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*Treasures (a trace of the story)*

The landing on the ground appeared to be a bit trickier than the going up process had been. Shrubs, prickly weeds, thorny vines awaited. We were undaunted. Our descent might not have exhibited grace but it was spirited and fast and we were over and on the ground standing in the small patch of what passed for a clearing.

“Ouch!” I removed a dry thorn from my arm. “Okay, Magellan. Where to?”

“Hmm.” Jean pointed. “How ‘bout going that way? It looks like there might have been a real path once.”

“That way” was north. It quickly proved more challenging than we’d expected. Fallen branches blocked us, we tripped over roots. Vines grabbed, then clung, to our ankles. We persevered. Thirty minutes later, we were scratched, slightly bloody, hot, dirty, tired and very thirsty.

“Break!” I yelled.

“Shoot, Bonnie, you’re a sissy.”

“I am not! I have bloody badges of courage all over my knees and calves. But I can’t be expected to find buried treasure in a weakened condition. I need rest. I need food. I need those sodas Hamp gave us no matter how hot they are now.”

Jean stuck her tongue out at me, but dropped the backpack. “I’m only taking a break because if we don’t eat the Snickers soon, they’ll melt all over my bag.”

“Yeah. Right. Hand ‘em over.”

We contentedly munched on chocolate (which had indeed melted) and drank warm sodas for the next ten minutes or so. Then, with renewed strength and a major sugar high, we were ready to tackle the forest again. We started hiking through jungle-like territory. The growth of weeds now reached our knees. Dead tree limbs lay in every direction. My scratches were turning into bloody welts. Going back for a *Wanda’s Special* was starting to have incredible appeal. I was about to suggest doing precisely that when suddenly we stumbled (literally) into a real clearing.

The dramatic change from the heat, the weeds, even dust, was immediate and slightly scary. Tall trees deflected searing rays of sunlight from entering, and there were no broken

shrubs or patches of dried grass. Only one huge toppled tree barricaded the center. Finally, in this space, the earth itself felt cool—detached from the summer heat. The remains of long dead campfires lent stillness to the scene, as did empty tin cans and broken bottles.

The drop in temperature was welcome, and for some absurd reason filled us the hope that we were about to discover the find of the century.

Jean began hopping up and down. “What do you think? Diamonds? Pearls? Emeralds?”

“None of the above. Unfortunately, I don’t see a nice case labeled ‘priceless jewels’ anywhere.” I smiled.

“Well, poo, I’m disappointed. Not surprised, mind you, but disappointed.”

Another good sit-down and relax session was clearly in order before we made the trek back to civilization. The fallen tree was tailor made for two semi-exhausted girls to plop in front of before devouring a picnic of chips and the remainder of soda that had gone from warm to nearly stove hot. We first scoured the area for any pesky rattlesnakes or sneaky copperheads who might have chosen this spot for their afternoon nap. No hissing or twitching could be heard or seen near the front of the tree but we were cautious. We tiptoed around the back to see if Mr. Rattles might be hiding in a hole.

We stopped.

The back side of the tree displayed a burnt portion, which had hollowed out a good chunk of the branch. I leaned down slowly in case that imagined snake lay in wait, and then popped my head back up.

“Hey. It’s a trunk. A steamer trunk. It’s dirty, it’s chipped, and it’s colorless. Looks *really* old. This is so cool!”

Jean leapt into the air, shrieking, “Yippee! Eureka! This is *it*. The moment we’ve been waiting for all our lives. Got to be a huge haul of treasure in there.”

I joined her and we danced a little gig. “Rich! We’re gonna be rich. We can go to England and meet the Beatles! Shit, we can go to England and *buy* the Beatles.”

Our imaginations had reverted to the level of six-year olds. Not terribly smart six-year olds, at that.

*Buried Treasure*. Gold bullions left by Spanish pirates who doubtless had roasted marshmallows and hot dogs in this very spot three hundred years ago.

“Come on. Let’s pull this sucker out.”

I nodded. We squatted. We each grabbed a handle on the ends, and then carefully edged the trunk out of the hole in the tree. Simultaneously we sank to the ground. I made an attempt to wipe away the top layer of dust and dirt from the front of the trunk using the wad of sweaty tissues I'd cleverly concealed in my baseball cap.

“Hey, Jean. Check this out.”

I pointed to the spot where I'd been diligently cleaning. Three letters stood out from beneath the grime. We both squinted and came up with the same conclusion. Initials. *M. D. H.*

“Far out! Let me think. M.D.H.,” I mused. “Wait . . . Ha! I've got it. This is the chest of Morgan Death Heart, a fierce rascalion from Madagascar. No. No. Better still. This belongs to one Mephistopheles Diablo Hernandez, ravisher of maidens and slayer of shipwrecked travelers from France. Ooh! Better! Manuel Diaz Harrigan from the Irish branch of Spain? Disowned by his Spanish cousins and sent to traverse the seas buckling swashes and also ravishing maidens.”