

CHAPTER VII

THE ADVENTURE OF TIGER ISLAND

I

WHAT passed between sister and brother that night John Lanier did not know. It was likely that he never would know, for, in the race of Loveless, private misunderstandings were settled privately, and the family preferred to turn an unruffled and united front to the world.

It was so on this occasion, for the only sequel that Lanier perceived was a very subdued and civil youth in the breakfast-room, politely awaiting the family guest.

The boy reddened and bade him good morning in a low voice, and seemed gratefully confused when the older man offered his hand, blandly ignoring any previous encounter.

"You must be Dirck Loveless," he said; "I'm John Lanier, and I hope I haven't kept the master of Red Moon waiting."

"Oh, it's quite all right," said the boy shyly. "Would you be kind enough to be seated here. My sister is breakfasting in her room——" He pulled the old-time velvet bell-rope, and they sat down in silence.

But Lanier permitted no awkwardness. "You have a fine place here, and your shooting must be wonderful," he said.

"It really is," replied the boy eagerly, "only this bluebird weather always stops it. You know the birds won't decoy, point shooting is hopeless, and even box shooting isn't worth the trouble. But you ought to see Place-of-Swans when the duck and geese are using off Crescent. You *will* see it, won't you? You're not going away soon, are you?"

The Mystery Lady

Here was instinctive hospitality—a nice boyish response to advances. Lanier was remembering what recently he had done to this same boy when he replied :

“Your sister has been kind enough to ask me to remain for a while, and I am very happy to do so if it suits her brother, too.”

“That’s fine! If you’ll stay long enough I promise you fast work in the box or off Crescent.”

“But, I know very little about duck shooting,” remarked Lanier, breaking a smoking muffin in two and buttering it.

“Don’t you *shoot*?” Dirck regarded him anxiously over suspended coffee-cup, a generous wish to find no sporting quality lacking in this stranger who had laid him so unmercifully by the heels the night before.

“Well, I *have* shot,” admitted Lanier, “a little.”

“Quail, probably, in Virginia.”

“N-no.”

“Oh! What have you shot?”

“Tigers. In India.”

The boy’s eyes became perfectly round.

“Lord!” he said. “You must think this punk sport.”

“I’m sure I’d like it when I learn how——”

“Tigers,” repeated Dirck, thrilled and content that Lanier had not fallen in his sporting estimation, “tigers! What wonderful sport, Mr. Lanier.”

“It’s one sort of shooting,” said the other carelessly. “I dare say your ducks are more difficult and quite as interesting——”

“But there’s no comparison!” exclaimed Dirck. “Tiger shooting in India. That is a *man’s* sport! But,” he added, loyally to make the best of it, “our duck do fly fast in rough weather. Lord, I’m glad I found out that you’ve hunted tigers before I bragged about our ducks!”

Lanier laughed at the lad’s transparent honesty, and Dirck’s resiliency was that of youth which rebounds

The Adventure of Tiger Island

readily from rough handling. He *liked* this man who had trounced him.

"I say," he began, blushing, "you certainly did wipe the floor with me last night. Oh, boy, what a wipe!"

"I had to, old chap."

"Yes. I put up some sort of a fight, though, didn't I?" he ventured.

Lanier made no effort to control his laughter. "I should say you did, you young devil. It was the toughest job I ever took on."

"No!" exclaimed the boy, delighted that such a man should deem him a devil.

"Rather! I thought I'd been in a fight or two, but I'd rather tackle a panther barehanded than try that job again."

The pride of all youth sparkled in the boy's eyes. The good-humoured tribute to his frantic struggles, the fact that he had been in combat with a tiger-hunter, Lanier's careless and frank kindness, his attitude of man-to-man without condescension—all these captivated Dirck.

In ten minutes he had become Lanier's devoted admirer. The older man, much amused, suspected it.

They sauntered out of the room and across the grass towards the water. Jake and Bob Skaw were fussing down among the boats, and Dirck responded shyly and uncertainly to their cordial greeting. For several minutes he and Lanier stood looking seaward. Suddenly the reaction came; memory awoke to the nightmare of the past. The boy, much upset, was swiftly realizing that this very admirable man beside him must know what a wretched character was his and what a miserable mess already he had made of life. As the realization grew he became more unhappy, more mortified, more uncertain of himself, and of the respect of the man whose approval he desperately longed for with all his youthful heart. Something had to be said. Masculine youth blurts out things in mental anguish—blurts, bleats, bawls—as do all calves.

"You probably have heard from my sister what a

The Mystery Lady

f-fool I was, Mr. Lanier. I hope you don't think me a hopeless r-rotter——"

Lanier turned, amiably surprised at the outburst, instantly and gravely kind when he saw the boy's flaming features dauntlessly facing him.

"Nonsense, old chap," he said evenly, "there are no rotters in your race. I suppose you refer to the dirty trick that those Orizava Oil people played you."

"Yes; but——"

"You're not the only one, don't think it," continued Lanier carelessly. "They fooled wise men."

"Do you know what I did?"

"I know what you *didn't* do. And *couldn't*."

"I suppose my sister told you everything," said the boy in hollow tones.

"Well, she mentioned what seemed necessary for me to know. You went off half-cocked, old chap. I don't blame you. They're a bad bunch, the Orizava crowd. I don't blame you, Dirck."

The familiarity at the psychological moment was so grateful to the boy that tears spangled his sight, and he turned sharply around.

Lanier seated himself on the grass. After a few moments the boy came and stood rather near, without turning.

"What information did you get over on Tiger Island?" asked Lanier cleverly.

There was new calm to the boy's pride in this aspect of his skulking flight. He dropped down on the grass.

"All Welper's Orizava gang are there," he said. "I didn't understand why they built the shanty and the saw-mill until I talked to my sister last night."

"Have they a saw-mill, too?"

"Yes, a steam one. They are cutting pines—for cofferdams and caissons, I suppose. You know that, after all, the *Red Moon* probably is lying off Place-of-Swans?"

"It seems rather certain that she is not lying off Tiger

The Adventure of Tiger Island

Island," said Lanier grimly. "Now let's talk this thing over, Dirck. There's some danger even now. Probably your sister has told you what she and I have discussed?"

"Yes."

"Then you understand why it is better that Barney Welper should not suspect you are alive?"

"Y-yes."

"Well, then, old chap, let's hold a council of war. Will you try one of my cigars?"

Behind them a slender figure in white appeared on the porch. Maddaleen looked at the two men squatting in friendly intimacy on the grass, and her heart grew grateful and warm towards Lanier. And then, gradually and subtly disturbed, her heart wondered, grew doubtful, wary. Because it recognized, in an indefinable way—the way of instinct—that yonder sat a man endowed with a dangerous quality—the gift of familiarity—the winning ability easily, swiftly to turn acquaintance into intimacy over night.

She advanced across the grass towards them; they heard her, and rose to receive her. There was curiosity, feminine irony, latent defiance in her blue eyes.

"A council of war," began Lanier, and saw at the same instant that she had declared it against him. He read it in her level gaze, felt it in the coolness of her hand, on her own voice.

It was as plain to him as though she had said: "I am a girl to whom sentimental emotion is neither understood nor welcome. You've started something, young man. I defy you to finish it!"

He had been sentimental—had surprised in her a momentary and faint response. Twice, the night before, she had been made conscious of this, and had avoided the subtle menace with a counter-challenge. She had turned up her nose at him; he promptly put that dainty feature out of joint. Did this girl admire him for it? Not more than the law of decent gratitude allowed. What he had

The Mystery Lady

done confused her. She was not grateful to the first man who ever successfully had meddled with her maiden emotions.

Further, his general habit of success, his easy ways of winning out, his complete victory over her brother, reacted oddly upon her. Self-assurance and efficiency are admirable. . . . He had thrilled her as long as his deeds remained impersonal. Suddenly he had made her conscious that his winning qualities might involve a conquest of herself.

That is where any feminine instinct takes alarm. No emotional awakening is really welcome to a normal girl. Suspicion follows caution—irony is the usual feminine weapon.

To watch, to distrust, to examine minutely—this was instantly the reaction to the touch of his lips on her hand and the consciousness of emotion awakening within her.

Maddaleen turned and seated herself upon the grass and invited the men to imitate her.

"Gentlemen," she said, "in November no Southern table is properly appointed without terrapin, canvas-back, and Madeira. The last is our sole claim to quality, so far."

"Terrapin are scarce as crowing hens, and how can you shoot canvas in bluebird weather?" expostulated Dirck.

"But," she insisted in mock surprise, "all we need do is to tell Mr. Lanier, who understands how to accomplish everything immediately."

Lanier gave her a long, thoughtful look; she was braiding together three blades of Bermuda grass, smilingly intent upon the process.

"A remarkably resourceful man," she murmured absently. "Ask him anything within reason or without, and it's merely a case of abracadabra—presto—change!"

She looked up impudently at Lanier, and was troubled because he grinned. A slight heat came into her cheeks.

The Adventure of Tiger Island

There are men who know too much. Even that could be pardoned; but it was irritating to wonder how his knowledge of women had been obtained. Gravity! the border of an obscurity not to be further investigated; white fingers busy again braiding Bermuda grasses—then Lanier:

“Now that we have had our morning pleasantries, suppose we start a cofferdam off the Old Man’s?”

With a calm consciousness of internal fury and a livelier, lovelier colour, Maddaleen ignored both suggestions and taunt. Dirck, however, said eagerly that there was plenty of lumber in the tool-house barn.

“Material for piles?” inquired Lanier.

“Yes, and a pile-driver on the dredging scow. We make our own docks, Mr. Lanier. Jake, Bob, Sid Warnock, and Chet Gray can build us any cofferdam we stake out.”

“I wish you’d get those documents, Dirck,” said Lanier, “and the map of Place-of-Swans showing where the seventh island and the Old Channel are.”

Maddaleen continued to braid her grasses; Dirck jumped up and ran back to the house.

Lanier said to his silent hostess: “Shall we digress?”

She looked up warily: “Digress?”

“Or, rather, revert?”

“Revert to what, Mr. Lanier?”

“Well, to carpet-cavaliers, for instance.”

“Ah!” she exclaimed, “you are *not* generous. And that’s one flaw anyway.”

“Never,” said he, “have I experienced such implied adulation.”

“There are plenty of other flaws,” she interrupted hastily. “Cracks, probably—yawning chasms full of Stygian darkness.” She braided her grasses faster, as though timing her fingers to some hidden, uneven rhythm. “Because,” she said, “you dragged my poor, half-starved brother upstairs by his heels I ought to swoon with admiration, I suppose? The trouble is I don’t know how to

The Mystery Lady

swoon. However, I am very much obliged to you for returning to me my brother."

There was on his visage the shadow of a grin. "You are needlessly alarmed. I am not going to kiss your hand again," he said.

"What?" she snapped.

"You offered me perpetual and manual osculatory concessions——"

"Is that your idea of indoor sport, Mr. Lanier?"

"That was the agreement you suggested——"

"I——"

"Wasn't it?"

She looked up so pink and so thoroughly incensed that the next instant they both laughed.

"I renounce the emolument," he said. "I permit you to enter a voluntary petition in bankruptcy——"

"You're very silly!"

"—Or, you may enter a plea of *non vult*," he added blandly, "and leave the penalty to me."

"Why do you bully and torment me, Mr. Lanier?"

"Oho!" he said. "I fear such meekness in you more than your sarcasms."

"You don't fear anything," she retorted; "if you did you'd be more attractive."

"It's your fearlessness that makes *you* attractive."

"You *know* I'm a coward!"

"Oh! Then what is it makes you so attractive to——"

"Any average girl is attractive to any idle young man——"

"But I'm a busy man——"

"Busy being flippant. I won't talk in this strain——"

"It's no strain on me——"

"Mr. Lanier!"

They laughed.

"It's like some horrid give-and-take vaudeville," she said. "And you *can* be sensible and interesting. Pax, if you please. And I'm sorry for the 'carpet-cavalier.' And I *do* thank you."

The Adventure of Tiger Island

"Pax," he said. "I didn't really mind your jeers."

That was part of her trouble; he didn't mind; and she lifted uncertain eyes to inspect this too-clever young man.

Dirck returned with map and documents; they spread them on the grass; Maddaleen placed the tip of one finger on a spot a little south by west of the Old Man's.

"Here," she said, "is where I have imagined that the *Red Moon* lies buried under silt and sand." She read aloud from the Spanish script: "From east to west . . . towards the south and at three fathoms' depth—"

"There's half a fathom there now, Sis," said Dirck, "but there may have been three fathoms then."

"Particularly," added Lanier, "if the *Red Moon* struck the vanished seventh island and sank in the shoals at the Old Channel's edge. Why not build a miniature cofferdam out there and try a little excavation? Or—better and quicker—why not do a little digging on the Old Man's first? For if that poor Spaniard, Carrillo, tried to salvage anything so long ago, some sign of his operations ought to remain on the Old Man's—some buried debris—bits of charcoal, metal, perhaps—"

"I'll get a couple of baymen and we'll go over and dig now," said Dirck impetuously. "What do you say—just for a try-out?"

"All right—if your sister thinks so," said Lanier politely. "In the reeds I don't think we need worry about a glass on Tiger Island."

"If they notice us at all they'll think we're digging a blind, probably," said Dirck.

He went down to the water where the live decoys yarded, and where, on the long wharf in a repair shop, Sid Warnock and Chester Gray were patching up leashes, leg-bands, weight-cords, and wooden decoys.

"Take some shovels and picks and a hand-pump over to the Old Man's," said Dirck. "We're going to get sea-boots and row over."

"You all aimin' to build a blind, Mr. Dirck?" inquired Warnock. "I better tote some cement, too—"

The Mystery Lady

"No; but if you've a wooden form we can sink a box in a hole. Fetch it with you, Sid. You can bring a couple of blasting cartridges, too."

His sister and Lanier were moving towards the house when the boy joined them.

In the gun-room closets were plenty of sea-boots, and Lanier was soon fitted out. Then they took a row-boat at the foot of the south lawn. Dirck assumed the oars, and they shot out across the quiet, sparkling water.

It was only a short pull to the lumpy expanse of mud and reeds called the Old Man's. Maddaleen led the men to the north-west end of the islet, where reeds stood higher than their heads.

A few minutes later the two young baymen arrived, poling their skiff; and the pump, the form for cement work, and the tools were carried up and laid among the reeds.

It was squashy digging; the four men all fell to with picks and long-handled shovels, and very soon the box-form was lowered into the hole and the pump started.

At the depth of two spade-blades Chet Gray struck a bit of timber. It was as heavy and sound as bog-oak and had a copper spike in it.

"Part of a ship's timber, I reckon," said Chet Gray. "I dunno how it come here."

"Driftwood from False Cape," suggested Sid Warnock. "Mebbe someone who was aimin' to build a boat towed it here in old times."

"It's good live-oak," remarked Lanier. "That was a big spike once."

They pumped the box, started to dig again; encountered more fragments of live-oak hewed, chiselled and planed. Some were pierced by spikes and bolts or bore the marks of them.

"These are the fragments of a ship's timbers," said Lanier, "and they are very, very old. They may have been bits of drift from False Cape brought here for boat

The Adventure of Tiger Island

patching or for fuel; or they might be fragments of the *Red Moon*."

He was down in the box, ankle deep in water, his hands and features spattered; and he looked up at Maddaleen Loveless with a smile.

"If I dig up the *Red Moon* for you," he said, "what's the reward?"

"Fifty-fifty—as I told you in New York," she replied with malice.

"But I refused that."

"Very well, what, then?" she asked defiantly, safe in the presence of the others from any gay presumption on his part.

He laughed and drove his shovel into the mud. "I'll dig up your ship first," he said. "Dirck, you'd better get busy with your pump!"

When the water was all out it was discovered that the silt was out, too. A deposit of almost dry, yellow sand appeared; and, at a spade-blade's depth, Lanier struck charcoal.

There was a bed of it full of lumps of metal which rang against the shovels. A few oyster-shells partly calcined, bits of iron and copper, shards from broken earthenware with patches of iridescent glazing left—but nothing of more value, no nobler metal; not a flake of gold or silver—merely the debris of some immemorial camp-fire, or the remains of a burnt rubbish heap.

Yet, to Lanier, this bed of charcoal was vividly significant. Here, perhaps, toiled that ancient and ship-wrecked outcast, Carrillo, all alone in this untenanted desolation, doggedly striving to maintain life in his wretched body with fire and scraps of scorched sea food. The remains of this ancient fire had warmed him through days and nights of horror; cooked for him what shell-fish he discovered; sent up a red, smoky, and wavering signal above infinite wastes of land and sea, calling man to the aid of man where only God existed.

Through the bed of charcoal, at three spade-blades'

The Mystery Lady

depth, all the men left the caisson; everybody retired to the eastern end of the islet, and a cartridge was exploded. Which resulted in revealing that, under the charcoal, there was nothing between it and the centre of the earth excepting yellow sand.

"That," remarked Lanier, "would seem to settle operations as far as this island is concerned. Where had you decided to build your cofferdam, Miss Loveless?"

The girl detected the shadow of amusement on his mud-spattered features. "That's mean," she said, "to put the burden of decision on me."

"I'll share it," he said. "Shall we wade out?"

Dirck warned them to beware of swan-holes as they stepped into the shallow water and moved out, knee-deep, towards the south-west. Lanier carried a pointed stake with a rag tied to it.

As they waded on, side by side, the girl showed him where the ancient channel once wound between Red Moon and Star Shoal, and where once it flowed on either side of the Old Man's.

She had made a little map that morning, and now she took it from her pocket and showed it to him.

"You see," she explained, "the dotted line is the ancient channel. Here, where I made a star within a circle, south-east of the Old Man's, and on the edge of the old channel, I believe that the *Red Moon* lies deep in the sand."

"Shall I set the stake here?" he inquired smilingly.

"Mr. Lanier, will you kindly give me your opinion first?"

"So you can hold me responsible in case of failure?"

"Do you wish to be considered too perfect to make mistakes? You are not divine, you know. And the unerring human is a bore."

"If I blunder in this will you like me better?"

"Probably I'd consider you less tiresome."

That was rude. It also was untrue. Maddaleen reddened, annoyed at herself and at Lanier's faint grin.

The Adventure of Tiger Island

"Well," he said, "I seem to lose out either way."
And he drove the stake into the sand.

2

That day, the next, and every day during the week, old Jake and his men were engaged in the preliminaries of building a cofferdam on the shoal off the Old Man's.

It was going to be a long and complicated matter ever to build such a dam on the shoals in a shallow sea where no great resistance of material was required.

The dredging scow had to be overhauled, its machinery put into shape, the pile-driver assembled and installed aboard another scow, fuel gathered and prepared, piles made ready, planks transported.

Lanier and Dirck worked nearly all day and every day to help the men make the most of this stretch of bluebird weather. Between times they cruised around Place-of-Swans or spent several hopeless hours in the blinds on Crescent Bar, with a total of a pair of black duck kicked up out of the marsh and one blue peter stupid enough to flitter past within very long range.

But the weather remained beautiful and warm, and life at Place-of-Swans was tranquil within doors by lamplight and in the unvarying sunshine out of doors.

As far as anybody knew no intruders from Tiger Island had come prowling around Place-of-Swans; no stranger sail save the lazy canvas of some poling fisherman ever broke the blue expanse of waters as far as the eye could see. Nothing moved in sky or sea save a gull or two wandering in from the ocean or a high hawk turning in the blinding blue.

Yet, with a good glass from any north window, they on Red Moon could see signs of distant activity on the western shore of Tiger Island, where, it appeared, dredging already was going on and preparations under way for other elaborate works of a nature not yet to be determined by the watchers on Red Moon.

The Mystery Lady

Several times, however, from an anchored scow, a clumsy figure that looked like a deep-sea diver in helmet and armour went over the sides. Maddaleen first detected this, Lanier confirmed her report later, and the three discussed the situation at the breakfast table.

"What a ghastly business it would be," said Dirck, "if, after all, the *Red Moon* should really lie off Tiger Island. It's our ship and our treasure; but they'd be entitled to it if they found it in their waters, wouldn't they?"

"After three hundred years," said Lanier, "I doubt that you could show title to the *Red Moon*, Dirck. Besides, unless we watched them at very close quarters we'll never find out whether they've discovered either ship or treasure."

Maddaleen said to Dirck: "I don't wish you ever to risk going among those men on Tiger Island." She did not include Lanier in this admonition; did not even look at him.

After she had left the breakfast table to encounter and dispose of daily household matters, write her letters, and generally put in order her personal affairs for the day, Dirck said to Lanier:

"All the same, I'd like to take a look at what Welper's people are up to. I'd run along shore in a launch if it wasn't so noisy."

"A launch would sound like the Battle of the Marne," remonstrated Lanier; "and besides, Dirck, it really is important that you remain deceased as far as Welper is concerned, for your sister's sake as well as for your own." He added: "They'd blackmail her and bleed her white."

Dirck reddened with anger. To realize what a fool he'd been was painful enough, but that his affair with Mrs. Wyvern should now threaten to involve his sister in the sinister coils of the conspiracy exasperated him.

"I lost my money like a fool," he said, "and I'll stand the gaff. But I've simply got to get that dictograph stuff back—somehow——"

The Adventure of Tiger Island

"I have that in mind always," said Lanier. "But don't ever start anything on your own, Dirck; talk it over with me first. When the opportunity offers we'll manage it somehow."

They went out of the house and down to the dock, and stood watching the boxing operations off the Old Man's.

Jake saw them, called through the megaphone to Dirck, asking for a chain and a coil of rope which lay on the wharf. The boy threw them into a skiff, jumped in himself, and poled it out.

Lanier watched him for a while, then turned on his heel and sauntered back to the house and upstairs to his room. Here he fastened a web belt across his chest, so that the two woven holsters attached to it lay under either armpit. Into each holster he slid a loaded pistol, filled the belt flaps with clips, buttoned his coat, and picked up his tweed cap.

In the little library downstairs Maddaleen sat writing.

"May I disturb you?" asked Lanier.

"You *never* disturb me," replied the girl, with malice in her smile that barely hinted at a double meaning.

The young man grinned cheerfully. "I'm going over to have a chat with Barney Welper," he said. "I thought—in the remote event of such a necessity—that I'd better leave an address to which you could telegraph from Stede's Landing. May I have a pen? Thanks——"

He wrote: "Notify Frank Lane, Desk Clerk, Hôtel Marquis of Granby, Norfolk, Virginia."

"Thank you," he said calmly. "I'll be back to dinner, I expect——"

"Mr. Lanier——"

He turned at the door; the girl sat quite motionless. He walked back to the table where she had been writing.

"Why are you going to Tiger Island?" she asked in a voice so constrained that it sounded cold.

"I thought I'd talk to Welper."

The Mystery Lady

"About—Dirck?"

"Yes; I thought perhaps there might be some way of getting that dictograph record."

"How?"

"I hadn't quite formulated any plan," he replied airily. "One is forced to become something of an opportunist in such affairs. One must see for one's self just how matters stand, and then, whichever way they turn, one must be ready to think quick——"

"Or shoot quick?"

After a moment: "Oh, I don't expect it to turn that way," he said pleasantly.

"But if it should turn that way, Mr. Lanier?"

"Well——"

"I stand to lose you."

"The man you send that telegram to will come and stand by you as I would have."

"You misunderstand. I said that I stood to lose *you*."

"But——"

"Is there any replacing a friend?"

"That's nice of you. I thought perhaps you did not quite regard me as such."

"You *know* I do. You know too much what people really think. . . . I don't have to explain anything. . . . And I won't." She clasped both hands on the table's edge and looked down at them. "Only—I don't want you to go," she said in a low and stubborn voice.

He rested one hand on the table, watching her, and presently she looked up out of troubled eyes. If there were any advantage to him in her attitude at that instant he ignored it. And earned a young girl's respect and gratitude.

"Really," he said, "I don't believe I run any danger in going over to Tiger Island. Barney Welper knows that you and I are here. He knows, also, that I must have told you exactly what to do in case I don't return. He's in no position to punish me; he's hot after the *Red Moon*, and the last thing on earth that he wants is any trouble

The Adventure of Tiger Island

with the authorities. Really, Miss Loveless, I feel very secure in doing what I propose to do."

He picked up his cap and was going; she rose and joined him, and they walked through the house and down to the southern cove where her sail-boat lay. He untied the painter, jumped in, picked up the pole.

"Au revoir," he said lightly.

"Please come back soon."

"As soon as I can."

She had been standing on the water's edge, her head lowered. As he pushed off she looked at him.

"I want you to know," she said, "that you are worth more to—us—than any kindness you can do for us."

He held the boat. "It makes me happy to hear you say so. Au revoir, Maddaleen."

"Good-bye, John Lanier."

With their given names on each other's lips and a little constraint in the parting smile, the skiff shot out into the water.

She watched him hoist sail and drift almost imperceptibly west by north, then north-west, then, as the land-breeze caught the sheet, the skiff headed north on a north-east track. A bunch of blue peters got up nervously at a long distance.

The girl watched his sail until, far across the water, it merged with the white dunes, glimmered, and was gone like the distant glint of a gull's wing.

3

Lanier landed, poling to a muddy shore through thickets of tall reeds which already turned from green to bronze and gold. Here he pulled up the prow a little way, unshipped the mast, and furled his canvas. But he had no intention of remaining there. This manœuvre was for the benefit of anybody watching from Tiger Island.

And now, stealthily as a blue peter, sneaking along

The Mystery Lady

reeds and rushes, he slipped off the bank and began to pole noiselessly, due east, kneeling so that nobody on land could see his head above the shore-reeds. In and out among the reedy thickets his skiff slipped swiftly, edging every indentation of the island, always eastward, until he had put a mile between his first landing-place and the spot he now chose. This was a muddy gully, possibly a channel, but probably a blind lead running south out of Tiger Island. Up this he poled a little way, drove his pole in for a mooring, tied his painter.

As he was about to step from the boat he recoiled, saving himself with a violent effort from putting his foot almost on top of a moccasin.

The deadly and filthy-looking serpent lay in its characteristic coil on the bank where the sun fell hot. Its triangular head, with the swollen chops, rested on what would have been its chin, if it had any, and was tilted slightly upwards, giving to it an expression of devilish impudence. But never had Lanier looked into two such fixed and deadly eyes, and, as he looked, the snake stirred in its heavy lustreless folds, silently opened its mouth and displayed a pair of needle slender-curved fangs against a yawning gullet as white and glistening as whitest satin.

When Lanier picked up his pole the snake struck so quickly that its movement was too swift for the eye to follow; but now the young fellow saw it crinkling up to recoil, and he hit it hard, ending the disgusting career of the creature. It was a heavy specimen—a big, bloated body ending in a whip tail, and he had some difficulty in lifting it on his pole and dumping it into the water.

Now, warily, he climbed out to the bank, and, warily always, picked his way across a rolling bit of country set with very young pines intensely green, which grew thickly everywhere, lifting great plummy terminal shoots from two or four feet above the earth.

Now Lanier took from his pocket a reel of tiniest wire, attached it to a young pine which grew on the bank above

The Adventure of Tiger Island

where his boat lay, then, slowly advancing, he unreeled his wire along the ground.

Between the tall and ancient pines which covered the centre of the island and the growth of young pines there was open scrub and grass. When he reached this he laid his reel of wire under a young pine, walked westward a hundred paces, carefully keeping count, and there he broke off and peeled a living pine about five feet high—not using his knife, not entirely removing the tender bark, but leaving it as though some of the wild hogs on the island had trampled it while fighting.

Now he continued to walk eastward, parallel with the pine woods on his right, and when he thought he had covered a mile, he walked into the high pine forest searching for some less lofty and climbable tree on the outskirts.

He found a live oak, which was easier and better. Up he went among the evergreen foliage and spectral drapery of shaggy Spanish moss, until he was high enough to see the shore.

It was as he expected; where he first had landed there were several men moving in the scrub. He could see the sun-glint on gun barrels. The company that had taken over Tiger Island was guarding its waters very vigilantly. There was every probability that the men yonder must conclude that the boat which had landed must have sailed away again. Lanier's mind was fairly at ease on that score. But what lay before him now began to disturb him. He got down from his tree, walked on eastward just inside the pine woods.

Twice he saw large, bloated, loathsome moccasin snakes sunning on fallen logs, and he proceeded with more caution, irritated and disgusted at the snake-infested place. At that time of year moccasins leave their accustomed haunts in bog and swamp to hole up for the winter under the roots of dead pines. But always warm weather brings them out to bask. The pines were gloomy enough without these sinister lurking reptiles to add horror to the forest twilight. Every shadowy hollow loomed dark with

The Mystery Lady

a new menace now, every dim gully was suspect, every fallen tree, every rotting log and stump.

Once a huge wild hog passed silently across his line of vision—a fierce, bearded, dirty, grey creature, agile, powerful, moving with springy, stealthy speed.

Except the moccasins, the hog, a buzzard or two, and himself, Lanier saw nothing alive among the pines of Tiger Island until he drew near the western end of it.

For some time now he had heard the mean whine of a saw-mill somewhere ahead in the forest. But the men who operated it evidently were on the western edge of the woods, and so screened from his view. As he advanced the scream of the saw became more distressingly near, and very soon he came in sight of the shore.

There were a few huts and a bunk-house on the woods' edge. Farther ahead, in a clearing beside a rough new road, stood the larger portable house, evidently used for drinking and eating purposes.

Very soon he was near enough to read the letters on the swinging board suspended from two iron hooks: "At the Sign of the Gay-Cat."

This saturnine humour had always hidden a grimmer meaning for John Lanier. To him it meant that Maddaleen was not forgotten; what she had done had been important enough for Barney Welper to remember it, and let her know he remembered it. There was still more in the sign—an insult to Maddaleen—for Welper now knew the truth concerning the girl's relations with Lanier.

Well, there was the tavern, there swung the sign, and beyond, on the water, he could see a sloop and a dredger anchored off-shore, two scows, and several boats of various sorts, all clustering off the westward point of Tiger Island, where, no doubt, Barney Welper had decided to begin salvage operations for the *Red Moon*.

Lanier now stepped from the rough ground into the new road, walked carelessly past a bunk-house and up to the Gay-Cat, walked into the open doorway, where he heard voices and the clinking of heavy glasses.

The Adventure of Tiger Island

Voices and the tinkle of glass ceased as he entered. From the farther end of a long pine table three men looked at him out of cold, astounded eyes.

"Hello, Barney!" he said, smiling; and to Mr. Samuel Potter and Harry Senix he spoke gaily, amiably, and with careless, good-humoured ease.

"Some plant you've got here, Barney," he added, pulling a chair towards him and seating himself. "I suppose all the Forty are in this deal, more or less?"

Perhaps it was the incredible impudence of the man that saved him at that instant; perhaps it was the swift common sense of Welper, whose left hand caught Mr. Potter's right hand under the pine table and crushed it immovable over the weapon it clutched.

If Lanier noticed and understood the scarcely perceptible movement he seemed to exhibit no concern. Harry Senix, with his pasty, scorbutic face, gazed at him out of washed-out eyes—the unblinking regard of a vindictive creature, sick but dangerous.

Lanier said carelessly to Welper: "I'm sorry you've got it in for me, Barney. But I'm sorrier yet that my girl did what she did in the Forty Club."

Welper's thin lips receded. "*Your girl!*" he sneered. "Whose else? I'm going to marry her."

"Like hell you are," said Sam Potter. "You tell me a straight skirt with a wad like that is going to fall for a crook like you?"

Harry Senix loosened his colourless, unhealthy lips: "All that's coming to you is jack. You framed Barney good, you did, and you've got your nerve showing up here."

"If I'd framed anybody in the Forty Club I wouldn't come here, you poor dope! Even if I had no more mind than the coke's left you I'd beat it if I ever framed the club or anybody in it."

"If you didn't frame me," said Welper softly, "what do you think you did to me with that gay-cat?"

"Talk straight!" retorted Lanier. "You've found out

The Mystery Lady

who and what my girl is. Cut out the gay-cat!" He turned suddenly on Sam Potter: "You know quite well she's no gay-cat or she wouldn't have started anything inside the club!" And to Welper again: "That's where I couldn't hold her. She didn't understand. Why, do you think I'd ever have let her pull anything if I could have helped it? I'm *marrying* her, I tell you!"

"*Maybe*," said Harry Senix, his pale, evil eyes unmoved.

"Oh, *maybe*? Who'll interfere, Harry?"

A silence, and Lanier's even tones again: "If you feel that way we can shoot it out *now*!"

Nobody stirred a muscle. Lanier, looking at Senix, addressed Welper: "It isn't what it looks like, Barney; my club record concerning you is clear. I wouldn't have had that happen for all the gold in the *Red Moon*, because gold is no use to a dead man. And if I'd framed you inside the Forty Club I might as well have kissed myself good-bye."

He glanced at Welper now, yet kept Senix within his orbit of vision.

"That isn't what worries me," he said. "Nobody in the club really believes me a fool. I know what happens to squealers——"

"So do I," said Senix thickly.

"You need a few shots before you know anything," said Lanier, smiling at his own double meaning. And to Welper again: "You *know* I never doubled you, Barney. You've more respect for my brains than to believe that. Am I right?"

There was an interval of silence.

"Am I right?" repeated Lanier coldly.

"M—m—I guess so. But—does that let you out, John?"

"Because I brought her there?"

"M—yes."

"Barney, she's my girl and she's going to be my wife. Your Orizava Oil bunch flim-flammed her brother, took

The Adventure of Tiger Island

his last cent, framed him, and drove him to bump himself. That was *enough*."

"Whaddye mean?" growled Sam Potter.

"That's what I mean, Sam. You'd done him enough dirt. And when his sister came to me and told me that Barney had taken the *Red Moon* documents, too, and that she ought to have them back, I said to her: 'Syre! Go to it—*outside* the club. That's allowable. That's understood. But,' I said, 'nothing like that indoors.' If she'd been a gay-cat she'd never 've tried it. You know that, Barney; you too, Sam. After a shot or two Harry, here, will agree with me. Why, my girl isn't even an amateur. She isn't crooked. Look what she did—followed Barney from the Museum to the Waldorf and picked his pocket of a *coat check*! Can you beat it? Then she stalls, gives me a phony date at the Ritz, goes to the Forty Club and frisks Barney's room! My hat—why all that trouble when she could swallow bichloride or shoot her face off?"

Lanier's short laugh was bitter; he took no further precaution to keep Senix within range of vision, but jerked his chair forward and rested both arms on the table. It is true that his arms were *folded*—and either hand within a fraction of a second to its hidden pistol.

"No," he said contemptuously, "I'm not worrying about myself. I did what I could; I chased her; I got your paper for you, Barney. What my girl pulled hasn't hurt you: you've bought Tiger Island; you're dredging already; your diver is working all day long. You've got no kick coming; you've nothing on me; and now that you know facts, you've nothing on *her*. If you punish her you do it to me. You can't touch me under club rules. All the Forty can do is to bump a squealer."

He looked quietly at Welper, at Sam Potter, at Senix.

"Is anybody here going to call me a squealer?" he inquired with a gentle smile.

After a long pause: "Well, then, by gad," burst out Sam Potter, "that's all you get, John! And if you're

The Mystery Lady

smelling around over here for a look in—you can smell your way home again."

"I see. You mean that my girl gets nothing out of this *Red Moon* job?"

Welper looked up slyly: "M—m, yes; that's what we mean, John. What your girl did to me lets her out. If she hadn't done *that*—and being your girl——"

"All right, then," interrupted Lanier sharply; "if that's the price and the penalty, I lose out, too, do I?"

"You've got to be responsible for your girl," growled Potter.

Senix stroked his scarred face with a twitching hand: "If you want a piece of the *Red Moon*," he said, "you gotta bump your girl—or we'll do it for you. Ain't that right, Barney——?"

Lanier turned on him: "Shut that dead clam you call your face!" he said. "What did *you* ever do to get a piece of the *Red Moon*, you lobbygow! You crook your finger once—*once!*—and you'll get the kind of free pill that's coming to you!"

Welper interposed with lifted hand: "John," he demurred in his smooth, soft way, "if you start anything on Tiger Island—m—m—you'll gum the show. If you—ah—gum us up we'll get your girl. M—m, yes—we'll get her if you pan us, John."

"Then tell that dope to stay out of this," retorted Lanier. "How can a guy keep his temper when his girl puts crimps in him and his pals read him out of the Forty Club, and a cuckoo like that coke over there wants to bump his skirt?"

"You gotta take your medicine," insisted Potter heavily.

"All right; I'll take it," snapped Lanier. "Between you guys and, my girl, I'm done good. All right. I don't get a piece of the *Red Moon*. All right; you're squared now." He turned on Welper: "Are you squared, Barney?"

"M—m, yes, John. I guess that's right."

The Adventure of Tiger Island

"And that's her punishment and mine—that we don't get a piece of the *Red Moon*?"

"You and her has gotta stand the gaff," muttered Potter.

"Very well—are we square, now?"

"I'll put it up to the club," said Welper in his mousy voice. After a moment he peered slyly at Lanier: "Hand it to me straight, John; what's that rich skirt to you?"

Lanier got to his feet, leaned both clenched hands on the table and bent his head almost level with Welper's:

"You want to know? I'll tell you," he said. "I don't care for the jack you took off her brother; I don't care about the *Red Moon*. That's all in a day's work; the smart guy gets his; it's what we're all out for; it's understood——"

He struck the table with doubled fist: "Those things don't worry *me*! What worries me is that my girl's straight, and she thinks I'm straight; and if any guy in the Forty Club slips her the facts she'll dump me. And there you are!"

The realization that they held the whip hand instead of the pistol hand only was reflected variously upon the visages of these three men. Welper veiled his sly eyes under long and beautiful lashes; Sam Potter smirked; Senix moistened his clay-tinted lips with a dry and bluish tongue, and there came a spasm over his features which was his manner of smiling.

Lanier looked from one to the other: "I'm satisfied," he said; "I'm glad we're squared. Because if any guy on Tiger Island had guessed what was worrying me and had slipped the facts to my girl, I'd have lost her, and her jack. And that—wouldn't—suit—me," he drawled.

Welper presently unveiled his small, sly eyes: "How do you square her about the Forty Club, John?"

"Well," said Lanier contemptuously; "she thinks I'm a dick, of course."

After a pause Lanier let his glance rest carelessly on these three expressionless faces, and was satisfied that

The Mystery Lady

these men had never even remotely suspected him on that score.

Welper sat up in his chair, eased his cramped limbs, reached for one of the bottles on the table and shoved a clean glass towards Lanier.

"This is Scotch," he said. "We got Rye, too, if you want it, John."

Potter heaved a great sigh, straightened his bulky body, withdrew his pistol-hand from h's coat pocket. Harry Senix reached for a glass with shaky fingers and held it clutched tightly while Welper half-filled it with raw rye whisky. Then the drug addict added two fingers of tabasco and three of Jamaica ginger.

Welper held up his glass: "Here's fun, John. You get your girl and her jack, anyway."

Potter held out his glass. "Sorry about the *Red Moon*, John, but it'll learn her to mind what you say."

Harry Senix emptied his horrible and scorching mixture without a tremor, and his eyes of a dead fish rested on Lanier.

"You do what you please, Lanier," he said thickly, "but if it was me I'd marry her for the jack, and then I'd croak her and cut in on the *Red Moon* deal."

Lanier laughed. "Dope and skirts don't mix," he said; "you've got to stick to one or the other." And, to Welper: "Well, then, we're set, Barney. I wouldn't touch Orizava Oil; I'm out of the *Red Moon*, so I'll stake myself to my girl's jack and try for my million on my own. Come on, show me your plant. Anybody else here that might try to bump me?"

"Eugene Renton and Dan Supple," replied Welper. "They heard what your girl did to me in the Forty Club. I told Donald Mayne, too. And Helen Wyvern knows. But these are all who know about it. I haven't laid it before the club."

"Is Don Mayne here?" asked Lanier.

"No, but he's coming with Helen."

"Well, then," continued Lanier, "don't you think it is

The Adventure of Tiger Island

just as well that Eugene Renton and Dan Supple should see you and me arm in arm, Barney?"

"I—m—m—think it highly advisable, John," said Welper. "If you wish to inspect our preparations directed towards the—ah—the recovery of the *Red Moon*, I am sure that Sam and Harry will share with me the—m—m—the pleasure of conducting you."

As they walked out into the outer sunshine Lanier said gaily to Welper: "That was a punk frame-up of yours, Barney, when you shoved Lance Ferray at us on the steamer."

"Did you realize my state of mind?" inquired Welper in mild reproach.

"Yes; but strychnine!"

"Yes," murmured Welper, "that was, perhaps, too severe—was ill considered—the natural impulse of youth and not of maturity. M—m, yes, John; your rebuke is just. And I've lost a perfectly good nigger."

"Lost?"

"M—m, yes; so to speak. It is—ah—regrettable, unfortunate. He might have continued to be of service to me; m—m, yes, of considerable service."

"What happened to Lance?" inquired Lanier.

"Ah—that I am not prepared to say, not being possessed of—m—m—of precise information concerning preliminary details of his—m—m—his decease——"

"Dead!"

"M—m, exceedingly so. I—ah—I am informed that the—ah—the admirably efficient police of Norfolk discovered the—m—m—the remains of the unfortunate negro—ah—floating near a dock."

"Yes," grunted Potter, who had been listening; "you scared him into a squealer, John, and when he asked the steward for headquarters telephone number, why, some guy stuck a knife behind his ear and pushed him overboard."

"Sam may be big and fat, but he's nervous," explained

The Mystery Lady

Welper, "and he's got to get his sleep. So someone eased his mind about Lance, that's all."

"Why," exclaimed Potter, virtuously outraged, "you scared him so that he had a fit in the pantry and began yelling about someone framing him, and about a cup of doped coffee. Do you suppose Barney and I would let any nigger get away with that bunk?"

"No," said Lanier, "I'm sure you wouldn't."

They came out on the western edge of Tiger Island. At that moment, aboard a scow, a heavily helmeted and armoured deep-sea diver was lowering himself on the ladder, while his assistants aided him or stood round the apparatus on deck ready to respond to his signals.

Sam Potter framed his mouth between huge, hollowed hands: "Hey! Aboard the scow! Any news?" he bellowed.

A man lifted a megaphone. "Only an old Spanish anchor!" he shouted.

"Well," remarked Welper, "that's something. Maybe it's the *Red Moon's* anchor. Maybe there are other ships down there. Who knows what we shall discover. It's a good graft, John, and it don't cost so much, considering the stakes—m—m, no, it don't cost such an awful lot, considering what we are playing for."

"A ship crammed full of gold," nodded Lanier. "I suppose there must be several millions aboard her."

"By mathematical deduction, assuming the capacity of the ancient Spanish sailing galley to be that of its measurements recorded in Spanish archives, we believe, John, that the *Red Moon* should contain gold valued—ah—at approximately eleven millions of gold dollars—m—m—yes—at about eleven millions."

"I see eleven members of the Forty Club retiring from business," laughed Lanier.

Potter turned to him with a bull-like grunt of admiration. "You're a good sport, John. I'll say so. You tell 'em."

"Oh," said Lanier carelessly, "I'll get mine, too, some

The Adventure of Tiger Island

day, and somewhere. And, if I don't, my girl is worth this entire show—to me. All the gold in the *Red Moon*—she's worth more than that to me.

"Barney," he said to Welper, "I'll be going——" He checked himself. Eugene Renton had come up behind the group, immaculate, jaunty, his clean-cut, clean-shaven face as colourless as ever, accenting his black eyes and black hair.

He wore solaro riding breeches, puttees, and a clean silk shirt, open at his very white throat. Two pistols sagged in holsters low on either thigh.

"Gene," said Welper, casting a sly glance at Lanier, "shake hands with John. He's squared himself, and we've squared ourselves."

"That's good," said Renton without changing his expression.

Lanier offered his hand; Renton accepted it. His black, still eyes remained intent on the other man.

Welper asked Lanier where he had left his boat. "Yes," said Renton, "Dan Supple and I went down to where we thought you landed, but you were gone."

"Oh, it was you?" replied Lanier carelessly. "I saw somebody down there." And, to Welper: "This seems to be a snaky place, Barney. It isn't always safe to land where you want to. Well, I'll be going," he repeated. "Good luck to you, Barney. Good luck, gentlemen——" He smiled, his eyes on Renton, and nodded adieu to him.

What he must do now came hard; he turned his back to Eugene Renton. For Lanier was as utterly convinced as though he had been told, that Renton suspected him in spite of Welper's endorsement and its acceptance by the others. For, while Eugene Renton was of a thoughtful, secretive type, with a false appearance of nervous frankness, sometimes he acted like lightning.

It was hard for Lanier to nod airily to these men, to walk on past them, to turn his back on Renton. Ten yards, twenty, thirty; and no explosion behind him sent

The Mystery Lady

him pitching on his face to die while the pistol-shot was still ringing in his lifeless ears. Thirty yards, forty, fifty; and here he strode out into the scrub.

And here it was natural for him or for anybody to turn, look back, wave a last greeting.

He looked back. Welper, Potter, Senix were gathered in a close group; Renton apparently harangued them with fiercely nervous gestures. He saw them lift their heads to look at him; saw Renton turn and stare. And he waved his cap in gay and careless adieu, entered the bushes, whirled on his heel under cover, and saw Renton start swiftly after him; saw Senix hesitate, then follow Renton; saw both men free their pistols.

He freed his own weapons, grasped them in either hand, moved on as fast as he could without running, not caring to face anybody with a thumping heart and gasping lungs to mar a steady trigger finger.

Suddenly he caught sight of his peeled pine bush, ran to it, swept the ground with one hand, caught the reel of wire, dropped it, and hurried on guided by the hair-fine strands running through his fingers.

It was not far; he saw the cleft where the gully cut inland. Then, as he came out on the bank above, he saw Dan Supple sitting in the boat, a rifle across his knees, but looking the wrong way.

"Put 'em up!" came Lanier's ringing command. "Stand and drop that rifle off your knees!"

Men like Dan Supple lose no time under such circumstances. Even as he jumped to his feet and lifted both arms on high Lanier landed on the deck.

"Step that mast, Dan! Quick!" snapped Lanier. "That's right. Grab that pole and shove her out. *Shove!*"

The boat shot out into the bay.

"Keep on poling," said Lanier. "Faster! Put your back into it. That's the way——"

There came a flash and report from the shore—another, another. There were two round holes in the sail and a

The Adventure of Tiger Island

ragged tear where it was partly furled. Another shot struck the water.

"Hey, you guys!" bawled Supple. "Who'n hell d'yeh think you're shootin'?"

Lanier picked up the rifle, emptied the magazine, reached over and stripped the cartridge belt from Supple's body.

"Thanks, Dan," he said. "Now step overboard."

"Swim?"

"I don't think you'll need to. Come, make it snappy! Hop it!"

Supple seized the gunwale, steadied himself, vaulted into the water. It was only waist-deep.

"Here's your rifle," said Lanier politely. "Look out for swan holes."

Supple, over his hips in water, stood glaring at him.

"Dan," said Lanier, holding the boat with the pole, "what does Gene Renton think he's got on me to chase me with two guns?"

Supple leered at him: "You want to know? All right, I'll tell you. You act too much like a squealer to suit Gene Renton."

"He's crazy. I squared myself with Barney. Do you think I could pull anything on Barney Welper and Sam Potter?"

"You done it!" retorted Supple savagely. "Orizava Oil is pinched. Mrs. Wyvern, too. She's out, on bail, and she wired Gene."

"What!"

"Ya-as, 'n' you squealed to square your girl with the Orizava bunch because they trimmed that rat of a brother of hers. Gene and I was over to Bonnet House to-day, and Helen Wyvern wired him how she got pinched. That's where you stepped on Gene Renton, and he's got it in for you."

Lanier reddened. "Dan," he said, "I'd rather have Renton put a bullet in me than hear you tell me that Orizava Oil has been pinched. You say so to Barney, and to Eugene. If they want to pull a gun on sight, all

The Mystery Lady

right; but, on my word—which you fellows know I never broke—I didn't know Orizava was pinched; I had nothing to do with it; and I wouldn't have had it happened for anything on earth."

Supple's little ruddy ferret eyes bored into Lanier's features for a full minute's silence.

"John," he said finally, "I gotta believe you. A liar—that's one thing you ain't, unless you've changed. I guess Gene got you wrong. But Helen is his girl. Any guy that's got a girl is influenced by her. And Helen wired Gene to watch you because of what your girl done to Barney and because we skinned your girl's brother. If that little rat wasn't dead I'd say he started the dicks after Orizava. I wonder if he is dead at all?"

"Wasn't his body found?"

"I didn't see it. . . . Rats is rats. Cats hasn't anything on 'em—no, not with all their nine lives. Rats has nine times nine. I wouldn't wonder——"

"You better start and wade ashore," remarked Lanier. "If you hit a swan hole you'll swim. Tell Gene the truth. Then, if he still itches to toss a gun, tell him it's all right with me. Only I want to know beforehand. I'd hate to kill him too quick."

"Got a glass on your island, John?"

"Yes."

"All right. I'm satisfied. If Gene wants war I'll burn a flare on the diving-dock at seven o'clock."

"Right. Good night, Dan."

"Aw review!" said Supple, and started towards the shore.

It was just seven o'clock when Lanier landed on Red Moon. As he stood up to unship his mast and furl sail, he looked across the darkness towards Tiger Island.

A distant flare burned at the extreme western end where the diving-dock ran out.

Between himself and Eugene Renton, now, any encounter meant death.