



CHAPTER XXVI. In Which We Find Treasure.

We began to dream of treasure as soon as the fierce winds ceased and the waves fell. The lust for wealth, partially blunted by the requirements of hardship and peril, revived within us the instant nature granted a temporary respite.

That same intense cold of the Antarctic smote us the moment the creaking hinges yielded, and we stood peering down through the aperture. We waited impatiently for the first frigid breath to escape, huddled about the stove in the cabin and recalling various sea tales of treasure seeking, which only served to whet our appetite for the coming adventure.

At last, but well wrapped in our mufflers and bearing a candle aloft to cast its flickering yellow light through the pitchy darkness, we ventured below, scrambling down the short ladder. Cole held the gim, his black face shining, the whites of his eyes conspicuous as he stared eagerly about. We found innumerable boxes and barrels, crates, bottles and wicker baskets, some open, the packing straw strewn about, others tightly nailed, piled everywhere, evidence that the galleon had been amply provisioned for a long voyage, and that her crew had never perished of starvation.

I never comprehended before how the passion and lust for gold can express itself upon man's face. Tense, motionless, breathing heavily, their features drawn, their eyes gleaming feverishly in the yellow flame, they stared at me and then at that ice-front, demoted and speechless. No one thought of where we were—castaways, a sudden wreck under us, our nearest nor a thousand miles away across a stormy sea; all we realized at that moment was that there, just before us, under that mantle of ice, lay buried three million pesos. God! the collar of my jacket seemed choking me; I breathed as if a man's fingers clutched my throat, and I saw McKnight's burly form shading as if he had an ague fit. Three million pesos! The hot blood rushed to my head, a lava stream, and De Nova's face, white as chalk behind his little black mustaches, seemed dancing before me ghostlike. Damn him! the fellow made me think of Salvatore, the man who, just above, frozen and dead, had guarded this treasure for 126 years.

I stepped aside, and the broad blade fell slashing against the front of the ice. "Only two of you men can work here at once," I put in hastily. "Hold on, Johnson, until we get this shipshape. An axman, with a helper to haul back the ice out of the way, is all we need. Any more would only be in the way; besides, some of us ought to be on deck. It is going to require hours, maybe days, to get that chest out, and meanwhile we must sail this vessel and keep her right side up. The thing to do is to arrange relays, and keep at it steady. Johnson, you and Kelly go to work first. The rest of us will climb up into the cabin, and figure it out."

They went along with me up the ladder, and they were prisoners, leaving the last lingering glances below, where the weird flame of the candle flickered yellow, the blows of the cleaver echoing sharply as they clustered about the stove, welcoming the warmth of it. It had been frigid below decks, although we had been scarcely conscious of it in our excitement. But now we stood shivering, gazing into each others' faces and actually afraid to talk lest the whole occurrence should prove a dream from which a chance word might awaken us. Three million pesos—here, actually here; almost within reach of our hands; they were digging for them just below; even then, in the silence, we could hear the faint echo of blows being struck against the ice. Three million pesos!—and it was all ours, our very own—to divide, to spend, to do with exactly as we pleased. We had dreamed about all this before, on the decks of the ill-fated Sea Queen, but now we sought to grasp it as an actual existing fact, and our minds seemed paralyzed by the knowledge. I even forgot that Doris was present until she touched me gently on the shoulder, and I looked down into her questioning eyes.



very butt of the mainmast whence could look up through the splintered deck to the narrow strip of sky overhead. There was a bulkhead forward, but the ice extended solidly to the wood. I could hear the ceaseless swell of the sea pounding against the sides, the groaning of timbers, the flapping of the jib's canvas, and realized more than ever before the sickening, sodden roll of the laden hull. The level surface of the ice told plainly enough its story of formation; when all that water came through, the vessel had been upon an even keel, imbedded firmly, no doubt, in the ice-pack. I crept back as cautiously as I had advanced, the rolling of the wreck rendering the slippery surface dangerous to travel over. The men watched me anxiously as I slid down into the lazarette.

"What did you find, sir?" "Nothing except ice, solid ice clear to the forward bulkhead. It looks as though we had reached the end of our treasure-hunt, my lads."

There was a sullen growl of profanity, McKnight viciously slashing at the ice-front with his cleaver. Twice he struck, with no other object except the venting of his ungovernable anger, his forehead beaded, the great muscles of his arms standing out like whiplashes. A considerable chunk scaled off, falling thumping to the deck, and causing him to spring backward to escape injury. As if maddened by it, she drove in the blade of the ax again—it clanged against metal! We all heard it; we all witnessed the rebound.

"By God, mates, there's one of 'em, anyhow!" roared a voice hoarse from exploding excitement. But I was already upon my knees, feeling blindly into the ice cavity. They came howling about me like so many wolves, eager to see with their own eyes, but I crowded them back, snatching the candle from De Nova's fingers and throwing the flickering light down level with the deck. "It's a brass-bound chest, men," I cried, straightening up and facing them. "But it is going to require some hard digging to get it out. About all I can see is the handle of it."

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"Do you not know what we have just discovered below?" I asked, still tingling to the marvel of it. "The treasure, the Spanish treasure!" "Oh, yes," but the soft voice seemed tinged with sadness. "Yet it does not greatly interest me. Money seems so little here, so utterly valueless."

The simple words, the tone of their utterance brought me to myself as I had received an electric shock. She was still smiling, yet all at once I noticed how white her face was, how dark the shadow beneath her eyes. The lure of the gold vanished from my mind, as if some wizard's wand had waved it away. I thought of the treacherous sea without, the life and death struggle before us, those dreary leagues separating us from hope. My hands clasped hers, the expression of love in my eyes brightening her face instantly.

"That is so much better, Jack," she said tenderly. "I knew it was only the madness of a moment which caused you to forget. Come out on deck with me until you lose all memory of it—until I bring you back to real life again."

"I do not need it, sweetheart," and I bent low, looking into her eyes. "The fever has left my blood. I hardly know how it ever laid such hold upon me, but the thought of all that wealth below drove me as mad as the others. You see how much I need you."

"I certainly shall not spare you to minister to them." She laughed, her happiness of disposition returning. "That would be useless; they are of different stamp. The fever for sudden wealth is in the blood of all of us. See how excited Celeste is. Perhaps if I had ever experienced poverty I might be crazed also. But it is so foolish here—here, and she swept her hands about in comprehensive gesture, "when we know it can be ours only for a day, or at most a week."

"But we have not given up hope," I protested. "Why should we? The Donna Isabel seems stanch beneath us."

"Even in case of that miracle I want nothing to do with this treasure," she said gravely. "It seems to me, Jack, there must be a curse upon that gold below. It will never do good to any human being. It was stolen by the sword, won for Spain by the shedding of blood, and has since cursed this ship and all who sailed in her. The living and the dead guarded it, and now we have come into its evil clutch. It is not superstition but faith which makes me say this—the Donna Isabel will never make port; that gold below will never do a soul on board anything but harm. I wish it could be left where it is, buried in the ice."

"At such a suggestion the men would mutiny." "I suppose so," she acknowledged sadly, "and the end will be the same in either case. But I want you to be different. Let them build their air castles; but do you come out on deck with me, where the sea and sky will give us other thoughts."

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