OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

The ARGONAUTS

By Morgan Robertson

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A FEW months ago I attended a banquet and left it as I always leave such functions, hungry. Entering an all-night lunch room I took a seat, and gave my order to a waiter, who, when he had filled it, sat down at the table with me. It was very late, and his duties were light.

"You're looking well," he remarked, as his glance traveled over my evening clothes. "You're dead swell, but the last time I saw you, you were covered with mud, carrying a stern line ashore in the Welland Canal."

"You seem to have the advantage of me," I said. "I know the Welland Canal, however, though I am trying to forget that ditch."

"You can't," he laughed. "No man can who ever went through it. That trip with you in the old Samana was my first and last. I struck for salt water again when the old man paid me off at Port Colborne. Don't you remember going to school with me?" He mentioned his name, and with a little effort I recalled him—a schoolmate a little older than myself, who had gone to sea early in life, and returned a full-fledged salt-water navigator, to ship, on his record, as first mate in the schooner that carried me before the mast, and to meet his Waterloo in the Welland Canal, the navigation of which demands qualities never taught nor acquired in the curriculum of seafaring. After grounding the schooner several times, parting every line on board, and driving us to open revolt by the extra work coming of his mistakes, he was discharged by the skipper. As I thought of all this the grumbling sailor rose within me, and there at the table, he a waiter, I a writer, we fought out a grudge of twenty years' standing. But it ended amicably; I called him a farmer, he called me a soldier, and we shook hands.

"I've learned," he said, as we settled back, "only in the last month or so, that you're the fellow that writes these rotten sea stories. Why don't you write real sea stories?"

"For the same reason that you don't serve a real Welsh rabbit," I answered, tapping the now cold concoction he had served me. "I couldn't sell a real story. Truth is too strange to pose as fiction."

"We're all bluffers, I guess. You are, here in this beanery with your glad rags on. I am, too—no, not now. I'm slinging hash, and glad of the chance. But I was a millionaire for a time. Not long. But while it lasted I had dreams—big dreams."

"You must have read in the papers a few weeks back," he began, "about that bunch of college men that chartered the old racer Mayflower, filled her up with diving gear and dynamite, and went down after the treasure in the Santa Margherita."

I nodded assent. "Yes, and a hurricane hit them and they barely escaped."

"They're keeping mum," he said, "and mean to try again; but it's no use. That treasure is seven hundred miles to the nor' nor'east now, and I was about the last man to look at it. It's resting in the hold of a small schooner, sunk in four hundred fathoms. I never heard of that treasure ship until about three years ago, when I quit a brigantine at Cedar Keys and mixed in with the boarding-house crowd. There was a fellow out of a job named Gleason, and he had a chart in his pocket that he talked about, but never showed. He told us all about that old Spanish ship that went down with all hands in the sixteenth century, carrying with her about seven millions' worth of gold, silver, and jewels; and he knew the location. He had got it from a drunken diver who had seen her on the sea bottom, spelled her dingy old name on the stern, and saved the news to himself while he wormed out of the skipper the latitude and longitude of the place. And now he wanted to enlist capital, or make up a crew of men that would do the work. Dead easy, he said. Just to get there, drag the bottom with two boats and a length of chain until the wreck was located, then to go down in a diving suit, hook on to the chests and hoist them up.

"Well, in the crowd that he talked to there wasn't a dollar. We were all dead broke, but we were all ambitious. There was Pango Pete, a nigger six foot tall, who couldn't write his name, but he was a seaman from his feet up; and a Dago named Pedro Pasqualal. These two were the kind that will choke you before they ask the time of night. Then there was Sullivan, old man Sullivan, a decrepit old codger who had sailed second mate all his life, and never got a first mate's berth because he couldn't master navigation. And there was Peters, a young fellow filled up with the romance and the glory of the life at sea—rot, as you and I know, but he was enthusiastic, and that was enough. A trio of Dutchmen were taken in—Wagner, Weiss, and Myers, three good fellows down on their luck. A Portuguese named Christo, and two Sou'wegian brothers named Swanson completed the bunch. We talked it over down at the end of the fruit dock, where the oyster boats come in and make fast, and where the downs-and-outs congregate to smoke and boast of the prosperous past.

"But this crowd talked of the prosperous future. Seven millions, said Gleason, lay down there off Turks Island in less than sixty fathoms, and all we needed was some kind of a craft to get us there, a diving suit, and a storage battery to light up a bulb to search for the treasure. These things seemed beyond our reach, until a schooner came in for supplies. We sized her up, and Gleason went wild as her different fittings and appliances showed up. There were the diving dresses we needed; there was the storage battery; there were the extra anchors for mooring a craft over a certain spot, and the air pumps and paraphernalia for diving operations, scattered about the deck. She was a small craft, and was manned by men who did not act and talk like sailors. There seemed to be no skipper, and they smoked on deck while working, and talked back and forth as though all were equal.

"'A company,' said Gleason, 'just like us, only they've got the money, and possibly the secret. Well, the company that gets the loot owns it, and such matters as the ownership of the schooner and the outfit can be settled afterwards, possibly out of court. What do you say? Are you game?'

"We were. We laid low, but watched, and when that schooner was filled up with grub, we were ready to raid her and chuck the crew overboard; but it wasn't necessary to do the latter. They filled up too late for the tide and went ashore for the evening, leaving no one aboard but a Japanese cook. We remembered as we climbed aboard after dark, that we hadn't a man among us who could cook, and so, instead of dropping that Jap over the rail, we simply locked him into a stateroom and made sail.

"Naturally, as Gleason originated the scheme, he was elected captain, but, as I was the only navigator in the crowd, I was made first mate, and the big nigger, Pango Pete, second mate.

"After we were around the Cape, Gleason gave me the latitude and longitude of the spot, and I made for it. It took me two or three days of careful observations and calculations before I announced that we were within six seconds of the spot, which is all that navigation will do. Then we dropped anchor and began to drag. We knotted together every line we had, and in the middle we had a length of mooring chain that would stick to the bottom. We kept two small boats, to which this was attached, a quarter of a mile apart and pulled on parallel lines, and at last felt a drag; then we pulled together, gathering in the slack, and when we met, the schooner, under charge of Gleason, came up and anchored, over the spot.

"I was the only man there who had any diving experience, so I went down. Say, have you ever been under water in a diving suit, trusting your life to the fellows above who pump the air into your helmet? No? Well, it's a curious experience. I had the feeling as I went down that I was number thirteen of that bunch, and that they only needed to shut off my air supply to make their number twelve instead of thirteen. But that didn't happen; they pumped, and I breathed and saw the old galleon, the Santa Margherita. She lay there, heeled over to starboard, covered with the ooze and the slime of the sea, with barnacles everywhere.

"The deck and rail were a foot thick with mud, and the small, spardeck guns could hardly be distinguished. I saw at once that I would need help, and signaled to be hauled up. On deck I told the news and all hands, even the Jap, went crazy over it. We got out two more diving suits, rigged a bulb for each, and Pango, Peters, and myself went down again.

"Now, this isn't a yarn of the finding of that treasure. Anyone can invent such yarns, and I've read dozens of them. They all wind up successfully, with each man wealthy and happy. This is a yarn of the men who found that treasure, and what happened to them. So, I'll just say that we didn't find a skeleton or a ghost when we got below decks. All hands were up, I suppose, when that ship went down, and the rush of water as she plunged, washed them off. We found seven big chests in the 'tween decks forward of the cabin, and in them all were coins, and jewelry, and here and there in the mess, what might have been an opal, or some kind of jewel. All the stuff was black from the action of the salt water; but we knew we had the real thing, and hooked on tackles. We had to come up to help each time we lifted a chest, for, after the chest was out of water, it was too heavy for the crowd above; but at last they were all up, and stowed snugly on the floor of the cabin. Then, after final search for other loot worth taking, we picked up our anchor and cleared out, not yet having decided where we were going.

"We were pirates under the law, and didn't know but what all the revenue cutters on the coast were looking for us, for the theft of that schooner. But with seven millions of bullion and jewels, melted down, counted up, and translated into cash in some bank, we didn't care for the charge of piracy. The real trouble was to get that stuff translated, and while we argued we sailed due east, out into the broad Atlantic. Peters, the young enthusiast, had been a jeweler, and he told us that nothing short of a blast of air in conjunction with the heat of a fire would melt gold and silver. Well, where could we set up a blast furnace with not a dollar in the party? My suggestion—and I was backed by Gleason, Peters, and old man Sullivan—was that we count out the loot, separate every salable jewel, and make some big port like New York, Liverpool, or Rio Janeiro, sell the jewels and get ready money with which to plan for the disposal of the rest; but we had to deal with men like Pango, Christo, Pedro, and the three Dutchmen, who didn't know what they were up against. They wanted an immediate count up and division; then, each man to go his way. The nonsense of it did not strike them; thirteen men to divide up seven heavy chests—each one shouldering seven-thirteenths of a load that took the whole thirteen to lift with a four-fold tackle. We asked the Jap cook what he thought, but he had no opinion.

"It's somewhat curious how the different men of that bunch had different ideas of what they wanted. Young Peters wanted to go back to his native town and win the girl that had soured on him because he was poor. Pango, Pedro, and the two Sou'wegians only wanted a big drunk. Old Man Sullivan wanted a course in a Nautical School and a first mate's certificate. The three Germans wanted to get to New York and set up in the saloon business. Gleason wanted to study law, and I wanted to study medicine and be a doctor, a gentleman who could enter any society in the world. The Jap didn't give out his aspirations.

"And so, growling like an unhappy family in a menagerie, we sailed east, with the question unsettled. But at last we won over the Dagoes and the Dutchmen, and agreed upon New York as a port, and the selling of the jewels in some Bowery pawnshop, where no questions are asked. Then we shook hands all round, gave the Jap hell about his cooking—for we had been too worried to attend to that matter before—and squared away before the trade wind for Sandy Hook and a market.

"From jealousy and mutual distrust, we all slept in the cabin. There were plenty of staterooms for the crowd, though some of us doubled up. None of us wanted to remain away from the seven chests of treasure, and the Japanese cook, who might have slept in the cook's room next the galley, still showed a preference for his room in the cabin, and we did not contest it. But now we were millionaires and easy—dead easy. We stood watch, steered and trimmed sail with no man for boss, for now the work was done, Gleason and myself and the nigger Pango gave up our false positions. We were a democracy, and loved and trusted one another, only, when we roused out the watch below and found that Old Man Sullivan did not come, and on investigation found him stone dead in his berth without a sign of violence, we forgot our brotherly love and began to wonder.

"'We did not know what he died of, but we gave him sea burial that day, and Gleason read a chapter from the book. We concluded that the old man had died of heart failure, or old age, and thought no more about it after the day had passed. But, when we called the watch at eight bells next mornin', we couldn't get one of the Swanson brothers up. He was cold and stiff; and there was nothing wrong with him either. That is, he had turned in cheerful and healthy and died during sleep, leaving no sign.

"The other Swanson raised merry hell that day, raving about the deck, mourning for his dead brother. But his grief was short-lived, for when we tried to waken him next watch he was cold and stiff. We buried him with the ceremonies, and began to think—all of us. We wondered whether men may rake up ill-gotten treasure from a dead past without coming under influences of that dead past. We thought of the conquered and enslaved natives, laboring in the mines for the aggrandizement and enrichment of Spain, and giving up their lives in the work, unrecognized and forgotten, while their exploiters, the children and relatives of Ferdinand and Isabella, sat back in luxury and self-satisfaction. We wondered as to what was killing our shipmates, ghosts or poison.

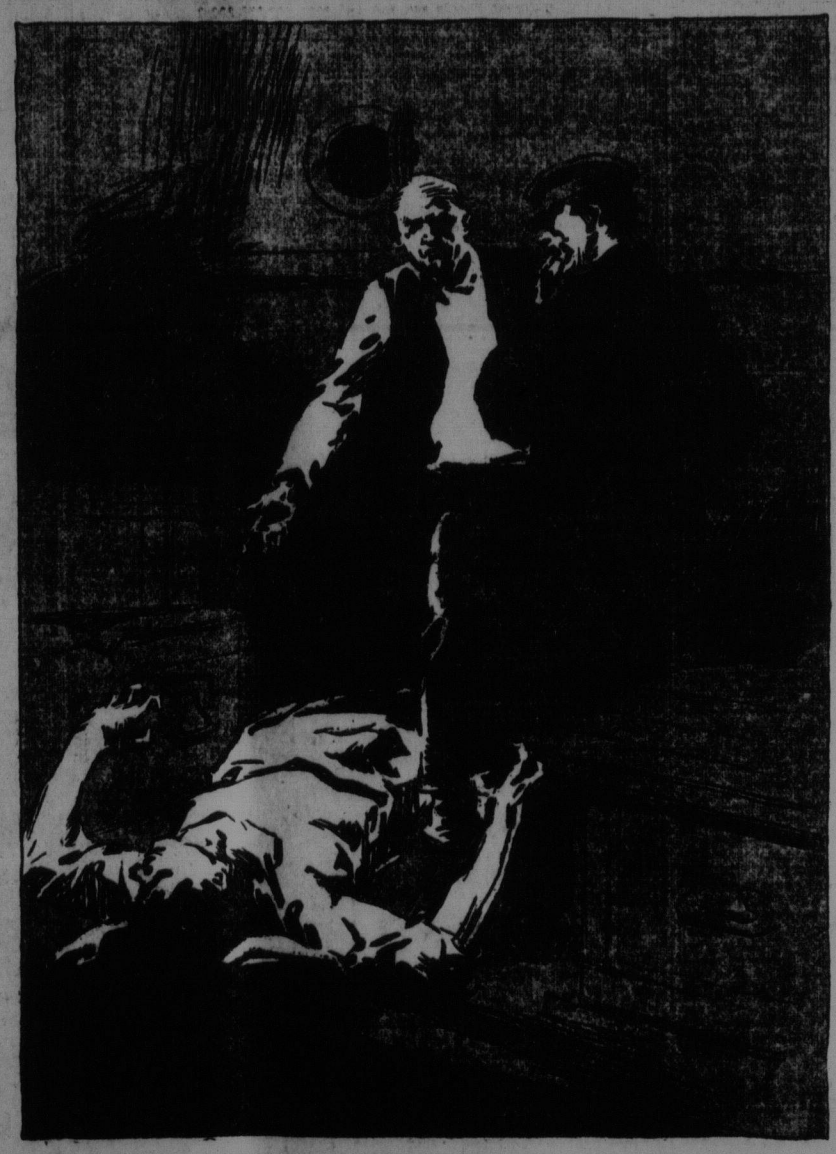
"Naturally, we suspected the cook, and Pango, the Dagoes, and the surviving Sou'wegian were for tossing him overboard; but the rest of us wouldn't have it. There was no evidence of poison, and as we'd done no killing so far in our piratical venture, we'd better keep clear of it now, with so much at stake. A court that would acquit us as soldiers of fortune that had merely borrowed a schooner might hang us as pirates and murderers; but we watched the Jap. We kept him away from the grub while we ate it. He brought it on in two or more big dishes, and there was no chance of his poisoning one without the rest. We weren't afraid of that.

"I examined Swanson thoroughly before we buried him, and there wasn't a mark on him, or a sign of anything out of the way, except what didn't seem in any way important, just below each ear, and back of the corner of the cheek bone, was a little pink spot; but there was no blood, and no sign of finger prints on the throat.

"Peters, the romantic young fellow, got ghosts on his mind, and as he thought about it, they got on his nerves. He couldn't sleep, and walked around, up and down from the cabin to the deck. The others slept in their watch below, and on that night nobody died. But the next night Peters was too exhausted to stay awake, and he went to sleep on the cabin floor alongside the chests. We couldn't waken him at eight bells, and we knew his troubles were over. At daylight I examined his body. Nothing wrong, only the two little pink spots under the ears. We buried him at daylight, with scant pretense of a burial service. Things were looking serious.

"All this time we were plowing along before the trade wind, but it soon panned out and we had light, shifty airs from all directions, with rain—regular Gulf Stream weather. It made us bad-tempered, and Pango and Gleason had a fight. It was a bad fight, and we couldn't stop them; both were powerful men, and as they brushed into me in their whirling lunge along the deck, locked tight, they knocked me six feet away. When I got to my feet, Pango had Gleason down and was choking him. I got a handspike and battered that coon's head with it; but he wouldn't let go, and before others came up to help he had killed him. He went for me, but had to stop before the handspikes of the crowd.

"Now, with Gleason dead, the command devolved upon me or Pango, and this fellow was in a mood to demand the place. He could lick any three of us, but not all hands; but, while we were growling about it and cooling down, we found other troubles to keep us busy. We had piled several tons' weight on the weak cabin floor timbers of an old schooner, and of a sudden, down they crashed to the hold below, leaving a yawning hole in the cabin floor and starting a butt or two in the planking. It was pump, pump, pump, now, for we couldn't rig any kind of a purchase to clear those busted chests away from the leak. Pango was a good worker, and, under the pressure of extreme fatigue, we forgot our grudges. I did not care for the cheap position of command over a bunch of foreigners, and so we made Pango skipper, while I remained navigator and mate. Pango promptly quit pumping, saying that skippers don't pump. And that night he quit everything. As skipper he stood no watch, but at breakfast time he was cold, with the same little marks under his ears. On his skin, however, they showed a brownish black.



"We couldn't waken him at eight bells and we knew his troubles were over."

"Gleason had been choked to death, and I had examined the imprint of Pango's fingers before we buried him. There was hardly a sign; nothing at all to show that the little pink spots came from the pressure of a strangler's grip. Besides, you cannot choke a man asleep without waking him. He would make some kind of a fuss, and apprise others; but that never happened.

"There were but seven of us now, three Germans, two Dagoes, the Jap and myself. I talked with that Jap. He was an educated man, highly trained in one of our universities; but he couldn't tell me anything, he said. It was all mysterious and horrible—this quiet taking off of men while they slept. As for poisoning, of which he knew he was suspected, it was absurd. There was no poison on board, to begin with; and why should he, a landsman, seek to poison the men who could take the ship and treasure to port? What could he do alone on the sea. This was logical, and as he was a small, weak and confiding sort of creature, I exonerated him in my mind from any suspicion of choking the victims.

"That night the two Dagoes, Pedro and Christo, passed into the land beyond. There were the same little marks, but nothing else. Weiss, Wagner and Myers, the three Germans, got nutty about this time, and talked together in their lingo while they pumped; and when they were alone they talked to themselves. I confess that I got nutty. Who wouldn't, with this menace hanging over him? I walked around the deck when I was off pump duty, and I remember that I planned a great school where ambitious young sailor men could study medicine, and escape the drudgery of a life 'fore the mast. Then I planned free eating houses for tramps, and I was going to use some of my wealth to investigate the private life of a Sunday school superintendent, who, when I was a kid, predicted that I would come to a bad end. You see, we never can judge of our own mental condition at the time. It's only when you look back that you can take stock of yourself. The result of this mental disturbance upon me was insomnia. I couldn't get to sleep; but I kept track of the ship, and worried the three Dutchmen and the Jap into trimming sail when necessary.

"We'd got up to the latitude of the Bermudas, I think, and I was beginning to hope that the curse had left us; for we had passed through three nights without a man dying. But on a stormy morning, when the gaff topsails were blown away, and we four men—for the Jap was useless on deck—were trying to get a couple of reefs in the mainsail, Wagner suddenly howled out a lot of Dutch language and jumped overboard. I flung him a line, but he wouldn't take it, and passed astern. The poor devil had taken the national remedy for trouble. Did you ever notice it in Germans, even the best? When things go wrong they kill themselves. They're something like the Chinese in this.

"There were only four of us now, counting the Jap, who still spoiled good grub, and it took a long time to snug that schooner down to double reefs and one head sail. The water in the hold had gained on us, and we pumped while we could stand it, then knocked off, and dropped down on deck for a snooze. We were dead beat, and told the cook to call us if the wind freshened or if anything happened. He didn't call us, but something happened. I wakened in time, and stood up, sleepy and stupid and cold; for you can't sleep on deck, even in the tropics, without getting chilled; and we were up to thirty-six north. The Jap was fooling round the galley, and the schooner, with the wheel becketed, was lifting up and falling off, practically steering herself, by-the-wind. Of course, I thought of the water in the hold, and sounded the well. There was four feet of wet line, and I knew that things were bad. Then I went to the two Dutchmen, to call them to the pumps, and found them cold and stiff, each with the little pink marks under the ears.

"Well, I naturally went more or less crazy. I took that Jap by the throat and asked him what had happened. He did not know, he said. He had left us to sleep, and rest, sorry for us, and trying to cook us a good meal, when we wakened. He was in a shaking fright, trembling and quavering, and I eased up. What was the use of anger and suspicion in the face of this horrible threat of death while you slept? We hove the two bodies overboard, and made a stagger at the pump; but we could not lessen the water in the hold, and at last I gave up, cleared away a boat, and stocked it with water and grub for two. Meanwhile I shaped a course for the Bermudas, and steered it after a fashion, hoping that I might beach the schooner and get, out of some court of salvage, a part of that seven millions down in the hold.

"But I had to steer, and keep the deck, for the Jap was useless. I kept it up until we sighted land, and then flopped, done up, tired out, utterly exhausted by work, and yet unable to sleep. I sang out to the cook, as I lay down on the hatch, to try and steer toward that blot of blue on the horizon, and then passed into a semidazed state of mind that was not sleep, nor yet wakefulness; I could hear, and, through my half-opened eyelids, could see; yet I was not awake, for I could not guard myself. I saw that Jap creeping toward me. I saw the furtive murderous glint in his beady eyes. I heard the soft pat of his feet on the wet deck, and I heard his suppressed breathing. But I could not move or speak.

"He came and stood over me, then reached down and softly pressed the tips of his forefingers into my throat, just below the ears and back of the cheek bones. Softly at first, so that I hardly felt it, then more strongly, and a sense of weakness of body came over me, something distinct from the weakness that I had felt while sinking down to try and sleep. It seemed a stopping of breath. I could not move, as yet, but could see, out of the corners of my eye, and a more hateful, murderous face never afflicted me than the face of that Japanese cook.

"He kept it up, steadily increasing the pressure, and soon I realized that I was not breathing. Then, I do not know why, there came to me the thought of that Sunday school superintendent, and his advice, to pray when in trouble. I forgot my grouch. I said to myself, 'God help me, God help me,' and I wakened. I found that I could move. I shook off the Jap, and he staggered back, chuckling and cluttering in his language. I rose to my feet, weak and shaky, and he ran away from me; but I found myself without power to follow. I was more than weak; I was just alive, just able to breathe, but I could not speak. I tried to, but the words would not come. He shut himself into his galley, and, with regard to the condition of the schooner, and my own helplessness, I painfully climbed into the boat I had stocked and cleared away the davit falls. Then I lay down.

"I have a dim remembrance of that sleep in the boat, of waking occasionally to drive that cowardly Jap off with an upraised oar; of my utter inability to speak to him, and the awful difficulty of taking a long breath. But the final plunge of the schooner stands out. I was awake, or as nearly awake as I could be. The Jap was forward, and the decks were awash. I knew that she was going down, and got out my knife to cut the falls when the boat floated. I did this successfully, for, though I could not speak, I could move, and as the schooner plunged under, and the screams of that heathen rang in my ears, I cut the bow tackle, then the stern tackle, and found myself adrift in a turmoil of whirlpools.

"I was picked up a few days later by a fruiter, and taken into New York. I found my hair had turned white. I've been working as a waiter most of the time since, hoping to enlist somebody's interest toward salving that schooner; but it's no go. I'm going to Cuba, where I've heard of a pot of money in the Santiago hills. Want to go along?"

"No," I answered. "But, tell me, what killed those men?"

"The Jap must have been an expert in jiu jitsu, the wrestling game of that country. I've made a stagger at studying medicine since then, and learned a little. The pneumogastric nerve did the business. It passes from the base of the brain, down past the heart and lungs and ends near the stomach. It is motor, sensory, and sympathetic, all in one. Gentle pressure inhibits breathing, continued pressure, or stimulus, paralyzes the vocal chords; a continuance of the stimulus renders you unconscious, and a strong pressure brings about stoppage of the heart action, and death."