush us. Come out and cool off a little."

The great heat of the day was over and the sun already dropping behind the peak of the island. Mr. Shaw and Cuthbert had been allowed to sit in the shade, and I thought their wrists were not too tightly bound for comfort. Cookie had been released, and under the eye of Horney was getting supper. Crusoe had earlier in the day received a kick in the ribs from Captain Magnus, fortunately too much occupied with the prisoners to pursue his vengeance further, and had fled precipitately, to my enormous relief. The dog was quite wise enough to know that he would help me best by keeping out of the clutches of our common foe.

Just then there come from the woods the sound of footsteps and voices, and the three pirates and Mr. Tubbs entered the clearing. A thrill ran through the camp. Captors and captives forgot all else but the great, the burning question—had the treasure been discovered? And I am sure that no one was so thrilled as I, although in my mind the question took another form.

For now I was going to know what had been waiting for me there in the cave, when I stood yesterday at its black entrance, afraid to go in.

CHAPTER XVI.

From Dead Hands.

At the head of the file, Capt. Tony advanced through the clearing, and what with his flowing black beard, his portly form and a certain dramatic swagger which he possessed, he looked so entirely Italian and operatic that you expected to hear him at any moment burst out in a sonorous basso. With a sweeping gesture he flung down upon the table two brown canvas bags, which opened and discharged from gaping mouths a flood of golden coins.

Slinker and the cross-eyed man shouted aloud. They ran and clutched at the coins with a savage greed.

"Gold, gold—the real stuff! It's the doubloons, all right—where's the rest of 'em?" These cries broke from Slinker and Horny confusedly as the gold slid jingling between their eager fingers.

"The rest of 'em is—where they is," pronounced Tony oracularly. "Somewheres in the sand of the cave, of course. Well dig 'em up tomorrow morning."

"What was the point in not digging 'em all up while you was about it?" demanded Slinker, lowering. "What was the good o' digging up jest these here couple o' bags and quitting?"

"Because we didn't dig 'em up," responded Tony darkly. "Because these was all ready and waiting. Because all we had to do was to say 'Thankee,' to the feller that handed 'em out. We got these here bags of doubloons, as I says, without havin' to dig for 'em—oncet we had found the cave, which it's no thanks to old Washtubs we ain't looking for it yet. We got these here bags right out of the fists of a skeleton. Most of him was under a rock, which had fell from the roof and pinned him amidships. Must of squashed him like a beetle, I guess. But he'd still kep' his hold on the bags." I turned aside, for fear that anyone should see how white I was. To the rest, these poor bones might indeed bear mute witness to a tragedy, but a tragedy lacking outlines, vague, impersonal, without poignacy. To me, they told with dreadful clearness the last sad chapter of the tale of Peter; Peter who had made me so intimately his confidante, whose love and hopes and solitary strivings I knew all about.

"There Ain't No Sense in You Girls Stayin' Cooped Up Here."

Vaguely I heard around me a babble of exclamations and conjectures. Murmurs of interest rose even from our captive band. Then came Slinker's voice, loud with sudden fear:

"Say, you don't suppose the—the Bones would of got away with the rest of the coin somehow, do you?" he demanded.

"Got away with it?" Tony contemptuously thrust aside the possibility. "Got away with it how? He sure didn't leave the island with it, did he? Would he of dug it up from one place jest to bury it in another? Huh! Must of wanted to work if he did! Now, my notion is that this happened to one of the guys that was burying the gold, and that the rest jest left him there for a sort of scarecrow to keep other people out of the cave."

"But the gold?" protested Slinker. "They wouldn't leave that for a scarecrow, would they?"

"Maybe not," admitted Tony, "but suppose that feller died awful slow, and went on hollering and clutching at the bags? Well, that cave wouldn't be a pleasant place to stay in, would it? And no one would have the nerve to snatch them bags away to bury 'em, 'cause a dying man, especially when he dies hard, can have an awful grip. So what they done was just to shovel the sand in on the gold they'd stowed away and light out quick."

If the ingenuity of this reasoning was more remarkable than its logic, the pirates were not the men to find fault with it. Desire is the most eloquent of advocates, and the five ruffians had only to listen to its voice to enjoy in anticipation all the fruits of their iniquitous schemes. The sight of the golden coins intoxicated them. They played with the doubloons like children, jingling them in their calloused palms, guessing at weight and value, calculating their equivalent in the joy of living. Laughter and oaths resounded.

They Played With the Doubloons Like Children.

(To Be Continued.)

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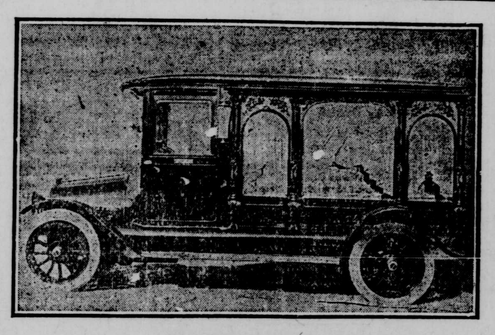

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