

CHAPTER X

THE ADVENTURE IN CRESCENT BLIND

I

Now there could be no doubt that old Captain Jake Winch and his brawny baymen were uncovering the remains of the *Red Moor* galley.

Examples of goldsmiths' work of ancient Maya and Aztec civilization were now being sifted out of age-old ooze every hour, and the pure, heavy Indian gold was as bright and flexible as when the long-dead master-goldsmiths finished burnishing.

Every ounce of silt was saved, screened, re-screened on the dredging scow, and again raked dry and screened twice more on shore. And out of the sand tumbled hundreds and hundreds of exquisite and curious specimens of Maya goldwork. The grotesque and fearsome Moan-bird of ill omen, with its basilisk eyes and horrid beak wide open as though screeching, turned up in scores. There were heavy, dolphin-shaped creatures, heavier alligators, stumpy, sinister little gods, and dumpy, ugly goddesses; there were frail, delicately sculptured butterflies and beautiful dragon-flies; there were wonderful bats, life-like crabs, fishes, conch-shells, birds—particularly vultures and harpy-eagles. Now and then a great lump of raw gold bounced off the screen; now and then some gold sacrificial vessel, or a ceremonial amulet, or part of some clavical, or gorget, or plaque pierced for fibre-cords that had long rotted, or still were attached in the guise of gold chains.

Now and then, but rarely, pure copper ornaments appeared, or a utensil composed of amalgam and gilded

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with a thin, beaten plate of virgin gold. But there were very few of these; practically everything was wrought out of solid gold, often without alloy, sometimes with a very small percentage of other metal.

Inside the cofferdam the men were digging by hand now, and every shovelful lifted was all glittering with gold ornaments, some intact, others in fragments.

The excitement and interest at Place-of-Swans became almost too thrilling to endure. At daylight Maddaleen, Dirck and John Lanier were out on the cofferdam watching, and sometimes even wielding shovels.

Never had they experienced thrills as when, from the screen, some lovely Maya creation of heavy gold rebounded and dropped at their feet on the sand. All gold hunger—all greed for gold because it was merely gold—vanished in the ecstatic delight of archæological research. With each shovelful of sand a newer and more lovely surprise rewarded them. And there seemed no end to the width and depth of this great golden vein which had been uncovered under the shallow waters of Place-of-Swans.

And the vein was practically all gold; there seemed to be no relics of the ship itself—not a ring, or bolt, or timber; no fragment of human remains; no rusted arms, no battered helmet, nor armour; no cannon-balls, no broken pottery, no brass utensils of Spanish or Dutch or English manufacture; no anchor chains—not a link—and no anchor.

Nobody ventured to estimate the value in gold which was being dug up every minute; nobody, so far, had spoken of that aspect of the affair. Even the astounding Spanish booty which Dirck had brought in from False Cape, and which had been carried to the wine-cellar and locked in, had not been discussed in terms of monetary value.

This loot from False Cape was real pirate's plunder—the sacrilegious harvest of bloody and desperate men, ravished from the sacked churches of Panama, from the convents of Hispaniola, palaces, castles, monasteries of

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a Spanish, French and English civilization which now was as extinct as that of Maya and Aztec.

The golden debris lay piled up in a vast heap on the floor of the wine-cellar at Place-of-Swans—beautiful sixteenth century altar vessels all crushed and battered, splendid chalices, ewers, basins, candlesticks, crucifixes—all mutilated and stamped on and hammered into more compact masses that the gold-crazed buccaneer could cram more loot into the space allotted them within the reeking hold.

Maddaleen was more shocked and concerned than thrilled by this windfall of blood-sprayed treasure; Dirck himself felt uncertain, troubled, apprehensive. For, after all, as he said to Lanier, this really was discovered by Welper's gang on territory belonging to them; and, even as recompense for the fortune out of which Welper and Orizava Oil had swindled him, it seemed too much like robbery to take what these ruffians had found off their own shores. But Lanier, who had been given the run of the house and access to all its garret-stored mass of musty archives, was rather sarcastic about the qualms of brother and sister.

"If you knew more about the history of your own manor and your own people," he said, "you'd know that the Spanish treasure belongs to both of you and not to Barney Welper."

He went to his room and brought back a dirty parchment deed, discoloured, brittle, and all over pinkish-red seals and shreds of silken tape.

"You never saw this, did you?" he inquired ironically. "It wasn't concealed. It lay on top of a sea-chest up there among the mud-wasp nests. It's the royal patent to your domain, fair lady and gallant sir; do me the honour to listen to this paragraph." And he read aloud:

"It being further understood that these same and aforementioned riparian rights to the manor which is called the Place-of-Swans does and shall for ever extend

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to and include, northward, the *high-tide mark and limit at greatest flood* upon the western and southern shores of Tiger Island; and, to the east, the high-tide mark upon all that western shore of the mainland known as False Cape, from and including the channel between Tiger Island and False Cape, to and including the *Inlet* south of the aforesaid cape——”

“Good heavens,” cried Dirck, “is Tiger Island *ours*?”

“As far as tide-water, my casual friend,” said Lanier, laughing.

“Then,” said Maddaleen, amazed, “Welper has no rights at all in the sunken *Holy Trinity*, has he, John Lanier?”

“None, dear lady. But this is hardly the moment to take up the question with Barney Welper.”

They were seated after dinner in the library before the fire of sea-wood. Coffee was being served. Maddaleen set her cup aside, took the old parchment with its rose-tinted seals, curled herself up in the depths of a wing-chair, and studied it carefully.

“Anyway,” she said, stealing a resentful glance at Lanier, “this deed must have been recorded somewhere, so *I’m* not the shiftless chatelaine you insinuate. You’re rather impudent sometimes, John Lanier.”

The latter merely grinned; then his face altered and he looked gravely at Dirck.

What Dirck had told him about his predicament on Tiger Island and about Eugene Renton’s murderous proclivities had deeply disturbed the elder man. And he laid down the law, without compromise, that henceforth Dirck was not to go roving anywhere unaccompanied.

“Well,” the boy had argued, “what could you or Jake have done with me against that entire gang?”

“I don’t know,” Lanier had replied, “but that’s the law now, Dirck. You can’t go cruising alone until this matter is finished. After all, you ought to consider your sister.”

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"I do——"

"You do not!" rejoined Maddaleen calmly.

Still studying the parchment, she said: "Brothers don't consider sisters. I don't expect it. But you ought to consider Mr. Lanier, Dirck."

"I do——"

"You don't. He has done about everything a man can do for this family. And the family just sits around and waits for him to do more. He has been as unselfish as a father, as loyal as a brother, fearless, tireless, resourceful, generous, not one thought for himself. . . . Not *one*! He may have come into this region in line of duty, but that scarcely included guarding and protecting me and mine and you and yours at the peril of his life.

"I think," she added, still examining the parchment, "that you and I owe him *something*. And if he requests you not to go cruising or shooting alone by yourself, that is the only thing he ever has asked of either of us. And—I wish he would ask—more."

"Of course I'll do whatever Lanier says," asserted the boy. "I'll do anything for him, and he knows it. No use talking as though I wouldn't, Sis."

"I'm rather overwhelmed," murmured Lanier. "Who am I to be offered such a tribute?"

"It's time somebody named Loveless offered you something—even if it's only the tribute of common consideration," said Maddaleen. "Dirck!"

"What?"

"It is absolutely ridiculous for Mr. Lanier to refuse to consider a proper and decent division of what we are dragging up out of the *Red Moon*, and what you are—are——"

"Stealing?"

"Obtaining—on False Cape. Can't you talk to him as men talk to one another?"

"Well, I can say, 'Hang it all, Lanier, you've just got to take a third of all this junk——'"

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"Nonsense!" interrupted the elder man, laughing. "What you dig up doesn't concern me. You're two kind and generous children; but I couldn't accept such a suggestion. I can't take anything. And you know it," looking at the girl.

She was studying the deed very intently. Presently she lifted her blue eyes, smiled slightly:

"You won't share with us? You refuse to take anything?"

"I couldn't take anything."

"Then will you *give*?"

"Yes. What?"

"Your promise not to go cruising alone."

He laughed. "I couldn't do that, either."

"I suppose not." She rested her chin on her hand, drew a deep breath. "You won't take, you won't give, John Lanier. I'm sure I don't know what to do with you."

"Well, I do," said Dirck; "it's beginning to blow, and I'm going to take Lanier to Crescent Blind before daylight and give him the duck-shooting of his life!"

"Do you think we ought to leave the cofferdam?" inquired Lanier.

"Jake and the men are honest. Besides, one of us can be back by ten o'clock."

"You'll have to come back, then. I don't want you alone anywhere—not even on Crescent—for the present."

"Nobody invites me," remarked Maddaleen.

"Come on, Sis," cried the boy cordially. "Three can shoot those twin blinds, or I can go over to the north-east blind and leave you and Lanier to stoop everything to the westward."

Maddaleen looked at Lanier. "The prospect doesn't enchant you, does it?"

"It does," he said. "I don't see why it wouldn't be all right for us to shoot on Crescent until ten o'clock."

"Do you apprehend any trouble on Red Moon Island?" inquired the girl uneasily.

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"None that I can foresee. No. Donald Mayne might come before daylight to talk to me. He'd find me gone, that's all."

"But he's never yet done that——"

"What?"

"Come over to Place-of-Swans."

"Oh, yes, he has!"

"When?" asked the girl, surprised.

"Yesterday morning and this morning before sunrise."

Maddaleen said: "You are very reticent, John Lanier."

"There was nothing important to tell you and Dirck. Mayne came on other business."

"I didn't mean to be inquisitive——"

"You're not. I'll tell you. Mayne and I are trying to herd a lot of malefactors together and nurse them along until similar groups in various other parts of the world can be beguiled into similar conditions and situation."

He smiled at Maddaleen. "You don't quite understand, and I'll be clearer. A gigantic drag-net is to be drawn over the whole world. That gang over there on Tiger Island comprises the brains of the criminal world in the Eastern United States. A few are missing. The authorities whom Mayne and I represent are trying to concentrate them all on Tiger. We don't want anything to happen to cause them any suspicion or in any way to interfere with their sense of security. Certain Federal authorities prematurely startled the Orizava Oil crowd. That was a blunder. What we who represent law are attempting to do is to strike without warning and simultaneously *all over the world.*"

The girl and her brother gazed at him wide-eyed and dumb.

Lanier went on slowly: "There is to-day throughout the world a serious conspiracy against civilization. In every land, under every government, sinister and dominat-

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ing combinations of minds direct this vast menace. To these groups is due the steadily increasing lawlessness in communities in nations which hitherto have been generally law-abiding and secure. It is a deliberate attempt, directed by diabolical wisdom, to invade, terrorize, ravage and overthrow all security, all law, all order—yes, and all refinements of civilization—science, art, all learning, all accepted moral conventions, all religion. The underworld is preparing for a conquest of civilization. And that is the fact we are facing. And that is why all governments founded upon law and order have now finally combined in a solemn and secret pact, engaging each other to put an absolute end to this increasing menace within their dominions. Certain simultaneous measures have been internationally agreed upon. Action is being concerted. The forces of disorder are being cleverly and amazingly organized by the master minds of evil. The forces of law and order must be even more perfectly organized. They will be. They are already. And of these forces I am a small and humble part—a mere cog that fits into a vast and intricate maze of machinery. And I think that the machine, when assembled, is destined to grind exceeding small."

He rose, tossed his burnt-out cigarette into the fire.

"To-morrow we shoot duck, dear lady," he said gaily, "if still it be your pleasure."

The girl flushed a little. As she passed him and said good night, she added under her breath: "I think you know what is my pleasure, John Lanier."

"What?"

"To meet your—wishes," she said; and, not looking at him, she mounted the stairs on light, swift feet.

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It was still very dark in his room when a knock on his door and Jake's voice aroused Lanier. He lighted his night-light, looked at his watch, got out of bed

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with a suppressed groan, and went about the business of bathing, shaving and dressing.

Outside the gilded sea-horse rattled and creaked, shutters banged, the wind-demons quarrelled in the chimneys, False Cape thundered.

When Lanier was dressed he went down to the lamp-lit breakfast room. Maddaleen, in sea-boots and leather shooting-coat, welcomed him with an airy gesture, and indicated a fowling-piece on a chair.

"That's your gun. Your shells are in the tin case beside it, along with your lunch bucket. Coffee will be ready in a moment. What splendid ducking weather!"

"It's blowing," he remarked, picking up his gun and adjusting it to his shoulder.

"It isn't blowing too hard. Does the stock suit you?" she added demurely.

"I suppose so. I don't know much about shot-guns. You suit me, anyway, Maddaleen. You look very fetching in your shooting clothes."

"Yes, I must resemble a baby elephant. Here's breakfast. We won't wait for Dirck——"

Dirck sauntered in at the moment; they seated themselves before coffee, hot bread, bacon, eggs and broiled bass.

"It would be a great day for canvas-back," suggested Dirck, falling to with his usual appetite. "I don't think it's too rough for a sink-box."

"We can't risk box-shooting with that gang on Tiger Island, you see," said Maddaleen. "And, besides, the men couldn't take out the tender. It won't do to leave the cofferdam unguarded with all that gold uncovered."

"I should say not," added Lanier. "I'm not sure that I ought to go at all——"

"Then I suppose I couldn't go," said Dirck. "You say I shouldn't go off alone——"

"If Mr. Lanier doesn't care to go," remarked his sister, "I can go with you, Dirck." She looked at Lanier defiantly.

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"Yes," returned Lanier, "that would solve all my anxiety—you and Dirck alone on Crescent."

The girl shrugged. "I know how to use the gun as well as Dirck does . . . if any of the Tiger Island gang should bother us. You think I'm a child."

"A nice variety of outdoor sport for a girl," retorted Lanier. "I thought you were sensible."

"You think cotton batting the proper clothing for me. It's nice of you, John Lanier, but it's Victorian——"

"Oh, shut up, Sis," interrupted her brother. "I don't care to have you blinded by a charge of sixes in the face, either. If Welper's people should ever really bother us, Lanier and I don't want you on the firing line."

The girl got up from the table and pulled on her sou'-wester.

"Are you coming, John Lanier? Yes or no? Choose between duck and dump—between girl and gold!"

"I'm Victorian enough to choose the girl," he said, picking up his gun, bucket and cartridge-case. "May I have her, Maddaleen?"

"You may have her—thanks. I am very grateful to be taken shooting by a tiger hunter."

There was a trace of malice in her bright, quick smile. Her cheeks were slightly pink.

Dirck followed to the rear door. All was darkness outside. Maddaleen lighted two lanterns, and they picked their way down to the little wharf on the lee shore behind the house, where were the yards for duck and geese decoys. Here lay their boat, and they stowed their guns and paraphernalia aboard.

"Oh, dear," sighed the girl, "this is what I don't like about duck-shooting, but the men sleep on the barge at night now, and I didn't want to bother Jake——"

"Come on, Sis," interrupted her brother. "Lanier and I will attend to the geese."

In their hip-boots they waded out and around to the water-gate in the palings which fenced in the decoys yard.

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Major Bagstock was the first victim; Dirck chased, cornered and seized the indignant gander, tucked him under one arm, caught Miss Tox, his spouse, and started for the boat, the Major protesting with a vehemence which would have won encomiums had he been staked out off the blind. Lanier managed to corner two belligerent geese and grab them, and the buffeting he got from their wings fairly staggered him.

"Let me show you!" said Maddaleen, laughing, as the furious impact of the pinions nearly knocked Lanier flat in the water.

She took one of the geese, showed him how to hold the other, and waded to the boat with him. Here, without ceremony, Dirck nabbed them and thrust them into a crate.

The geese always were difficult; the mallard turned out to be *more difficult to catch, but far easier to handle*. Maddaleen chased, cornered, caught and crated her quota, and finally all the live decoys were aboard; and Dirck slung some three dozen wooden ones into the cock-pit—a mess of battered stools, tangled cords and weights.

Major Bagstock already had his head out between the crate bars and with evil intent, and he managed to nip Lanier twice before that young man learned how to avoid him.

But now it was time to set sail.

"Not earlier than one hour before sunrise," the law reads.

Dirck stepped the mast, Maddaleen took the tiller, and Lanier stowed himself among guns, buckets, crates, oars, stools and poles, and as far from Major Bagstock as possible.

There was a good deal of a sea running off Red Moon Island; the boat did some pitching and Dirck some baling. From the darkness overhead came a charming confusion of treble voices, where unseen swan in hundreds were already on the wing. Now and again the thrilling tumult of wild geese broke out upon their ears,

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sometimes from far away, sometimes startlingly close overhead. The great armies of waterfowl were awake and stirring upon the infinite waste of waters; from every direction out of darkness came the clangour of geese and halloo of wild swan, and sometimes a mighty rush of wings where wild duck sped swiftly through the viewless lanes of night.

The boat came up to the windward of Crescent and was fairly blown ashore across the shallows.

Out of obscurity, which now had grown greyer, loomed the low reed barricade of a point blind.

Maddaleen stepped overboard, and stood knee-deep holding the boat while the two men carried ashore the guns and luggage and laid everything in the blind.

Now the live decoys, geese and duck, were dragged forth unceremoniously, weighted leg cords were attached, the birds liberated in proper groups at proper distance and intervals.

Major Bagstock discussed the outrage excitedly with Miss Tox; other geese floundered, splashed, preened or inquired loudly what had become of their several wives. All the mallard duck were quacking and gossiping and resenting the scandalous proceedings, and the green-headed drakes answered in soft, lisping response—the very refinement of a ghostly quack.

Out of darkness somewhere one old marsh-duck had set up a raucous and incessant clamour; and far away in reedy obscurity other marsh-duck fussed and commented excitedly, while in the greying light above, though not yet visible, the snowy legions of the sky swept past in endless battalions, filling the dawn with their wild hallooming.

And now the mast was unshipped, the boat pulled up and concealed among the reeds; Maddaleen and Lanier seated themselves on the rough board, with guns resting on the edge of the reeded sill in front, and Dirck squatted down above and behind them, his slicker for a seat, and ranks of growing rushes to conceal him.

Almost instantly the treble whimper of wings filled

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their ears; right in front, just beyond the decoys, a bunch of whistlers sped past. Three reports shattered the silence; then a fourth. Three ducks struck the water; then a fourth collapsed far out, slanted down and hit the running waves with a visible splash.

"Don't move, they'll drift right in to the blind," said Dirck in a hoarse whisper. "Ready! Pin-tails coming!"

The duck decoys set up a loud quacking. A dozen pin-tails drove high over the marsh behind them, and the boy called them: "Deedle-deedle-deedle — dilly-dilly-dilly!"

"Dirck's pulled them round," whispered Maddaleen. "You must shoot this time, John Lanier. Here they come!"

"Let them come all the way round!" muttered Dirck. "They'll drop in, I think."

The pin-tails swept past outside the decoys at full speed and disappeared. Three excited pairs of eyes waited expectantly. Suddenly, right in their faces, the duck reappeared, rising a little to breast the wind, their wings curved to a bow. For an instant they seemed to be suspended in mid-air; then down they dropped on to the water amid the treacherous quacking of the decoys.

"John?"

"Yes, Maddaleen?"

"When I count three you stand up. And when the pin-tails jump you kill two."

"Yes—dear lady."

"One-two-three!"

Lanier rose, and so did Maddaleen. Out on the water a dozen sleek, seal-brown heads were turned in alarm; a dozen startled duck clattered up out of the water; Lanier fired twice—with perfect safety to the duck. Then four shots cracked out and five pin-tails doubled up, collapsed, hitting the water beyond the decoys in a rapid series of splashes.

"Well done, Sis!" cried Dirck. "You crossed two beautifully."

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But his sister was looking with a sort of sweet anxiety at Lanier.

"You'll get the hang of it after a shot or two," she said.

He smiled: "I hope so; but you and Dirck mustn't bother with me. You keep on doing the serious work, and I'll blaze away and furnish the comic element."

Dirck, out in the water, was picking up the floaters driven in-shore. The decoys, which had helped to lure their own wild kindred into the ambushade, didn't like to have their victims come splashing among them or floating by too near, and all the duck were tugging at their leashes and splashing and beating their wings in efforts to avoid their assassinated dupes.

"We're careful," explained Maddaleen, "not to shoot at any duck when it might fall among the decoys. It scares the decoys, and sometimes renders them useless."

Dirck came wading back to the blind, dragging the nine inert but beautiful masses of plumage. Maddaleen and Lanier laid the birds behind the reeds.

"Look out!" whispered Dirck, scrambling back to his place as the clamour of Major Bagstock, taken up by Miss Tox, set all the geese and duck decoys vociferously vocal. Thrillingly from the sky came the clamour of wild geese replying.

"Don't move an eyelid," whispered Maddaleen to Lanier. "Don't let them see your face; keep your head down; I'll warn you in time."

Louder and more boisterously called Major Bagstock and his feathered hirelings; louder, nearer came the metallic clangour of the wild geese.

"About thirty—passing over behind us—fairly low," whispered Dirck. And, to Major Bagstock: "Call—you treacherous son-of-a-gun! Call! Gloop-uck! Gloop-uck! Gloop! Gloop! Gloop-uck!—by Jingo! they're turning. We've turned them, Sis! They're coming. Look out, now——"

Overhead came the wild geese again, answering the

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wildly excited invitation of their tethered comrades below to alight and join the alluring banquet.

Suddenly in front of the blind the air was filled with great grey and black and white creatures balanced on wide pinions, gliding down to the water level.

Lanier's heart was thumping; the girl touched his arm.

"Now," she whispered.

He stood up; then came a thunderous noise of spray and wings; all space before him was a bewildering mass of rapid motion. He fired at a goose, saw it pitch over, strike the waves, flap furiously. He fired at it again, and saw the long neck fall flat on the water. Four other geese fell dead, clean shot, and floated with heads under.

"Good work!" cried the girl, extending her cold, wet hand to Lanier.

"Probably a fluke," he said, "but thanks for congratulations——"

"Don't move! Canvas!" came Dirck's warning. "Take them as they pass, Lanier; they don't usually decoy to a point——"

"Quick! Here they are!" breathed Maddaleen. "Now."

Lanier fired at some grey-white streaks that glimmered for a second in his line of vision; he did not even hear the other guns, so excited was he.

"By jingo!" cried Dirck, "you got one, Lanier."

"Good heavens! Did I?"

"I missed clean with my left," said the girl. "You got one with each barrel, Dirck." She turned a bewilderingly brilliant smile on Lanier; her cap was off, her brown hair bowing on her forehead.

"One each for us, John. Are you going to overtake, then beat me at my own game so soon?"

"I just want to overtake you—as Atalanta was overtaken."

"Oh—— You mean catch me?"

"I do."

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The girl broke her gun; the spent cartridges flew out; she reloaded, a faint smile curving her lips.

"Have you provided yourself with a few golden apples?" she inquired, closing her gun with a soft click and looking up at him. "There were three golden apples, you remember, which were the undoing of that speedy but grasping wench."

"I have three words——"

"Oh! Don't fling them too soon. All girls are not as easily swerved as that empty-headed jade, Atalanta."

He said with a forced smile: "Then you don't care for golden apples . . . or words—to the same effect? And you don't think I could overtake you?"

She examined the Damascus pattern on her gun-barrels, tracing the convolutions with slowly moving finger.

"I don't know," she said. "No race is over till it's won——"

"Get down!" whispered Dirck fiercely as the decoys broke out into a clamour.

But it was only an eagle, sailing up magnificently into the wind, sheering almost into their very faces in fierce menace to the frantic waterfowl below.

"Get out!" shouted Dirck, springing up and flourishing his gun.

The great bird swept past, its yellow eyes glittered almost level with Lanier's. For an instant it hung there on the air, its snow-white head and tail and brownish-bronze body shining gloriously; then the splendid bird rose and slanged away to the westward; and the tumult of the terrified decoys abated.

"Mallard! Coming fast! Ready!" came Dirck's excited warning.

"John, now!" whispered the girl as the mallard came in grandly, bowed their wings, dropped, only to spring into the air again as the ambush was revealed, and fall as though lightning struck in the dry crack of the guns.

And now the wild duck came driving by in an almost

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unbroken flight, squad after squad, bunch following bunch, wedges of teal, a pair of widgeon, a rushing drive of blue-bills, a solitary oyster-duck, ignored by sister and brother, but neatly bowled over by Lanier who, at first, did not understand their gaiety at his expense.

"Don't mind our beastly manners," said the girl; "it was a good shot, John."

"So that's a fish-duck, is it?" he said grimly. "Well, I ought to be compelled to eat him——"

"Two black duck—in!" whispered Dirck.

"One with each barrel, please," said the girl close to his ear with a taunting smile.

"It would surprise you, I suppose."

"You always are surprising, John Lanier."

"If I do it—how about those three golden words I'm keeping in reserve?"

"I don't know——"

"May I try them—if I get those two duck?"

"I can't advise you in—in such matters. Ask the gods."

"Is anybody going to put up those marsh-duck and kill them?" demanded the boy impatiently. "They're suspicious already and they're swimming out."

Lanier looked at Maddaleen, and saw her turn slightly pink.

"I offer them to Mrs. Aphrodite," he said. He rose; the wily black duck rose too, clattering noisily. With a deliberation that fascinated the girl he killed one with each barrel—killed them clean—the last one towering, a long shot at extreme range limit.

"Yonder," he said calmly, "float my votive offerings to Venus." The girl smiled mechanically; then, as their eyes met, she blushed and got to her feet as though startled by her own sudden confusion.

"Somebody had better get those votive offerings of yours," she remarked, "or they'll sweep past our point——"

Already she was climbing over the blind when Lanier

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detained her, saying he'd wade out and get them for himself.

"I'll go," she insisted with a malicious sweetness in smile and voice; "you'd probably lose them both now—and you can't expect to do much with any goddess if you don't back up your prayers with something substantial."

She vaulted over the blind into the water and, wading out across the tossing shallows, skilfully headed the two duck which the wind already had driven beyond their point. He saw her reach down and seize one, wade out still farther, seize the other, turn, lift them both in triumph above her head.

"Now, John Lanier!" came her clear call across the water, "pray your prettiest and pray fast and hard; because your giddy goddess may not care for your wild duck dinner after all."

Lanier laughed. But he was now looking at a sail which suddenly had glimmered distantly a mile or so beyond her to the north-west.

"What's that, Dirck? A fisherman?" he inquired.

"Probably," said the boy. "I hope he has no intention of fishing in our vicinity. He'll queer our shooting."

Maddaleen came wading up to the blind, swinging her two black ducks and looking at Lanier with a saucy air.

"Here," she said, "you can give them to your fancy friend from Olympus if you want to; but I've heard gossip about that woman."

"About my friend, Mrs. Aphrodite?"

"They say she's no better than she should be," returned Maddaleen, her nose in the air.

Lanier helped her in over the blind. She stood swinging the two ducks by their legs, the indefinable smile edging her lovely mouth. Then she extended her arm towards him.

"Many thanks," he said, relieving her of the two heavy ducks. "I'm sure my business with Madame Venus

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is going to be successful if you'll continue to help me a little——"

"She's a notorious character. They're a shady family—she and that brat of hers. They're not on *my* calling list, John Lanier."

"Be polite to her," he urged. "It might mean a lot to me——"

"That confounded fisherman *is* headed this way," called out Dirck. "He has no business off Crescent and he knows it. Probably it's one of those Bonnet Bay poachers. *I'll* send him about his own affairs if he anchors in our waters."

After a few moments: "It's Ray Wirt's boat," said Maddaleen uneasily. "What is he doing off Crescent?"

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The boat was standing in for Crescent, that seemed plain enough. Three men were aboard; but Dirck had forgotten his ducking glasses, and nobody could make them out for a while.

"That's Ray Wirt at the tiller," said Dirck finally.

"That's the Vice-President of the Forty Club forward," added Lanier.

"Who?" asked Maddaleen, startled.

"Sam Potter. I don't seem to recognize the slim man with the red handkerchief tied round his head. Wait——" He turned to Dirck: "Drop out of sight," he said; "that's Helen Wyvern."

The boy reddened darkly and seated himself low in the blind.

"What do they want over here?" he muttered, giving his sister a distressed and shame-faced glance.

Lanier, watching the approaching boat, touched Maddaleen and motioned her to be seated. Then he slipped two cartridges into his gun, walked out into the reed-lined alley, and sauntered down to the water's edge.

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"Boat ahoy!" he called across the water. "On board the boat, there! What do you want?"

"We want to land," bawled Potter. "Is that you, John?"

"Keep off! Keep outside our decoys!" returned Lanier calmly. "Can't you see you're spoiling the shooting?"

"We want a word with your girl——"

Lanier levelled his gun. "Anchor where you are, Sam," he said coldly. "You there at the tiller—down with your sail, now. Hold it!"

"Hey!" cried Potter, turning to Wirt. "You better do what he says."

Wirt stepped hastily overboard and held the boat, sail flapping.

"Say," he yelled, "you-all act right smart with your shot-gun. Who do you reckon you are?"

Lanier ignored him. "What do you want, Sam?" he demanded.

"I want to talk private to your girl."

"No, you talk right out loud to *me*, Sam."

"All right, then. You know what your girl's brother did to Barney?"

"What?"

"Frisked his office safe for a hundred thousand."

"Is that so?"

"Yaas, that's so," retorted Mr. Potter. "And half of it was Helen's."

Lanier looked at Helen Wyvern and she gazed back coolly, the scarlet handkerchief fluttering on her temples.

"What are you doing over here, Helen?" he asked pleasantly.

Helen Wyvern replied in a placid voice: "I thought perhaps that your friend, Miss Loveless, might wish to make good what her brother stole—rather than have any trouble——"

"Trouble?"

"Yes—prosecution—publicity——"

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"You mean that you think Miss Loveless might submit to blackmail rather than have her brother arrested for theft?"

"Hold on, John!" shouted Potter; "it isn't blackmail to try to recover stolen property! Don't start anything like that——"

"Wait! Miss Loveless does not believe that her brother stole a penny from Barney Welper."

Helen laughed: "Well, John, we have a dictagraph record of his own confession. Would Miss Loveless care to have us present that to a jury?"

"You say you have such a record."

"We've got it, John," she said, smiling.

"It's for sale," added Potter; "your girl had better buy it in."

After a silence: "How much?" asked Lanier drily.

"Well—a trifle for our trouble, and the interest and expenses—well, say a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Too much."

"What! Your girl's rich. What are you stalling for? Isn't it worth that to keep her brother out of State's prison?"

"Will you take ten thousand? No? Twenty? Thirty? Fifty?"

"No; nor sixty, seventy, ninety-nine," shouted Potter. "We've got the goods; she can buy them cheap if she wants them, or she can carry a little basket of cake in a clean napkin once a week to her brother for the next ten years."

Lanier looked at Helen Wyvern. "I suppose Eugene put you up to this."

"A social error, old dear," retorted the girl. "I'm off Eugene. No; it's a better man who backs me in this little flyer."

"Donnie?"

"None of your business! Concern yourself with your own girl. And say, John, I fancy you've a handful, too."

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Potter, squirming uncomfortably on the covered deck forward, hitched his bulk around to let his legs dangle in the cockpit.

"Well, John," he demanded, "what's the answer?"

"That's a rotten thing to do to my girl. I understood I was square with you—all except Eugene Renton."

"You're square with me as far as I'm concerned. I don't care whether you shoot it out with Eugene. Neither does Helen, I guess."

"Then why do that to *me*?"

"We're doing it to your girl, not you."

"She's mine, I tell you."

"Then make her behave, and she won't get into trouble—I'd hate to tell you what we think of your girl."

"Go on."

"No, I don't want to hurt your feelings, John——"

"Go on, I tell you."

"Oh, very well. You want it straight? Here it is then: whoever catches a gay-cat in the pantry has a right to make her sing. That's what we're going to do, make her sing. Loud!"

"What tune, Sam?"

"I told you; one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. Now what have you got to say, John?"

Lanier made no reply, and after a silence: "What is your answer, John?" asked Helen Wyvern.

"I'll tell you what my answer is: I want a week to think it over."

"No; tell us now."

"I want three or four days anyway, Helen——"

"No; Sam is here for an answer. Yes or no; pay your debts or we call in the dicks and fight it out before a jury."

"Come, John," said Potter, "you deserve all that's coming to you, and you know it—staking your gay-cat to a free razzle in Barney's private quarters. By rights we ought to have bumped you and your girl. You're

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getting off very slick, my son. Come on; grin and pay up——”

“You disciplined me by crowding me out of the *Red Moon*,” insisted Lanier.

“Yes, but all the while you knew that rat of a brother of your girl was alive, and you knew he had touched Barney for his roll, and you never said a word. Come on, now, John, we want your answer.”

“You’ve got to have it *now*?”

“Right now, just like that!”

“Very well, Sam. I’ll give my answer to *you*. Get overboard, wade in, and I’ll meet you halfway.”

“And you with that gun,” rejoined Potter derisively.

Lanier set the gun inside the blind, turned, waded out towards the boat.

At that, Potter climbed over the side and began the wallowing progress towards Lanier. They met halfway. Neither offered to shake hands. Lanier said in a very low voice :

“Sam, I want a week to think it over before I let loose a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars.”

Mr. Potter shook his head.

“Yes, and you’re going to give me a week to make up my mind, Sam,” added Lanier calmly.

“Like nothing I will. Where do you get that stuff, John?”

“Shall I tell you?”

“Sure.”

“Well, then,” said Lanier, lowering his voice, “I got that stuff where you and Barney and Dan buried it in the sand on False Cape. Now do I get my week?”

Mr. Potter’s large visage lost all its sanguinary colour.

“Or,” continued Lanier, “must I speak to Helen about the matter——”

“Hush, for Heaven’s sake,” whispered Potter in a strangled voice.

“All right. But you and Barney can call off that gay-cat of Renton’s over there. You know it’s a lie; the boy

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has not stolen that money. It's a frame-up, a hold-up, and you know it."

Potter's little pale eyes in his fat and ghastly face glittered pure murder.

"Now you see what comes of crowding a friend," said Lanier. "You don't like to be crowded, do you, Sam? But if you're not very, very careful, I'll not only crowd you, but I'll step on you."

"All right," said Potter in a ghost of a voice. "I'm the Patsy. Let's play the cards as they lie——"

"No."

"Hey?"

"No; I draw another ace first. I fill, Sam; and now, my one best bet is that you'll get that dictagraph record, bring it to me."

"Good heavens! I can't——"

"You've got to."

"John——"

"Go back and tell them that you've given me a week to decide. And you get that record to me within the week or Eugene and Helen and the rest will learn how the President and the Vice-President of the Forty Club double-crossed the rest."

Potter's large, flabby face seemed to have actually wilted to a smaller size.

Without a word he turned, ploughed his way back through the water, climbed into the boat with an effort.

"Well?" demanded Helen.

"He gets a week to think it over," muttered Potter.

"What! You let him stall you——"

"He's got good reasons——"

"He bluffed you, Sam! And you let him——"

"Never mind!" roared Mr. Potter, losing self-command. "Barney's running this business and I'm his deputy. If you don't like what I done, make your holler to Barney." And to Ray Wirt: "Get aboard and go back. I got business ashore and I can't stay here monkeying——"

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"Sam," said Helen Wyvern, with a sinister smile on her pretty face, "John Lanier has got something on you and he's scared you off."

"And that's a lie, whether you're a lady or not," retorted Mr. Potter. "No; go and holler your head off to Gene Renton or that new guy of yours——"

"Donald Mayne," nodded the girl, all the evil in her terribly transfiguring her face. "It's *his* bread you're taking out of his mouth, is it? And, Sam, you can't do that to any man I stand for——"

"Shut up or I'll throw you overboard," growled Mr. Potter. "I've heard all I care to hear from any skirt. You shut your lip-stick box or I'll put you out for keeps, my fancy Moll!"

He turned and encountered Ray Wirt's leering visage: "What is it to *you*?" he demanded coldly. "Why, you blamed Carolina cracker, I'll bust your bean if you grin at me. Get *that*!"

The voyage to Tiger Island proceeded in silence.