

The Million Dollar Mystery

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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Today she was an onion ship; which precludes any idea of adventure. She was about four thousand tons, and her engines were sternward and not amidship. She carried two masts and a half dozen hoist booms, and the only visible sign of anything new on her was her bowsprit. This was new doubtless; because she had poked her nose too far into her last slip.

Her crew was orderly and tractable. There were shore drunks, to be sure, because they were sailors; but they were at work. They moved about briskly, for they were on the point of calling for the Bahamas—perhaps for more onions. Presently the windlass creaked and shrilled, and the bloomy links, much in need of tar paint, red as fish gills, clattered down into the bow. Sometimes they painted the chain as it came over; but paint was costly, and this was done only when the anchor threatened to stay on the bottom.

There was a sailor among this crew, and he went by the name of Steve Blossom; and he was one of his kind. A grimy dime novel protruded rakishly from his hip pocket, and his right cheek was swollen as with the toothache, due, probably, to a generous "chaw" of Seaman's Delight. He was a real tobacco chewer, for he rarely spat. He was as peaceful as a back-water bay in summer; non-argumentative and passive, he stood his watch in fair weather and foul.

No one gave the anchor any more attention after it came to rest. The great city over the way was fairy-like in its hush and softened lines. It was the poetry of angles, of shafts and spars of stone; and Steve Blossom, having a moment to himself, leaned against the rail and stared regretfully. He had been generously drunk the night before, and it was a pleasant recollection. Chance led his glance to trail down the cutwater. His peck stretched from his collar like a turtle's from its shell.

"Well, I'll be hornswoggled!" he murmured, shifting his cud from starboard to port.

Caught on the fluke of the anchor was the strangest looking box he had ever laid eyes on. There were leather and steel bands and diamond-shaped ivory and mother of pearl, and it hung jauntily on the point of the rusty fluke. Anybody would be hornswoggled to glimpse such a droll jest of fate. On the fluke of the old mudhook, by a hair, you might say. In all the wild sea yarns he had ever read or heard there was nothing to match this. Treasure!

And Steve was destined never to be passive again. His first impulse was to call his companions; his second impulse was to say nothing at all, and wait for an opportunity to get the box to his bunk without being detected. Treasure! Diamonds and rubies and pearls and old Spanish gold; all hanging to the fluke of the anchor.

"Hornswoggled!" in a kind of awe-some whisper this time. "An' we aheadin' for th' Bahamas!" For under his feet he could hear the rhythm of engines. "What'll I do? If I leave it, some one else'll see it." He scratched his chin perplexedly; and the cud went back to starboard. "I got it!"

He took off his coat and carefully dropped it down over the mysterious box. It was growing darker and darker all the time, and shortly neither coat nor anchor would be visible without close scrutiny. Treasure: greed, cupidity, crime. Steve saw only the treasure and not its camp followers. What did they call them?—doubloons and pieces-of-eight?

He ate his supper with his messmates, and he ate heartily as usual. It would have taken something more vital than mere treasure to disturb Steve Blossom's appetite. He was one of those enviable individuals whose imagination and gastric juices work at the same time. And while he ate he planned. In the first place, he would buy that home at Bedford; then he would take over the Gilson house and live like a lord. If he wanted a drink, all he would have to do would be to turn the spigot or tip a bottle; and more than that, he'd have a bartender to do it. Onions! He swore he would not have an onion within a

cards. "Not for me. Busted. How long d' y' thing \$40 'll last in New York, anyhow?" And he stalked out of the forecastle and went down into the waist to enjoy his evening pipe, all the while keeping a weather eye forward, at the ratty old pilot house.

It was ten o'clock, land time, when he rammed his cutty into a pocket and resolutely walked forward. If any one watched him they would think he was only looking down the cutwater. The thought of money and the pleasures it will buy makes cunning the stupidest of dolts; and Steve was ordinarily a dolt. But tonight his brain was keen enough for all purposes. It was a hazardous job to get the box off the fluke without letting it slip back into the sea. Steve, however, accomplished the feat, climbed back on the rail and sat down, waiting. A quarter of an hour passed. No one had seen him. With his coat securely wrapped about his precious find he made for the forecastle. His mates, save those who were doing their watch, were all in their bunks. An oil lamp dimly illuminated the forward partition. Steve's bunk was almost in darkness. Very deftly he rolled back the bedding and secreted the box under his pillows, and then stretched himself out with the pretense of snoring till the bell called him to duty.

He was rich; and the moment a man has money he has troubles; there is always some one who wants to take it away from you. His bunk was on the port side, and there was plenty of hiding space between the iron plates and the wooden partition. He intended to loosen three or four planks, and then when the time came, slip the box behind them. Some time during the morning the forecastle would be empty, and then would be his time.

But he suffered the agonies of damnation during the four hours' watch. Supposing some fool should go rummaging about his bunk and discover the box? Suppose . . . But he dared not suppose. There was nothing to do but wait. If he created any curiosity on the part of his mates he was lost. He would have to divide with them all, from the captain down to the cook's boy. It was a heart-rending thought. From being the most open and frank man aboard, he became the most cunning. From being a man without

a grouch? Is it any o' your business? All right. When we step ashore at th' Bahamas, Mister Jim Dunkers, I'll tear the ropes out o' your pulley blocks. But till we get there, you t' th' upper bunk an' me t' mine."

"Leave th' ol' grouch alone, Jim. Th' mate won't stand for no scrapper aboard. We'll have th' thing done right in th' custom sheds. We'll have a finish fight. Queensberry rules, an' may th' best man win."

"I'm willin'," said Jim. "So'm I," agreed Steve. But his intentions were not honorable. He proposed to desert before any fight took place. Not that he was physically afraid; no; he wanted to dig his hands deep into those doubloons and pieces-of-eight.

So the four days down passed otherwise uneventfully, amid paint pots and iron rust and three meals a day of pork, onion soup, potatoes, and strong, bitter coffee. The winds became light and balmy and the sea blue and gentle. The men went about in their undershirts and dungarees, barefooted. Of course the coming fight was the main topic of conversation. It promised to be a rattling good scrap, for both men were evenly matched, and both had a "kick" in either hand. Even the captain took a mild interest in the affair. He was an old sailor. He knew that there was no such word as arbitration in a sailor's vocabulary; his disputes could be settled only in one manner, by his calloused fists.

When the old mudhook (and some day Steve was going to buy it and hang it over the entrance of the Gilson house) slithered down into the smiling waters of the bay, Steve concluded that discretion was the better part of valor. He would steal ashore on the quarantine tug which lay alongside. He was willing to fight under ordinary circumstances, but he must get his treasure in safety first. They could call him a welcher if they wanted to; devil a bit did he care. So he pried back the boards of his bunk wall, took out the box, eyed it fondly, and noted for the first time the lettering on it:

STANLEY HARGREAVE.
He wrinkled his brow in the effort to recall a pirate by this name, but was unsuccessful. No matter. He hugged the box under his coat and made for the gangway, and inadvertently ran into his enemy. Dunkers caught a bit of the box peeping from under the coat. "What 'a yuh got there?" he demanded truculently.

"None o' your damn business! You lemme by; hear me?"

"Ain't none o' my business, huh? Where'd yuh git a box like that? Steal it? By cripes, I'm goin' t' have a look at that box, my hearty. It don't smell like honest onions."

"You lemme by!" breathed Steve, with murder in his heart.

Suddenly the two men closed, surged back and forth, one determined to take and the other to hold this mysterious box. Dunkers struggled to uphold his word; not that he really wanted the box out to prove that he was strong enough to take it if he wanted to. The name on the box flashed and disappeared. It was a kind of shock to him. He and Blossom went battering against the rail. Dunkers' grip slipped and so did Blossom's. The result was that the box was catapulted into the sea. With an agonizing cry, Blossom leaned far over. He saw the box oscillate for a moment, then sink gracefully in a zigzag course, down through the blue waters. Fainter and fainter it grew, and at last vanished.

"I'm sorry, Steve; but yuh wouldn't let me look at it," said Dunkers, contritely.

"Damn you; I'm goin' t' kill y' for that!"

It became a real fight this time, fist and foot, tooth and nail; one mad with the lust to kill and the other desperately intent on living. It was one of those contests in which honor and fair play have no part. But for the timely arrival of the captain and some

(Continued on page 12)

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mille of the Gilson house. "Onions!" Quite unconsciously he spoke this word aloud.

"Huh? Well, if ye don't like onions, find a hooker that packs violets in her hold," was the cheerful advice of the man at Steve's elbow.

"Who's talkin' t' you?" grunted Steve. "Wha' did I say?"

"Onions, ye lubber! Don't we know what onions is? Ain't we smelt 'em so long that ye could stick yer nose in th' starboard light an' never smell no kerosene? Onions! Pass th' cawfy."

Steve helped himself first. The man who spoke bunked over him, and they were not on the best of terms. There was no real reason for this frank antagonism; simply, they did not splice any more effectually than cotton rope and hemp splice. Sailors are moody and superstitious; at least they generally are on hookers of the "Captain Manners" breed. Steve was superstitious and Jim Dunkers was moody and had no thumb on his left hand. Steve hated the sight of that red nubbin. He was quite certain that it had been a whole thumb once, on the way to gouge out somebody's eye, and had inadvertently connected with somebody's teeth.

Spanish doubloons and pearls and diamonds and rubies! It was mighty hard not to say these words out loud, too; blare them into the sullen faces grouped around the table. He was off watch till midnight; and he was wondering if he could get the box without attracting the attention of the lookout, who had a devilish keen eye for everything that stirred on deck or on water. Well, he would have to risk it; but he would wait till full darkness had fallen over the sea and the lookout would be compelled to keep his eyes off the deck. The boys wanted him to play

enemies, he saw an enemy even in his shadow.

At four o'clock he turned in and slept like a log.

In the morning he found his opportunity. For half an hour the forecastle was empty of all save himself. Feverishly he pried back the boards, found the brace beam, and gently laid the box there. It was a mighty curious looking box. Once he had stoked up the Chinese coast from the Philippines, and he judged it to be Chinese in origin. He tried to pry open the cover and feast his eyes upon the treasure; but under the leather and ivory and mother of pearl was impervious steel. It would take an ax or a crowbar to stir that lid. He sighed. He replaced the boards, and became to all appearances his stolid self again.

But all the way down to the Bahamas he was moody, and when he answered any questions it was with words spoken testily and jerkily.

"I know what's th' matter," said Dunkers. "He's in love."

"Shut your mouth!"

"Didn't I tell yuh?" laughed the tantalizer, dancing toward the companionway. "Steve's in love, 'r he didn't git drunk enough on shore t' satisfy his whale's belly!"

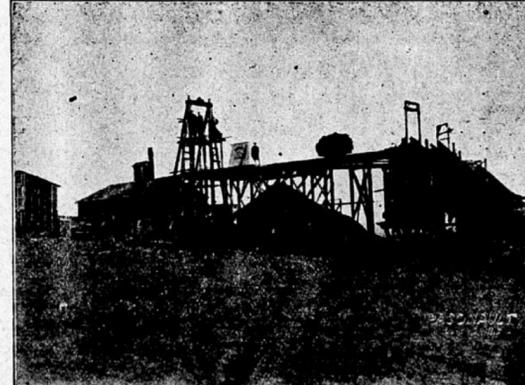
A boot thudded spitefully against the door jamb.

"You fellahs let me alone, 'r I'll bash in a couple o' heads!"

"O, yuh will, will yuh?" cried Dunkers from the deck. "If yuh want a little exercise, yuh can begin on me, yuh moonstick swab! What's th' matter with yuh, anyhow? Where'd yuh git this grouch? What've we done t' yuh? Huh?"

"You keep out o' my way, that's all. I'm mindin' my watches, an' don't ask no odds of you duffers. What if I have

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