

Buried Treasure

Explorers of the Dawn #1

Mazo de la Roche

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BURIED TREASURE

BY MAZO DE LA ROCHE

I

It was Saturday morning, and we three were together in Mrs. Handsomebody's parlor—Angel, and The Seraph, and I.

No sooner had the front door closed upon the tall, angular figure of that lady, bearing her market basket, than we shut our books with a snap, ran on tiptoe to the top of the stairs, and, after a moment's breathless listening, cast our young forms on the smooth walnut banister, and glided gloriously to the bottom.

Regularly on a Saturday morning Mrs. Handsomebody went to market, and with equal regularity we, her pupils, instantly cast off the yoke of her restraint, slid down the banisters, and entered the forbidden precincts of the Parlor.

On other week-days the shutters of this grim apartment were kept closed, and an inquisitive eye, applied to the keyhole, could just faintly discern the portrait in crayon of the late Mr. Handsomebody, presiding, like some whiskered ghost, over the revels of the stuffed birds in the glass case below him.

But on a Saturday morning Mary Ellen swept and dusted there. The shutters were thrown open, and the thin-legged piano and the haircloth furniture were furbished up for the morrow.

Moreover, Mary Ellen liked our company. She had a spooky feeling about the parlor. Mr. Handsomebody gave her the creeps, she said; and once when she had turned her back she had heard one of the stuffed birds twitter. It was a gruesome thought.

When we bounded in on her, Mary Ellen was dragging the broom feebly across the gigantic green-and-red lilies of the carpet, her bare red arms moving like listless antennæ. She could, when she willed, work vigorously and well, but no one knew when a heavy mood might seize her, and render her as useless as was compatible with retaining her situation.

‘Och, byes!’ she groaned, leaning on her broom. ‘This spring weather do be makin’ me as wake as a blind kitten! Sure, I feel this mornin’ like as if I’d a stone settin’ on my stomach, an’ me head feels as light as thistledown. I wisht the missus’d fergit to come home an’ I could take a day off—but there’s no such luck for Mary Ellen!’

She made a few more passes with her broom and then sighed.

‘I think I’ll soon be leavin’ this place,’ she said.

A vision of the house without the cheering presence of Mary Ellen rose blackly before us. We crowded round her.

‘Now, see here,’ said Angel masterfully, putting his arms about her stout waist. ‘You know perfectly well that father’s coming back from South America soon to make a home for us, and that you are to come and be our cook, and make apple-dumplings, and have all the followers you like.’

Now Angel knew whereof he spoke, for Mary Ellen’s ‘followers’ were a bone of contention between her and her mistress.

‘Aw, Master Angel,’ she expostulated, ‘what a tongue ye have in yer head to be sure! Followers, is it? Sure, they’re the bane o’ me life! Now git out o’ the way o’ the dust, all of yez, or I’ll put a tin ear on ye!’ And she began to swing her broom vigorously.

We ran to the window and looked out; but no sooner had we looked out than we whistled with astonishment at what we saw.

But first, I must tell you that the street on which we lived ran east and west. On the corner to the west of Mrs. Handsomebody’s house was the gray old cathedral; next to it was the Bishop’s house, of gray stone also, then a pair of dingy white brick houses exactly alike. In one of these we lived with Mrs. Handsomebody, and the other was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer Pegg and their three servants.

To us they seemed every elegant, if somewhat uninteresting people. Mrs. Mortimer Pegg frequently had carriage callers, and not seldom sallied forth herself in a sedate victoria from the livery stables. But beyond an occasional flutter of excitement when their horses stopped at our very gate, there was

little in this prim couple to interest us. So neat and precise were they as they tripped down the street together, that we called them (out of Mrs. Handsomebody's hearing) Mr. and Mrs. 'Cribbage' Pegg.

Now, on this morning in early spring when we looked out of the window, our eyes discovered an object of such compelling interest in the Peggs' front garden that we rubbed them again to make sure that we were broad awake.

Striding up and down the small enclosure was a tall old man wearing a brilliant-hued, flowered dressing-gown that hung open at the neck, disclosing his long brown throat and hairy chest, and flapped negligently about his heels as he strode.

He had bushy iron-gray hair and moustache, and tufts of curly gray beard grew around his chin and ears. His nose was large and sunburned; and every now and again he would stop in his caged-animal walk and sniff the air as though he liked it.

I liked the old gentleman from the start.

'Oo-o! See the funny old man!' giggled The Seraph. 'Coat like Jacob an' his bwethern!'

Angel and I plied Mary Ellen with questions. Who was he? Did he live with the Peggs? Did she think he was a foreigner?

Mary Ellen, supported by her broom, stared out of the window.

'For th' love of Hiven!' she ejaculated. 'If that ain't a sight now! Byes, it's Mr. Pegg's own father come home from somewheres in th' Indies. Their cook was tellin' me of the time they have wid him. He's a bit light-headed, y'see, an' has all his meals in his own room—th' quarest dishes iver—an' a starlin' for a pet, mind ye!'

At that moment the old gentleman perceived that he was watched, and saluting Mary Ellen gallantly, he called out,—

'Good morning, madam!'

Mary Ellen, covered with confusion, drew back behind the curtain. I was about to make a suitable reply when I saw Mrs. Mortimer Pegg, herself, emerge from her house with a very red face, and resolutely grasp her father-in-law's arm. She spoke to him in a rapid undertone, and, after a moment's hesitation, he followed her meekly into the house.

How I sympathized with him! I knew only too well the humiliation experienced by the helpless male when overbearing woman drags him

ignominiously from his harmless recreation. A bond of understanding seemed to be established between us at once.

The voice of Mary Ellen broke in on my reverie. She was teasing Angel to sing.

‘Aw, give us a chune, Master Angel, before th’ missus gets back! There’s a duck! I’ll give ye a pocketful of raisins as sure’s fate!’

Angel was the possessor of a flute-like treble, and he could strum some sort of accompaniment on the piano to any song. It was Mary Ellen’s delight on a Saturday morning to pour forth her pent-up feelings in one of the popular songs, with Angel to keep her on the tune and thump a chord or two.

It was a risky business. But The Seraph mounted guard at the window while I pressed my nose against the glass case which held the stuffed birds, and wondered if by chance any of them had come from South America where father was.

Tum-te-tum-te-tum, strummed Angel.

‘Casey would waltz with the strawberry blonde,
And the—band—played—on.’

His sweet reedy tones thrilled the April air.

And Mary Ellen’s voice, robust as the whistle of a locomotive, bursting with health and spirits, shook the very cobwebs that she had not swept down.

‘Casey would waltz wid th’ strawberry blonde,
And—the—band—play—don!’

Generally we had a faithful subordinate in The Seraph. He had a rather sturdy sense of honor. On this spring morning, however, I think that the singing of Mary Ellen must have dulled his sensibilities, for, instead of keeping a bright lookout up the street for the dreaded form of Mrs. Handsomebody, he lolled across the window-sill, dangling a piece of string, with the April sunshine warming his rounded back.

And as he dangled the string, Mrs. Handsomebody drew nearer and nearer. She entered the gate—she entered the house—she was in the parlor!

Angel and Mary Ellen had just given their last triumphant shout, when Mrs. Handsomebody said in a voice of cold fury,—

‘Mary Ellen, kindly cease that ribald screaming. David [David is Angel’s proper name], get up instantly from that piano stool and face me! John,

Alexander, face me!’

We did so tremblingly.

‘Now,’ said Mrs. Handsomebody, ‘you three boys go up to your bedroom—not to the schoolroom, mind—and don’t let me hear another sound from you to-day! You shall get no dinner. At four I will come and discuss your disgraceful conduct with you. Now march!’

She held the door open for us while we filed sheepishly under her arm. Then the door closed behind us with a decisive bang, and poor Mary Ellen was left in the torture-chamber with Mrs. Handsomebody and the stuffed birds.

II

Angel and I scurried up the stairway. We could hear The Seraph panting as he labored after us.

Once in the haven of our little room, we rolled in a confused heap on the bed, scuffling indiscriminately. Such a punishment was not new to us. It was a favorite one with Mrs. Handsomebody, and we had a suspicion that she relished the fact that so much food was saved when we went dinnerless. At any rate, we were not allowed to make up the deficiency at tea-time.

We always passed the hours of our confinement on the bed, for the room was very small and the one window stared blankly at the window of an unused room in the Peggs’ house, which blankly returned the stare.

But these were not dull times for us. As Elizabethan actors, striding about their bare stage, conjured up brave pictures of gilded halls or leafy forest glades, so we little fellows made a castle stronghold of our bed; or better still, a gallant frigate that sailed beyond the barren walls into unknown seas of adventure, and anchored at last off some rocky island where treasure lay hid among the hills.

What brave fights with pirates there were, when Angel as captain, I as mate, with The Seraph for a cabin-boy, fought the bloody pirate gangs on those surf-washed shores, and gained the fight, though far outnumbered!

They were not dull times in that small back room, but gay-colored, lawless times, when our fancy was let free, and we fought on empty stomachs, and felt only the wind in our faces, and heard the creak of straining cordage. What if we were on half-rations!

On this particular morning, however, there was something to be disposed of before we got to business: to wit, the rank insubordination of The Seraph. It was not to be dealt with too lightly. Angel sat with up a disheveled head.

‘Get up!’ he commanded The Seraph, who obeyed wonderingly.

‘Now, my man,’ continued Angel, with the scowl that had made him dreaded the South Seas over, ‘have you anything to say for yourself?’

The Seraph hung his head.

‘I was on’y danglin’ a bit o’ stwing,’ he murmured.

‘String!’ repeated Angel, the scowl deepening, ‘dangling a bit of string! You may be dangling yourself at the end of a rope before the sun sets, my hearty! Here we are without any dinner, all along of you. Now see here, you’ll go right over into that corner by the window with your face to the wall and stand there all the time John and I play! An’—an’ you won’t know what we’re doing nor where we’re going nor *anything*—so there!’

The Seraph went, weeping bitterly. He hid his face in the dusty lace window-curtain. He looked very small. I could not help remembering how father had said we were to take care of him and not make him cry.

Somehow that morning things went ill with the adventure. The savor had gone out of our play. Two were but a paltry company after all. Where was the cabin-boy with his trusty dirk, eager to bleed for the cause? Though we kept our backs rigorously turned to the window, and spoke only in whispers, neither of us was quite able to forget the presence of that dejected little figure.

After a bit, The Seraph’s whimpering ceased, and what was our surprise to hear the chuckling laugh with which he was wont to signify his pleasure!

We turned to look at him. His face was pressed to the window, and again he giggled rapturously.

‘What’s up, kid?’ we demanded.

‘Ole Joseph-an’-his-bwethern,’ he sputtered, ‘winkin’ an’ wavin’ hands wiv me!’

We were at his side like a shot, and there in the hitherto blank window of the Peggs’ house stood the old gentleman of the flowered dressing-gown, laughing and nodding at The Seraph. When he saw us he made a sign to us to open our window, and at the same instant raised his own.

It took the three of us to accomplish it, for the window moved unreadily, being seldom raised, as Mrs. Handsomebody regarded fresh air much as she regarded a small boy, as something to be kept in its place.

At last the window rose, protesting and creaking, and the next moment we were face to face with our new acquaintance.

‘Hello!’ he said, in a loud, jovial voice.

‘Hello!’ said we, and stared.

He had a strong, weather-beaten face, and wide-open, light eyes, blue and wild as the sea.

‘Hello, boy!’ he repeated, looking at Angel. ‘What’s your name?’

Now Angel was shy with strangers, so I usually answered questions.

‘His name,’ I replied then, ‘is David Curzon; but mother called him Angel, so we jus’ keep on doing it.’

‘Oh,’ said the old gentleman. Then he fixed The Seraph with his eye. ‘What’s the bantling’s name?’

The Seraph, mightily confused at being called a bantling, giggled inanely, so I replied again.

‘His name is Alexander Curzon, but mother called him The Seraph, so we jus’ keep on doing it too.’

‘Um-hm,’ assented the old gentleman; ‘and you—what’s your name?’

‘John,’ I replied.

‘Oh,’ he said, with an odd little smile, ‘and what do they keep on calling *you*?’

‘Just John,’ I answered firmly, ‘nothing else.’

‘Who’s your father?’ came the next question.

‘He’s David Curzon, senior,’ I said proudly, ‘and he’s in South America building a railroad, an’ Mrs. Handsomebody used to be his governess when he was a little boy, so he left us with her; but some day, pretty soon, I think, he’s coming back to make a really home for us with rabbits an’ puppies an’ pigeons an’ things.’

Our new friend nodded sympathetically. Then, quite suddenly, he asked,

‘Where’s your mother?’

‘She’s in heaven,’ I answered simply. ‘She went there two years ago.’

‘Yes,’ broke in The Seraph eagerly, ‘but she’s comin’ back some day to make a *weally* home for us.’

‘Shut up!’ said Angel gruffly, poking him with his elbow.

‘The Seraph’s very little,’ I explained apologetically; ‘he doesn’t understand.’

The old gentleman put his hand in the pocket of his dressing-gown.

‘Bantling,’ he said with his droll smile, ‘do you like peppermint bull’s-eyes?’

‘Yes,’ said The Seraph, ‘I like them—one for each of us.’

Whereupon this extraordinary man began throwing us peppermints as fast as we could catch them. It was surprising how we began to feel at home with him, as though we had known him for years.

He had traveled all over the world, it seemed, and he brought many curious things to the window to show us. One of these was a starling, whose wicker cage he placed on the sill where the sunlight fell.

He had got the bird, he said, from one of the crew of a trading vessel off the coast of Java. The sailor had brought it all the way from Devon for company; and he added, ‘The brute had put out both its eyes so that it would learn to talk more readily; so now, you see, the poor little fellow is quite blind.’

‘Blind—blind—blind!’ echoed the starling briskly,—‘blind—blind—blind!’

He took it from its cage on his finger. It hopped up his arm till it reached his cheek, and there it began to peck at his whiskers, crying all the while in its shrill, lonely tones, ‘Blind—blind—blind!’

We three were entranced; and an idea that was swiftly forming in my mind struggled for expression.

If this wonderful old man had, as he said, sailed the seas from Land’s End to Ceylon, was it not possible that he had seen, even fought with, real pirates? Might he not have followed hot on the trail of hidden treasure? My cheeks burned as I tried to put the question.

‘Did you—’ I began, ‘did you—’

‘Well?’ he encouraged. ‘Did I what, John?’

‘Oh, did you,’ I burst out, ‘ever see a pirate ship, an’ pirates—real ones?’

His face lit up.

‘Surely,’ he replied casually, ‘many a one.’

‘Praps,’ ventured Angel, with an excited laugh, ‘praps you’re one yourself!’

The old gentleman searched our eager faces with his wide-open, sea-blue eyes; then he looked cautiously into the room behind him, and, being apparently satisfied that no one could overhear, he put his hand to the side of his mouth, and said in a loud, hoarse whisper,—

‘That I am. Pirate as ever was!’

I think you could have knocked me down with a feather. I know my knees shook and the room reeled. The Seraph was the first to recover, piping cheerfully,—

‘I yike piwates!’

‘Yes,’ repeated the old gentleman, reflectively, ‘pirate as ever was. The things I’ve seen and done would fill the biggest book you ever saw, and it’d make your hair stand on end to read it—what with fights, and murders, and hangings, and storms, and shipwreck, and the hunt for gold! Many a sweet schooner or frigate I’ve sunk, or taken for myself, and there isn’t a port on the South Seas where women don’t hush their children’s crying with the fear of Captain Pegg!’

Then he added hastily, as though he feared he had gone too far,—

‘But I’m a changed man, mark you—a reformed man. If things suit me pretty well here I don’t think I shall break out again. It is just that you chaps seem so sympathetic, makes me tell you all this; but you must swear never to breathe a word of it, for no one knows but you. My son and daughter-in-law think I’m an archæologist. It’d be an awful shock to them to find that I’m a pirate.’

We swore the blackest secrecy, and were about to ply him with a hundred questions, when we saw a maid carrying a large tray enter the room behind him.

Captain Pegg, as I must now call him, gave us a gesture of warning and began to lower his window. A pleasant aroma of roast beef came across the

alley. The next instant the flowered dressing-gown had disappeared and the window opposite stared blankly as before.

Angel drew a deep breath. ‘Did you notice,’ he said, ‘how different he got once he had told us he was a pirate—wilder and rougher, and used more sailor words?’

‘However did you guess it first?’ I asked admiringly.

‘I think I know a pirate when I see one,’ he returned loftily. ‘But oh, I say, wouldn’t Mrs. Handsomebody be waxy if she knew?’

‘An’ wouldn’t Mary Ellen be scared stiff if *she* knew?’

‘An’ won’t we have fun? Hurray!’

We rolled in ecstasy on the much-enduring bed.

We talked excitedly of the possibilities of such a wonderful and dangerous friendship. And as it turned out, none of our imaginings equaled what really happened.

The afternoon passed quickly. As the hands of our alarm clock neared the hour of four we obliterated the traces of our sojourn on the bed as well as we could, and when Mrs. Handsomebody entered, she found us sitting in a row in the three cane-bottomed chairs on which we hung our clothes at night.

The scolding she gave us was even longer and more humiliating to our manhood than usual. She shook her hard white finger near our faces and said that for very little she would write to our father and complain of our actions.

‘Now,’ she said, in conclusion, ‘give your faces and hands a thorough washing, and comb your hair, which is disgraceful; then come quietly down to tea.’

The door closed behind her.

‘What beats me,’ said Angel, lathering his hands, ‘is why that one white hair on her chin wiggles so when she jaws us. I can’t keep my eyes off it.’

‘It wiggles,’ piped The Seraph, as he dragged a brush over his curls, ‘’cos it’s nervous, an’ I wiggle when she scolds, too, ’cos *I’m* nervous.’

‘Don’t you worry, old man,’ Angel responded gayly, ‘we’ll take care of you.’

We were in fine spirits despite our scolding. Indeed, we almost pitied Mrs. Handsomebody for her ignorance of the wonders among which she had

her being.

Here she was, fussing over some stuffed birds in a glass case, when a live starling, who could talk, had perched near her very window-sill! She spent hours in conversation with her Unitarian minister, while a real pirate lived next door!

It was pitiful, and yet it was very funny. We found it hard to go quietly down to tea with such thoughts in our minds, and after five hours in our bedroom.

III

The next day was Sunday.

As we sat at dinner with Mrs. Handsomebody after Morning Service, we were scarcely conscious of the large white dumplings that bulged before us, with a delicious, sticky, sweet sauce trickling down their dropsical sides. We plied our spoons with languid interest around their outer edges, as calves nibble around a straw stack. Our vagrant minds scoured the Spanish Main with Captain Pegg.

Suddenly The Seraph spoke in that cocksure way of his.

‘There’s a piwate at Pegg’s.’

Mrs. Handsomebody looked at him sharply.

‘What’s that?’ she demanded.

At the same instant Angel and I kicked him under cover of the dining-table.

‘What did you say?’ repeated Mrs. Handsomebody, sternly.

‘Funny ole gennelman at the Cwibbage Peggs’,’ replied The Seraph with his mouth full.

Mrs. Handsomebody greatly respected Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer Pegg, and this play of words on the name incensed her.

‘Am I to understand, Alexander,’ she gobbled, ‘that you are making *game* of the Mortimer Peggs?’

‘Yes,’ giggled the wretched Seraph, ‘it’s a cwibbage game. You play it wiv Peggs.’

‘Leave the table instantly!’ ordered Mrs. Handsomebody. ‘You are becoming unbearable.’

The Seraph cast one anguished look at his dumpling and burst into tears. We could hear his wails growing ever fainter as he plodded up the stairs.

‘Mary Ellen, remove that dumpling!’ commanded Mrs. Handsomebody.

Angel and I began to eat very fast. There was a short silence; then Mrs. Handsomebody said didactically,—

‘The elder Mr. Pegg is a much traveled gentleman, and one of the most noted archæologists of the day. A trifle eccentric in his manner, perhaps, but a deep thinker. David, can you tell me what an archæologist is?’

‘Something you pretend you are,’ said Angel, ‘and you ain’t.’

‘Nonsense!’ snapped Mrs. Handsomebody. ‘Look it up in your Johnson’s when you go upstairs, and let me know the result. I will excuse you now.’

We found The Seraph lounging in a chair in the schoolroom.

‘Too bad about the dumpling, old boy,’ I said consolingly.

‘Oh, not too bad,’ he replied. ‘Mary Ellen fetched it up the back stairs to me. I’m vewy full.’

That afternoon we saw Captain Pegg go for a walk with his son and daughter-in-law. He looked quite altered in a long gray coat and tall hat. Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer Pegg seemed proud to walk with him.

The following day was warm and sunny. When lessons were over we rushed to our bedroom window, and to our joy we found that the window opposite was wide open, the wicker cage on the sill, with the starling inside swelling up and preening himself in the sunshine, while just beyond sat Captain Pegg smoking a long pipe.

He seemed delighted to see us.

‘Avast, my hearties!’ he cried. ‘It’s glorious sailing weather, but I’ve just been lying at anchor here, on the chance of sighting you. It does my heart good, y’see, to talk with some of my own kind, and leave off pretending to be an archæologist—to stretch my mental legs, as it were. Well—have you taken your bearings this morning?’

‘Captain Pegg,’ I broke out with my heart tripping against my blouse, ‘you said something the other day about buried treasure. Did you really find some? And would you mind telling us how you set about it?’

‘Yes,’ he replied meditatively, ‘many a sack of treasure trove I’ve unearthed—but the most curious find of all, I got without searching and without blood being spilt. I was lying quiet those days, about forty years ago, off the north of the Orkney Islands. Well, one morning I took a fancy to explore some of the outlying rocks and little islands dotted here and there. So I started off in a yawl with four seamen to row me; and not seeing much but barren rocks and stunted shrubs about, I bent over the stern and stared into the sea. It was as clear as crystal.

‘As we were passing through a narrow channel between two rocky islands, I bade the men rest on their oars, for something strange below had arrested my attention. I now could see plainly, in the green depths, a Spanish galleon, standing upright, held as in a vice by the grip of the two great rocks. She must have gone down with all hands, when the greater part of the Spanish Armada was wrecked on the shores of Britain.

‘“Shiver my timbers, lads!” I cried, “here’ll be treasure in earnest! Back to the ship for our diving-suits! Booty for every one, and plum duff for dinner!”

‘Well, to make a long story short, I and four of the trustiest of the crew put on our diving-suits, and soon we were walking the slippery decks once trodden by Spanish grandees and soldiers, and the scene of many a bloody fight, I’ll be bound. Their skeletons lay about the deck, wrapped in sea-tangle, and from every crevice of the galleon tall red and green and yellow and purple weeds had sprung, that waved and shivered with the motion of the sea. Her decks were strewn with shells and sand, and in and out of her rotted ribs frightened fish darted at our approach. It was a gruesome sight.

‘Three weeks we worked, carrying the treasure to our own ship, and I began to feel as much at home under water as above it. At last we set sail without mishap, and every man on board had his share, and some of them gave up pirating and settled down as innkeepers and tradesmen.’

As the sound of his deep voice ceased, we three were silent also, gazing longingly into his eyes, that were so like the sea.

Then—‘Captain Pegg,’ said Angel, in a still small voice, ‘I don’t—s’pose—you’d know of any hidden treasure hereabouts? We’d most awfully like to find some. It’d be a jolly thing to write and tell father!’

A droll smile flickered over the bronzed features of Captain Pegg. He brought down his fist on the window-sill.

‘Well, if you aren’t chaps after my own heart!’ he cried. ‘Treasure about here? I was just coming to that—and a most curious happening it is! There was a cabin-boy—name of Jenks—a lad that I trusted and loved like my own son, who stole the greater part of my share of the treasure, and though I scoured the globe for him,—the captain’s eyes rolled fiercely,—‘I found neither trace of him nor the treasure, till two years ago. It was in Madagascar that I received a message from a dying man, confessing that, shaken by remorse, he had brought what was left of the plunder and buried it in Mrs. Handsomebody’s back yard.’

‘Mrs. Handsomebody’s back yard!’ We chanted the words in utter amazement.

‘Just that,’ affirmed Captain Pegg solemnly. ‘Jenks found out that I owned the house next door, but he dared not bury the treasure there because the yard was smoothly sodded, and would show up any disturbance; while Mrs. H.’s yard, being covered with planks, was just the thing. So he simply raised one of the planks, dug a hole, and deposited the sack containing the last of the treasure, and wrote me his confession. And there you are!’

He smiled benignly on us. I longed to hug him.

The wind swooped and whistled down the alley, and the starling gave little sharp twittering noises and cocked his head.

‘When, oh, when?’ we burst out; ‘to-night? May we search for it to-night, Captain Pegg?’

He reflected. ‘No-o. Not to-night. Jenks, you see, sent me a plan of the yard with a cross to mark where the treasure lies, and I’ll have to hunt it up so as not to waste our time turning up the whole yard. But to-morrow night—yes, to-morrow at midnight we’ll start the search!’

IV

At dinner that day the rice-pudding had the flavor of ambrosia. By nightfall preparations were already on foot.

First, the shovel had been smuggled from the coal-cellar and secreted in a corner of the yard behind the ash-barrel, together with an iron crowbar to use as a lever, and an empty sack to aid in the removal of the treasure.

I scarcely slept that night; and when I did my mind was filled with wild imaginings. The next morning we were heedless scholars indeed, and at

dinner I ate so little that Mrs. Handsomebody was moved to remark jocularly that somebody not a thousand miles away was shaping for a bilious bout.

At four o'clock Captain Pegg appeared at his window, looking the picture of cheerful confidence. He said it warmed his heart to be at his old profession again, and indeed I never saw a merrier twinkle in any one's eyes. He had found the plan of the yard sent by Jenks and he had no doubt that we should soon be in possession of the Spanish treasure.

'But there's one thing, my lads,' he said solemnly: 'I make no claim whatever to any share in this booty. Let that be understood. Anything we find is to be yours entirely. If I were to take any such goods into my son's house, his wife would get suspicious, and uncomfortable questions would be asked, and it'd be all up with this archæologist business.'

'Couldn't you hide it under your bed?' I suggested.

'Oh, she'd be sure to find it,' he replied sadly. 'She's into everything. And even if they didn't locate it till I am dead, they'd feel disgraced to think their father had been a pirate. You'll have to take it.'

We agreed, therefore, to ease him of the responsibility of his strangely gotten gain. We then parted, with the understanding that we were to meet him in the alley between the two houses promptly at midnight, and that in the meantime, we were to preserve a calm and commonplace demeanor.

With the addition of four crullers and a slab of cold bread pudding filched from the pantry, our preparations were now complete.

We were well-disciplined little animals; we always went to bed without a murmur, but on this night we literally flew there. The Seraph ended his prayers with—'And for this private treasure make us truly thankful. Amen.'

The next moment we had dived under the bedclothes and snuggled there in wild expectancy.

From half-past seven to twelve is a long stretch. The Seraph slept peacefully. Angel or I rose every little while and struck a match to look at the clock. At nine we were so hungry that we ate all four crullers. At eleven we ate the slab of cold bread pudding. After that we talked less, and I think Angel dozed, but I lay staring in the direction of the window, watching for the brightness which would signify that Captain Pegg was astir and had lighted his gas.

At last it came—a pale and trembling messenger, that showed our little room to me in a new aspect—one of mystery and grotesque shadows.

I was on my feet in an instant. I shook Angel's shoulder.

'Up with you!' I whispered, hoarsely. 'The hour has come!'

I knew that drastic measures must be taken with The Seraph, so I just grasped him under the armpits and stood him on his feet without a word. He wobbled for a space, digging his knuckles in his eyes.

The hands of the clock pointed to ten minutes to twelve.

Angel and I hastily pulled on our trousers; and he, who liked to dress the part, stuck a knife in his belt and twisted a scarlet silk handkerchief (borrowed from Mary Ellen) round his head. His dark eyes glistened under its folds.

The Seraph and I went unadorned, save that he girt his trusty sword about his stout middle and I carried a toy bayonet.

Down the inky-black stairs we crept, scarcely breathing. The lower hall seemed cavernous. I could smell the old carpets and the haircloth covering of the chairs. We sidled down the back hall among goloshes, umbrellas, and Turk's-head dusters. The back door had a key like that of a jail.

Angel tried it with both hands, but though it grated horribly, it stuck. Then I had a try, and could not resist a triumphant click of the tongue when it turned, for Angel was a vain fellow and took a rise out of being the elder.

And when the moonlight shone upon us in the yard!—oh, the delicious freedom of it! We hopped for joy.

In the alley we awaited our leader. Between the houses we could see the low half-moon, hanging like a tilted bird's nest in the dark-blue sky, while a group of stars fluttered near it like young birds. The cathedral chimes sounded the hour of midnight.

Soon we heard the stealthy steps of Captain Pegg, and we gasped as we saw him, for in place of his flowered dressing-gown he wore breeches and top boots, a loose shirt with a blue neckerchief knotted at the throat, and, gleaming at his side, a cutlass.

He smiled broadly when he saw us.

'Well, if you aren't armed—every man-jack of you—even to the bantling!' he cried. 'Capital!'

‘My sword, she’s *weal*,’ said The Seraph with dignity. ‘Sometimes I fight giants.’

Captain Pegg then shook hands with each of us in turn, and we thrilled at being treated as an equal by such a man.

‘And now to work!’ he said, heartily. ‘Here is the plan of the yard as sent by Jenks.’

We could see it plainly by the moonlight, all neatly drawn out, even to the ash-barrel and the clothes-dryer, and there, on the fifth plank from the end, was a cross in red ink, and beside it the magic word—‘Treasure’!

Captain Pegg inserted the crowbar in a wide crack between the fourth and fifth boards, then we all pressed our full weight upon it with a ‘Yo heave ho, my hearties!’ from our chief.

The board flew up and we flew down, sprawling on the ground. Somehow the captain, being versed in such matters, kept his feet, though he staggered a bit.

Then, in an instant, we were pulling wildly at the plank to dislodge it. This we accomplished after much effort, and a dark, dank recess was disclosed.

Captain Pegg dropped to his knees, and with his hand explored cautiously under the planks. His face fell.

‘Shiver my timbers if I can find it!’ he muttered.

‘Let me try!’ I cried eagerly.

Both Angel and I thrust our hands in also and fumbled among the moist lumps of earth.

Captain Pegg now lighted a match and held it in the aperture. It cast a glow upon our tense faces.

‘Hold it closer!’ implored Angel. ‘This way—right here—don’t you see?’

At the same moment we both had seen the heavy metal ring that projected, ever so little, above the surface of the earth. We grasped it simultaneously and pulled. Captain Pegg lighted another match. It was heavy—oh, so heavy!—but we got it out: a fair-sized leather bag bound with thongs. To one of these was attached the ring we had first caught sight of.

Now, kneeling as we were, we stared up in Captain Pegg's face. His wide blue eyes had somehow got a different look.

'Little boys,' he said gently, 'open it!'

There in the moonlight, we unloosed the fastening of the bag and turned its contents out upon the bare boards. The treasure lay disclosed then, a glimmering heap, as if, out of the dank earth, we had dugged a patch of moonshine.

We squatted on the boards around it, our heads touching, our wondering eyes filled with the magic of it.

'It is treasure,' murmured Angel, in an awe-struck voice, 'real treasure trove. Will you tell us, Captain Pegg, what all these things are?'

Captain Pegg, squatting like the rest of us, ran his hands meditatively through the strange collection.

'Why, strike me purple,' he growled, 'if that scamp Jenks hasn't kept most of the gold coins and left us only the silver! But here's three golden doubloons, all right, one apiece for ye! And here's ducats and silver florins, and pieces of eight—and some I can't name till I get the daylight on them. It's a pretty bit of treasure all told; and see here—'

He held up two old Spanish watches, just the thing for gentlemen adventurers.

We boys were now delving into the treasure on our own account, and brought to light a brace of antiquated pistols, an old silver flagon, a compass, a wonderful set of chessmen carved from ivory, and some curious shells, that delighted The Seraph. And other quaint things there were that we handled reverently, and coins of different countries, square and round, and some with holes bored through.

We were so intent upon our discovery that none of us heard the approaching footsteps till they were fair upon us. Then, with a start, we turned, and saw to our horror Mrs. Handsomebody and Mary Ellen, with her hair in curl-papers, and close behind them, Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer Pegg, scantily attired, the gentleman carrying a revolver.

'David! John! Alexander!' gobbled Mrs. Handsomebody.

'Now what d'ye think of that!' came from Mary Ellen.

'Father! Have you gone quite mad?' cried Mrs. Pegg. And—'Oh, I say, governor,' stammered the gentleman with the revolver.

Captain Pegg rose to his feet with dignity.

‘These young gentlemen,’ he said, simply, ‘have with my help been able to locate some buried treasure, which was stolen from me years ago by a man named Jenks, and has lain hidden here since two decades. I hereby renounce all claim to it in favor of my three brave friends!’

Mr. Pegg was bent over the treasure.

‘Now, look here, sir,’ he said, rather sharply, ‘some of this seems to be quite valuable stuff—’

‘I know the value of it to a penny,’ replied his father, with equal asperity, ‘and I intend that it shall belong solely and wholly to these boys.’

‘Whatever are you rigged up like that for?’ demanded his daughter-in-law.

‘As gentlemen of spirit,’ replied Captain Pegg, patiently, ‘we chose to dress the part. We do what we can to keep a little glamour and gayety in the world. Some folk’—he looked at Mrs. Handsomebody—‘would like to discipline it all away.’

‘I think,’ said our governess, ‘that considering it is *my* back yard, I have some claim to—’

‘None at all, madam—none at all!’ interrupted Captain Pegg. ‘By all the rules of treasure-hunting, the finder keeps the treasure.’

Mrs. Handsomebody was silenced. She did not wish to quarrel with the Peggs.

Mrs. Pegg moved closer to her.

‘Mrs. Handsomebody,’ she said, winking her white eyelashes very fast, ‘I really do not think that you should allow your pupils to accept this—er—treasure. My father-in-law has become very eccentric of late, and I am positive that he himself buried these things very recently. Only day before yesterday, I saw that set of ivory chessmen on his writing table.’

‘Hold your tongue, Sophia!’ shouted Captain Pegg loudly.

Mr. Mortimer Pegg looked warningly at his wife.

‘All right, governor! Don’t you worry,’ he said, taking his father’s arm. ‘It shall be just as you say; but one thing is certain, you’ll take your death of cold if you stay out in this night air.’

As he spoke, he turned up the collar of his coat.

Captain Pegg shook hands with a grand air with Angel and me, then he lifted The Seraph in his arms and kissed him.

‘Good-night, bantling!’ he said, softly. ‘Sleep tight!’

He turned then to his son.

‘Mort,’ said he, ‘I haven’t kissed a little boy like that since you were just so high.’

Mr. Pegg laughed and shivered, and they went off quite amiably, arm in arm, Mrs. Pegg following, muttering to herself.

Mrs. Handsomebody looked disparagingly at the treasure. ‘Mary Ellen,’ she ordered, ‘help the children to gather up that rubbish, and come in at once! Such an hour it is!’

Mary Ellen, with many exclamations, assisted in the removal of the treasure to our bedroom. Mrs. Handsomebody, after seeing it deposited there, and us safely under the bedclothes, herself extinguished the gas.

‘I shall write to your father,’ she said, severely, ‘and tell him the whole circumstance. *Then* we shall see what is to be done with *you*, and with the *treasure*.’

With this veiled threat she left us. We snuggled our little bodies together. We were cold.

‘I’ll write to father myself, to-morrow, an’ ’splain everything,’ I announced.

‘D’you know,’ mused Angel, ‘I b’lieve I’ll be a pirate, ’stead of a civil engineer like father. I b’lieve there’s more in it.’

‘I’ll be an engineer just the same,’ said I.

‘I fink,’ murmured The Seraph, sleepily, ‘I fink I’ll jus’ be a bishop, an’ go to bed at pwoper times an’ have poached eggs for tea.’

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[End of *Buried Treasure* by Mazo de la Roche]