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Treasure Hunting in the Caribbean

dtv Tiger Eye - Treasure Hunt

128 Pages

Rights Sold: Latvia, Korea, Poland,
Chinese (simplified characters),
Turkey

ISBN 978-3-423-07712-5

In the Depths of the Wardrobe

“Did Frau Wagner really spend six months sitting in a library?”
Instead of trying out her new diving gear in the River Elbe, Luzie found herself standing in her father’s bedroom one afternoon, unable to believe her luck – she would soon be on a plane to Cuba! Her father had had to resort to quite a lot of arguing and shouting down the phone, but in the end Luzie’s mother had agreed. Luzie hadn’t even bothered to unpack her case.

Tim Timm screwed up his eyes and seemed to be looking at something in the depths of his wardrobe. “That Wagner woman is a real pro. She’s been treasure hunting for years. And to find out where a ship sank, she has to find out whether it did in fact sink and what it had on board. To do that she trots along to the library and reads all sorts of stuff.”

“Does that mean there’s a book that tells you where and when a ship sank and what it had on board?” Luzie could actually picture this book in her mind:

"ALL THE BURIED TREASURE IN THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD.

WHERE IT IS AND HOW YOU CAN FIND IT!"

“Of course it’s not quite that easy. “ Tim Timm chucked a load of socks into his sailor’s kitbag. “Frau Wagner was looking for old court records.”

“Records?” Luzie didn’t understand him.

Luzie’s father scratched the back of his head. “How can I explain it? After all, every ship belongs to someone or other. And if a ship sinks, then of course the person it belongs to wants to know what happened to it. Usually they take the captain to court. And every court has records of what the judges decided. The *Santa Clara* belonged to King Philip of Spain. She was supposed to bring a shipload of 200 gold bars, heaps of silver coins and old native Indian gold jewellery from South America to Spain. In 1828, the *Santa Clara*, along with several other ships, set sail from the harbour at Vera Cruz in Mexico. But unfortunately the *Santa Clara* was overloaded with all that gold and silver. The captain, Don Juan de Altonara, wanted to sail to Havana, and from there on to Spain. But pirates ambushed the convoy just before it reached the harbour at Havana.”

Luzie stared at her father. “Real pirates?”

Luzie’s father nodded. “Sure. At that time the Caribbean was teeming with pirates. – Captain de Altonara tried to sail away from the pirates and he concealed the ship in a cove. But the pirates found him. There was a battle at sea. It was during this battle that the *Santa Clara* was sunk.”

“With all that gold and silver on board?” Luzie leaned against the doorframe. “And what did the king say to that?”

“He was angry.”



“I can imagine.”

“King Philip was so angry that he took Captain de Altonara and the first officer, who managed to escape the pirates and flee to Spain, to court. They wanted to know exactly what had happened. The King interrogated all the survivors of the battle. And before long it became clear that the captain had sunk the ship himself, so that the gold and silver wouldn’t fall into the hands of the pirates.”

Luzie looked at her father. “Really? And what did the King say about that?”

Captain Timm shrugged his shoulders. “There’s nothing about that in the records. But he let the captain go free. Apparently he preferred his treasure to be lying on the seabed in a cove somewhere off Cuba rather than for the pirates to have had it.”

“And it says all that in the court records?” asked Luzie.

Her father got up. “Yes. The records even list everything that was on board. From the first canon down to the last silver coin. That’s why the Wagner woman knows that the *Santa Clara* is well worth looking for. And there’s a pretty accurate description of the cove where the battle took place, too.”

Luzie scratched her head. “But if it’s all recorded in the court file, then surely some other treasure hunters are bound to have found the treasure the pirates were after!”

“Slow down. Hold your horses!” Tim Timm shoved the clothes deeper into his bag. “Just because something’s written down somewhere doesn’t mean that everyone knows *where* it’s written down! Frau Wagner spent months going through those old court files before she finally came across the case of the *Santa Clara*.” He snapped shut the kitbag. “When she was finally on to the case, she studied all the old sea charts and tried to work out where the ship went down according to the information the captain gave. And she checked whether the wreck had already been salvaged.”

“And?”

“No one’s found it.” Luzie’s father grinned.

“What’s so funny about that?” Luzie asked.

Tim Timm’s grin grew even wider. “The joke is that Captain Juan de Altonara lost his ship, but he found something else as well: an island. In fact it was off this island that he hid his ship from the pirates. It used to be named after him: *Cayo Altonara*. But the island hasn’t been called that by anyone for 300 years. Because for a long time it’s been called by a name that describes how it looks: the island is shaped like the letter ‘W’ – that’s why it’s called “W-Island”. In Spanish: *Cayo Uve Doble*.”

“And you knew that?” asked Luzie.

Tim Timm shook his head. “No, but I knew that the island wasn’t marked on very old maps of the Caribbean, like those the pirates and the Spanish sailors used. And I know approximately how fast a heavily laden



galleon can sail. Putting those two facts together made me realise that de Altonara could have reached the island. And once I'd come across *Cayo Uve Doble*, all I had to do was check when the island was discovered – and I found its old name on a map.”

“So, in fact, it's *you* who worked out where the wreck is!” Lucy said full of admiration.

“No. I just helped. Without the Wagner woman it wouldn't even have occurred to me to look for such a treasure. That Wagner woman is a real pro. She's already looked for treasure in the Mediterranean, off the coast of Gibraltar and even in the desert – and she found some, too. That's how she came by the money to look for more treasure.”

“Can I take my diving gear with me?” Luzie asked abruptly.

“Forget it!” Her father gave Luzie a sideways glance. “You don't seriously think I'm going to let you dive for treasure? That's far too dangerous!”

“Oh, honestly Daddy, I just want to do a bit of snorkelling near the beach,” Luzie lied. Of course she wanted to look for the *Santa Clara*.

But Tim Timm lived up to his reputation for being as stubborn as a mule: “Absolutely no chance. All that diving stuff is staying here, so you won't get any silly ideas!”

We'll see about that, Luzie thought to herself.

English sample translation by Ruth Feuchtwanger