An Aunt Errant. 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 velvettongued 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 selfapproving conscience. So it ended with my packing her off to New York,

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 Christ-

where I wrote to her frequently and

kindly, urging her not to mind me but

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 to manage Aunt Jane demands aggressive and continuous action. Hence the bolt from the blue above alluded

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 sayagely. "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 expe dition was enough to shake the strongest intellect. And yet, amid the wel ter 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 Higglesby Browne, whom she sprung on you without the slightest explanation, as though alluding to the queen of Sheba or the Slamese 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 Higglesby-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 Higglesby Browne. however,

nad assisted Aunt Jane to find herself. and as a consequence Aunt Jane, for the comparatively trifling outlay needful 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 Higglesby-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 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 secret and the map-of course there was a map-had become Miss Higglesby-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 knowprobably they mean to hold her for m and murder her outright if it is not forthcoming. Or perhaps some of them will marry her and share the spoils with Miss Higglesby-Browne.



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,

"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 al-

ready 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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E. L. STIFF

422 FIRST STREET

Peresessessessessessesses

party have left the hotel!"

For-the island?" I gasped. He raised his eyebrows. "Can't say, I'm sure." He gave me an appraising stare. Perhaps the woe in my face touched him, for he descended from the eminence of the hotel clerk where he dwelt apart sufficiently to add, "Is it important that you should see her?"

"I am her niece. I have come all the way from San Francisco expecting to join her here.

The clerk meditated, his shrewd eyes piercing the very secrets of my

"She knew nothing about it," I hastened to add. "I intended it for a surprise."

This candor helped my cause. 'Well," he said, "that explains her not leaving any word. As you are her niece, I suppose it will do no harm to tell you that Miss Harding and ber party embarked this morning on the freighter Rufus Smith, and I think it very likely that the steamer has not left port. If you like I will send a man to the water-front with you and you may be able to go on board and have a talk with your aunt."

Did I thank him? I have often vondered when I waked up in the night. I have a vision of myself dashing out of the hotel, and then the hack that brought me is bearing me away. Bellboys hurled my bags in after me, and I threw them largess recklessly. Madly we clattered over cobbled ways. Out on the smooth waters of the roadstead lay ships great and small, ships with stripped masts and smokeless funnels, others with faint gray spirals wreathing upward from their stacks. Was one of these the Rufus Smith, and would I reach her-or him-before the thin gray feather became a thick black

ward swoop. "Miss Jane Harding and | ilume? I thought of my aunt at the mercy of these unknown adventurers with whom she had set forth, helpless as a little fat pigeon among hawks, and I felt, desperately, that I must reach her, must save her from them and bring her safe back to How I was to do this at the eleventh hour, plus about fifty-seven minutes, as at present, I hadn't considered. But experience had taught me that once in my clutches Aunt Jane would offer about as much resistance as a slightly melted wax doll. She gets so soft that you are almost afraid to touch her for fear of leav-

ng dents. So to get there, get there, get there,

was the one prayer of my soul. I got there, in a boat hastily comnandeered by the hotel clerk's deputy. We brought up under the side of the little steamer, and the wide surprised face of a Swedish deckhand stared down at us.

"Let me aboard! I must come

aboard," I cried. Other faces appeared, then a ropeladder. Somehow I was mounting it-a dizzy feat to which only the tumult of my emotions made me indifferent. Bare brawny arms of sailors clutched at me and drew me to the deck. There at once I was the center of a circle of speechless and aston-

"Well?" demanded a large breezy voice. "What's this mean? What do you want aboard my ship?"

I looked up at a red-faced man in a large straw hat.

"I want my aunt," I explained. "Your aunt?" he roared. "Why the devil should you think I've got your

"You have got her," I replied with firmness. "I don't see ber, but she's

here somewhere." The captain of the Rufus Smith shook two large red fists above his

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"Another lunatic!" he shouted. "Td as soon have a white horse and a minister aboard as go to sea in a floating

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 Higglesby-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 ittle nose with no bridge.

But what riveted my eyes was the deadly glare with which hers were urned on me. I saw that not only was she as certain of my identity as hough she had guided me from my first tottering steps, but that in a flash she had grasped my motives, aims and purposes, and meant once for all to face, out-general and defeat me with great slaughter.

So she announced to the company with deliberation: "The Young Per-

son is mad!"

It nettled me extremely. "Mad!" I flung back at her. "Because I wish to save my poor aunt from such a situation as this? would be charitable to infer madness in those who have led her into it!" When I reviewed this speech afterward I realized that it was not, under the circumstances, the best calculated to win me friends.

"Jane!" said Miss Higglesby-Browne in deep and awful tones, "the time has come to prove your strength!"

Aunt Jane proved it by uttering & shrill yelp, and clutching her hair with a reckless disregard of its having originally been that of a total stranger. So severe were her shrieks and struggles that it was with difficulty that she was borne below in the arms of two strong men.

I had seen Aunt Jane in hysterics before-she had them that time about the convict. I was not frightened, but I hurried after her-neck and neck with Miss Browne. It was fifteen minutes before Aunt Jane came to, and then she would only moan. bathed her head, and held her hand, and did all the regulation things under the baleful eye of Miss Browne. who steadfastly refused to go away. but sat glaring like a gorgon who sees her prey about to be snatched from her.

In the midst of my ministrations I awoke suddenly to a rhythmic heave and throb which pervaded the ship. Dropping Aunt Jane's hand I rushed on deck. There lay the various pieces of my baggage, and in the distance the boat with the two brown rowers was skipping shoreward over the ripples. As for the Rufus Smith, she was under way, and heading out of the roadstead for the open sea.

I dashed aft to the captain, who stood issuing orders in the voice of an aggrieved fog-horn.

"Captain!" I cried, "wait; turn around! You must put my aunt and

He whirled on me, showing a crim son angry face. "Turn around, is it, turn around?" he shouted. "Do you suppose I can loaf about the harbor here a-waitin' on your aunt's fits? You come aboard without me askin'. Now you can go along with the rest. This here ship has got her course se for Frisco, pickin' up Leeward island on the way, and anybody that ain't goin' in that direction is welcome to jump overboard."

That is how I happened to go to Leeward island.

CHAPTER II."

Apollo and Some Others. The Rufus Smith, tramp freighter, had been chartered to convey the Harding-Browne expedition to Leeward island, which lies about three hundred miles west of Panama, and could be picked up by the freighter in her course. She was a little dingy boat with such small accommodations that I cannot imagine where the majority of her passengers stowed themselves away. My aunt and Miss Brown had a stateroom between them the size of a packing-box, and somebody turned out and resigned another to me. I retired there to dress for dinner. In the haste of my departure from San Francisco I had not brought a trunk, so the best I was able to produce in the way of a crusher for Miss Higglesby-Browne and her fellow-passengers was a cool little white gown, which would shine at least by contrast with Miss Browne's severely utilitarian costume. White is becoming to my hair, which narrow-minded persons term red, but which has been

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

Five minutes after the gong 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 cy tones, "Miss Virginia Harding."

Two of the men rose, the others tared and ducked. Except for Miss Browne and the captain, I had reeived on coming aboard only the most olurred impression of my fellow-voyagers. I remembered them merely as composite of khaki and cork helments and astounded staring faces. But I felt that as the abetters of Miss Browne a hostile and sinister atmosphere enveloped them all.

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

"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 readymade 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

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 thireen, and then boys, ever went treasire-hunting."

"Ah, but lads of thirteen couldn't well come such a distance on their own, you know," returned Apollo, with the kindest air of making allowance for the female intellect.

I hurriedly turned the subject. "I really can't imagine Aunt Jane on a desert island. What will she do if she meets a cannibal and he tries

to eat her?" "Oh, really, now," argued the para gon earnestly, "I'm quite sure there's no danger of that, don't you know? I believe there are no natives at all o the island, or else quite tame ones, I forget which, and there are four of us

chaps, with no end of revolvers and



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

Mr. Shaw-sitting opposite Miss Browne, you know-is running things, so if you feel nervous you should talk to him. Was with the South Polar expedition and all thatknows no end about this sort of thing -wouldn't for a moment think of letting ladies run the risk of being eat-

I peeped around Apollo for a glimpse of the experienced Mr. Shaw. saw a strong-featured, weatherbeaten profile, the face of a man somewhere in his thirties, and looking, from this side view at least, not only

stern but grim. I made up my mind at once that the backbone of the party, and inevitably the leader in its projected villainies, whatever they might be, was this rugged-looking Mr. Shaw. couldn't fancy him as the misled follower of anybody, even the terrific

As it seemed an unpropitious mo-