



CHAPTER VIII

THE ADVENTURE AT THE GAY-CAT

I

At last the cofferdam off the Old Man's was finished; pump and dredge had been at work for a week; the debris of mud and sand, dumped on the scow, had been carefully screened.

So far nothing was discovered to encourage anybody in the hope that a submerged ship lay anywhere in the vicinity. The dump-heap consisted of nothing but sand, silt, weed, and a few antique shells.

Blue-bird weather had vanished, skies changed, grey days came and raw nights and rough water. It grew colder, the four winds were up and busy, blowing freshly one day, boisterously the next, never entirely quiet—blustering winds, sudden winds, treacherous winds, arising capriciously anywhere and at any hour.

Sometimes at night Lanier could hear the roar of a mighty tempest in the pines on Tiger Island, or the cannon-like thunder of a gale beyond the dunes off False Cape. Wind-demons whined in the chimneys, whimpered around the eaves, and tormented the gilded weather-vane until it shuddered, veered wildly, creaking, complaining.

Duck, geese and swan now came in thousands—no remaining, however, very close to Star Shoal and the Old Man's, where early dredging operations stirred them up and kept them from returning until late at night.

Also the duck and geese were made uneasy by activities on Tiger Island. Yet, even with all that stir and noise and the constant sailing of boats between Tiger Island and Bonnet Bay, the wild-fowl of that wilderness might

The Mystery Lady

not have felt very much disturbed had it not been for the nightly revels of Welper's gang—their sudden mania for lighting bonfires and setting off fireworks.

Why and what the Forty Thieves were celebrating nobody on Red Moon Island could guess. It made Lanier uneasy, apprehensive, and finally moody. Had it not been a case of shooting on sight between him and Eugene Renton he might again have risked a visit to the Gay-Cat. He was contemplating it.

But he did not wish to kill Renton, or anybody else if it could be avoided. Moreover, there was another way of securing information. He went after luncheon one day with Jake in the launch to Bonnet Bay; and, from Everley's house at Stede's Landing, he called up Frank Lane, desk clerk at the Hôtel Marquis of Granby in Norfolk.

"Frank," he said, "this is Number B. Give me *your* number."

"Double B. What is your letter?"

"Twenty-six. What is yours?"

"My letter is fifty-two."

"All set. How is the fishing?" inquired Lanier.

"Number E is very anxious to go fishing. He calls me up every day for instructions. Have you any advice to give?"

"Yes. Please call up Number E and say you are wiring him instructions. Tell him in code that the fishing season has begun; that he is to go on the job at once, find out what is happening in the fish-pond, and get the information to me. You know where I am?"

"Perfectly."

"Instruct Number E. By the way, one of the Department has poked a pole into the pool again. One fish was hooked, then released. But the whole pond is frightened."

"So I noticed in the newspapers."

"Too bad," said Lanier. "They're premature once more. Try your best to make them understand that they

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

are interfering with the entire puddle. I'll do my best to keep the fish quiet, but they'll surely scatter if they're scared again. It will be the same everywhere in the world; every local fish-pond is sure to empty itself into the ocean; and when the big net is drawn there'll be nothing in it."

"I'll post notices on the preserve. Look for Number E within two days."

"Right! Thanks!"

Late one windy afternoon, returning with Bob Skaw from a cautious cruise through a choppy sea, he noticed a strange launch off Red Moon Island, alongside the dredging scow. Bob told him that the launch belonged to the game warden, Bill Bailey, who was on his annual visit to those remote regions for the purpose of inspecting licences.

The warden, a weather-beaten native in sou'-wester and tarpaulin, hailed Bob jocosely:

"Vere you-all been a-sailin' to ven I come a-visitin'?"

"We was chasin' sand-flies on False Cape. We got a licence to kill skeeters, too." He handed the licences to the warden, who inspected and returned them.

"Vat you-all diggin' in de duck-weed, Cap'n Bob?" he demanded in a bantering voice, gazing at the dredging scow.

"We're diggin' up swans' aigs, Bill," replied Bob gravely. "You-all been over to Tiger?"

"I reckon."

"What's all them fires 'n' fireworks for?" demanded Bob. "What is them doin's yonder I dunno. They act like they's aimin' to cl'ar the bay o' duck."

"Vell," replied the warden, "ven I seen dem doin's yonder I vent over vit' de launch. Dee tell me how dee done find some old ship sunk off'n Tiger——"

"Hey? They've located a sunken ship, you say?"

"I reckon."

"Wot kinda ship!" demanded Bob incredulously.

The Mystery Lady

"Dee tell me she's Spanish an' dees a heap o' money in de hold——"

"Is that why they're shootin' rockets an' celebratin'?"

"I reckon hit's dat-a-way, Cap'n Bob."

"A-h," retorted Bob, "they're a b'ilin' bunch o' liars, them Bonnet Bay fellers! Bert Mewling he's a crook and a poacher and a liar. Don't you let 'em tell you they found no Spanish ship full o' gold——"

"I reckon it's silver," drawled the warden; "vich is vat dee showed me, anyvay."

"You seen silver money took up out of the water off'n Tiger!" demanded Bob furiously.

"I reckon."

The warden ejected a compact quid, slowly gnawed a section from a twist of native plug, thoughtfully started his engine, seated himself, and took the tiller. As his launch started he glanced around at Bob.

"Dees all drunk on Tiger, 'n' shoutin' lak dees crazy, 'n' shootin' rockets, 'n' buildin' bonfires. Ef dee scares yo' ducks, gentlemen, kin'ly lay a complaint an' dee 'll fin' a summons nailed up on de shanty do' ven dee vakes up in de mawnin'."

Lanier called across the widening interval of water:

"Did you see those silver coins, warden?"

"Yaas, I did, suh."

"Were they old coins?"

"Yaas, suh."

"What kind?" shouted Lanier.

"Spanish, I reckon, suh," came the faint reply across the water.

Bob poled the launch to the dock; Lanier sprang to the landing and tied up.

"That looks bad for us, sir," remarked Bob Skaw in sombre tones.

"I wonder," muttered Lanier.

When he was bathed and dressed it was near the dinner hour. He found Maddaleen in the library before

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

an open fire, her slender feet on the fender. She extended one hand to him in friendly welcome.

"You've been to Stede's?"

"Yes."

"Rough?"

"Rather rough."

He pulled up closer to the fire.

"Well," he said, re-seating himself, "how is the dredging going on?"

"Nothing, so far," she admitted ruefully.

"You're not discouraged, are you?"

"I don't know. Jake told me, just now, what the game-warden told you and Bob Skaw."

"About the Tiger Island gang finding some silver coins?"

"Spanish silver. That is rather disturbing, isn't it?"

"In a way . . . certainly. Welper pretends that he's discovered a sunken ship and has dredged up some Spanish silver coins. In consequence the gang over there got boiling drunk, lighted bonfires, and fired rockets. And yet, Maddaleen, I'm not as much disturbed as the wild duck are."

The girl turned in her arm-chair and saw that he was smiling.

He said: "In the documents you have there is no mention of *silver*. We are told only that the *Red Moon* galley was loaded to the gunwales with pure, soft, *Indian gold*. The metal mentioned was *Indian*, not *Spanish*. And that remote ancestor of yours traded with *Indians*, not with *Spaniards*. He was not paid for his beads and knives and looking-glasses in *Spanish coin*, or in coin of any sort, either gold or silver. He was paid in soft *Indian gold*."

The girl flushed slightly. "Really," she said, "you have an extraordinary talent for comforting people. I've been rather blue since Jake told me what the warden said."

"It worried me, too. But I've been thinking it over.

The Mystery Lady

If the *Red Moon* was laden with gold, that gold, of course, was not minted. The Indians had no coinage. The gold was native gold. Perhaps there were raw lumps of it; perhaps utensils, or sacrificial implements. But what I think is this: that your adventurous ancestor acquired many sackfuls of those marvellous specimens of the Maya and Aztec goldsmiths' art which once—and even to-day—are found in the tombs of certain important personages who reigned or who functioned as high dignitaries in the ancient Maya and Aztec civilizations."

Maddaleen had seen the superb collection of golden *objets d'art* in the Museum of Natural History in New York. But somehow—and naturally enough where piracy was concerned—the girl had thought of golden treasure on the sunken *Red Moon* in terms of doubloons.

Now, suddenly, Lanier's theory appeared to be the reasonable one: gold ornaments from Maya tombs!—of these was the treasure of the *Red Moon* composed!

And the girl, who had seen such recovered treasures, was aware they were marvels of cleverness, of archaic skill, of beauty—these tomb-ornaments which continually were being discovered in Costa Rica. In some of them there seemed to be a touch of Chinese grotesquerie; in all a characteristic fidelity to truth. Some were strangely reminiscent of the great monsters of stone carved on Gothic cathedrals; others seemed startlingly modern; some Futuristic; some as naïve as the wooden products of a German toy maker.

There were eagles and vultures of every type and design; the Moan-bird of ominous significance, sinister as a Gothic gargoyle. There were spiders, bats, delicate and lovely butterflies, beautifully modelled crabs, sea-shells; and there were panthers, jaguars, little dogs with curly tails, dolphins, crocodiles; and there were Aztec gods, male and female—all wrought out of pure gold, and varying from half an inch to nearly ten inches in diameter.

Certainly it must have been with such objects as these

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

that the *Red Moon* galley was so deeply laden "to the gunwales with pure, soft, Indian gold!"

2

Dinner had been announced; the girl rose and took Lanier's offered arm, resting on it gently with light yet confident familiarity.

"I breathe freely again," she said, "thanks to you, John Lanier."

That, so far, was her concession—his full name, John Lanier, but not the more intimate John, alone.

Dirck, who had been on Crescent Bar, was a little late in changing his wet clothing. He appeared when dinner was nearly over, almost starved.

"Sis," he said, "you and Lanier"—the boy was proud to call him Lanier without prefix—"should have been on Crescent. There was a north-west wind, and the duck came in as fast as driven snowflakes. Geese, too! My, what a sight, and what a day——"

"What did you get?" asked Maddaleen with the unfeigned interest of a sportsman.

"I got my limit. I could have doubled it—tripled it! I got four geese, six sprig; three canvas, seven mallard, two red-head, a golden-eye, a blue-bill, and black duck."

"Fine, Dirck. Did any of the decoys get loose?"

"Oh I had a terrible time with that old gander, Major Bagstock. The major always keeps at his leg-cord until he gets it off. He went nearly halfway to Tiger before I headed him.

"Then two mallard pulled loose and I had a time rounding them in."

Maddaleen and Lanier lingered over their coffee to listen to the boy's adventures by flood and field; and he talked and ate and gesticulated with a detached vigour and delightful freedom from brag and home conditions.

The Mystery Lady

The decease of each one of those twenty-five wild-fowl had to be related, singly and in detail. Each episode was described with excited pantomime—how the wretched geese-decoys sulked and refused to “call” at the critical moment; how he, Dirck, had “called” where he crouched; how the crafty leader of the clamouring but wary geese in the sky overhead finally swerved, turned, beguiled to his doon below; and how this deluded gander carried down with him the wide-winged squad of comrades to the water where their treacherous fellows preened and floated off the fatal blind.

As his sister and Lanier listened, they seemed to see the wild duck whirring in; see their short, strong wings curve to a bow; the webbed feet thrust out as they lit on the rough water; see the hidden figure in the blind stand up; the grey light on his gun-barrels; hear the scuttering clatter of startled wild-fowl rising, breast to the wind; hear the two short, dry reports; see a pair of towering duck collapse in mid-air, hurtle downward and strike the water with separate splashes.

“You’re very graphic, young man,” said Lanier gravely. “I feel the fever myself, and if this cursed thirst for hidden treasure would ever let up I’d go and burn a few shells myself.”

“You could have gone to-day,” said Maddaleen.

“No, I had to go to Stede’s Landing.”

“Why?” inquired Dirck.

Lanier lit a cigarette. “I’ll tell you why. In the peculiar service in which I am engaged there is a man named Donald Mayne. We keep in touch with each other.” He smiled at Maddaleen. “Don, also, is a member of the Forty Club——”

“Dirck,” interrupted the girl seriously, “you understand how confidential this is. You know what would happen to Mr. Lanier and to his comrade, Mr. Mayne, if Welper suspected them?”

“Yes,” said the boy bitterly. “I know.”

Lanier nodded and went on: “Day before yesterday

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

I sent word to Donald Mayne that I need him on Tiger Island. He'll be there to-night. I want you both to know that—in case a stranger appears in these waters asking for me—probably the man will be Donald Mayne. And the way you may recognize Mayne is this: When he says, 'Tell John Lanier a fisherman wants to see him, you must say, 'What do you do with the fish you catch? If it is Mayne he will say, 'When I catch them I fry them.' I've told Jake; Jake is to instruct all your men how to recognize one of my friends, no matter where he comes from, what he looks like, or what his behaviour may be."

In spite of the real seriousness of the situation—which they never yet had entirely realized—the boy and his sister were agreeably conscious of the dramatic element developing daily in the unusual affair of the *Red Moon* galley.

The discovery of the Eden documents, the linked chain of events which followed, the entire dramatic gamut excepting tragedy alone—yes, even tragedy!—the murder of Lance Ferray—every separate episode had arisen in logical sequence, promising in turn some inevitable sequel. Never had cause been plainer, effect more natural, consequences more disturbingly simple and swift than when Dirck Loveless came into his inheritance and started out to tell the world where it got off.

The sister looked up at the brother, concerned, unsmiling, yet still conscious of the thrill in the situation as it was so rapidly developing. There were dangerous men on Tiger Island who might become more dangerous at any moment. She had never dreamed what she was stirring up when she went to the Museum to find Welper and, by sheer chance, encountered there the very man she was searching for.

Immediately there stepped into the scene an agent of some occult international bureau representing law. He had stood between her and peril unnoticed, unimagined: he had guarded, guided, counselled her: he had dis-

The Mystery Lady

covered her demoralized brother and restored him to her; and now he had summoned to her aid a comrade who was to watch her enemies. Yet, so far, for brother and sister, the romance of it all, the legendary setting, the glamour of piracy, of wild deeds, of sunken gold, seemed to obscure the raw and ugly fact that a gang of cold-blooded modern men had swindled and blackmailed the brother, had attempted to murder the sister; and were entirely capable of trying it again whenever annoyed.

However, that evening, the graver aspect of the situation seemed to be dawning on Maddaleen's mind; and when they went into the library after dinner she seated herself near Lanier—instinct unconsciously seeking protection, perhaps.

There was half a gale off False Cape that night. From far darkness came the dull thunder of bombardment. On the flag-pole the golden sea-horse fretted and whinnied, halyards clattered, windows rattled, chimneys were full of the little demons of the wind, rustling, wailing, screaming.

The boy said: "Major Bagstock is no good. He doesn't care for Miss Tox. I never before heard of a wild gander that wouldn't fuss and talk and gossip and complain if you staked him out separated from his wife. But the major never said *gloo-gluck once!*"

"Did the mallard quack?" inquired his sister.

"Not very well, except when an eagle or a hawk showed up. Of course, all decoys have their days of sulkiness and perversity. The swan were tumultuous in the sky. It sounded like thousands of little children dressed in white all calling to one another up there; and it looked like a perpetual flight of angels."

The girl said to Lanier: "I love the swan. Even when law allowed we never shot them. The baymen don't like them because they dig swan-holes, but Dirck and I adore them. Only the English skylark seems to bring one as close to Heaven. . . ."

After an interval: "The white brant were flying on

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

the beach," said the boy. "I think I'll dig a pit out there and see if I can't get some."

Lanier said to Dirck: "Be a little careful about Welper's gang. They are likely to make trouble if they discover you are alive."

The boy returned his gaze soberly:

"I carry a dozen of buck and swan shot," he said without any braggadocio whatever.

"Not good enough, old chap, if they happen to carry rifles."

"No. I could carry a light Mannlicher and bandolier——"

"Look here; a shooting bee isn't what we want, Dirck. Stay out of trouble——"

"But if I happen to get into it——?"

"Dirck, we don't want any snow-geese," interrupted his sister. "Goodness, the larder is hanging thick with all the duck and geese we need, and thousands more are off the Crescent. Why do you want to wander around False Cape?"

Why does any boy want to wander? That is something no girl can find out or understand.

Lanier's understanding and vaguely sympathetic glance crossed Dirck's, but he merely said: "You comprehend the situation. Use the better half of valour for a while."

After Dirck had gone out to nose the gale and come to some conclusion concerning prospects for point-shooting on the morrow, Maddaleen looked at Lanier.

"You might care to follow your own excellent advice yourself, John Lanier. It would materially reduce my worries."

"What advice?"

"To use more liberally the better part of valour—discretion."

"Am I indiscreet?"

"You went to Tiger."

"Oh, that?"

The Mystery Lady

"And there's a ruffian named Renton who'll open fire on you without notice."

"I expect to have sufficient notice. Does that worry you?"

"It does," said the girl calmly, but not caring to look at him.

"From what angle does your apprehension arise, Maddaleen?"

"What do you mean?" But she knew; and her eyes regarded him indifferently.

"Oh, well," he said, leaning forward and lifting another heavy bit of driftwood on to the fire, "I know you like me enough to be concerned."

"Certainly I do. I'm not inhuman."

"Un-human?"

"You pretend to think I am." She shrugged. "But is it un-human to lift a polite but warning traffic-hand when a young man, a little *too* sure of himself, puts on a trifle too much speed?"

Lanier said slowly: "But if he knows what he wants——"

"Others who also know what they want are to be considered, too, John Lanier."

"Do you know what you want?"

The girl looked at him in chilled surprise, then, to her consternation, turned scarlet. Perhaps at that instant, and for the first time, she really knew—or desperately suspected—the truth. But she did not want so crude a truth, she wouldn't have it so.

"I suppose," she said very icily, "you think you are flirting with me very cleverly."

"I am paying my court to you—not very cleverly."

"That always is a woman's due, I suppose. . . . Whether she likes it or not."

"Do you dislike it, Maddaleen?"

"It does not always amuse me."

"Does it—sometimes?"

"Possibly."

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

There was a silence. The girl looked at the fire. The driftwood burned blue and green.

"Copper bolts," she remarked. "Oh, I wonder whether those miserable creatures on Tiger really have discovered treasure? Positively it would make me sick!"

She rose, walked to the door, opened it, and stood on the doorstep.

Presently, over her shoulder: "John Lanier, the wind has stopped blowing. It's turning warmer."

He went to the door where she was standing; she moved to make room for him on the doorstep:

"Stars in a clear sky, look!" she said. "That is ominous in this country."

"Why?"

"Such sudden calms come between gales. And the second gale is sometimes a hurricane."

"Do you think we'd better make things snug?"

"Everything is snug."

"I'm wondering about the cofferdam, too——"

They walked out over the grass to the dock.

"Torches on the cofferdam!" she exclaimed. "That's odd."

Splinter-wood torches were burning on the cofferdam and aboard the dredging-scow. In the red, smoky glare men's forms were visible.

"I don't understand *that!*" remarked Lanier.

There was a megaphone in the summer-house. He fetched it, set it to his lips:

"Hallo! Aboard the scow!"

In a moment old Jake's voice came back to reassure them.

"What are you up to, captain?" shouted Lanier.

"We dredged up a coupla funny images just afore you went to supper. When the ca'm come, thinks I, we'll try it again."

"Images!" repeated Lanier, the thrill of rising excitement in his voice. "What kind of images, captain?"

"Waal, one's a kinda bird, I reckon, 'n' t'other's a

The Mystery Lady

crab; 'n' they're heavy 'n' yaller; 'n' if you ask me I reckon I'd say they's gold."

"Bring them ashore and put out your lights. There may be a glass on Tiger Island spying on you."

3

There was.

Ray\ Wirt, of Stede's Landing, just in with a jug of blockade whisky for Tiger Island, noticed the distant glare off Place-of-Swans, used his night glasses, and reported to Bert Mewling that men were working by torchlight near the Old Man's.

"Aw," said Mewling, "they wanta get their blinds done; they're duckin' weather comin'!"

But after a long observation with Wirt's night glasses:

"That looks funny, Ray. They're a-dredgin'!"

"You reckon the Place-o'-Swans' folk are startin' after treasure, too?"

"Jake Winch ain't no booby, Ray. I guess John Lanier ain't, neither. Mebbe the Loveless girl set 'em to work. I reckon her brother was a fool, and it may run in the family."

"It shore does look that a-way, Bert. See that dredge? See them buckets? I reckon some'n done tole 'em we've struck sunken treasure, 'n' that Loveless girl has started 'em diggin' like a passel o' swan."

Mewling took another look through the night glasses.

"Them buckets is shore dippin' out silt, Ray. They don't want no foundation like that for no duckin' blind, 'n' they ainta aimin' to build no lighthouse. It's funny. What 'n' earth 'r' them folks up to? Why don't you go 'round that way a piece, Ray, 'n' take a peek on your way back?"

"Becuz," remarked Wirt, "it's too ca'm to go a-moseyin' off Tiger to-night; 'n' I reckon I better git fur Bonnet's afore hell busts loose off'n False Cape."

"I reckon," nodded Mewling, leering up at the stars.

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

"Them stars is worse'n them gay women up to No'falk, a-smilin' an' a-winkin' an' invitin' you to take a walk," grunted Wirt, stepping into his launch and giving the wheel a twist. "This here ca'm scares me, 'n' I'm bound to mosey, Bert. You a-comin' back to Bonnet's?"

"Them lights on the Old Man's has went out," said Mewling. "Now what was they a-dredgin' up in them buckets? . . . No, I ain't a-goin' back to-night."

He stood on the rough dock watching the starlit wake of Ray Wirt's motor-boat foaming in the starlight, curving magnificently away into darkness. He put his glasses to his ratty eyes: far out he could make out Wirt's launch rushing westward. Southward, now, all was dark. North and east there were few stars. After a little while none.

"Somer's off'n False Cape," he said to himself, "hell's a-r'arin' 'n' a-t'arin'; 'n' a-comin' into this 'ere sound."

But if hell was what he looked for, peering, listening there in darkness, there was a more convenient inferno at hand—only a few rods away—where an unpainted house stood, from which hung a painted board, "At the Sign of the Gay-Cat." He walked there slowly, slouching along in his sea-boots, listening now to the yelling, and to the outrageous noise of an upright piano. The piano appeared to be intact; it was merely Mr. Potter's technique that had deceived Mr. Mewling.

The occasion for vivacity at the Gay-Cat was the recovery, by a diver, from the hull of a sunken vessel, of about a thousand dollars' worth of silver in pieces-of-eight. Not one among the members of the Forty Club present doubted that the *Red Moon* galley had been located. Therefore they were rejoicing.

They were a picturesque company of ruffians. Like all metropolitan dwellers of their sort, a sojourn in the countryside meant for them an opportunity to abandon convention, live impudently, behave riotously, and neglect personal appearance.

The Mystery Lady

To wallow—that was the instinct—to live unshaven in old clothes, gorge, guzzle, sleep swinishly, relapse into original beastliness—that is the sort of primitive orgy into which such men drift swiftly.

Barney Welper wore a red shirt, a red sash, and a red bandanna twisted around his head. His sprouting beard, to the surprise of all, came out a dirty white. Sam Potter preferred a yellow silk shirt and bandanna and velveteen corduroy trousers; Harry Senix, Dan Supple and Eugene Renton all were clad in gaudy odds and ends—big slouch hats, brilliant shirts and bandannas—and all were drinking Ray Wirt's fiery, white "blockade"; and all were lolling loutishly, yelling the songs that Sam Potter pounded out of the trembling piano :

"Bully Billy Teach
Marooned me on the beach,
And here I lie,
And here I'll die;
I got no rum,
Neither water have I got,
So I suck my thumb
A-waiting for to rot !

"There's no one nigh for to hear my groans
On the red-hot beach where the ebb tide moans;
On the red-hot sand I'll leave my bones;
Oh, it's wetter,
Oh, it's better
Down to Bully Davy Jones !

Refrain.

"Bully Davy Jones !
Bully Davy Jones !
That's where I'd like for to lie;
That's where I'd be,
A-sousing in the sea,
Down—down to Bully Davy Jones !"

"Hey," screeched Bert Mewling into Barney Welper's ear, "they's doin's an' gallivantin's on to Place-o'-Swans."

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

Welper, slightly intoxicated, looked around on the Bonnet Bay man gravely out of eyes no longer focused.

"M—m, certainly," he muttered; "what's it all about?"

"Loveless folk, yon, is started dredgin', same as we uns!" shouted Mewling. "They's took to dredgin' by splinter-light at night. An' they ain't a-dredgin' oysters!"

"Let 'em dredge," retorted Welper owlshly. "We've got the *Red Moon*."

Renton, paler for the fiery drink in him, but with clearer head than Welper, came unsteadily over to where Mewling stood yelling at Welper through the din.

"What do you think the Place-o'-Swans people are up to?" he inquired. "You think they're after treasure, too?"

"Ain't sayin' that. They ain't diggin' oysters. Mebbe they all found a ship, same as we found."

"You mean a Spanish ship?"

"Lawsee, man, how do I know? It ain't like our folk down here to start a-dredgin' by torchlight."

"You told us that the Place-of-Swans people were busy building blinds on that mud-heap."

"I reckon they's dug deep enough for to start a lighthouse, too."

"You suspect they've found a ship, do you?"

Mewling hesitated, and then replied impatiently: "You-all can't prove it by me, Gene Renton. I seen 'em dredgin' by splinter-wood light. Now I've done tole you-uns all I knowed. Now you-uns know all I knowed, 'n' you kin chaw on to it like you was a-chawin' on to a hank o' twist. Gimme a pull at Ray's stuff—I'm dry that-a-way shoutin' like a baptized nigger to a flat-wood fire."

"Bully Davy Jones!
Bully Davy Jones!
That's where I'd like for to lie!"

bawled Sam Potter, hammering the piano till it rocked on the uneven floor. Sweat spangled his large, broad

The Mystery Lady

features; he winked it out of his small, pale eyes, flourished his fists and bellowed the chorus.

Then Renton's penetrating tenor set another verse to the air of "Bully Billy Teach":

"Bully Billy Teach
He left me on the beach,
At dawn o' day,
For that's his way;
He left no crumbs—
Not a morsel on the sands—
So I suck my gums
And I gnaw my hands;
No sail on the sea where the green waves roll—
O for a priest to save my soul—"

Harry Senix pulled a pistol and, raising it, fired into the ceiling to time the chorus.

Suddenly the door opened, and into the heat and smoke and noise there stepped a man and a woman wrapped in dripping rubber coats.

The yelling chorus swelled to a shout. Sam Potter, a large pale cigar screwed into the corner of his mouth, looked around over his shoulder, still thumping the piano. Then he picked up his partly filled glass and towered to his big flat feet as the din rose to a crescendo roar; and waving his glass and facing the new-comers he intoned their impromptu welcome:

"O here's to Happy Helen,
 Drink her down!
O here's to Happy Helen,
 Drink her down!
O here's to Happy Helen,
That's she's buyin' or she's sellin',
Eugene knows but he ain't tellin'
 Drink her down!
"O here's to Donald Mayne,
 Drink him down!
O here's to Donald Mayne,
 Drink him down!
With da greata bigga brain,
For he's brought Eugene his Jane,
 Drink him down!"

The Adventure at The Gay-Gat

Sam Potter's stentorian voice drowned everything; then the Forty cheered vociferously, while Mayne and Helen Wyvern came right into the room and shook hands all round.

"We're on the loose!" yelled Dan Supple. "We got the ship and the first thousand, and there's plenty more to come. How about it, Nellie?"

"Take off your coat, Donnie," added Welper in a thick voice; "this convention is all fresco—m—m—bueno retiro—cappa-d'a-monti—dolce-far-niente——"

"Soused to the fins, you old pirate!" said Mayne with his quick, lively smile. "What's all this—a buccaneer's bally-hoo? What do you think you are—a bunch of Flying Dutchmen, or the Pirates of Penzance?"

Harry Senix, partly dazed but persistent, was trying to tie a red handkerchief over Helen Wyvern's red hair.

"We're a gang o' pirates," he kept repeating; "we're diggin' up pirate jack out of a blinkin' pirate ship. You gotta make us a black flag, Nellie—with a skull and——"

"All right, Harry—quit pulling me about, you fresh dope!—make him stop, Eugene!"

"We wanta flag with a skull an' bones," insisted Senix, "like a dope label——"

"Your face and shin-bones will do," interrupted Eugene Renton, pushing him away; "hit the box, Sam! Everybody fill up! Helen, you better take yours hot."

His resonant, unpleasant tenor voice rang out as he pulled the girl towards him, and he sang with one wiry arm around her supple waist:

"I looked to the East
And I looked to the West,
Where I lay aloft
In the old crow's nest;
And I seen a sail
And I seen her run,
And I up with my flag
And I fire a gun;
Bang! goes the gun,
Up goes the rag,
Hurrah! Hurrah! for the jolly black flag!"

The Mystery Lady

In the din of the chorus Helen Wyvern continued to pull at Renton's arm, trying to make herself heard: "Eugene! Where am I to sleep? I don't want to hit it up to-night—I'm tired, hang it all——"

"You stay put," he retorted, seating himself and pulling her with him. "We've found the *Red Moon*, and we're telling the world we've struck gold!"

Mayne was patiently attempting to extract information from Barney Welper, but, like the classic parrot, "Pieces-of-Eight!" was all that Welper repeated, and his glassy stare offered no further encouragement.

"But pieces-of-eight are silver, not gold," insisted Mrs. Wyvern. "The *Red Moon* was supposed to be loaded with gold! Have you found any gold?"

Harry Senix waved his lank, nicotine-stained fingers vaguely: "Lotsa gold," he said with a deathly leer, "lotsa gold, Nellie. That's my middle name, Nellie—gold! You help yourself—I got millions 'n' millions, 'n' millions—'n' billions——"

The heat from the big sheet-iron stove, the acrid tobacco smoke, the fumes of blockade liquor, were stifling the girl. The din had become terrific. Sam Potter at the piano pounded out a frenzied rag; Renton drew Helen Wyvern into an iron embrace and started to dance with her, his gaudy sash and bandanna fluttering as he moved. Barney Welper got up and gravely attempted an old-fashioned waltz-step by himself; Harry Senix and Dan Supple footed it together with dips and struts and fancy steps.

Mayne opened the door for air.

A few deck-hands from the dredging scow, the diver and his crew and some natives from the saw-mill were clustered around the Gay-Cat shanty, gazing at the gaiety through the dirty windows.

Mayne stepped out; Mrs. Wyvern managed to elude Renton, dodged Senix too, and joined Mayne.

"This is disgusting," she panted; "I'm tired and sleepy and mussed and wet. That was a rough trip

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

across the bay. Have you any idea where our quarters are, Don?"

A man with a lantern pointed out the bunk-house to them.

"They'll keep it up all night," she said to Mayne. "Shall we go?" Her pretty dark eyes regarded him sideways, and she took his arm.

"All right," he said with his quick, agreeable smile; "but I'd better get our luggage first."

He went to the dock, picked up her hand luggage and his own, and returned to where she stood in the lantern light.

"Thanks, Don," she said. "Will you take me over now?"

They walked together towards the bunk-house, where a kerosene lamp burned feebly behind a filthy window.

The door was ajar. They entered. Mayne lifted the lamp and looked around the corridor.

"Here's your name chalked on a door," he remarked.

There was another lamp in the little bedroom. He lighted it for her, and they gazed about at the flimsy, unpainted place with its scanty furniture.

On the bureau stood a cheap pitcher, and in this pitcher somebody had stuck some branches bearing glossy green leaves and set with orange-tinted berries.

"Probably a sentimental attention from Eugene," remarked Mayne, smiling.

The girl turned up her dainty nose.

"Well," said Mayne, "if you're all right here, Helen, I'll beat it."

"Don't go yet, Donnie."

"You said you were tired and sleepy."

"I only meant I didn't care for that kind of party." She seated herself on the flimsy bed and nodded towards the only chair: "Please talk to me, Don."

"No," said Mayne, "Eugene is touchy. I'll be going."

"I don't belong to Eugene."

The Mystery Lady

"Oh! Well, it seems to be his impression that you do——"

"I want to talk to you, Don."

"Why not to-morrow?"

She leaned back against the pillow and drew her prettily shod feet up on to the spread.

"We had two whole days alone together," she sighed, not looking directly at him. "Did you also find our journey agreeable?"

"Certainly."

"So did I. I thought it wonderful."

He remained warily silent.

"Don?"

"Yes?"

"If you think Eugene Renton ever interested me sentimentally you are mistaken. I merely want you to know the truth."

"I am much flattered by your confidence."

"I don't think you are. I don't believe you ever could be flattered."

"All men can be," he said, laughing. "It's the universal masculine failing. None is exempt."

She shook her dark head. "You're very clever, Don. You're different from most men. You look like a jolly sort of boy; and you laugh like one. But there's age-old wisdom behind those boyish blue eyes of yours. I've often watched you at the Forty Club, and I've wished I knew you better. All you ever let women see of you is your nice manner and your quick smile. You always seem to be too busily occupied to be interested in——" She hesitated.

"In what?"

"In—sentiment."

His quick laugh rang out.

"It's the general impression that you have little use for women," she insisted. "I suppose that's why Eugene suggested that you come down here with me."

"Glad to be considered safe and sane," he said.

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

"Are you really? Most men like to be considered dangerous."

"Well, I'm not dangerous," he admitted smilingly.

"Are you quite sure, Don? . . . Because I am not."

He glanced at her, got up, looked at her outstretched hand. It was a wistful gesture and a lovely hand, softly persuasive; and it remained extended towards him. He took it politely, gave it a friendly little shake.

"Good night," he said. "Hope you have a jolly good rest. We'll take a look around to-morrow."

He went out, closing her door behind him. Farther along in the corridor he discovered his own name chalked on a pine door. The door was ajar and he went in, carrying his suit-case.

"If I don't look out," he thought, "that girl will involve me in a shooting scrape with Renton before I get off this island."

He slipped quickly into his pyjamas and then into bed.

As he lay there in darkness he could hear the revelry at the Gay-Cat, the sound of the piano, hoarse voices loud in song—free-booters' songs of the Forty Club.

"Continue to sing," he said grimly; "you'll be whining a sicker tune before I finish with you, gentlemen."

He turned over, felt for his two pistols, located them, placed his flashlight beside them, and closed his eyes. The girl down the corridor didn't interfere with his slumbers. Yet, understanding her species, he remained a trifle concerned about Renton.

"It would be like her," he thought, "to stir up that cold-blooded skunk. He's a bad one, and so is she. I don't intend to mix it with either of them."

He slept after a while. He may have been asleep for two hours or more when he awoke suddenly with a light in his eyes.

Helen Wyvern stood by his bed holding a lamp.

"Don?"

The Mystery Lady

"What?" he asked coldly.

"Who do you suppose they've caught on this island?"

"I don't know. Who?"

"They've caught that wretched little sneak, Dick Loveless."

Mayne lay still for a moment, then he yawned and sat up in bed.

"I thought he was dead," he remarked vaguely.

"Well, he isn't. One of the natives—Bert Mewling, of Bonnet Bay—recognized him hanging around the diving dock. They told Welper, but he's too drunk to understand. Eugene wants to shoot him, but Sam Potter says he's more value alive."

"Why?"

"Well, I suppose Sam wants us all to make an honest penny on the side. I've got a dictagraph record in Barney's safe that could send that snivelling cub to prison—unless his sister cares to buy him off."

"Isn't she John Lanier's girl?"

"Eugene tells me that we're through with John Lanier," said Mrs. Wyvern calmly. "His girl acted up like a gay-cat, and Eugene means to bump him off on sight. That's what Eugene told me just now. I think he means to croak that kid."

"Where have they got the boy?"

"Locked up in the tool-house. What do you think of that rotten kid faking a bump-off to fool us and getting away with it? Eugene says we ought to bump him off for fair. He says he's sure to squeal if we don't. Eugene hates a squealer. I don't know what Barney might decide if he were sober."

"Is Barney Welper very drunk?"

"Very," said the girl. "Do you think Eugene ought to wait 'til Barney sobers up?"

"Certainly, there's plenty of time to fix the kid," replied Mayne drowsily. And he dropped back and buried his curly head in the pillow.

The lamp in the girl's hand trembled a trifle. "Good

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

night, Donnie," she said softly. But Mayne seemed to be already asleep.

The instant his door closed and the girl had gone, Majne got out of bed, dressed swiftly, took both pistols in one hand, his shoes in the other, opened his door, and crept out into the lamp-lit corridor.

He knew Eugene Renton; he knew that he was absolutely cold-blooded, and he was terribly convinced that if Renton considered the Loveless boy as a possible squealer, the boy would never live till sunrise.

As he crept past Helen Wyvern's door he listened, but did not hear her stir.

Out on the road he put on his shoes. As he finished tying them he saw Renton come out of the Gay-Cat and start towards the tool-house, where a splinter-torch was burning. He carried a key in one hand and a pistol in the other.

The key was already in the keyhole, and Renton was already turning it when Mayne's hand fell on his slender, bony wrist, pushed it away, and jerked out the key.

"What's the matter with *you!*" snapped Renton in angry surprise.

"Eugene," replied Mayne smilingly, "you're getting a little too fresh. Maybe because you've made a lot of money you think you're running the Forty Club. You're wrong!"

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. You've made a lot of easy money in South America. But everybody hasn't been as lucky. Some of us still need jack. That kid in there may prove a source of revenue. But you've got yours; you don't care, so you come out here to bump the kid without asking anybody's opinion. It isn't done, old top!"

"He's a squealer, that's why. You bump a squealer where you find him."

"All right, but pump him first, then bump him. Isn't his sister's money good? Maybe it isn't worth your trouble, but it's good enough for a poor guy like me."

The Mystery Lady

"Safety first," insisted Renton stubbornly. "If that kid squeals on the Orizava Oil crowd, where'll I be? You weren't in it, Donnie, and you don't care——"

"That's all right, but you're not running the Forty Club, Eugene. Don't think it. If there's any revenue to be had out of this kid, I want mine. I've a right to it. Keep off till I get it. After she's bled white I don't care what you do to the kid."

"I tell you," insisted Renton, "we'd better bump him. It's a safe job. He's supposed to be dead. I don't want that habbling kid running around and blabbing——"

"You wait to hear what Barney has to say. You can't put anything over on me!"

In Renton's pale visage the contracting eyes grew deadly.

"Is—that—so?" he sneered.

"Sure it's so. Don't try any of your nervous temperament on me, Eugene. I don't like it."

"Give me that key."

"Well, we'll leave it in the door," said Mayne pleasantly.

As he put it into the keyhole Renton reached for it.

"Don't touch it," smiled Mayne.

"What'll you do?"

"Blow your bean to bits," replied Mayne, still smiling.

Renton reached for the key, found himself closely inspecting two pistols, stood frozen, white as a corpse.

"Sorry," said Mayne cheerfully; "but both these guns are likely to go right off in your face if you touch that key. I think you'd better back off a little. . . . That's the idea. . . . Thank you, Eugene. And don't ever again try to interfere with my legitimate sources of income. . . . That's one of the rules of the Forty Club. Any member monkeying with another's source of income is liable to be bumped. *You* know that. And if ever you try it again I'll lay it before the club, and you'll get a great big fat fine which you won't like. Because you're stingy, Eugene, and you never staked a guy in all your life."

The Adventure at The Gay-Cat

"All right," retorted Renton venomously, "I'll bet you a thousand dollars right now that Barney says to bump the kid. Do you take me on?"

Mayne yawned. "No, I'm poor. And, also, whatever Barney says goes."

"You bet it goes," barked Renton, white and exasperated; "and we'll settle the matter now!"

He glared palely at Mayne, glared at the locked door of the tool-house, turned sharply on his heel, and hurried towards the Gay-Cat in search of Mr. Welper.