

SPANISH DOUBLOONS



CHAPTER I

An Aunt Errand.

Never had life seemed more fair and smiling than at the moment when Aunt Jane's letter descended upon me like a bolt from the blue. The fact is, I was taking a vacation from Aunt Jane. Being an orphan, I was supposed to be under Aunt Jane's wing, but this was the merest polite fiction, and I am sure that no hen with one chicken worries about it more than I did about Aunt Jane. I had spent the last three years, since Aunt Susan died and left Aunt Jane with all the money and no one to look after but me, in snatching her from the brink of disaster. Her most recent and narrow escape was from a velvet-tongued person of half her years who turned out to be a convict on parole. She had her handbag packed for the elopement when I confronted her with this unpleasant fact. When she came to she was bitter instead of grateful, and went about for weeks presenting a spectacle of blighted affections which was too much for the most self-approving conscience. So it ended with my packing her off to New York, where I wrote to her frequently and kindly, urging her not to mind me but to stay as long as she liked.

Meanwhile I came up to the ranch for a long holiday with Bess and the baby, a holiday which had already stretched itself out to Thanksgiving, and threatened to last until Christmas. As to Aunt Jane, my state of mind was fatuously calm. She was staying with cousins, who live in a suburb and are frightfully respectable. I was sure they numbered no convicts among their acquaintance, or indeed any one from whom Aunt Jane was likely to require rescuing. And if it came to a retired missionary I was perfectly willing.

But the cousins and their respectability are of the passive order, whereas Aunt Jane demands aggressive and continuous action. Hence the bolt from the blue above alluded to.

I was swinging tranquilly in the hammock, I remember, when Bess brought my letters and then hurried away because the baby had fallen downstairs. Unwarned by the slightest premonitory thrill, I kept Aunt Jane's letter till the last and skimmed through all the others.

At last I came to Aunt Jane. I ripped open the envelope and drew out the letter—a fat one, but then Aunt Jane's letters are always fat. Nevertheless, as I spread out the close-filled pages I felt a mild wonder. Writing so large, so black, so staggering, so madly underlined, must indicate something above even Aunt Jane's usual emotional level. Perhaps in sober truth there was a missionary—

Twenty minutes later I staggered into Bess' room. "Hush!" she said. "Don't wake the baby!"

"Baby or no baby," I whispered savagely. "I've got to have a time-table. I leave for the city tonight to catch the first steamer for Panama!"

Later, while the baby slumbered and I packed, I explained. This was difficult; not that Bess is as a general thing obtuse, but because the picture of Aunt Jane embarking for some wild, lone isle of the Pacific as the head of a treasure-seeking expedition was enough to shake the strongest intellect. And yet, amid the welter of ink and eloquence which filled those fateful pages, there was the cold hard fact confronting you. Aunt Jane was going to look for buried treasure, in company with one Violet Higgleby-Browne, whom she sprung on you without the slightest explanation, as though alluding to the queen of Sheba or the Siamese twins. By beginning at the end and reading backward—Aunt Jane's letters are usually most intelligible that way—you managed to piece together some explanation of this Miss Higgleby-Browne and her place in the scheme of things. It was through Miss Browne, whom she had met at a lecture upon Soul-Development, that Aunt Jane had come to realize her claims as an individual upon the Cosmos, also to discover that she was by nature a woman of affairs with a talent for directing large enterprises, although adverse influences had hitherto kept her from recognizing her powers. There was a dark significance in these "adverse influences," though whether they meant me or the family lawyer I was not sure. Miss Higgleby-Browne, however,

and assisted Aunt Jane to find herself, and as a consequence Aunt Jane, for the comparatively trifling outlay needed to finance the Harding-Browne expedition, would shortly be the richer by one-fourth of a vast treasure of Spanish doubloons. The knowledge of this hoard was Miss Higgleby-Browne's alone. It had been revealed to her by a dying sailor in a London hospital, whither she had gone on a mission of kindness—you gathered that Miss Browne was precisely the sort to take advantage when people were helpless and unable to fly from her. Why the dying sailor chose to make Miss Browne the repository of his secret, I don't know—this still remains for me the unsolved mystery. But when the sailor closed his eyes the secret and the map—of course there was a map—had become Miss Higgleby-Browne's.

Miss Browne now had clear before her the road to fortune, but unfortunately it led across the sea and quite out of the route of steamer travel. Capital in excess of Miss Browne's resources was required. London proving cold before its great opportunity, Miss Browne had shaken off its dust and come to New York, where a mysteriously potent influence had guided her to Aunt Jane. Through Miss Browne's great organizing abilities, not to speak of those newly brought to light in Aunt Jane, a party of stanch comrades had been assembled, a steamer engaged to meet them at Panama, and it was ho, for the island in the blue Pacific main!

With this lyrical outburst Aunt Jane concluded the body of her letter. A small cramped postscript informed me that it was against Miss H-B's wishes that she revealed their plans to anyone, but that she did want to hear from me before they sailed from Panama, where a letter might reach her if I was prompt.

"And of course," I explained to Bess as I hurled things into my bags, "if a letter can reach her so can I. At least I must take the chance of it. What those people are up to I don't know—probably they mean to hold her for ransom and murder her outright if it is not forthcoming. Or perhaps some of them will marry her and share the spoils with Miss Higgleby-Browne.



"I Must Get to Panama in Time to Save Her."

Anyway, I must get to Panama in time to save her."

"Or you might go along to the island," suggested Bess.

I paused to glare at her. "Bess! And let them murder me, too?"

"Or marry you—" cooed Bess.

One month later I was climbing out of a lumbering hack before the Tivoli hotel, which rises square and white and imposing on the low green height above the old Spanish city of Panama. In spite of the melting tropical heat there was a chill fear at my heart, the fear that Aunt Jane and her band of treasure-seekers had already departed on their quest.

I crossed the broad gallery and plunged into the cool dimness of the lobby in the wake of the bellboys who, discerning a helpless prey, had swooped en masse upon my bags.

"Miss Jane Harding?" repeated the clerk, and at the cool negation of his tone my heart gave a sickening down-

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ward swoop. "Miss Jane Harding and party have left the hotel!"

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head. "Another lunatic!" he shouted. "I'd as soon have a white horse and a minister aboard as go to sea in a floating bedlam!"

As the captain's angry thunder died away came the small, anxious voice of Aunt Jane. "What's the matter? Oh, please tell me what's the matter!" she was saying as she edged her way into the group. Her eyes, round, pale, blinking a little in the tropical glare, roved over the circle until they lit on me. Right where she stood Aunt Jane petrified. Her poor little chin dropped until it disappeared altogether in the folds of her plump neck, and she remained speechless, stricken, immobile as a wax figure in an exhibition.

"Aunt Jane," I said, "you must come right back to shore with me." I spoke calmly, for unless you are perfectly calm with Aunt Jane you fluster her. She replied only by a slight gobbling in her throat, but the other woman spoke in a loud voice, addressed not to me but to the universe in general. "The Young Person is mad!" It was an unmistakably British intonation.

This, then, was Miss Violet Higgleby-Browne. I saw a grim, bony, stocky shape, in a companion costume to my aunt's. Around the edges of her cork helmet her short iron-gray hair visibly bristled. She had a massive head, and a seamed and rugged countenance which did its best to live down the humiliation of a ridiculous little nose with no bridge.

known to cause the more discriminating to draw heavily on the dictionary for adjectives. My face is small and heart-shaped, with features strictly for use and not for ornament, but fortunately inconspicuous. As for my eyes, I think tawny quite the nicest word, though Aunt Jane calls them hazel and I have even heard whispers of green.

Five minutes after the goong sounded I walked into the cabin. Miss Browne, Captain Watkins of the freighter, and half a dozen men were already at the table. I slid unobtrusively into the one vacant place, fortunately remote from the captain, who glared at me savagely, as though still embittered by the recollection of my aunt's fits.

"Gentlemen," said Miss Browne in icy tones. "Miss Virginia Harding." Two of the men rose, the others stared and ducked. Except for Miss Browne and the captain, I had received on coming aboard only the most blurred impression of my fellow-voyagers. I remembered them merely as a composite of khaki and cork helmets and astounded staring faces. But I felt that as the abettors of Miss Browne a hostile and sinister atmosphere enveloped them all.



"What Will She Do if she Meets a Cannibal and He Tries to Eat Her?"

Being thus in the camp of the enemy, I sat down in silence and devoted myself to my soup. The majority of my companions did likewise—audibly. But presently I heard a voice at my left: "I say, what a jolly good sailor you seem to be—pity your aunt's not!" I looked up and saw Apollo sitting beside me. Or rather, shall I say a young man who might have walked out of an advertisement for a ready-made clothing house, so ideal and impossible was his beauty. He was very tall—I had to tilt my chin quite painfully to look up at him—and from the loose collar of his silk shirt his throat rose like a column. His skin was a beautiful clear pink and white just tinged with tan—like a meringue that has been in the oven for two minutes exactly. He had a straight, chiseled profile and his hair was thick and chestnut and wavy and he had clear sea-gray eyes. To give him at once his full name and titles, he was the Honorable Cuthbert Patrick Ruthmore Vane, of High Staunton Manor, Kent, England. But as I was ignorant of this, I can truthfully say that his looks stunned me purely on their own merits.

Outwardly calm, I replied, "Yes, it's too bad, but then who ever dreamed that Aunt Jane would go adventuring at her time of life? I thought nobody over the age of thirteen, and then boys, ever went treasure-hunting."