

## CHAPTER III

### THE ADVENTURE OF THE FORTY CLUB

#### I

THE girl turned and looked up at the house.

It stood on the south side of the street just west of the shabby avenue—an ancient brick edifice in extreme dilapidation. Broken blinds closed every window. Steps, iron railing, deeply recessed door, fanlight, pilasters—all were sadly eloquent of generations forgotten. For the age of this melancholy mansion could not have been less than a century; and it looked twice as old.

Maddaleen Dirck glanced at Lanier, and the smile he gave her was ironical and slightly sinister.

"You don't have to come in," he said.

"I do have to. But goodness, how dismal! This house is not merely expiring; it's already done for. It's all in, Mr. Lanier."

"Oh, a touch of lively paint would revive it——"

"No; only bedizen it. Like rouging a corpse. There's no resurrection for this house. It's *dead*."

He seemed amused at her imagination. "Well," he said, "shall we enter this melancholy morgue, and make ourselves comfortable on a pair of slabs?"

"Tea," she said, "is a balm. Let us go in and embalm ourselves."

"You seem to be in a mortuary mood, Miss Dirck."

"Illogical?"

"Necrological."

"Isn't that house sufficient reason?"

"It's more cheerful inside."

"I hope so."

## *The Mystery Lady*

They ascended the worn steps. Lanier touched an electric button. The old-fashioned door opened silently; they entered; the door clicked behind them very softly.

The interior of the Forty Club was agreeably lighted by shaded globes. To the left opened a small cloak-room; to the right a dining-room; and in the rear was the lounge, pleasantly lighted, comfortably furnished. In fact, the place resembled one of the quieter and quainter London clubs, with its dark old woodwork polished by time, its black marble fireplaces where, behind old-fashioned fire-screens, heavy logs burned.

A pair of fat grey cats dozed on the hearth in conjugal proximity.

"Their names," remarked Lanier, "are Hell and Maria."

In the subdued light of the lounge two or three members were visible, lolling in arm-chairs, reading, smoking, dozing. There seemed to be nobody in the dining-room, where small tables for two were ranged along the walls.

"You mentioned tea," suggested Lanier.

"Yes, please. But I meant lunch."

He smiled and stepped into the cloak-room, took her fur coat, and hung up his own coat, hat and stick beside it. There were no checks, nobody in attendance.

"Personal property is supposed to be safe in this club," he observed. "Otherwise there'd be no club."

They entered the lamp-lit dining-room and seated themselves at one of the tables. Lanier pushed a button. A door opened at the farther end of the room, and a servant in yellow and black livery brought the luncheon card. He looked like any servant in any respectable club; he took orders for grape fruit, omelette, chops, muffins and tea; Lanier signed the check; the servant filled their water glasses, brought fresh butter, retired, soundlessly.

The girl's dark eyes roved brightly about the room. Wainscot and mantel of old black cherry glimmered in the mellow light. Against the woodwork a few faded pictures hung in tarnished frames—paintings of horses,

## *The Adventure of the Forty Club*

hounds, gentlemen in pink careering across a very British landscape. Over the fireplace grinned a wolf's head mounted on a panel, and appropriately flanked by the heads of two sheep.

"Did he eat them because they soiled the water?" inquired Maddaleen Dirck.

Lanier, who had been slyly watching her, replied:

"Is not the baa-baa created to be eaten by wolves?"

"Is that why you ordered chops, Mr. Lanier?"

"You're quite witty," he said.

"No, I'm frightened."

"I wonder."

"You needn't; my flippancy is a certain symptom that I'm badly scared."

"How old are you?" he asked abruptly.

"Twenty-three."

"That makes you nine years my junior; I'm only thirty-two."

Maddaleen shook her head. "That is one of those popular and masculine delusions. Really there is no wisdom in women."

"The wisdom of serpents."

"Perhaps that much——" She hesitated, then: "These walls have the usual ears, I suppose?"

"I don't think so."

"Really?"

"Quite. This is sanctuary. Even malefactors have to have one."

"Then I may talk to you in safety?"

"Except before servants or other members."

She sat looking absently at her plate in silence until luncheon was served.

And when the servant had retired, and after they had been eating for a little while:

"I've told you why I desire to join this club, Mr. Lanier."

"You wish to pick the pocket of our Mr. Welper."

"I do."

## The Mystery Lady

"You'll have to accomplish that bit of legerdemain *outside* these walls. This is the crooks' heaven—

'Where they cease from double-crossing  
And the leery are at rest,'"

he hummed under his breath; but his lively glance became sardonic, and his eyes remained curiously intent on hers.

"What would happen to me if I stole that paper inside this club?" she asked.

"It isn't done."

"I know. But what might result if I did?"

"Some member would 'get' you sooner or later. Treachery within is a common danger and concerns every member of this club. If you do such a thing it becomes the club's business to get rid of you."

"Expel me?"

"Kill you."

"Do you mean that they'd continue to track me until——"

"I do mean exactly that. You couldn't get away with it. Sooner or later you'd be found dead somewhere, or—you'd remain missing indefinitely."

"If I took that paper from him inside this house, would it get *you* into trouble?" she asked calmly.

"No. But they'd expect me to help get *you*."

He sipped his glass of water.

"Is that all you want out of this club—a scrap of paper in Barney Welper's pocket?"

"That is all."

"And you are not sure the paper is of any value to you?"

"No, not absolutely sure."

"And you are willing to pay five thousand dollars initiation and five thousand dues on the chance that the paper is worth that much to you?"

"I am."

## *The Adventure of the Forty Club*

"And you are willing to take a chance of picking Welper's pocket inside this house?"

"Yes."

"You're some plunger, aren't you?"

"Why?"

"Ten thousand dollars—and thirty-nine guns, all to be drawn on you at sight. Thirty-nine large, black automatics——"

"Thirty-eight, Mr. Lanier."

"Oh! You don't think I'd go after you?"

"Not if the paper I want is worth what I expect. I've offered you half interest, you know."

"Suppose I—prefer to *inherit*—your share?"

The girl's eyes seemed 'o darken, and the curve of lip and cheek stiffened.

"No use," she said. "The other half of that paper is in my safe deposit box."

"What foresight!" he exclaimed, in a bantering voice.

"So you hold the key to Mr. Welper's document?"

"I think so."

"Then why do you want Welper's paper?"

"It is also the key to mine—I *think*."

"Oh-o! I understand. The one is useless without the other."

"I think so."

Lanier smiled: "You do a lot of thinking, don't you, Miss Dirck? And what is your ultimate conclusion concerning yourself, myself, and this scrap of paper?"

"That I *must* have it. And that I don't believe you'll kill me."

"Not if you frisk your man outside the club. Otherwise I——"

"No. You *must* try to kill me whatever I do," she said in a low voice. She had been studying the pattern on the table-cloth. She raised her eyes as she spoke, looked straight into the young man's face with intuition as old as the mother of all serpents. "You'd never kill me," she murmured.

## *The Mystery Lady*

"Is that another of those things you think?"

"I don't trouble to think about that. It is what these others might do to *you*——"

"What about what they might do to *you*? You can't beat this game, Miss Dirck."

"You say so." After a moment a pale smile touched her features. "Let me do a little more thinking," she said.

While they had been talking several members drifted into the club, and among them Mr. Welper. Lanier, facing the hall, had noticed those who entered. Now he said to the girl:

"I'll introduce you to Barney Welper when you're ready. He came in about a quarter of an hour ago."

"I'm ready," said Maddaleen Dirck.

### 2

Mr. Welper was seated by the fire in the lounge reading the *Evening Post*.

He looked up when Lanier and Maddaleen Dirck paused beside his chair; then he got up cautiously.

"How are you, Barney?" said Lanier, in his low, agreeable voice.

"Quite well, I thank you, John. I trust you, also, enjoy all the blessings of health." They shook hands.

"Miss Dirck," said Lanier, "this is Mr. Welper. Barney, this is Miss Maddaleen Dirck. Miss Dirck and I hope, some day, to live in a little house in Passy—No. 9 Rue d'Alençon. We know Paris; we wish to go back and live there." He looked pleasantly at Maddaleen. "I think," he said, "that money is the only obstacle to our marrying. But I shall work very hard because I am very much in love."

Mr. Welper's beautiful but sly eyes were scarcely lifted to the girl's flushed face. Then his veiled gaze slipped towards Lanier.

## The Adventure of the Forty Club

"I am very grateful," he said, in his mousy manner, "for the privilege of being presented to your ah—m—m—to your affianced wife, John. Miss Dirck, I wish you every happiness. If there is anything that I can do to——"

"There is, Barney. We are only thirty-nine members in this club to-day. I propose my fiancée."

After a silence and a slight veiling of the shifting eyes: "Do I quite understand you, John——"

"You do."

"Then your affianced wishes to become your—ah—m—m—helpmeet—ah—*prior* to the—m—m—nuptial ceremony?"

"We have no time to lose," interrupted the young man bluntly, "either waiting for money or for marriage."

"That is true," murmured Welper, with a slight sigh; "time is the one thing none can afford to lose. Ah, time, 'fugacious time!' . . . *Temporibus mores sapiens sine crimine mutat.* Ah, yes, yes."

The epigram, the stealthy side-look, the unctuous inclination he bestowed upon the girl, all were evil. The hot colour in Maddaleen's cheeks deepened. But her daring smile flung across Welper to Lanier was utterly enchanting.

"*Argilla quidvis imitaberis uda,*" she said. "Soft clay, you know, takes any form you please, John Lanier. What I shall become depends on you."

Now the sly hazel eyes and long lashes of Barney Welper remained intent upon Maddaleen Dirck.

"You see," said Lanier, "she is perfectly qualified for membership."

"Doubtless," murmured Welper, "you have already instructed Miss Dirck concerning our—ah—little family here in the Forty Club? Our quaint customs, and—ah—m—m—our little *prejudices* and——"

"I've explained it all. She knows. I'm entirely responsible for her, Barney."

"Very well, John." He turned with an almost slinking

## *The Mystery Lady*

inclination to the girl. "Then there remains only to—ah—to offer you my respectful felicitations . . . and the freedom of the Forty Club, Miss Dirck, as soon as you care to m—m—to—ah—consummate the happy event."

Maddaleen smiled, opened her black reticule, and offered ten one-thousand-dollar bills to Mr. Welper.

"I thank you," he said with unctiousness. "You are now at home, Miss Dirck. I pray you to accept the hospitality of our little club until a happy fortune renders you again—m—m—ineligible. I thank you; I thank you. I am always your servant to command." With his horribly small, soft hand he lifted hers and bowed very low over it.

Lanier coolly slipped his arm through Maddaleen's: "Thank you, Barney, for congratulations," he said gaily. "I'd like to show my future wife round a bit. You speak to Gorm and tell everybody it's all right." To the girl: "I want you to see our club, dearest."

Together they turned and strolled across the room through the mellow lamp radiance.

"Who is Gorm?" she asked, still rosy from his easy familiarity of speech and touch.

"The doorman. He saw you come in. Welper will tell him you're one of us. Shall we go upstairs?"

They went up over a soundless velvet carpet.

"There's the library. You mustn't talk in there. It's a fine library for students in our profession—full of standard practical working volumes—art, science, psychology, and hundreds of forbidden books; a lot of privately printed stuff, too."

"What sort?"

"Oh, on poisons, for example. And on the manufacture of forbidden implements."

"Burglars' tools?"

"Oh, yes. Everything of interest to us."

She glanced around the empty library; then, guided by his arm, they moved into a writing-room where, in alcoves, desks stood.

"There's no monogram or address on our club paper,"



## *The Adventure of the Forty Club*

remarked Lanier, smiling. "No water-mark, either. And usually we prefer to wear gloves when we write letters."

Other rooms were private dining-rooms.

"Things are hatched in here," he said carelessly. "These private dining-rooms are great incubators. And that door over there leads into the ladies' room. Take a look at it." He dropped her arm and stood aside.

When the girl emerged she said: "It's really quite pretty. Only there's no maid in attendance."

"We get along with few servants. It's safer," he said dryly.

"Do any members live here?"

"Barney Welper lives here permanently."

"Are there other rooms? Could a woman take up quarters here?"

"Do *you* wish to take a room here?" he asked curiously.

"I'd like to, for a week or so. Could I see one of the bedrooms now?"

"Certainly." He unhooked the transmitter of a service telephone. "Gorm? It's Mr. Lanier. Send Dan Supple up with the master-key. I want to show the bedrooms to Miss Dirck, our new member. . . . All right."

In a minute or so the same servant who had served their luncheon came with a little key-ring, from which dangled nine Yale keys. Asking pardon, he led the way to the floor above, selected the master-key, opened the first door, lettered *E*.

It was a clean bedroom in white muslin, with private bath adjoining.

After Maddalena had inspected it she sauntered out to the corridor again and glanced along the row of doors.

"May I select any of the rooms?" she inquired of Lanier.

"Any except *A* and *H*. Mr. Welper inhabits *A* and I live in *H*."

## The Mystery Lady

"Then," she said with her enchanting smile, "I shall take room G, so we can talk through the door if I'm lonely." And, to Supple: "Please give me my key."

"These are duplicate keys; madam. Your key is in Mr. Gorm's office."

"Can you get it now?"

"Yes, madam, I can run down and fetch it."

She stretched out her pretty arm and took the key-ring out of his hand, saying that she'd open room G with the master-key while he was gone.

"Open *your* door, too; I wish to look in," she said gaily to Lanier.

As they walked together towards room H her fingers were carelessly occupied with the keys—more swiftly still as soon as Lanier turned to unlock his own door.

Even before he could open it the girl had detached the master-key from the ring and substituted for it a Yale key from her own reticule.

"So that is where you live?" she said, glancing around the room from the threshold.

"Won't you come in?"

"Ought I? I suppose it makes no difference in a club of this kind."

"None. Will you come in?"

She seemed to hesitate, a faint smile on her lips. And before she arrived at a decision the servant, Supple, returned with the key to room G.

"Thank you," she said, handing him the key-ring and taking the key he offered. She unlocked the door, walked in, glanced around, walked out, closed and locked the door.

"I'll take it," she said briefly.

When Supple had gone away with his keys, jingling down the corridor, Maddaleen Dirck signed to Lanier to close his own door.

"Another time," she said coolly. "I must be going now."

## The Adventure of the Forty Club

Together they turned to retrace their steps, descended the staircase, paused on the next landing.

"Are there any other women members in this club?" she inquired.

"Yes; four or five."

"Women of——"

"Yes, crooked," he said coldly. "But don't ask who they are. Nobody ever asks that question in this club. Members talk to one another if they are inclined. But our members are very busy with their own business, and nobody would presume *outside*, on casual acquaintance made in here. You see, you might meet any of our members almost anywhere in any social environment in the world."

"I understand."

"Well, then, that is the Forty Club. You can't come here unless you appear to be well bred, cultivated, accustomed to the forms and traditions of fastidious society. That's what makes us dangerous. And yet we're not criminal at heart—the majority of us. Are we, Maddaleen dear?"

His bantering smile took the edge off the impertinence; and he was so very good-looking, and so indefinitely agreeable that the familiarity scarcely displeased her.

"I wonder," she said, "what you think our relations are likely to be, Mr. Lanier?"

"Crooked, I hope."

"What!" she asked crisply.

"Why, crooked, of course. You're going to pick pockets and go halves with me. That's not a moral relation, is it?"

The swift flush of annoyance in her face still lingered when she realized he was poking sardonic fun at her.

"Our relations," she said, "will always remain on a business basis."

"You don't like me, personally?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we are affianced."

## *The Mystery Lady*

"Oh, yes, I forgot."

"Don't forget. It's the only reason Barney Welper let you in. Our manner towards each other here ought to confirm the idea."

"Oh!"

"You are an actress; you ought to play the sweetheart convincingly."

"How often do you come here, Mr. Lanier?"

"Quite often," he replied, with the slightest touch of a grin.

"Very well," she said coolly, "my manner towards you will be theatrically correct. And, by the way, may I not settle our luncheon check?"

She looked for annoyance in his face, discovered it with satisfaction, shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Don't presume upon the situation," she said. "It isn't funny. You are too much my own sort to take any liberty; too much of another sort to make any impudence agreeable."

"Now," he said, "I *know* you're not a crook."

"Do I say I am?"

"You said——"

"I said that I am not *too* good. I'm not. But what does that mean?"

"What *does* it mean?"

"Occupy your leisure with that problem," she suggested, laughing and moving to the door.

"That is exactly what I mean to do, Maddaleen, because I like you a lot."

She turned and looked hard at him. "Does it matter what you think as long as I pay *you* for your services, my nimble friend?"

"Do you feel *that* way?"

"Certainly. If you'd let me be on friendly terms with you—as a comrade, on that footing—very well. But anything further is not agreeable to me, Mr. Lanier."

"You couldn't tolerate any other footing from a crook,

## The Adventure of the Forty Club

is that it? Because it's that, or you're crooked, too, and you've got a 'feller.'"

"You must draw your own conclusions."

"All right," he said amiably. After a pause she glanced at him. He was still smiling. She thought, with swift repugnance, that he looked well-bred, parodied in a disturbing manner the sort of man he was not. And suddenly the girl realized how terribly dangerous was such a man.

Prudence, perhaps fear, parted her lips in a forced smile.

"I'd like to be friends," she said. "Anything more I simply don't want. Do you mind?"

"Doesn't it depend on the man—how much you tolerate?"

"I don't want more from *any* man. Isn't that quite clear?"

"Quite," he said seriously.

After a moment's silence they turned away together. She drew on her gloves as they descended the stairs.

At the front door she offered her hand. "I'm glad we understand," she said. "We do, don't we?"

"Yes. Will you dine here this evening?"

"Perhaps. I'll decide when I get home."

"Where is home?"

"The Ritz—temporarily."

"Please telephone me when you decide about dinner. Our private telephone is Stanwix 7205." He scribbled it on a card and gave it to her. "Please call me and tell me what you are going to do this evening. Will you?"

"I think so. Good-bye, Mr. Lanier."

His clasp tightened, silencing her. "Don't forget we're closer than *that*. You'll have to play your part better when we're here."

She smiled adorably. "Good-bye, Jack, dear, *et à bientôt!*" she added with her enchanting little laugh.

The door clicked behind her.

After a moment Lanier turned on his heel and walked

## The Mystery Lady

slowly back into the lounge. Welper, standing with his back to the fire, rolling an unlighted cigar between his fingers, looked up as the younger man approached.

"John," he said softly, "why is your girl following me about town?"

"What!" demanded Lanier, thunderstruck.

"She followed me in a taxi to the Waldorf this morning. Why?"

"Nonsense!"

"And now she turns up here. *Why?*"

"You're crazy, Barney. Why should she do that?"

"You ask her," said Welper in his stealthy voice.

"What rot! Why don't *you* ask her if you suspect her of——"

"No."

"It's ridiculous," repeated Lanier. "You're developing nerves, Barney. Where did you think you saw her?"

"I'm not perfectly sure. I did notice a girl in black—— Your girl is in mourning, too. Her taxi dogged mine from Seventy-second Street to the Waldorf."

"Then what?"

"I lunched. I didn't see her again until she turned up here with you."

"Is that all?"

"And—I lost my coat check out of my pocket at the Waldorf."

"What do you mean, Barney?"

"Nothing—nothing. It may have been somebody else, who resembles your—ah—charming fiancée. Certainly it must have been somebody else. I don't doubt it."

"Well, what *do* you doubt, Barney? *Me?*"

The sly eyes sought the rug. "If I doubted you I wouldn't have taken your girl's money. If it really was she who followed me in a taxi I'll find out why. But I guess it was somebody else. I guess so. Yes. I guess so, John."

"I guess so, too," said Lanier scornfully. And he

## *The Adventure of the Forty Club*

dropped into a leather arm-chair and picked up an evening paper.

And whenever the paper concealed his face, the sly eyes of Barney Welper studied him intently from head to foot.

### 3

Mr. Welper had a room at the club; so had John Lanier. Both lived there. But the other eight rooms had never been occupied permanently, members usually occupying quarters for a few days or a few weeks at a time, and very seldom longer than a month.

Lanier was reading a nature story in the children's column of the *Sun*, when Welper said softly: "Are you dining here, John?"

"Possibly."

"Are you perhaps—ah—m—m—dining alone? Ah, the eternal domestic!" murmured Welper. "A beautiful girl, John. Yes, yes, cosmopolis incarnate. Lovely, very lovely. And clever, I presume. Ah, yes, my friend, a true helpmeet from the start."

"Why not?" laughed Lanier, tossing aside his newspaper.

"Ah, why not, indeed?" repeated Welper with exquisite unction. "Do not the little birds first mate and then aid each other to—ah—to feather their little nests? Nature, John, nature. Your pretty helpmeet is wise to follow nature's laws and help to—ah—m—m—ah—to collect sufficient material for the future—m—m—domicile. John, I think it is my accustomed hour to bathe and dress for the evening repast."

"Same here," said the other, getting up.

As they went towards the staircase they nodded politely to two or three members, who courteously acknowledged the attention.

"Renton is likely to resign before the year ends, I hear," remarked Lanier.

## *The Mystery Lady*

"Eugene has so informed me," purred Welper. "My word, John, what a little oil can do for a brisk young man! Have you seen to-night's paper?" He fished it out of his pocket, put on a pair of pince-nez, found the column with his forefinger, and read:

**"THREE ACCUSED OF \$2,000,000 OIL SWINDLE  
WOMAN AND TWO MEN SUSPECTED  
TEN THOUSAND PEOPLE BOUGHT WORTHLESS STOCK**

"Complaints from nearly 10,000 small investors, alleging that they had been swindled out of their savings by the stock promoters of the Orizava Oil Company, resulted in the filing of a sealed indictment in the Federal Court on Monday, charging a woman and two men with using the mails in a scheme to defraud. A precedent of two years' standing—that the United States attorney's office, in the present crowded condition of the calendar, cannot take cognisance of such cases—was broken only when it was discovered that the total of the alleged fraud was more than \$2,000,000, and that its victims numbered nearly 10,000.

"In the indictment, which was released from seal yesterday, the defendants are charged not only with grossly mis-stating the financial condition of the company, but with the misappropriation of the names of two widely-known business men and a lady well known in New York society, to lend respectability to their venture.

"In the letters and circulars sent out to advertise Orizava Oil stock, according to the indictment, it was set forth that the corporation controlled leases on 19,000 acres of land in proven fields; that its production averaged between 800 and 1,000 barrels a day; that it operated 100 producing wells; that it was drilling fourteen others in proven fields; that it had a surplus of property assets totalling \$1,500,000, and that it had recently acquired large producing tracts in Iceland.



## *The Adventure of the Forty Club*

“All these statements, it is charged, were false. The Government believes that Orizava Oil did not have more than half a dozen wells under its control, and three of these were the property of subsidiaries which promptly went into bankruptcy.

“The central figure in the alleged fraud is thought to have been Mrs. Helen Wyvern, a trim, dark-haired woman in her thirties, who has been connected with oil promotion schemes since she failed as an actress a few years ago. Dressed in the latest Paris creations, living at the best hotels and driving a racing car, she won the friendship of many prominent business men.

“It was a business concern of which she was an officer, the Wyvern Oil Company, which was two years ago expanded and renamed to consummate the alleged fraud. Mrs. Wyvern has disappeared, as have also the two men, who figured as relatives of well-known business men, and whose proper identities have not yet been established——”

Welper paused, looked slyly over his paper at Lanier. “Eugene Renton and Harry Senix,” he murmured. “Do you see what a little oil can do?”

He looked oily himself as he spread his little pasty hands—a benignant gesture characteristic of Mr. Welper when appreciating any financial coup.

“Eugene Renton,” said Lanier, “is well thought of in Central America, whatever a few thousand suckers are going to think of him here.”

“Possibly,” said Welper mildly, “it were as well that Eugene started betimes for Central America. You—ah—recollect the little verse so popular among our members :

‘You never can tell  
When a sucker will yell——’

“I have a little business in Costa Rica which he could transact for me. I think the emoluments would complete his million. Security, John. Ah, what a sacred word, and

## The Mystery Lady

how sadly misused when—m—m—applied to—ah—to some securities!”

He smiled benignly and entered his room; and John Lanier went on down the corridor to his own quarters and turned on the bath. Then he sat down on his bed, and, like our best shirt-front actors, bit his underlip and looked vacantly at his carefully kept finger-nails.

What on earth had ever induced him to suggest the Forty Club to this girl? What irresponsible devil had prompted him to so perilous a procedure for them both? He was beginning to realize now that if this girl meant to dog Welper until she accomplished the theft of the paper she was after, he on his part must watch her every moment that she was in this club, and see that she didn't attempt so dangerous a trick within its walls.

She might. He didn't understand. He hadn't made her out. She might attempt it. Amateurs are foolhardy. Besides, it was very evident that she had unlimited courage.

But—was she amateur or professional, sophisticated or still inexperienced? Was she all good, or only partly; all bad, or only half?

What mischance had driven her into the underworld? Usually it's a man. Somehow he didn't reconcile such a scrape with her. Or was she the most perfect of actresses, or no more of an actress than is every woman?

*Had* she been long in the business? She couldn't have . . . not with that mouth. The eyes, too. Yet—how marvellously she had played the terrified thief when he touched her arm in the Waldorf! “Not *too* good.” He'd never forget that, and the enchanting wickedness of her smile.

“I was crazy to bring her here,” he thought. “If she hadn't mentioned Central America—and if she hadn't been dogging Welper——”

He got up and turned off the water in the tub. Then, as he began the matter of freshening mind and body for

## The Adventure of the Forty Club

the approaching evening, his room telephone rang, and Maddaleen's voice greeted him :

"Come to the Ritz after dinner. I wish to talk to you. If I'm not there, wait for me. Will you do this—Jack dear?"

"Yes, dearest."

"Be sure to wait?"

"Certainly."

"All right, dear. Good-bye."

"Wait——"

She had hung up.

Meanwhile the vice-president and treasurer of the Forty Club, Mr. Samuel Potter, had entered Mr. Welper's room, and now those two gentlemen were engaged in low-voiced conversation while Welper, his horrid, tiny feet in socks, pattered about preparing evening attire for his fat, short person.

"It isn't John Lanier," he said, "who's got me going, Sam; it's his girl. I've seen that girl somewhere. I must be getting ga-ga if I can't remember a face I've once seen. I *know* I've seen her before. But where? That's the annoying part of it."

Sam Potter, large, florid, iron-grey and genial in his smooth-shaven, sloppy way—except for his too pale eyes—chewed an unlighted cigar reflectively.

"It may have been accident," continued Welper, "but a girl in black, in a taxi, certainly did dog me to the Waldorf this morning. I couldn't get a close-up; the window was dirty and there was a lot of traffic."

"She look like Jack's girl?" inquired Sam Potter.

"Well, when Jack brought her in I thought of it right away. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe I've seen Jack's girl somewhere else. It's likely—— Where *are* those studs, Sam? M—m—yes; what would any girl be chasing *me* for, Sam?"

"I'm not asking you," said Potter in his honest, hearty, disarming way, "but maybe you pulled off a job on some young lady in black——"

## The Mystery Lady

"You wrong me, Sam," said Welper gently. "If I ever do any business with anybody, their face is like a photograph in my vest pocket. I never before talked to that girl of John's. All the same, I've seen her—some-where. And—some girl dogged me."

"Had you just pulled something fine? I'm not asking you, Barney——"

"I've pulled something—ah—recently. Partially pulled it. I don't know who could be after me in the shape of a girl."

He got into his bath-robe and toddled into the bath-room, where presently Mr. Potter heard him wallowing and singing in a thick and greasy voice :

"On Execution Dock I was hung,  
  I was hung,  
On Execution Dock I was hung,  
    And the rain will wash the stains  
    Where I'm rotting in my chains,  
While the ravens eat my brains and my tongue——"

"Some Kidd!" called out Sam Potter jovially, and lighted his heavy, damp cigar. Then he also began to sing the older version of the favourite club melody :

"Oh, I murdered William Moor as I sailed,  
  As I sailed,  
I murdered William Moor as I sailed;  
    I knocked him on the head  
    Till he bled the scuppers red,  
And I heaved him with the lead  
  As I sailed."

From the bath came spatter and splash, and the unctuous voice of Barney Welper :

"The Jolly Roger's dancing in the sky,  
  In the sky,  
And I hope to God I never dance as high;  
    With a hemp around my throat  
    On a galley, brig or boat,  
For I'd rather walk the deck than dance and die."

## *The Adventure of the Forty Club*

And Potter roared his jolly verse in turn :

“Lord Bellomont he took me in his trap,  
  In his trap,  
And my King who set me sailing round the map,  
And the scurvy Lords of Trade  
Sat and trembled sore afraid,  
Till Livingstone accomplished my mishap—”

“Sam,” interrupted Welper from his bath, “I’m going out among ’em to-night, and I guess I’ll be stylish and wear two guns. They’re in the top drawer. Fill ’em up, will you?”

Then he nestled down into the warm, soapy water again, murmuring: “Who on earth was that girl in black? She better quit dogging me. I’ve known little girls to get bumped for less. M—m—yes, bumped for less than that.”

Sam Potter, loading both guns with new clips, called out jocosely: “What are you shooting to-night?”

“Craps, maybe. . . . Maybe little girls.” He added piously: “The future, Sam, is known to God alone. . . . And I wish you’d open the—m—m—the bottom drawer of my dresser and—ah—fill up that ammonia squirt-gun for me. And lay that knife in the silk sheath beside it, Sam—the one with the Spanish spring-blade—in case I shoot craps.”

“Yeh, craps,” muttered Potter, as he opened the drawer and selected the articles described. “Now, isn’t he the fancy cut-up? He’s a scream, he is!”

### 4

After Lanier had dined at the club he put on hat and coat and went blithely to the Ritz. Miss Dirck was out, he was politely informed, but had left word that Mr. Lanier should be kind enough to await her return.

He waited. He was enormously interested.

And at the very moment when this young man most

## *The Mystery Lady*

impatiently awaited the return of Maddaleen Dirck, that young lady descended from a taxi, paid the driver and entered the shabby portal of Forty Club and rang for the doorman, Riley Gorm.

The old doorman appeared presently, and informed her that Mr. Lanier had gone out after dinner. She then inquired for Mr. Welper. Mr. Welper also, it appeared, had left the club for bournes unknown.

Miss Dirck, who was in black evening gown and wearing a cloak of silver fox, seemed to hesitate.

"I wish," she said, "to leave with you a very important and confidential note for Mr. Welper."

"Yes, madam."

"Is there writing material in my bedroom?"

"Yes, madam."

She nodded a pleasant thanks and went up the velvet staircase to the bedroom floor, unlocked her door, turned on the light and entered.

She had left her door ajar. And now, as she seated herself at the desk and started to write, she listened intently for any step in the corridor outside.

She wrote: "There is no need to inform you why I have not gone to the police in this affair. You took a cowardly, dastardly advantage of a lonely, frightened boy in fear of arrest to gain his confidence and then rob him. And now you are to learn that what you stole from him will be worth millions to me. And so I take it from you.

"You look and speak like a pious old fraud, but they say you are murderous when irritated. But if you'll be advised, you had better keep your temper in this matter.

"Because it is not safe to bother those who, not daring to ask protection from the police, must depend entirely upon themselves for safety.

"Keep your temper and keep away, Barney Welper. There will be no more blackmail; there will be only bullets now, if you ever bother us again.

"(Signed) THE BOY'S SISTER."

## *The Adventure of the Forty Club*

When Maddaleen finished, folded, sealed and addressed the note to room *A*, she took a pistol and the master-key from her reticule, went out to the passageway, listened; then silently traversed the corridor to Mr. Welper's room. Swiftly she unlocked his door, turned on the light, locked the door from inside, and began her feverish search. Flinging the contents of the bureau drawers in every direction, she rummaged everything, scattering hosiery, underwear, portfolios, jewellery about. She jerked the pillows from the bed, tore the coverings away, searched every pocket of every garment in his wardrobe, turned breathlessly to the small bookcase, and began to open and shake out the pages of each volume in turn.

That is where she found the paper she was looking for, among the leaves of a large, fat Bible.

It was the copy, not the original parchment. Probably that was in his safe deposit. But it didn't matter now.

Pistol in hand, muffled in her silver-fox cloak, the girl unlocked the door, stole out, relocked it, and sped away through the corridor.

It was necessary for her to recover her breath before descending. Flushed and breathing rapidly, she waited until self-command was restored; then she locked her door, placed pistol and master-key in her reticule, went leisurely downstairs, and handed to Gorm the letter addressed to "B. Welper, Esqre."

"As soon as he comes in, please," she said with her engaging smile.

"Yes, madam."

As she descended the steps she met Welper coming up.

For a second her knees almost gave way; then she smiled prettily.

"Good evening, Mr. Welper," she said.

He lifted his very shiny top hat, and his bow was almost a cringe.

She forced herself to walk leisurely to her taxi, and to say in a clear, careless voice: "To the Ritz, please."

## *The Mystery Lady*

As she seated herself and the cab moved off, she glanced sideways. Mr. Welper had paused on the steps to watch her.

As soon as her taxi turned the corner of Park Avenue she leaned forward and opened the sliding glass in front.

"The Pennsylvania Station," she said. "Fifty dollars if you don't get caught in the traffic!"

There was comparatively little traffic at that hour; the theatre and opera rush was over; and her driver took empty one-way streets with all the speed he dared.

At the station she hurried to a telephone, called the Ritz, asked the desk to call up Mr. Lanier, got him in a few moments.

"Mr. Lanier?"

"Oh, it's *you!*"

"Yes. I have the paper I wanted——"

"*What!*"

"I have it. I came near being caught. Welper came into the club as I left. I tore his room to pieces, but I found my paper."

"Are you crazy?"

"No; but he will be. He probably is by this time. And I want to warn you. He *may* suspect you, because you were with me when I took the master-key. You recollect?"

"Good heavens!"

"That's how I got into his room to-night. And I left a letter for him, warning him to keep away from me and mine. And he may go to the Ritz to look for me, because he heard me tell my taxi driver to go to the Ritz. So look out——"

"*You* look out!" he interrupted harshly. "If you're not utterly mad, you'll stay away from the Ritz! I tell you that man is bad all through."

"I'm not going to the Ritz. I'm going aboard my train in a moment."

"What train? Where?"

"Don't ask me, Mr. Lanier, but give me an address."



## *The Adventure of the Forty Club*

On my honour, if that paper is of any value, I shall share with you half and half. Where can I reach you?"

"The Imperial Loan and Trust."

"I'll remember. Thank you for what you've done."

"Maddaleen!"

"I hear you quite plainly, Mr. Lanier."

"I beg you to let me see you a moment."

"No; my train leaves at eleven-five."

"Where are you? Which station?"

"I can't answer. Look out for Welper. I'm worried."

"You *should* be."

"Not about myself," she returned scornfully.

"You need have no concern about me," he said; "but this is a bad business. I *wish* you'd let me see you a moment before you——"

"No. Thank you again, and good-bye."

"Maddaleen!"

She hung up in his ear.

The next moment he called up the New York Central Station. There was no train leaving at eleven-five. But a minute later he learned there was a train for the south leaving the Pennsylvania Station at eleven-five.

It was just ten o'clock. He telephoned to an apartment on Park Avenue. "Is that you, Donald?"

"It is," replied a calm young voice.

"I'm leaving the Penn Station at eleven-five. Will you have Tikko pack what he can and get it to me in time?"

"All right. Wait——" Lanier heard young Mayne call sharply: "Tikko! Two suit-cases for Mr. Lanier at the Penn Station by eleven sharp!" Then to Lanier: "Do you need me, Jack?"

"Not so far. I think I'm in Dutch at Forty Club. I think they may conclude to get me. Can't tell yet."

"What is it about?"

"I can't talk now. Send my cheque-book and five hundred. Don't worry. I'll get into touch with you as soon as I can. Good-bye."

## *The Mystery Lady*

By ten-forty Lanier had secured a drawing-room on the eleven-five and was standing near the iron gates, when a little smiling Japanese came trotting up, laden with two suit-cases.

"Fine!" said Lanier, also smiling. "Give them to that red-cap, Tikko."

"Missa John has ticket!" inquired Tikko.

"Everything."

Tikko handed him an envelope, lisping: "Cheque and money, sir."

"Thank you. And please say to Mr. Mayne that he need have no concern about my safety."

Tikko smiled, lifted his little bowler hat, turned and trotted cheerfully away.

At that moment Maddaleen Dirck, followed by two red-caps with her luggage, came out of the waiting-room and walked leisurely to the gates.

"Maddaleen," he said as she passed him.

The girl turned deathly white. Then, as he came up to her, a furious colour flamed in her cheeks.

"Damn you!" she said breathlessly. "If you interfere with me I'll kill you! Do you understand *that*, you petty crook?"