

CHAPTER XI

THE ADVENTURE OF THE LITTLE DEATH

I

WHEN Ray Wirt's sail-boat, with Sam Potter and Helen Wyvern aboard, tied up below the diving-dock on Tiger Island, there seemed to be an excited crowd above clustered around the Portuguese diver who had just been hauled up.

Harry Senix looked over the edge of the dock, his nervous, dead-white features working.

"Sam," he called down, "we've struck the gold vein in the *Red Moon!* That diving wop, Lorenzo, has just fetched up what looks like a gold spittoon crammed full of big, thick doubloons. Eugene's counting 'em."

"That's great," shouted Potter, forcing surprise and delight into his voice. "That's the dope, Harry." And, to Helen, turning with heavy jocularly: "Say, Nellie, that's better than shaking down John's girl. You're going to get yours easier than that, and faster and more of it. How about it, hey?"

Helen gave Potter a searching look: "It's all right," she said; "and I hope you are, too, Sam."

"What's that!" he demanded.

But Helen was climbing up the diving dock, where the throng pressing around Eugene Renton sullenly parted for her. She made her way among them politely, and looked down at the heap of heavily minted gold coins which Eugene Renton, seated cross-legged on the plank-ing, was digging out of a huge, solid gold ewer in double hands full.

Just beyond him the diver and his aids were busy

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with preparations; the diver was going down again—had already set his leaden feet on the ladder.

Helen turned and looked at the dripping and monstrous shape; at the connecting tubes and lines, at the dank, unquiet water into which he was already descending. Then she glanced at Eugene's colourless, determined visage, at his pallid fingers arranging the gold pieces in piles of tens; at the double ring of flushed faces, fiercely intent upon the placing of every coin.

There were men there who would have done murder for less than one of those piles of thick, gold coins. The girl's calm glance moved from face to face as she realized this. Sam Potter, with obvious intent to placate her, took her familiarly by the arm.

"That's the dope, Nellie, ain't it?" he said with false jocularity. "Add a little more of that stuff to the silver we got in pieces-of-eight, and we'll pay for our outlay, and everything else will be velvet. How about it, my beauty, eh?"

The girl's expression remained unresponsive; her gaze followed Renton's deft, swiftly moving fingers. She was preoccupied, not with Renton's activities, but with a gradual, subtle invasion of that intuition which in women is the awakening of a sixth sense.

Something was wrong; she felt it. Instinct, vaguely stirring, began to warn her of it. Sam Potter's voice and manner, and now Potter's obvious attempt at reconciliation after his brutality to her, were disturbing her profoundly. She lifted her pretty head and looked round for Donald Mayne. He was not there. Neither did she see Barney Welper. But his valet pal was there.

Replying to her inquiry, Dan Supple said that Mayne had sailed for Bonnet House with Bert Mewling, to get a supply of fireworks.

"Sure," cried Potter with feigned heartiness, "we got to celebrate the opening of this gold vein in the *Red Moon!* Hey, Nellie, old sport?"

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Renton placed a pile of ten doubloons on the plank-ing and looked up palely at Helen for the first time.

The girl nodded and smiled. "Well," she said; "the situation looks better, Eugene, doesn't it?"

"Do you think so?" he asked in a colourless voice.

"Why, of course I do; don't you?"

Renton gazed at her for a moment with something terrible brooding in his light grey eyes; then he resumed his counting without an answer.

Sam Potter nudged the girl and whispered: "Gene's dead sore on you and Donnie. He's acting mean, and he's shot full of dope. You better tell your young man to sleep with both his guns on."

"He needn't; I can sleep with mine on," she said; and walked away towards the Gay-cat.

Potter, uneasy, followed her as far as the Gay-cat; but Mrs. Wyvern kept on towards the bunk-house, and Potter turned aside and went into the tavern. Nobody seemed to be in the tap-room, which stank of gin. He went on upstairs to his bedroom. Listening, he heard something stir in Welper's bedroom—the flutter of paper and scrape of a pen—and he knocked gently on the board partition.

"Barney," he called in a modulated voice.

"Come on in, Sam."

Potter went in. Welper was writing, but he looked up, shoved aside his papers, and sat tapping his front teeth with the pen-holder.

"How are things, Barney?" inquired Potter.

"Bert Mewling brought in a letter from Bonnet Bay after you left this morning," replied Welper. "It's in code from the Rio bunch. I been de-coding it out of my pocket Bible. They write that Government agents are watching them, and that, if things get any hotter, they're going to scatter. That tight-wad, Gene Renton, has been getting nervous for the last two months. He's a pretty good barometer. I wonder—m—m—whether

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he's been writing to the Rio crowd and stirring them up. You think it likely, Sam?"

"All misers have got yellow guts," remarked Potter, seating himself. "Renton is nervous because Helen is bedevilling him."

"Also, he's made his pile," nodded Welper; "and, as you say, Sam, all rich guys are scary. I think he meant to beat it. So I told Lorenzo to let 'em see a little gold for their money."

"Oh, that's why?" nodded Potter.

"M—m—yes. . . . I want Renton where I can see him for a while."

Potter shrugged up his fat back: "He won't skip. He's too sore on Donnie. He ain't a-going to leave his girl with Donald Mayne, Barney. But that isn't what I came in to talk about. What do we care about that South American bunch—or about Gene's troubles with Helen? Not a damn." He leaned forward bulkily in his chair.

"Barney," he said, "something's gone wrong. I'm in punk."

"What?"

"Dead punk," repeated Potter solemnly. "Let me tell you. You know that Helen and I went over this morning in Ray Wirt's boat to stick up John's girl and shake her down for a hundred and twenty-five on account of her rat of a brother?"

"Yes, I know. Did you—ah—prosper, Sam?"

"It was Helen's graft. She wanted the jack for Donnie. It wasn't nothing to me——"

"I know. M—m, did Providence aid Helen in her, m—n., enterprise?"

"Listen. We sailed for Red Moon Island, but those Place-of-Swans crackers on the coffer-dam where dredging is going on jumped into a power boat and ordered us off. They had guns, and we had to sheer off. Then Ray Wirt he heard shootin' near Crescent, and sure enough when we sailed across, John Lanier said how-de-

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do to me with a shot-gun in one hand—the dirty squealer.”

There was a silence.

“I wish Renton had got him,” mused Welper.

“I’m sorry, too. Well, I tried to bluff him out before everybody. It didn’t work.

“Then he said he’d like to talk to me private; so we waded out and met half-way between shore and boat. And *what* in hell do you think that squealer handed me, Barney?”

“What?”

“He said he wanted a week to think it over before letting go his girl’s hush-jack. I wouldn’t listen, naturally——”

“I should think you wouldn’t!” protested Welper, with virtuous indignation.

“But I *did* listen. I *had* to.”

“I’m astonished, Sam——”

“Well, don’t be. Here’s the way it went: I says, ‘Where do you get that stuff, John?’ And he comes back with, *I got that stuff where you and Barney and Dan buried it in the sand on False Cape!*”

Welper’s face became greyish; he started to get out of his chair, dropped back, limp. But the sly eyes, partly veiled under thick, curling lashes, peered steadily at Potter.

“What do you think of that?” inquired Mr. Potter.

“I near fell dead when he come back at me with that.”

Welper made no reply.

“What was I to say,” insisted Potter—“before Helen and that dirty cracker, Ray Wirt?”

“What *did* you say, Sam?” inquired Mr. Welper softly.

“I said what I *had* to say. He had me. I was scared stiff he’d talk out loud before Helen and that cracker. He had me cold. He knew it. He laid down the law to me; he said he’d take a week to consider; and in the meantime, I’m to get that dictagraph record from you

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in which her rat brother convicts himself. And that's what I got by going over and trying to help Helen stick up John Lanier and his gay-cat. Say, it's a sweet situation, ain't it, Barney?"

Welper looked out of the window.

"Did Helen hear?" he asked.

"No; but John Lanier will see to it that she hears if he doesn't get that document. What's the answer, Barney?"

After a long interval of silence Welper's sly eyes again sought Mr. Potter's.

"I guess he gets the record, Sam."

"I guess he does."

"M—m, yes—certainly. There seems to be nothing else to do in that direction. No, nothing to hope for, Sam. M—m, the Lord Almighty did not bless our undertaking. No; Providence, Sam, does not seem disposed to prosper our desires involving the—ah—matter in question. No bounteous return, no plenteous harvest promises to benefit us with rich reward for our labours. No."

"He's a good man to bump," mused Potter. "John Lanier. Yes, I guess so."

"M—m, yes. I'm sorry—very sorry—that we ever let him go. I wonder if Renton could go over some—ah—some night——"

"If he could shoot before John talked—yes. That's what's worrying me, Barney—the fear of John's talking. What would that gang on Tiger Island do to you and me and Dan and that wop diver if they found we'd double-crossed them?"

They sat there very still in the grey light, looking at each other.

"Who spilled the beans?" inquired Welper very gently.

"Search me; the diver? What for? Dan? No. You didn't; I didn't. There's no one else. Somebody saw us. That's the answer."

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"M—m, I presume so. Yes, Sam, it was God's will that some blamed, sneaking, weaselly son of a yellow slut spied on us. The ways of the Almighty are beyond human understanding, Sam. We must bow our heads meekly to the inscrutable will. Yes, Sam—to the m—m, the mysterious and occult behests of Providence. If I thought that Eugene could get our friend John Lanier before he had a chance to talk—but no. Let us accept the decree of Heaven with resignation, Sam. Did you go over to False Cape?"

"How the hell was I to go to False Cape with Helen and Ray Wirt in the boat?"

"I suppose what we buried is gone," concluded Welper calmly. Under his long, velvety lashes his little hazel eyes glittered. He said softly: "I don't doubt that John took it. He knew he was safe. We can't holler. He and his gay-cat have done us in, Barney."

After a rigid silence Welper relaxed in his chair with a sigh, slowly veiling his murderous eyes.

"I guess John had better have that record," he said. "Of course, we'll have to bump him. His girl, too. And the brother. M—m, yes; all in God's good time, Sam. Or some of the Forty Club are going to bump us."

"I get you," nodded Mr. Potter. "But say, what about that spittoon full of gold that Lorenzo fished up?"

"That," said Welper, "was premature—a ghastly mistake, Sam. I thought, before we added to our little dividend on False Cape, that we ought to encourage the others—just enough—for fear of suspicions. She's a smart slut—that Wyvern woman. She's acted just a little strange lately—and I'm always afraid of a woman like that—too keen, too clever, too efficient to monkey with very much. So I told Lorenzo to bring up just enough gold to keep 'em quiet. I'm sorry—I don't know whether we could let her in with safety now——"

"We haven't anything to offer her; John's got it," said Potter with calm ferocity. "Besides, Nellie would

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want Donald Mayne in on it. She's crazy about him—and who can guess what he'd do if she let him in?"

Welper thought for a while.

"Well?" demanded Potter anxiously.

"It's hard to keep a clear brain and think straight," explained Mr. Welper, "when your mind's full of murder, Sam. I pray that a merciful Providence gives me my chance at John Lanier before I die—and another crack at that girl of his. I won't ask for too much of the Almighty. I don't ask for the kid brot!er; I'll be grateful for a chance at those two—or just John—if the Lord lets me fix him the—m—m—the way I hope to fix him——"

The grey rage in his visage slightly startled Potter.

"Well, Barney," he said, "quit dreaming pleasant dreams and come back to earth. What are we going to do? John Lanier gets our pile and we get the gate. He gets a record too, or he spills on us. If he spills, the bunch on Tiger will kill us, sure."

"Yes; we shall be cut off and utterly destroyed," murmured Mr. Welper.

"Well, what are we to do? We can't get at John now. Helen is sore. She wants the hush-jack for Donnie. You know how a moll is when she's stuck on a guy? Fierce. She's leery, too. She'll go and talk to Donnie. You may work it out. They may go talk to that wop diver. If they ever get it into their beans that we held out on them—say!—*if* they ever get that on their minds——"

"Could you take a boat and go over with the letter to John—and *get him*—in some manner——"

"Forget it! You know John Lanier. Say, do you think he'd ever give me a chance?"

"M—m, no. And yet, Sam, if you and I are to remain on Tiger Island, John Lanier can't go on living. Do you realize that?"

"If he gets that record he'll play square, I think."

"Why do you think so, Sam? He doubled me for

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his gay-cat, didn't he? He let her frisk me, didn't he?"

"I'm not so sure," said Mr. Potter. "I guess he really did warn her not to try anything in the club. And outside—well, it was her money—which was the same as his—and who wouldn't make a play for it within the rules of the Forty Club? You would; I would; and so would Tom, Dick and Harry, and the Messrs. Doe and Roe! I wasn't for driving him out. It was that tightwad, Renton. I wasn't for crowding him because his fool of a girl broke a club rule. That was you, Barney—and Eugene. Now you see what comes of it. Why wasn't you satisfied with what you did to the kid? Why must you chase that gay-cat with guns and strychnine when you seen how John was acting—same's you and me would act in them same circumstances. You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you gummed us up. I think you're getting old, Barney, and your mind ain't what it once was."

As Welper gazed at him, his hand, resting on the arm of the chair, trembled very slightly.

"That," he said, "is the worst thing anyone ever handed me, Sam."

"I can't help it. You've gummed this. I'm beginning to think it's almost too late for us to do anything except beat it."

"Leave Tiger? Leave the *Red Moon*?"

"You got out a couple of millions in gold, and you let a guy swipe it. You and I are walking around on this island like we had ropes around our necks and was doin' a clog on the drop-trap. If John Lanier spills on us we're the same as bumped. Where does that get us? I think we ought to beat it."

Welper considered.

"We could get Lorenzo to fetch up all the gold he could lay his hands on first, then beat it. . . . Just you and I, Sam!"

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"Double-cross Dan?"

"I'm afraid so. God knows it would hurt me more than it would him," added Welper piously. "I'm fond of Dan——"

"Leave the diver, too?"

"What's a Portuguese wop?" inquired Welper softly. "I can hire a cracker to cut his life-line for a hundred-dollar bill. Yes, for a ten spot."

"You mean that you and me ough' to take a boat some night and beat it for Bonnet Bay?"

"And then to Norfolk, Sam. And then to Europe—Providence assisting."

"My God, if they caught us—Gene, or Dan, or Donnie, or that fly girl of his! No. . . . *No!* Get that record to John Lanier. We'll take a chance that he won't spill. And we'll stay and play the game—and try to start another kitty. That's all there is to do——"

There came a knock at the door. Welper took a pistol from under his left armpit, placed it in his coat side pocket, and pleasantly said: "Come in!"

2

Renton entered in his nervous, restless manner. His countenance was pale and wet with sweat.

"Look here," he said, "the game's up on Tiger! The diver just came up, and he says there's no more gold and only some bars of silver left in the *Red Moon*. And that isn't all I've got to tell you. Do you know what they're dredging up at Place-of-Swans out of that cofferdam? They're shovelling up tons of gold figures, gods and things—birds, snakes, animals. One of their rafts got adrift last night, and Bert Mewling picked it up and towed it in. There was a half-ton of dry silt on it, and the sand was full of gold ornaments. Here's one!"

He pulled from his pocket a moan-bird carved out of

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virgin gold, and set it upright upon the table where Welper had been writing.

"Now," he said in his strident, menacing voice, "what about it, Barney? It looks like Helen was right when she said that the real *Red Moon* had nothing except gold in her, and that we had found some other sunken ship and not the one we're after."

Welper gazed blankly at the golden bird of ill-omen. Its alarming beak was open as though shrieking; its fierce, bold eyes seemed to glare back at him. In its talons it clutched what seemed to be a mass of blind snakes—or human entrails, perhaps. In the copy of the Maya parchment which he had stolen from Dirck Loveless such a creature was figured.

Renton said: "That's the kind of gold that John Lanier is digging out of his cofferdam across the water yonder. Tons of gold like this. And all we get is some silver and one little pot of gold coins. While that squealer and his gay-cat, and the rat you wouldn't let me bump——"

"That will do for the present, Gene!" interrupted Mr. Welper in a ghost of a voice.

"What," retorted Renton violently, "you're going to stand for it?"

"I don't know. I haven't considered it. M—m, this is a—ah—a painful surprise, Eugene. I do not propose to discuss it at the top of my voice with you——"

"Everybody knows it. Bert Mewling towed in the raft and everybody saw it, and watched us screen the silt. Dan's filled two pockets full of gold gods and animals. The men in the sawmill heard of it, and have come down to the dock to see what we got. Everyone's watching Place-of-Swans through their sea-glasses; Helen is sitting at the telescope; the Bonnet Bay bunch are talking ugly——"

"How ugly?" demanded Sam Potter.

"They say it's our ship, no matter where she lies.

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They're talking about going over and taking their share. And the lumber crowd, too, talk crazy stuff——"

"What's so crazy about going over and cleaning out that Place-of-Swans bunch?" interrupted Potter. His glance flickered towards Welper, returned to the damp, pale visage of Renton. "If it's our ship, it's ours! We know the *Red Moon* sank in our waters off Tiger. She belongs to us wherever she drifted afterwards——"

"Do you mean gun-play?" asked Renton in an altered voice. "Besides, that isn't the law."

After a silence: "What's law to do with a God-forsaken place like this?" said Mr. Potter slowly. "We got enough men to clean 'em up. We got the Bonnet Bay bunch, and the lumberjacks——"

"Are you crazy?" demanded Renton. "Are you trying to tell me we can go over there, bump half-a-dozen people, and get away with it?"

"Who's to hear our guns? And if airy a soul comes into this waste end of the world he'll think it's gunners shooting duck."

Renton stared at Mr. Potter in unconcealed alarm.

"Are you trying to tell me we can stick up those Place-of-Swans people, shoot a few, and get away with a ton or two of raw gold?"

"Are you a quitter?" retorted Mr. Potter.

"I won't cut my own throat!"

"No?"

"Not me! No!"

"I see. You've got yours. You're heeled. You'll quit us."

"I'm through, anyway!" said Renton harshly.

"No, you're not! You're not through with your girl, nor with Donald Mayne," said Welper softly. "You'll never quit and leave them together, Gene. . . . Besides, you're wrong about a get-away. I've fixed that."

Renton's bony, symmetrical visage regained the sudden stain of colour.

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"How have you fixed it?" he asked.

"There's a tramp steamer named the *Mandrill* cruising off False Cape. . . . Hull down. . . . Three red rockets and two green ones bring her in. . . . We got to scatter, anyway. It's getting too hot. I heard from Rio to-day."

Potter said: "Leave it to us. We can fix it so it's a baymen's feud between Bonnet Bay and Place-of-Swans. It's just a crackers' fight, see? Let 'em shoot each other. It will be weeks before it's known. . . . And we'll be scattered over the globe from South America to Singapore. And we'll stay put till things are quiet. Do you get us right, Gene?"

Renton glared at him. "No," he said, "not me. I'm through."

"You leave Helen to Donnie?" asked Welper softly.

Suddenly Renton snarled at him, turned and went out swiftly, slamming the flimsy door. Potter rose and looked out of the dirty window.

"There he goes, the dirty white-livered miser," he said over his shoulder to Welper.

"I'm sorry. I hoped he might get John . . . or get bumped."

Potter came back into the room.

"I take your idea, Barney. I get you. We got to beat it, sure. And maybe we can take enough jack with us to help a little. What does Lorenzo really know about the wreck? There's plenty more yellow-ones down there, ain't there?"

Welper surveyed him gloomily. "There's another spittoon-full. That's all, except silver in bars."

"What! No more coin?"

"That's all."

"No jugs and mugs and crosses and gold pots and pans?"

"Only that antique cuspidor—or whatever it is. No, Sam; we're through down there."

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"Then that ship ain't the *Red Moon* after all. John Lanier's won?"

"I guess that's right," admitted Mr. Welper. "He's got almost everything. Sam, he's got the *Red Moon*, he's got a rich girl, he's got our jack, and he's got our goat. I——" Mr. Welper lifted sly, pious eyes to the ceiling, "poor as I am, Sam, God knows I've always tried to act square to that man in the Forty Club; but if it be the will of the Almighty, he's as good as bumped right now. And I know how to do it."

"How?"

"You go down to the dock and pay everybody double wages. And you tell 'em it's a holiday. You tell 'em there's free booze at The Gay-cat, and we're going to celebrate and have piano music and a fiddle. Tell the lumber-jacks and the Bonnet Bay bunch to fetch their girls over in Bert's launch."

"Barney!"

"Yes, Sam?"

"Do you realize what you're a-doin' of?"

"I guesso. I'm starting a brand-new hell. We'll have the old one looking like Brooklyn on a Sunday morning in July."

After a silence: "I get you," nodded Mr. Potter. "Is Dan Supple in on this?"

"Yes. He's got to help us fetch and carry, and run us over to False Cape. Tell him to sodger his drinks."

"Lorenzo? Do we take him, too?"

Mr. Welper shook his grey head and his sly eyes travelled from the writing-table to the sheet-iron stove.

"I'm going to burn my papers and yours, Sam. We travel light—except for what we pick up—at Place-of-Swans. . . . Tell Dan we'll want the new launch to-night. Tell him to load her as we agreed—one bundle of red rockets and one of green ones; our suit-cases, empty; two dozen empty canvas sacks; three rifles; a box of dynamite, fuses, battery, and wire."

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He got up, swept together an armful of papers from the table, including the blotter, carried them to the big sheet-iron stove. Potter lifted the lid, Welper dumped in the papers.

"Got yours, Sam. And don't forget the blotter," said Welper cheerfully.

He was singing in a low voice when Potter returned with a suit-case full of letters. He lighted a match and dropped it into the stove; Potter dumped in his letters and replaced the lid.

"You going to send John that record he wants?" asked the latter.

"Like hell I am," replied Mr. Welper softly.

The stove, which had leaked smoke a little, now began to roar. Welper carried to it an armful of underclothing and toilet articles and dumped them in, singing contentedly under his breath. The celluloid comb and brushes burnt fiercely as he clapped the lid on.

"Burn everything except what you got on," said Mr. Welper. "Here's some scissors; cut off the buttons and buckles on your clothes. We can throw them into the bay when we go out."

Mr. Potter went to his room and returned with all his extra clothing. Very patiently he cut off the buttons and buckles and deposited them in a heap on the bed.

"Fix mine, too, Sam," said Welper cheerfully, and he continued the hymn he was singing:

"From wicked men's designs and deeds
My hands and heart refrain,
Nor let me share their evil works
Nor their unrighteous gain!"

Garment by garment Mr. Potter incinerated his wardrobe and Welper's. Everything else went in—every stray scrap excepting their razors. These, when the

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holocaust was finished, they shoved into their pockets along with their pistol ammunition.

"Lightly, lightly, lightly," sang Mr. Welper :

"Tread lightly over trouble,
Tread lightly over gloom,
There's pearls to string of gladness
On this side of the tomb;
Why clasp Woe's hands so tightly?
Why sigh o'er blossoms dead?
Why cling to things unsightly?
Why not seek joy instead?
Lightly, lightly, lightly,
Tread lightly over trouble!"

"You got your guns loaded?" inquired Mr. Potter.

"I thank you, yes. Make a bundle of those cold chisels and the other tools, Sam." He went to the rear window, opened it, looked up at the smoke whirling out of the chimney, took a cautious survey of the woods, then bent his grey head and looked down at the deep water below.

"All right," he said to Potter.

Together they dropped the remaining debris into the rocking depths of the bay—burglars' tools, spare ammunition, buttons, buckles, bottles with corks drawn, scissors, pens, ink-wells—everything that would sink.

In the Gay-cat there now remained no physical traces of these two men's occupancy. Of all their possessions, excepting suit-cases, they retained only what they wore and carried on their persons.

Mr. Welper had become almost cheerful now.

"It's going to be some party, Sam," he said. "When these coyotes get their skins full enough of the joyful juice, oh, boy!—who's going to hold 'em? Wow! They'll start over to clean out that Place-of-Swans bunch. And what pickings! All that gold junk we buried on False Cape!—all that stuff they dug up out of their cofferdam—you and I and Dan the only sober ones—"

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He looked up towards the sky, humbly, slyly: "Out of Thy plenteous bounty, oh Lord, grant us sufficient of Thy good things to reward us for our toil and industry this day."

"A million apiece," added Mr. Potter solemnly, "and we'll live straight ever after."

"Amen," said Mr. Welper, with a furtive glance out of the north window. "Hell!" he continued, "that Wyvern woman is watching our chimney."

"What of it, Barney? It's cold enough for a wood-fire."

"Chuck in some pine sticks," said Mr. Welper. "If Nellie likes to watch smoke we'll give her plenty."

"She's a snake," remarked Mr. Potter. He dumped an armful of fat pine sticks into the stove.

"Go on down to the dock and tell 'em about the party," said Mr. Welper. "And I'm going to dope Nellie's high-ones if she starts acting up. Look at her nosing us down there by the bunk-house. . . . That's Donald Mayne with her, isn't it, Sam?"

"Yes. Say, Barney, I'll be happier when I see that steamer send a boat when we send up our rockets."

"Don't worry," said Welper; "Dan's got a sail-boat on the ocean side—if worse comes to worst. Say, you got to beat the box and start things downstairs good, Sam. Don't forget we sodjer our booze, either. Now, you better go down to the dock——"

He went to the window and looked across at the bunk-house.

"I'm wondering," he said gently, "if that Wyvern girl is leery. You know, Sam, I never yet was perfectly certain what was buzzing in her bean."

Helen Wyvern could see Mr. Welper at the window. She looked at him; she also looked at the smoke which

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now had changed character and was rolling black and thick from the chimney of The Gay-cat.

A brisk, chill wind was blowing from the west; there was a sound from the pine forest as though a rapid river was rushing through its viewless depths; squadrons of big white clouds moved across the blue sky; sunshine and shadow alternated swiftly; and waves splashed high on the dock.

Mrs. Wyvern turned to Donald Mayne, who was seated on the bunk-house doorstep, cleaning a pistol.

"Where did you go this morning, Don?" she inquired.

"To Bonnet Bay," he said carelessly.

"Oh, to Bonnet House?"

"No, to Everly's."

"To Everly's," she repeated, surprised, "what for?"

"I telephoned the desk clerk at The Marquis of Granby to reserve a room for me to-morrow. I'm going up to Norfolk for a day or two."

He had told her the truth; not all of it. He had also telephoned to Frank Lane, desk clerk at the Marquis of Granby, that there was a shoal of fish approaching, and that boats should start immediately. Moreover, he had instructed Mr. Lane to relay by radio the information to all fishermen interested. In addition to this, on his way back to Tiger Island, he had signalled Bob Skaw on the cofferdam off The Old Man, and had tossed a letter ashore to him as he passed at full speed in the launch.

The letter, addressed to John Lanier, merely said:

"All set. Orders by radio. Fishing fleet to rendezvous off Place-of-Swans. No. B will command. Good luck and a big catch.

"No. E."

These were the activities which had kept Mr. Mayne busy in the early hours of morning.

Seated on the step in the bunk-house doorway he

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poured a drop or two of Three-in-One on to a rag and gently applied it to the heavy black pistol clutched in his left hand. Mrs. Wyvern's dark and pretty eyes watched him.

She said: "I suppose you know that you've got to be careful when you telephone from Everly's."

"Yes, I know."

"Because," she said, "this is a very sketchy business we're in, Don. - I'm beginning to feel a little uneasy."

"Why?" he inquired, carelessly, not looking up.

"I don't know just why I feel the way I do, Don, but I'm growing rather anxious about this whole business," she repeated.

"What's on your mind?" asked Mayne, amiably.

"Nothing definite. But this Tiger Island enterprise is plainly a flivver. The silver we found won't pay our expenses. The gold they discovered this morning won't, either."

"The pines are worth something," remarked Mayne.

The girl shrugged her shoulders: "I suppose so. But I'm wondering——"

"About what?"

"I don't quite know, Don. We haven't located the *Red Moon*. I don't know what ship we've found, but it's not the *Red Moon*. It worries me. . . . And it looks to me as though John Lanier has found our ship off Place-of-Swans."

"He's found *some* ship; that's clear enough," said Mayne. "Did he say anything about it when you and Sam went over this morning?"

"No. I told you all he said. He stalled. He's got something on Sam. That's another thing that bothers me; what has he got on Sam that scares him stiff?"

"Maybe it's a bluff."

"No. And I tell you it enrages me, Don. There ought to be a hundred thousand dollar shake-down for me in that business. I've got the goods on that rat of a boy. I hold all the cards. I need the money. And when I

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reach for it, Sam suddenly caves and lets me down! Why?"

Mayne was now rubbing his pistol with a bit of chamois. Helen Wyvern, leaning gracefully against a pine, looked down at him with an odd expression on her clever, handsome features.

"I wanted that money—for you," she said, very calmly.

Mayne looked up, scowling: "Cut that out!" he said. "I don't want your money."

"You don't seem to want me, either," she returned, with a smile that seemed a little forced.

"I'm frank, Helen—I don't. I don't want any woman, or any woman's money."

She gazed intently at him where he sat. He now had begun to clean the other pistol.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he inquired politely.

"You've never even given me friendship, Don," she replied in her quiet, agreeable voice.

"Am I not always courteous and amiable to you?"

"I mentioned *friendship*," she repeated.

"I don't make friends easily."

"You haven't ever tried to make one out of me."

He slipped his pistol into the holster under his left armpit.

"Some day," he said, "I'll do you a friendly turn if you'll let me. But I predict you won't."

"Try."

"Perhaps—when the time comes."

"Try," she repeated. "I'd make you a good friend, Don."

He got up. "I don't make friends in the Forty Club. I don't need them; I don't want them. They cramp my style."

"In a way," she said, "you're right. There's no such thing as a square crook—except when the crook happens to be a woman—and in love."

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Mayne laughed: "And when she's out of love?"

"I said *love*, Don. That happens only *once* to us. The rest doesn't mean anything."

"Well, what does 'love' mean?" he inquired, with smiling disbelief.

"Everything."

"Yes, I've read about that——"

"Will you try me?"

"No, I won't."

"Please, Don——"

"Suppose I told you I'm going to get a job and live straight?"

"That's all right," she said coolly.

"Would *you*?"

"I could—with you."

"On wages? Or a salary? I don't think you could or would, Helen."

"Yes."

"No," he said, "you couldn't stand it."

"I'll do anything you tell me to, Don."

He laughed. "All right. Go back to New York and live straight."

"Very well. When?"

"*Now!* There's Ray Wirt's launch ready to go to Bonnet House for booze. Get aboard and beat it."

"Alone?"

"Certainly."

"When will you come?"

"Never, probably."

"Isn't there a single chance, Don?"

"You can kid yourself that there's a chance and you can take it if you like," he said, smiling. "You can go to New York or any other place and live straight for the next three or four years. If you like it let me know. But I tell you now, I never make a friend of a crook. And probably that is why I'm still out of jail."

The girl came slowly towards him, laid one hand lightly on his sleeve, looked wistfully into his eyes.

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"Men don't ever love," she said. "I don't care what you are or what you've done. Your record makes no difference to me. There isn't anything you may have done rotten enough or revolting enough to alter the way I feel towards you. And you can be cruel to me. . . . Or you can go with another girl. . . . I'd suffer. I'd try to kill the other woman, but not you, Don. And I'd never change, no matter what you did to me—if only you'd be with me—call me your girl—love me a little—a very little—once in a while——"

He said: "Take your hand off my sleeve."

Her slim hand dropped to her side.

"Now," he said, "you listen to me. Any friend I ever make must be clean, not dirty. Never mind how dirty I am; I don't want dirty friends; I want clean ones. You're crooked all through; I suppose you weren't born so. I fancy Joe Wyvern started you vamping and swindling and blackmailing. You've done about everything a crooked woman can do short of murder. I don't want to fool with you. Dirty women disgust me. I don't know that you ever could clean up. . . . Perhaps you could. You still wear your scapular. Well, you know how it's done. Blood and tears, I guess. I suppose nothing is impossible. But if you try to clean up because you think there's anything in it for you—any reward, yes, even a cinch on the Hereafter—there's no use trying; the dirt won't come off."

The girl watched him as though fascinated. Her oval face had become pale under the dark mass of curly hair. Unconsciously the smooth, almost immature hands had come together in a slowly tightening clasp.

He said: "I'm telling you two sure things: the first is that you've got no chance with me as far as love is concerned; the second is if you get into Ray's launch *now*, then go to New York and get a job, we might become friends. . . . But you won't do it," he added smilingly.

"Yes," she said, "I will. Hold that boat, Don."

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She turned and ran into the bunk-house.

"Launch ahoy!" shouted Mayne. "Wait a minute, Ray! Mrs. Wyvern wants to go over with you."

Wirt, standing up in his launch, waved one hand in understanding. Mayne, surprised and still incredulous, waited.

In a few moments Helen Wyvern came out with a satchel and a suit-case.

"I haven't enough money, Don," she said, with an unfamiliar softness in her face—an odd sort of hesitation and embarrassment.

He took a sheaf of bills from a portfolio in his breast pocket and laid them in her reluctant hand.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, reddening. "I'll repay you, Don. And—please be careful. There's something wrong here. Be careful of Sam . . . and of Gene. Will you let me write to you?"

"Yes, at the club. Don't write here. I'm leaving very soon."

"I'm glad. Don't forget me. I'll try to—clean—myself."

"Good luck," said Mayne, with a sceptical but good-humoured smile.

Wirt came up and took her luggage. "Goin' to Norfolk?" he asked. "All right. You goin' too, Mr. Mayne? No? Well, you'll have company anyway, Mrs. Wyvern. Mr. Renton, he's a-goin' over to Bonnet's."

"What!" said Mayne sharply, turning to look at the launch where she lay behind the bunk-house. And he saw Eugene Renton seated on the turtle deck.

"Don't quarrel with him. Be careful," murmured Mrs. Wyvern, as they followed Wirt with her luggage.

Mayne said nothing. Renton stood up as they approached the launch. Wirt stowed the luggage.

"Where are you goin'?" said Renton to Mrs. Wyvern, as Mayne handed her over the side.

She made no reply. Mayne said to Renton in a low voice: "Get out of that boat!"

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Renton's right hand jerked towards his pocket, hesitated. Mayne laughed, reached down, and took him by the arm.

"Do you want me to beat you up and pull you ashore by your heels? Get out of that boat!"

Renton slowly obeyed. Every atom of colour had left his face. He walked a few paces across the wharf; stopped.

Mayne scarcely noticed him. "Tell Ray," he said to Helen, "what train you're returning on, so he can meet you at Bonnet House."

She understood him and nodded. Then hastily she turned her head. With started the engine; the launch slid out into the blue water. With his amiable but unbelieving smile, Mayne watched the receding boat for a few moments. The girl, crouched forward, did not look back, but sat with her face clasped between both hands. Her handkerchief was crushed under one of them. Twice he saw her wipe her face with it. Probably spray was coming aboard.

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And now Mayne turned away, and saw Renton still standing there, not looking at him.

"Eugene," he said pleasantly, "don't try to leave this island until I leave. If you do I'll go after you and catch you. And when I catch you, Eugene, I'll punish you."

Renton's visage was damp and ghastly, and his right hand twitched convulsively.

"No," said Mayne, laughing; "don't kid yourself you're a gun-fighter. You're afraid. If I lay dead you'd be afraid to plug me for fear I'd get up and knock your cowardly head off."

And he lit a cigarette and sauntered away across the grass towards the Gay-Cat.

Renton's face was that of a damned man. Twice his

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shaking right hand fumbled and trembled under his left armpit, and fell away, shaking and jerking the handkerchief he had clutched. Yet he had a fair mark—a man's back—not a difficult shot. But *if* he missed the first shot!

Renton's pallid face glistened with sweat now; and he was crying, his mouth loose and sagging. Suddenly he began to run towards the woods as though distracted.

Mayne walked on into the open door of the Gay-Cat. Renton had drawn his pistol at last. But now the range was too far; his chance had vanished.

He stood a moment staring at the empty doorway. Then his knees sagged, the pistol fell among the shore weeds, and Renton sank down, clutching his distorted face in his fingers—bowed lower, lower till the cool herbage brushed his cheeks.

In silence, and very, very slowly, the Little Death stirred deep among the weeds—so noiselessly, so deliberately that not a stalk moved.

"Oh, God," whispered the crouching man, "let me kill him!"

Like lightning the moccasin struck his right cheek near the neck. The sheer shock of the blow knocked him backward so that he lost his balance and fell on his left side. Still confused by the impact he got to his feet, feeling stunned and bewildered. Blood and venom dripped from his neck, wetting collar and shirt.

It was only when his eyes recovered their focus that he realized what had happened. Something stirred in the weeds—a bloated fold as thick as a man's leg; and up from the lustreless, slowly pulsating heap he saw something white slowly rising and unclosing—the livid, widening maw of the Little Death.

Crashing physical reaction, cerebral chaos, thin noises that seemed to squirt out of swelling tissues—the man trying to scream, trying to run—

In the doorway of the Gay-Cat he collided with Bert Mewling, pitched blindly into the crowded bar-room, hit the table and fell on to a chair.

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His face was blotched a blackish grey, his head already shapeless with the monstrous swelling.

Two lumberjacks and Bert Mewling partly guided, partly carried him upstairs to Welper's bed. There they forced his jaws apart and poured in whisky, surest accelerator of dissolution.

But one cannot ligature the human head.

Downstairs Sam Potter sat with inert fingers still gripping the keys of the piano. The noise, the shouting, singing, trample of dancing of feet, was hushed.

Then, from the bedroom above, they heard the dying man screaming again.

Welper got up and shook Potter's shoulder.

"Beat the box, for heaven's sake!" he said hoarsely. "Go on, hit her a wallop!"

Potter struck at the keys with both spread palms, and the deafening dissonance drowned the horror breaking out above:

"Oh, here's to the ladies that I weep,

Bless their bones.

For I sewed 'em in a sack and they sleep

With Davy Jones;

Slim and tall, short and fat, it was love, love, love!

And a smack and a sack and a shot and a shove,

And a splash in the sea on a starboard tack;

The shadow of a shark—and they never came back!"

Harry Senix, on wavering legs, waved a slopping glass and piped out refrain:

"Oh, I weep for their souls

And I weep for their bones,

Where the green sea rolls

They're a-kissing Davy Jones!"

"Everybody!" bawled Mr. Potter, as a dreadful sound came faintly from above, and he struck at the piano as though he had gone insane.

Somebody got the black flag, decorated with skull and bones, which Helen Wyvern had made. The Portuguese

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diver, Lorenzo, climbed to the table and began to flap it over the heads of the yelling crowd.

Then the door was flung open and Ray Wirt came lurching in, drenched with spray and carrying two great stone jugs.

A lumberjack jerked out the stoppers. Colourless blockade whisky slopped into every glass, was drained, poured out again blindly, running over table and floor.

Harry Senix tied a scarlet bandanna around his dishevelled head and flourished the black flag.

"Come on," he yelled, "we'll clean out that bunch across the water! Come on! Let's go!"

Mayne sprang forward and dragged the man from the table.

"Shut up—shut up!" he said, shaking him—shaking the quick pistol out of his scarred and pasty fingers.

But the lumberjacks were reeling to their feet and roaring a ferocious acquiescence.

Mayne forced his way to Welper.

"Do you understand what that dope Senix is starting?" he said sharply. "Pull your guns and stop it!"

But Welper, apparently drunk, dandled his head and leered at Mayne.

"Let 'em loose!" he said. "Let 'em loose! S'all same to me!"

"All hands!" bellowed Potter, mounting his chair and stamping on the piano keys. "Break out your flag! All hands for Place-o'-Swans!"

In the seething, milling, drunken mass of men plunging towards the door Mayne caught the glimmer of the sly, veiled eyes of Mr. Potter. Then he understood.

"All hands!" he roared, shouldering his way out into the red sunset light.

The doorway of the Gay-Cat vomited armed men, plunging, struggling, fighting their way towards the dock—reeling, cursing, maddened men—tumbling into launches and sail-boats, shouting, gesticulating, fiercely struggling to hoist sail or start engines.

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Welper, Potter and Don Supple got into a small launch together. Supple, crouched in the engine-pit, was trying to start her; Welper forward and Potter in the stern kept off others with warning pistols. That was the last that Mayne saw as he turned to run towards the bunk-house where his own launch lay.

And as he started he heard a vague and dreadful sound from the bedroom overhead, then silence.

The victim of the Little Death lay dead at last on Mr. Welper's bed.

All his pockets had been turned inside out.