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Absalom Martin**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KASTLE KRAGS: A STORY OF MYSTERY ***

KASTLE KRAGS
A STORY OF MYSTERY
BY
ABSALOM MARTIN



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KASTLE KRAGS

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CHAPTER I

Who could forget the Ochakee River, and the valley through which it flows! The river itself rises in one of those lost and nameless lakes in the Floridan central ridge, then is hidden at once in the live oak and cypress forests that creep inland from the coasts. But it can never be said truly to flow. Over the billiard-table flatness of that land it moves so slowly and silently that it gives the effect of a lake stirred by the wind. These dark waters, and the moss-draped woodlands through which they move, are the especial treasure-field and delight of the naturalist and scientist from the great universities of the North.

It is a lost river; and it is still a common thing to see a brown, lifeless, floating log suddenly flash, strike, and galvanize into a diving alligator. The manatee, that grotesque, hair-lipped caricature of a sea-lion, still paddles in the lower waters; and the great gar, who could remember, if he would, the days when the nightmare wings of the pterodactyls whipped and hummed over his native waters, makes deadly hunting-trips up and down the stream, sword-like jaws all set and ready; and all manner of smaller fry offer pleasing possibilities to the sportsmen. The water-fowl swarm in countless numbers: fleet-winged travelers such as ducks and geese, long-legged dignitaries of the crane and heron tribe, gay-colored birds that flash by and out of sight before the eye can identify them, and bitterns, like town-criers, booming the river news for miles up and down the shores. And of course the little perchers are past all counting in the arching trees of the river-bank.

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In the forests the fleet, under-sized Floridan deer is watchful and furtive because of the activities of that tawny killer, the "catamount" of the frontier; and the black bear sometimes grunts and soliloquizes and gobbles persimmons in the thickets. The lynx that mews in the twilight, the raccoon that creeps like a furtive shadow through the velvet darkness, the pink-nosed 'possum that can only sleep when danger threatens, and such lesser folk as rabbit and squirrel, weasel and skunk, all have their part in the drama of the woods. Then there are the game-birds: wild turkey, pheasant, and that little red quail, the Bob White known to Southern sportsmen.

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Yet the Ochakee country conveys no message of brightness and cheer. Some way, there are too many shadows. The river itself is a moving sea of shadows; and if the sun ever gets to them, it is just an unhappy glimpse through the trees in the long, still afternoons. The trees are mostly draped with Spanish moss that sways like dark tresses in the little winds that creep in from the gulf, and the trees creak and complain and murmur one to another throughout the night. The air is dank, lifeless, heavy with the odors of vegetation decaying underfoot. There is more death than life in the forest, and all travelers know it, and not one can tell why. It is easier to imagine death than life, the trail grows darker instead of brighter, a murky mystery dwells between the distant trunks.... Ordinarily such abundant wild-life relieves the somber, unhappy tone of the woods, but here it some way fails to do so. No woodsman has to be told how much more cheerful it makes him feel, how less lonely and depressed, to catch sight of a doe and fawn, feeding in the downs, or even a raccoon stealing down a creek-bank in the mystery of the moon; but here the wild things always seem to hide when you want them most; and if they show themselves at all, it is just as a fleet shadow at the edge of the camp-fire. These are cautious, furtive things, fleet as shadows, hidden as the little flowers that blossom among the grass-stems; and such woodsfolk as do make their presence manifest do not add, especially, to the pleasure of one's visit. These are two in particular—the water-moccasin that hangs like a growing thing in the wisteria, and the great, diamond-back rattlesnake whose bite is death.

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The river flows into the gulf about half-way down the peninsula, and here is the particular field of the geologist, rather than the naturalist. For miles along the shore the underlying limestone and coralline rocks crop up above the blue-green water, forming a natural sea-wall. Here, in certain districts, the thickets have been cleared away, wide areas planted to rice, and a few ancient colonial homes stand fronting the sea. Also the sportsman fishes for tarpon beyond the lagoons.

A strange, unhappy land of mystery; a misty, enchanted place whose tragic beauty no artist can

trace and whose disconsolate appeal no man can fathom! Forests are never cheerful, silent and steeped in shadow as they are, but these moss-grown copses beside the Ochakee, and crowding down to the very shores of the gulf, have an actual weight of sadness, like a curse laid down when the world was just beginning. Yet Grover Nealman defied the disconsolate spirit of the land. He dared to disturb the cathedral silence of those mossy woods with the laughter of carefree guests, and to hold high revelry on the shores of that dismal sea.

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CHAPTER II

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The allurements of a September day had brought me far down the trail, past the neck of the marsh, and far from my accustomed haunts. But I could never resist September weather, particularly when the winds are still, and the sun through the leaves dapples the trail like a fawn's back, and the woods are so silent that the least rustle of a squirrel in the thicket cracks with a miniature explosion. And for all the gloom of the woods, and the tricky windings and cut-backs of that restless little serpent of a trail, I still knew approximately where I was. A natural sense of direction was seemingly implanted with less essential organs in my body at birth.

The Ochakee River wound its lazy way to the sea somewhere to my right. A half mile further the little trail ended in a brown road over which a motor-car, in favorable seasons, might safely pass. The Nealman estate, known for forty miles up and down the shore, lay at the juncture of the trail and the road—but I hadn't the least idea of pushing on that far. Neither fortune nor environment had fitted me to move in such a circle as sometimes gathered on the wide verandas of Kastle Krags.

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I was lighting a pipe, ready to turn back, when the leaves rustled in the trail in front. It was just a whisper of sound, the faintest scratch-scratch of something approaching at a great distance, and only the fact that my senses had been trained to silences such as these enabled me to hear it at all. It is always a fascinating thing to stand silent on a jungle-trail, conjecturing what manner of creature is pushing toward you under the pendulous moss: perhaps a deer, more graceful than any dancer that ever cavorted before the footlights, or perhaps (stranger things have happened) that awkward, snuffling, benevolent old gentleman, the black bear. This was my life, so no wonder the match flared out in my hand. And then once more I started to turn back.

I had got too near the Nealman home, after all. I suddenly recognized the subdued sound as that of a horse's hoofs in the moss of the trail. Some one of the proud and wealthy occupants of the old manor house was simply enjoying a ride in the still woods. But it was high time he turned back! The marshes of the Ochakee were no place for tenderfeet; and this was not like riding in Central Park! Some of the quagmires I had passed already to-day would make short work of horse and rider.

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My eye has always been sensitive to motion—in this regard not greatly dissimilar from the eyes of the wild creatures themselves—and I suddenly caught a flash of moving color through a little rift in the overhanging branches. The horseman that neared me on the trail was certainly gayly dressed! The flash I caught was *pink*—the pink that little girls fancy in ribbons—and a derisive grin crept to my lips before I could restrain it. There was no mistaking the fact that I was beginning to have the woodsman's intolerance for city furs and frills! Right then I decided to wait.

It might pay to see how this rider had got himself up! It might afford certain moments of amusement when the still mystery of the Floridan night dropped over me again. I drew to one side and stood still on the trail.

The horse walked near. The rider wasn't a man, after all. It was a girl in the simplest, yet the prettiest, riding-habit that eyes ever laid upon, and the prettiest girl that had ridden that trail since the woods were new.

The intolerant grin at my lips died a natural death. She might be the proud and haughty daughter of wealth, such a type as our more simple country-dwellers robe with tales of scandal, yet the picture that she made—astride that great, dark horse in the dappled sunlight of the trail—was one that was worth coming long miles to see. The dark, mossy woods were a perfect frame, the shadows seemed only to accentuate her own bright coloring.

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It wasn't simply because I am a naturalist that I instantly noticed and stored away immutably in my memory every detail of that happy, pretty face. The girl had blue eyes. I've seen the same shade of blue in the sea, a dark blue and yet giving the impression of incredible brightness. Yet it was a warm brightness, not the steely, icy glitter of the sea. They were friendly, wholesome, straightforward eyes, lit with the joy of living; wide-open and girlish. The brows were fine and dark above them, and above these a clear, girlish forehead with never a studied line. Her hair was brown and shot with gold—indeed, in the sunlight, it looked like old, red gold, finely spun.

She was tanned by the Florida sun, yet there was a bright color-spot in each cheek. I thought she had rather a wistful mouth, rather full lips, half-pouting in some girlish fancy. Of course she hadn't observed me yet. She was riding easily, evidently thinking herself wholly alone.

Her form was slender and girlish, of medium height, yet her slender hands at the reins held her

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big horse in perfect control. The heels of her trim little shoes touched his side, and the animal leaped lightly over a fallen log. Then she saw me, and her expression changed.

It was, however, still unstudied and friendly. The cold look of indifference I had expected and which is such a mark of ill-breeding among certain of her class, didn't put in its appearance. I removed my hat, and she drew her horse up beside me.

It hadn't occurred to me she would actually stop and talk. It had been rather too much to hope for. And I knew I felt a curious little stir of delight all over me at the first sound of her friendly, gentle voice.

"I suppose you are Mr. Killdare?" she said quietly.

Every one knows how a man quickens at the sound of his own name. "Yes, ma'am," I told her—in our own way of speaking. But I didn't know what else to say.

"I was riding over to see you—on business," she went on. "For my uncle—Grover Nealman, of Kastle Kraggs. I'm his secretary."

The words made me stop and think. It was hard for me to explain, even to myself, just why they thrilled me far under the skin, and why the little tingle of delight I had known at first gave way to a mighty surge of anticipation and pleasure. It seems to be true that the first thing we look for in a stranger is his similarity to us, and the second, his dissimilarity; and in these two factors alone rests our attitude towards him. It has been thus since the beginning of the world—if he is too dissimilar, our reaction is one of dislike, and I suppose, far enough down the scale of civilization, we would immediately try to kill him. If he has enough in common with ourselves we at once feel warm and friendly, and invite him to our tribal feasts.

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Perhaps this was the way it was between myself and Edith Nealman. She wasn't infinitely set apart from me—some one rich and experienced and free of all the problems that made up my life. Nealman's niece meant something far different than Nealman's daughter—if indeed the man had a daughter. She was his secretary, she said—a paid worker even as I was. She had come to see me on business—and no wonder I was anticipatory and elated as I hadn't been for years!

"I'm glad to know you, Miss——" I began. For of course I didn't know her name, then.

"Miss Nealman," she told me, easily. "Now I'll tell you what my uncle wants. He heard about you, from Mr. Todd."

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I nodded. Mr. Todd had brought me out from the village and had helped me with some work I was doing for my university, in a northern state.

"He was trying to get Mr. Todd to help him, but he was busy and couldn't do it," the girl went on. "But he said to get Ned Killdare—that you could do it as well as he could. He said no one knew the country immediately about here any better than you—that though you'd only been here a month or two you had been all over it, and that you knew the habits of the turkeys and quail, and the best fishing grounds, better than any one else in the country."

I nodded in assent. Of course I knew these things: on a zoological excursion for the university they were simply my business. But as yet I couldn't guess how this information was to be of use to Grover Nealman.

"Now this is what my uncle wants," the girl went on. "He's going to have a big shoot and fish for some of his man friends—they are coming down in about two weeks. They'll want to fish in the Ochakee River and in the lagoon, and hunt quail and turkey, and my uncle wants to know if—if he can possibly—hire you as guide."

I liked her for her hesitancy, the uncertainty with which she spoke. Her voice had nothing of that calm superiority that is so often heard in the offering of humble employment. She was plainly considering my dignity—as if anything this sweet-faced girl could say could possibly injure it!

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"All he wanted of you was to stay at Kastle Kraggs during the hunting party, and be able to show the men where to hunt and fish. You won't have to act as—as anybody's valet—and he says he'll pay you real guide's wages, ten dollars a day."

"When would he want me to begin?"

"Right away, if you could—to-morrow. The guests won't be here for two weeks, but there are a lot of things to do first. You see, my uncle came here only a short time ago, and all the fishing-boats need overhauling, and everything put in ship-shape. Then he thought you'd want some extra time for looking around and locating the game and fish. The work would be for three weeks, in all."

Three weeks! I did some fast figuring, and I found that twenty days, at ten dollars a day, meant two hundred dollars. Could I afford to refuse such an offer as this?

It is true that I had no particular love for many of the city sportsmen that came to shoot turkey and to fish in the region of the Ochakee. The reason was simply that "sportsmen," for them, was a misnomer: that they had no conception of sport from its beginnings to its end, and that they could only kill game like butchers. Then I didn't know that I would care about being employed in such a capacity.

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Yet two or three tremendous considerations stared me in the face. In the first place, I was really

in need of funds. I had not yet obtained any of the higher scholastic degrees that would entitle me to decent pay at the university—I was merely a post-graduate student, with the complimentary title of “instructor.” I had offered to spend my summer collecting specimens for the university museum at a wage that barely paid for my traveling expenses and supplies, wholly failing to consider where I would get sufficient funds to continue my studies the following year.

Scarcity of money—no one can feel it worse than a young man inflamed with a passion for scientific research! There were a thousand things I wanted to do, a thousand journeys into unknown lands that haunted my dreams at night, but none of them were for the poor. The two hundred dollars Grover Nealman would pay me would not go far, yet I simply couldn’t afford to pass it by. Of course I could continue my work for my alma mater at the same time.

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Yet while I thought of these things, I knew that I was only lying to myself. They were subterfuges only, excuses to my own conscience. The instant she had opened her lips to speak I had known my answer.

To refuse meant to go back to my lonely camp in the cypress. I hoped I wasn’t such a fool as that. To accept meant three weeks at Kastle Krag—and daily sight of this same lovely face that now held fast my eyes. Could there be any question which course I would choose?

“Go—I should say I will go,” I told her. “I’ll be there bright and early to-morrow.”

I thought she looked pleased, but doubtless I was mistaken.

CHAPTER III

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It didn’t take long to pack my few belongings. At nine o’clock the following morning I broke camp and walked down the long trail to Kastle Krag.

No wonder the sportsmen liked to gather at this old manor house by the sea. It represented the best type of southern homes—low and rambling, old gardens and courts, wide verandas and stately pillars. It was an immense structure, yet perfectly framed by the shore and the lagoon and the glimpse of forest opposite, and it presented an entirely cheerful aspect as I emerged from the dark confinement of the timber.

It was a surprising thing that a house could be cheerful in such surroundings: forest and gray shore and dark blue-green water. The house itself was gray in hue, the columns snowy white, the roof dark green and blending wonderfully with the emerald water. Flowers made a riot of color between the structure and the formal lawns.

But more interesting than the house itself was the peculiar physical formation of its setting. The structure had been erected overlooking a long inlet that was in reality nothing less than a shallow lagoon. A natural sea-wall stretched completely across the neck of the inlet, cutting off the lagoon from the open sea. There are many natural sea-walls along the Floridan coast, built mostly of limestone or coralline rock, but I had never seen one so perfect and unbroken. Stretching across the mouth of the lagoon it made a formidable barrier that not even the smallest boat could pass.

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It was a long wall of white crags and jagged rocks, and I thought it likely that it had suggested the name of the estate. It was plain, however, that the wall did not withstand the march of the tides. The tide was running in as I drew near, and the waves broke fiercely over and against the barrier, and little rivulets and streams of water were evidently pouring through its miniature crevices. The house was built two hundred yards from the shore of the lagoon, perhaps three hundred yards from the wall, and the green lawns went down half-way to it. Beyond this—except of course for the space occupied by the lagoon itself—stretched the gray, desolate sand.

Beyond the wall the inlet widened rapidly, and the rolling waves gave the impression of considerable depth. I had never seen a more favorable place for a sportsman’s home. Besides the deep-sea fishing beyond the rock wall, it was easy to believe that the lagoon itself was the home of countless schools of such hard-fighting game-fish as loved such craggy seas. The lagoon was fretful and rough from the flowing tide at that moment, offering no inducements to a boatman, but I surmised at once that it would be still as a lake in the hours that the tide ebbed. The shore was a favorable place for the swift-winged shorebirds that all sportsmen love—plover and curlew and their fellows. And the mossy, darkling forest, teeming with turkey and partridge, stretched just behind.

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Yet the whole effect was not only of beauty. I stood still, and tried to puzzle it out. The atmosphere talked of in great country houses is more often imagined than really discerned; but if such a thing exists, Kastle Krag was literally steeped in it. Like Macbeth’s, the castle has a pleasant seat—and yet it moved you, in queer ways, under the skin.

I am not, unfortunately, a particularly sensitive man. Working from the ground up, I have been so busy preserving the keen edges of my senses that I have quite neglected my sensibilities. I couldn’t put my finger on the source of the strange, mental image that the place invoked; and the thing irritated and disturbed me. The subject wasn’t worth a busy man’s time, yet I couldn’t leave it alone.

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The house was not different from a hundred houses scattered through the south. It was larger than most of the larger colonial homes, and constructed with greater artistry. If it had any atmosphere at all, other than comfort and beauty, it was of cheer. Yet I didn't feel cheerful, and I didn't know why. I felt even more sobered than when the moss of the cypress trees swept over my head. But soon I thought I saw the explanation.

The image of desolation and eery bleakness had its source in the wide-stretching sands, the unforgettable sea beyond, and particularly the inlet, or lagoon, up above the natural dam of stone. The rocks that enclosed the lagoon would have been of real interest to a geologist—to me they were merely bleak and forbidding, craggy and gray and cold. Unquestionably they contained many caverns and crevices that would be worth exploring. And I was a little amazed at the fury with which the incoming waves beat against and over the rocky barrier. They came with a veritable ferocity, and the sea beyond seemed hardly rough enough to justify them.

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Grover Nealman himself met me when I turned on to the level, gravel driveway. There was nothing about him in keeping with that desolate driveway. A familiar type, he looked the gentleman and sportsman that he was. Probably the man was forty-four or forty-five years old, but he was not the type that yields readily to middle-age. Nealman unquestionably still considered himself a young man, and he believed it heartily enough to convince his friends. Self-reliant, inured to power and influence, somewhat aristocratic, he could not yield himself to the admission of the march of the years. He was of medium height, rather thickly built, with round face, thick nose, and rather sensual lips; but his eyes, behind his tortoise-shell glasses, were friendly and spirited; and his hand-clasp was democratic and firm. By virtue of his own pride of race and class he was a good sportsman: likely a crack shot and an expert fisherman. Probably a man that drank moderately, was still youthful enough to enjoy a boyish celebration, a man who lived well, who had traveled widely and read good books, and who could carry out the traditions of a distinguished family—this was Grover Nealman, master of Kastle Kraggs.

I didn't suppose for a moment that Nealman had made his own fortune. There were no fighting lines in his face, nor cold steel of conflict in his eyes. There was one deep, perpendicular line between his eyes, but it was born of worry, not battle. The man was moderately shrewd, probably able to take care of his investments, yet he could never have been a builder, a captain of industry. He dressed like a man born to wealth, well-fitting white flannels whose English tailoring afforded free room for arm and shoulder movements; a silk shirt and soft white collar, panama hat and buckskin shoes.

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He was not a southerner. The first words he uttered proved that fact.

"So you are Mr. Killdare," he said easily. He didn't say it "Killdaih," as he would had he been a native of the place. "Come with me into my study. I can tell you there what I've got lined up. I'm mighty glad you've come."

We walked through the great, massive mahogany door, and he paused to introduce me to a middle-aged man that stood in the doorway. "Florey," he said, kindly and easily, "I want you to meet Mr. Killdare."

His tone alone would have identified the man's station, even if the dark garb hadn't told the story plainly. Florey was unquestionably Nealman's butler. Nor could anyone have mistaken his walk of life, in any street of any English-speaking city. He was the kind of butler one sees upon the stage but rarely in a home, the kind one associates with old, stately English homes but which one rarely finds in fact—almost too good a butler to be true. He was little and subdued and gray, gray of hair and face and hands, and his soft voice, his irreproachable attitude of respect and deference seemed born in him by twenty generations of butlers. He said he was glad to know me, and his bony, soft-skinned hand took mine.

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I'm afraid I stared at Florey. I had lived too long in the forest: the staring habit, so disconcerting to tenderfeet on their first acquaintance with the mountain people, was surely upon me. I think that the school of the forest teaches, first of all, to look long and sharply while you have a chance. The naturalist who follows the trail of wild game, even the sportsman knows this same fact—for the wild creatures are incredibly furtive and give one only a second's glimpse. I instinctively tried to learn all I could of the gray old servant in the instant that I shook his hand.

He was the butler, now and forever, and I wondered if, beneath that gray skin, he were really human at all. Did he know human passion, human ambition and desires: sheltered in his master's house, was he set apart from the lusts and the madresses, the calms and the storms, the triumphs and the defeats that made up the lives of other men? Yet his gray, rather dim old eyes told me nothing. There were no fires, visible to me, glowing in their depths. A human clam—better still, a gray mole that lives out his life in darkness.

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From him we passed up the stairs and to a big, cool study that apparently joined his bedroom. There were desks and chairs and a letter file. Edith Nealman was writing at the typewriter.

If I had ever supposed that the girl had taken the position of her uncle's secretary merely as a girlish whim, or in some emergency until a permanent secretary could be secured, I was swiftly disillusioned. There was nothing of the amateur in the way her supple fingers flew over the keys. She had evidently had training in a business college; and her attitude towards Nealman was simply that of a secretary towards her employer. She leaned back as if waiting for orders.

"You can go, if you like, Edith," Nealman told her. "I'm going to talk awhile with Killdare, here,

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and you wouldn't be able to work anyway."

She got up; and she threw me a smile of welcome and friendliness as she walked out the study door.

CHAPTER IV

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Nealman had me take a chair, then seated himself before the window from which he could overlook the lagoon. "I always like to sit where I can watch it," he told me—rather earnestly, I thought. "I can't see much of it—just a glimpse—but that's worth while. The room I've designated for your use has even a better view. You can't imagine, Killdare, until you've lived with it, how really marvelous it is—how many colors play in the lagoon itself, and in the waves as they break over the Bridge——"

"The Bridge——"

"That's the name we've given to the natural rock wall that cuts off the lagoon—rather, the inlet—from the open sea," he explained.

"It's one of the most interesting natural formations I've ever seen," I told him.

"It is, isn't it?" He spoke with genuine enthusiasm. "And don't the crags take peculiar shapes around it? You see it makes a veritable salt-water lake out of all this end of the inlet. But Killdare—if you can overlook the dreariness and the desolation of it all, it certainly is beautiful——"

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I nodded. "With a creepy kind of beauty," I told him. "I wish some great artist could come here and paint it. But it would take a great one—to get the atmosphere. I've never seen a more wonderful place for a distinguished home."

It was rather remarkable how pleased he was by the words—particularly coming from a humble employee. Evidently Kastle Kraggs was close to his heart. His face glowed and his eye kindled.

"I'm wild about it myself," he confessed. "My friends want to know why I bought such a place—miles from a habitation—and guy me for a hermit, and all that. Once they see the place, and its devilish fascination gets hold of 'em, they won't want to leave."

From thence the talk led to business, and he questioned me in regard to the game and fish of the region. I assured him that his friends would have sport in plenty, that I knew where to lead them to turkey and partridge, and that no better fishing could be found in the whole south than in the Ochakee River. He seemed satisfied with my knowledge of the country; and told me a little of his own plans. Just as Edith Nealman had told me, he was planning a week's fish and hunt for a half dozen of his man friends, beginning a fortnight from then. They were coming a long way—so he wanted to give them sport of the best. The servant problem had been easily solved—he had recruited from the negro section of the nearest city—but until he had talked with my friend, Mr. Todd, he had been at a loss as to where he could procure a suitable guide.

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"I'd like to have a guide for each man, if I could," he went on, "but of course they are not to be found. Besides, only a small part of the party will want to go out at once. Most of them will be content to hang around here, drinking my brandies and fishing in the lagoon."

"How is fishing in the lagoon?" I asked.

"The best. Sometimes we even take tarpon. All kinds of rock fish—and they fight like fiends. The rocks are just full of little crevices and caves, and I suppose the fish live in 'em. These same crevices are the source of one of the most interesting of the many legends connected with this house."

It's a dull man that doesn't love legends, and I felt my interest stirring. "There are some tales here, eh?"

"Tales! Man, that's one of the reasons I bought the place."

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Nealman needed no further urging. Evidently the old stories that almost invariably accumulate about such an ancient and famous manor-house as this, had the greatest fascination for him; and he was glad of the chance to narrate them to any listener. He lighted a cigarette: then turned to me with glistening eyes.

"Of course I don't believe them," he began. "Don't get that in your head for an instant. All these old houses have some such yarns. But they surely do lend a flavor to the place—and I wouldn't have them disproved for thousands of dollars. And one of them—the one I just referred to—surely is a corker."

He straightened in his chair, and spoke more earnestly. "Killdare, you're not troubled with a too-active imagination?"

"I'll take a chance on it," I told him.

"I've seen a few men, in my time, that I wouldn't tell such a yarn to for love nor money—especially when they are doomed to stay around here for a few weeks. You won't believe it, but

some men are so nervous, so naturally credulous, that they'd actually have some unpleasant dreams about it. But I consider it one of the finest attractions of the place.

"The yarn's very simple. About 1840, a schooner, sailing under the Portuguese flag, sailed from Rio de Janeiro. Her name was the *Arganil*, she had a mixed cargo, and she was bound for New Orleans. These are facts, Killdare. You can ascertain them any time from the marine records. But we can't go much further.

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"Among the crew were two brothers, Jason by name. Legend says that they were Englishmen, but what Englishmen were doing on a Portuguese ship I can't tell you. The name, however, might easily be South-European—it appears, you remember, in Greek mythology. Now this point also has some indications of truth. There was certainly one Jason, at least, shipped as boatswain—the position of the other is considerably in doubt.

"Now we've got to get down to a matter of legend, yet with some substance of truth. The story goes that there was a treasure chest on the ship, the property of some immensely rich Brazilian, and that it contained certain treasures that had been the property of a Portuguese prince at the time that the court of Portugal was located in Rio de Janeiro. This was from 1808 to 1821—breaking up in a revolution just a hundred years ago. This is history, as you know. Just what was the nature of the treasure no one seems to have any idea. It was a rather small chest, so they say, bound with iron, and not particularly heavy—but it was guarded with armed men, day and night. Of course the prevailing belief is that it contained simply gold—the same, yellow, deadly stuff that built the Armada and made early American history. It might have been in the form of cups and vessels, beautiful things that had been stolen from early heathen temples—again it might have been jewels. No estimation of its value was ever made, as far as I know—except that, like all unfound-treasures, it was 'incalculable.'

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"You can believe as much of this as you like. Gold, however, is heavy stuff—no one can carry much over twenty thousand dollars worth. If the chest wasn't really very heavy, and really was of such incalculable value, it had to contain something more than gold.

"This part of the story is pretty convincing. I've investigated, and the legends contain such a wealth of detail concerning the appearance of the chest, how it was guarded, and so on, and the various accounts dovetail so perfectly one with another, that I am personally convinced that the treasure was a reality—at least that such a chest existed on the old ship. When you get into the contents of the chest, however, you find only a maze of conflicting rumors. To me they tend to make the story as a whole even more interesting—and I'll confess I'd love to know what was in that chest.

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"Well, the *Arganil* broke to pieces off the west coast of Florida, not more than twenty miles from here. That fact can not be doubted. There are accounts of the wreck on official record. And legend has it that through Heaven knows what wickedness and bloodshed and cunning, the two Jason brothers not only managed to get off in the stoutest of the ship's boats, but that they carried the treasure with them.

"If there were any other members of the crew in the boat with them they were unquestionably murdered. Nothing was ever heard of them again. The two brothers are said to have landed somewhere close to this lagoon.

"But naked treasure breeds murder! It is a strange thing, Killdare, but the naked, yellow metal, as well as glittering jewels, gets home to human wickedness as nothing else in the world can. If that chest had been full of valuable securities, even paper currency, it wouldn't have left such a red trail from Rio to Florida. Gold and jewels waken a fever of possession out of all proportion to their actual value. When they landed on the shore one of the Jasons neatly murdered the other and made off with the chest.

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"The same old yarn—Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus. Killdare, did you know that fratricide is shockingly common? There are three kinds of brothers, and the Jasons were simply one of the three kinds. Sometimes you find brothers that love each other beyond belief, with a self-sacrificing devotion that is beautiful to see. Then you find the great mass of brothers—liking each other fairly well, loyal in a family scrap, fair pals but much closer to other pals that aren't their brothers. Then you come to this third class, a puzzle to psychologists the world over! Brothers that hate each other like poison snakes.

"Why is it, Killdare? Jealousy? A survival from the beast? These were the kind of brothers that go through life bitter and hating and at swords' points. And all too often they get to the killing stage."

"You find it in the beast-world, too," I commented. "Look at the case of the wolves and the dogs. They are blood-brothers, drop for drop—and they hate each other with a fervor that is simply blood-curdling."

"True enough. I remember hearing about it. Well, one of the Jasons—the one whose cunning conceived of the whole wickedness to start with—killed the other, disposed of his body, and then through some unknown series of events, concealed the treasure.

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"He went away awhile, the old wives say—taking a small portion of the treasure with him. At this point the name of Jason is lost, irremediably, in the mist of the past. But it is true that some two years later a seafaring man, one who had worn earrings and who cursed wickedly as he talked,

came back and bought a great colonial home where the treasure was supposed to have been concealed.

"This part of the story can not be doubted. The county books contain records of the sale, and it's written, plain as day, on the abstract. The man gave his name as Hendrickson.

"Legend has it that this Hendrickson was no one but Godfrey Jason, that he had sold and turned into cash a small part of the treasure, temporarily evaded his pursuers, and had bought the big manor house with the idea of living in luxury the rest of his life. Incidentally, he was accompanied by a Cuban wife.

"It seemed, however, that like most evil-doers, he got little good out of his treasure. He paid only a small amount down on the estate, and after a year or two let it go back to the original owners. He went away, but it doesn't seem likely he took the treasure with him. At least he died wretchedly in poverty some months later, and had spent no large amount of money in between. The report of his death can be found in the records of the city of Tampa, in this state.

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"Now all this is unquestionably a mixture of truth and fact. Unquestionably there is a vein of truth in it; and I don't see but that most of it is fairly credible. But the rest of the yarn is simply laughable.

"I tell it only because it goes with the rest—not that I believe one word of it myself. After you hear what it is you'll wonder I ever took the trouble to tell you that I disbelieved it. It's just the sort of thing imaginative old niggers make up to tell their children. And of course—the niggers on the place believe every word of it.

"They say that this Jason—or Hendrickson—put a guard over his treasure. He was a deep-sea fisherman at one time, when he wasn't a seaman, with considerable acquaintance with the various man-eating monsters of the deep. It is known that Hendrickson did some queer exploring and fishing along the rocky shores beyond the estate. What did the villainous old pirate do but catch some big octopus—or some other such terrible ocean creature—and transplanted him to the lagoon where he was said to have concealed the treasure.

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"That's all there is to it. The beast is supposed to be there yet, growing bigger and fiercer and more terrible year by year. An octopus is supposed to live indefinitely, you know. Once in awhile, the story goes, it creeps up on the rocky shore of the lagoon and grabs off a colored man. When any one searches around for the chest he's apt to meet up with Mr. Monster! Sure proof of his existence, the niggers say, is that Mas'r Somebody or other, the son of one of the subsequent owners of the estate, also mysteriously disappeared and has never been heard of since. When the blacks lose one of their own number they seem to regard it as a mere matter of course—but when 'one of de white folks' is taken, it's another matter! And of course, even to this day, you can't get a colored man to go within two hundred yards of the lagoon at night, and they hate to approach it even in the daylight.

"The lagoon where the chest is supposed to be hidden is the one just outside my window, cut off from the sea by the natural rock wall you just saw. The big crags and rocks and crevices are supposed to conceal his ferociousness the sea-monster, growing bigger and hungrier and fiercer every day. The house that Jason—or Hendrickson—bought, neglected, and let return to the owners is the one you're sitting in, right now."

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CHAPTER V

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After Nealman and I had each smoked a cigarette, I thought of a little plan that might increase his guest's interest in the week's shoot and hunt. He had been right when he said that even incredible legends, believed by no one, still add flavor to the country manor. I didn't see why we shouldn't turn them into account.

"I've got an idea," I told him, "and it all depends whether or not you've already sent the invitations to your guests."

"No, I haven't—just haven't got around to it," he answered. "All I was going to do was to write to about nine or ten of my men friends. I don't suppose all of them can come."

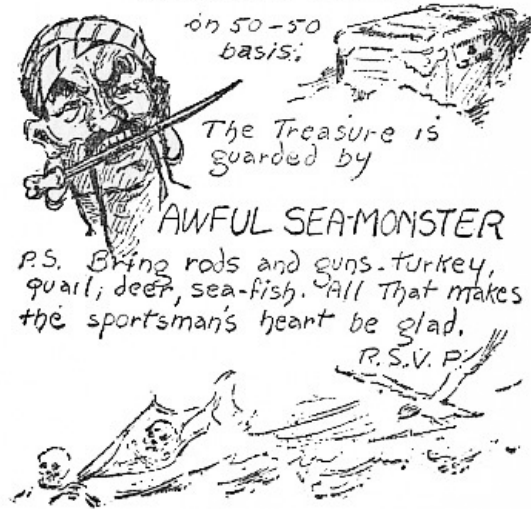
"Good. I thought it might be interesting if we worked that legend into the invitation—just to add a little spice to the fishing and hunting. It might serve to waken a little extra interest in your party. Of course—it includes poking fun at the ferocious Jason and his treasure."

"They'll have a lot more fun poked at them before we're done. As I told you—only the colored people take them seriously at all."

I took out my fountain pen, found a scrap of paper, and drew something like this:

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GRAND TREASURE HUNT
You are hereby invited to rally round at
KASTLE KRAGS
Sept. 6-12; search for
SPANISH GOLD



As my only drawing experience consisted in portraying specimens, it had no artistic pretensions whatever.

He seemed pleased, adopted the plan in an instant, then began to write down the names of his guests so that I could prepare an invitation for each. Most of them, I observed, lived in great cities to the North, New York and Boston particularly, and one or two of the men were more or less nationally known. The first half dozen names came easy. Then he paused, frowning.

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"I wish I knew what to do about this bird," he muttered, as much to himself as to me. "Killdare, I don't suppose you've ever heard of him—Major Kenneth Dell?"

I shook my head. "Not that I remember."

"Well, I haven't either—yet I suppose he's a good sportsman. In the last few weeks he's got close to my best friend, Bill Van Hope, and Bill asked me to ask him down for this shoot. Says he's a distinguished man, the best of fellows, and is simply wild to try Floridan game. Oh, I'll put him down. If Bill recommends him he must be the goods."

He completed the list in a moment, then his duties calling him elsewhere, he left me in the study to prepare the invitations. And the hour turned out fortunately for me, after all. Thinking that the room was empty, Edith Nealman came back to her desk.

All the gold in Jason's chest could not have bought a more lovely picture than she made, standing framed in the doorway. She was dressed in a spotless cotton middy-suit, and the red scarf at her throat brought out to perfection the light in her eyes and the high color in her cheeks. Then she came in and inspected the invitations.

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There was no occasion for me to leave at once. We talked a while, on everything under the sun, and every minute something that was like delight kept growing within me. She'd been up against the world, this girl that chattered so gayly in the big, easy office-chair. She had known poverty, a veritable struggle for existence; yet they hadn't hardened her in the least. No one I had ever met had possessed a sweeter, truer outlook, an unfeigned friendliness and comradeship for every decent thing that lived. Maybe you'd call it a childish simplicity, but I didn't stop to consider what it was. I only knew that she was the prettiest and the sweetest girl I'd ever seen, and I was going to spend every moment possible in her presence.

Oh, but I loved to hear her laugh! I kept my brain busy thinking up things to say to her, that might waken that rippling sound of silver bells! I liked to see her eyes grow serious, and her lips half-pout as some delightful, fanciful thought played hide-and-seek in her mind. She had imagination, this niece of Grover Nealman. Perhaps, after all, it was the secret of her charm. I didn't doubt for a moment but that she read romantic novels by the score, but I, for one, wouldn't hold the fact against her.

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We talked over the legend of Jason's chest; and I was a little surprised at her devoted interest in it. Evidently the savage tale had gone straight home to her imagination. Whether she put the least credence in it I couldn't tell.

It came about, in the twilight hour, that we walked together down to the craggy shore of the lagoon. Then we stood and watched the light dying on the blue-green water.

Once more the tide was rolling in. The waves beat with a startling fury over and against the rock

wall, and in the half-light the white stones looked like the foam-covered fangs of a mighty sea-monster, raging at our intrusion. The water swept through the little crevices in the wall, and the cool spray, refreshing after the tropic day, swept against our faces.

The gray sand stretched down to the desolate sea. A plover uttered his disconsolate, wailing cry far out to sea. Some dark heron or bittern rose croaking from beside the lagoon, then flapped awkwardly away. I felt the girl's hand on my arm as she drew closer to my side.

A worthy place—this manor house of Nealman. Vague thoughts, not quite in keeping with the ordered dimensions of life, had hold of my mind. Presently the girl's grip tightened, and she pointed toward the lagoon.

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I saw her face before I followed her gesture. I didn't get the idea that she was frightened. Rather she was smiling, quietly, and her eyes glistened.

Seventy yards out, and perhaps fifteen yards back from the Bridge, great bubbles were bursting upward through the blue-green troubled waters. Some mysterious action of the currents, stirred by the tides, was the unquestioned cause; yet both of us were stirred by the same fancy. It was as if some great, air-breathing sea-monster was exhaling beneath the waves.

CHAPTER VI

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The next two weeks sped by as if with one rise and fall of the tides. I spent the time in locating the various fields of game: the tall holly-trees where the wild turkeys roosted, the sloughs where the bass were gamest, and marked down the cover of the partridge. In the meantime I collected specimens for the university.

It came about that I didn't always go out alone. The best time of all to study wild-life is in late twilight and the first hours of dawn—and at such times Edith was unemployed. Many the still, late evenings when we stood together on the shore and watched the curlews in their strange, aerial minuet that no naturalist has even been able to explain; many the dewey morning that we watched the first sun's rays probe through the mossy forest. She had an instinctive love for the outdoors, and her agile young body had seemingly fibers of steel. At least she could follow me wherever I wanted to go.

Once we came upon the Floridan deer, feeding in a natural woods-meadow, and once a gigantic manatee, the most rare of large American mammals, flopped in the mud of the Ochakee River. We knew that incredible confusion and bustle made by the wild turkeys when they flew to the tree-tops to roost; and she learned to whistle the partridge out from their thickets.

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Of course we developed a fine companionship. I learned of her early life, a struggle against poverty that had been about to overwhelm her when her uncle had come to her aid; and presently I was telling her all of my own dreams and ambitions. She was wholly sympathetic with my aim to continue my university work for a higher degree; then to spend my life in scientific research. I described some of the expeditions that I had in mind but which seemed so impossible of fulfillment—the exploration of the great "back country" of Borneo, a journey across that mysterious island, Sumatra, the penetration of certain unknown realms of Tibet.

"But they take thousands of dollars—and I haven't got 'em," I told her quietly.

She looked out to sea a long time. "I wish I could find Jason's treasure for you," she answered at last.

I was used to Edith's humor, and I looked up expecting to see the familiar laughter in her eyes. But the luster in those deep, blue orbs was not that of mirth. Fancies as beautiful as she was herself were sweeping her away....

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Most of the guests arrived on the same train at the little town of Ochakee, and motored over to Kastle Kraggs. A half dozen in all had accepted Nealman's invitation. I saw them when they got out of their cars.

Of course I straightened their names out later. At the time I only studied their faces—just as I'd study a new specimen, found in the forest. And when Edith and I compared notes afterward we found that our first impression was the same—that all six were strikingly similar in type.

They might just as well have been brothers, chips off the same block. When Nealman stood among them it seemed as if he might change names with any one of them, and hardly any one could tell the difference. There was nothing distinguishing about their clothes—all were well-dressed, either in white or tweeds; their skins had that healthy firmness and good color that is seen so often in men that are free from financial worry; their hair was cut alike; their linen was similarly immaculate; their accent was practically the same. Finally they were about the same age—none of them very young, none further than the first phases of middle-age.

Lemuel Marten was of course the most distinguished man in the party. Born rich, he had pushed his father's enterprises into many lands and across distant seas, and his name was known, more or less, to all financiers in the nation. His face was perhaps firmer than the rest—his voice was more commanding and insistent. He was, perhaps, fifty years of age, stoutly built, with crinkling

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black hair and vivid, gray eyes. From time to time he stroked nervously a trim, perfectly kept iron-gray mustache.

Hal Fargo had been a polo-player in his day. Certain litheness and suppleness of motion still lingered in his body. His face was darkly brown, and white teeth gleamed pleasantly when he spoke. A pronounced bald spot was the only clew of advancing years. He was of medium height, slender, evidently a man of great personal magnetism and charm.

Joe Nopp was quite opposite, physically—rather portly, perhaps less dignified than most of his friends. I put down Nopp as a dead shot, and later I found I had guessed right. For all his plump, florid cheeks and his thick, white hands, he had an eye true as a surveyor's instrument, nerves cold and strong as a steel chain. He was a man to be relied upon in a crisis. And both Edith and I liked him better than any of the others.

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Lucius Pescini was an aristocrat of the accepted type—slender, tall, unmistakably distinguished. His hair was such a dark shade of brown that it invariably passed as black, he had eyes no less dark, sparkling under dark brows, and his small mustache and perfectly trimmed beard was in vivid contrast to a rather pale skin.

Of Major Kenneth Dell I had never heard. He had been an officer in the late war, and now he was Bill Van Hope's friend, although not yet acquainted with Nealman. The two men met cordially, and Van Hope stood above them, the tallest man in the company by far, beaming friendship upon them both. Dell was of medium size, sturdily built, garbed with exceptionally good taste in imported flannels. He also had gray, vivid eyes, under rather fine brows, gray hair perfectly cut, a slow smile and quiet ways. Solely because he was a man of endless patience I expected him to distinguish himself with rod and reel.

Bill Van Hope, Nealman's friend of whom I had heard so much, was not only tall, but broad and powerful. He had kind eyes and a happy smile—altogether as good a type of millionaire-sportsman as any one would care to know. Nealman introduced him to me, and his handshake was firm and cordial.

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Nealman took them all into the great manor house: I went with Nealman's chauffeur to see about the handling of their luggage. This was at half-past four of a sunlit day in September. I didn't see any of the guests again until just before the dinner hour, when a matter of a broken fly-tip had brought me into the manor house. Thereupon occurred one of a series of incidents that made my stay at Kastle Krag the most momentous three weeks of my life.

It was only a little thing—this experience in Nealman's study. But coming events cast their shadows before—and certainly it was a shadow, dim and inscrutable though it was, of what the night held in store. I had passed Florey the butler, gray and sphynx-like in the hallway, spoke to him as ever, and turned through the library door. And my first impression was that some other guest had arrived in my absence.

A man was standing, smoking, by the window. I supposed at once that he was an absolute stranger. There was not a single familiar image, not the least impulse to my memory. I started to speak, and beg his pardon, and inquire for Nealman. But the words didn't come out. I was suddenly and inexplicably startled into silence.

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It is the rare man who can analyze his own mental processes. Of all the sensations that throng the human mind there is none so lawless, so sporadic in its comings and departure, so utterly illogical as fear—and great surprise is only a sister of fear. I can't explain why I was startled. There was no reason whatever for being so. I must go further—I was not only startled, but shaken too. It has come about that through the exigencies of the hunting trail I have been obliged to face a charging jaguar—in a jungle of Western Mexico—yet with nerves holding true. My nerves didn't hold true now—and I couldn't tell why. They jumped unnecessarily and quivered under the skin.

I did know the man beside the window after all. He was Major Kenneth Dell that I had observed particularly closely—due to having heard of him before—when he had first dismounted from the car. The thing that startled me was that in the hour and a half or so since I had seen him his appearance had undergone an amazing change.

It took several long seconds to win back some measure of common sense. Then I knew that, through some trick of nerves, I had merely attached a thousand times too much importance to a wholly trivial incident. In all probability the change in Dell's appearance was simply an effect of light and shadow, wrought by the window in front of which he stood.

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But for the instant his face simply had not seemed his own. Its color had been gone—indeed it had seemed absolutely bloodless. His eyes had been vivid holes in his white face, his features were drawn out of all semblance to his own, the facial lines were graven deep. His lips looked loose, as with one whose muscle-control is breaking.

But my impression had only an instant's life. Either the man drew himself together at my stare, or my own vision got back to normal. He was himself again—the same, suave, genial sportsman I had seen dismount from the car. He answered my inquiry, and I turned through the library door.

If I had seen true, there could be but one explanation: that Major Dell had undergone some violent nervous shock since he had entered the door of the manor house of Kastle Krag.

After the dinner hour Nealman came for me, in the room just off the hall from his own that he had designated for my use. I'd never seen him in quite so gay a humor. His eyes sparkled; happiness rippled in his voice. His tone was more companionable too, lacking that faint but unmistakable air of patronage it had always previously held. He had never forgotten, until now, that he was the employer, I the employee. Now his accent and manner was one of equality, and he addressed me much as he had addressed his wealthy guests.

He had been drinking; but he was not in the least intoxicated. Perhaps he had been stimulated, very slightly. He wore a dinner coat with white trousers.

"Killdare, I want you to come downstairs," he said. "Some of my friends want to talk to you about shootin' and fishin'. They're keen to know what their prospects are."

"I'd like to," I answered. "But I'll have to come as I am. I haven't a dinner coat——"

"Of course come as you are."

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His arm touched mine, and he headed me down the hallway to the stairs. Then we walked side by side down the big, wide stairway to the big living-room.

Already I heard the sound of the guests' laughter. As I went further the hall seemed simply ringing with it. There could be no further doubt of the success of Nealman's party. Evidently his distinguished guests had thrown all dignity to the winds, entering full into the spirit of play.

The glimpse of the big living-room only verified this first impression. The guests were evidently in that wonderful mood of merriment that is the delight and ambition of all hosts, but which is so rarely obtained. Most men know the doubtful temper of a mob. Few had failed to observe that the same psychology extends to the simplest social gatherings. How often stiffness and formality haunt the drawing-room or dining-table, where only merriment should rule! How many times the social spirit wholly fails to manifest itself. To-night, evidently, conditions were just right, and hilarity ruled at Kastle Kraggs.

As I came in Joe Nopp—the portly man with the clear, gray eyes—was telling some sort of an anecdote, and his listeners were simply shouting with laughter. Major Dell and Bill Van Hope were shooting craps on the floor, ten cents a throw, carrying on a ridiculous conversation with the dice. A big phonograph was shouting a negro song from the corner.

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There was a slight lull, however, when Nealman and I came in. Van Hope spoke to me first—he was the only one of the guests I had met—and the others turned toward me with the good manners of their kind. In a moment Nealman had introduced me to Joe Nopp's listeners and, an instant later, to Major Dell.

"Mr. Killdare is down here doing some work in zoology for his university," Nealman explained, "and he's agreed to show you chaps where to find game and fish. He knows this country from A to Izzard."

I held the center of the floor, for a while, as I answered their questions; and I can say truly I had never met, on the whole, a better-bred and more friendly company of men. They wanted to know all about the game in the region, what flies or lures the bass were taking, as to the prevalence of diamond-backs, and if the tarpon were striking beyond the natural rock wall. In their eagerness they were like boys.

"You'll talk better with a shot of something good," Nealman told me at last, producing a quart bottle. "Have a little Cuban cheer."

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The bottle contained old Scotch, and its appearance put an end to all serious discussion. From thence on the mood of the gathering was ever lighter, ever happier; and I merely sat and looked on.

"The question *ain't*," Hal Fargo said of me with considerable emphasis, "whether he knows where the turkeys are, but whether or not he knows his college song!"

I pretended ignorance, but soon Van Hope and Nealman were singing "A Cow's Best Friend" at the top of their voices, while Nopp tried to drown them out with "Fill 'em up for Williams."

Even now it could not be said that any of the group were intoxicated. Fargo was certainly the nearest; his cheeks were flushed and his speech had that reckless accent that goes so often with the first stages of drunkenness. The distinguished Pescini was only animated and fanciful, Van Hope and Marten perhaps slightly stimulated. For all the charm of their conversation I couldn't see that Nopp or Major Dell were receiving the slightest exhilaration from their drinks.

But the spirit of revelry was ever higher. These men were on a holiday, they had left their business cares a thousand miles to the north, mostly they were tried companions. None of us was aware of the passing of time. I saw at once that my presence was not objectionable to the party, so I lingered long after the purpose for which I had been brought among them had been fulfilled—purely for the sake of entertainment. I had never seen a frolic of millionaires before, and needless to say I enjoyed every moment of it.

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In the later hours of night the revellers ranged further over the house. Joe Nopp was in the

billiard room exhibiting fancy shots and pretending to receive the plaudits of a great multitude; Pescini and Van Hope were in conversation on the veranda, and Fargo was wholly absent and unaccounted for. I had missed Marten, the financier, for a moment; but his reappearance was the signal for a fresh rush to the living-room.

The whole party met him with a yell. In the few moments of his absence he had wrought a startling change in his appearance. Over his shoulders he had thrown a gayly colored Indian blanket, completely hiding his trim dinner coat. He had tied a red cloth over his head and waxed the points of his iron-gray mustache until they stood stiff and erect, giving an appearance of mock ferocity to his face. A silver key-ring and his own gold signet dangled from his ears, tied on with invisible black thread. And to cap the climax he carried a long, wicked-looking carving-knife between his teeth.

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Of course he was Godfrey Jason himself—the same character I had portrayed in the invitations. Fargo made him do a Spanish dance to the clang of an invisible tambourine.

Some of the gathering scattered out again, after his dramatic appearance, drifting off on various enterprises and as the hour neared midnight only four of us were left in the drawing-room. Marten stood in the center, still in his ridiculous costume. Van Hope, Nealman, Pescini and myself were grouped about him. And it might have been that in the song that followed Pescini too slipped away. I know that I didn't see him immediately thereafter.

With a little urging Marten was induced to sing Samuel Hall—a stirring old ballad that quite fitted his costume. He had a pleasant baritone, he sung the song with indescribable spirit and enthusiasm, and it was decidedly worth hearing. Indeed it was the very peak of the evening—a moment that to the assembled guests must have almost paid them for the long journey.

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*“For I shot a man in bed, man in bed—
For I shot a man in bed, and I left him
there for dead,
With a bullet through his head—
Damn your eyes!”*

But the song halted abruptly. Whether he was at the middle of the verse, a pause after a stanza, or even in the middle of a chord I do not know. On this point no one will ever have exact knowledge. Marten stopped singing because something screamed, shrilly and horribly, out toward the lagoon.

The picture that followed is like a photograph, printed indelibly on my mind. Marten paused, his lips half open, a strange, blank look of amazement on his face. Nealman stared at me like a witless man, but I saw by his look that he was groping for an explanation. Van Hope stood peculiarly braced, his heavy hands open, beads of perspiration on his temples. Whether Pescini was still with us I do not know. I tried to remember later, but without ever coming to a conclusion. He had been standing behind me, at first, so I couldn't have seen him anyway. I believed, however, without knowing why, that he walked into the hall at the beginning of the song.

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The sound we had heard, so sharp and clear out of the night, so penetrating above the mock-ferocious words of the song, was utterly beyond the ken of all of us. It was a living voice; beyond that no definite analysis could be made. Sounds do not imprint themselves so deeply upon the memory as do visual images, yet the remembrance of it, in all its overtones and gradations, is still inordinately vivid; and I have no doubt but that such is the case with every man that heard it.

It was a high, rather sharp, full-lunged utterance, not in the least subdued. It had the unrestrained, unguarded tone of an instinctive utterance, rather than a conscious one—a cry that leaped to the lips in some great extremity or crisis. Yet it went further. Every man of us that heard it felt instinctively that its tone was of fear and agony unimagined, beyond the pale of our ordered lives.

“My God, what's that?” Van Hope asked. Van Hope was the type of man that yields quickly to his impulses.

None of us answered him for a moment. Then Nealman turned, rather slowly. “It sounded like the devil, didn't it?” he said. “But it likely wasn't anything. I've heard some devilish cries in the couple of weeks I've been here—bitterns and owls and things like that. Might have been a panther in the woods.”

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Marten smiled slowly, rather contemptuously. “You'll have to do better than that, Nealman. That wasn't a panther. Also—it wasn't an owl. We'd better investigate.”

“Yes—I think we had better. But you don't know what hellish sounds some of these swamp-creatures can make. We'll all be laughing in a minute.”

His tone was rather ragged, for all his reassuring words, and we knew he was as shaken as the rest of us. A door opened into the hall—evidently some of the other guests were already seeking the explanation of that fearful sound.

It seemed to all of us that hardly an instant had elapsed since the sound. Indeed it still rang in our ears. All that had been said had scarcely taken a breath. We rushed out, seemingly at once, into the velvet darkness. The moon was incredibly vivid in the sky.

We passed into a rose-garden, under great, arching trees, and now we could see the silver glint of the moon on the lagoon. The tide was going out and the waters lay like glass. [Pg 62]

Through the rifts in the trees we could see further—the stretching sands, gray in the moonlight, the blue-black mysterious seas beyond. What forms the crags took, in that eerie light! There was little of reality left about them.

We heard some one pushing through the shrubbery ahead of us, and he stopped for us to come up. I recognized the dark beard and mustache of Pescini. "What was it?" he asked. Excitement had brought out a deep-buried accent, native to some South European land. "Was it further on?"

"I think so," Nealman answered. "Down by the lagoon."

He joined us, and we pushed on, but we spread out as we neared the shore of the lagoon. Some one's shadow whipped by me, and I turned to find Major Dell.

The man was severely shaken. "My God, wasn't that awful!" he exclaimed. "Who is it—you, Killdare?" He stared into my face, and his own looked white and masque-like in the moonlight. Then all of us began to search, up and down the shore of the lagoon.

In the moonlight our shadows leaped, met one another, blended and raced away; and our voices rang strangely as we called back and forth. But the search was not long. Van Hope suddenly exclaimed sharply—an audible inhalation of breath, rather than an oath—and we saw him bending over, only his head and shoulders revealed in the moonlight. He stood just beside the craggy margin of the lagoon. [Pg 63]

"What is it?" some one asked him, out of the gloom.

"Come here and see," Van Hope replied—rather quietly, I thought. In a moment we had formed a little circle.

A dead man lay at our feet, mostly obscured in the shadow of the crags of the lagoon. We simply stood in silence, looking down. We knew that he was dead just as surely as we knew that we ourselves were living men. It was not that the light was good; that there was scarcely any light at all. We knew it, I suppose, from the huddled position of his form.

Joe Nopp scratched a match. He held it perfectly steadily. The first thing it showed to me was a gray face and gray hair, and a stain that was not gray, but rather ominously dark, on the torn, white front of the man's evening shirt. Nealman peered closely.

"It's my butler, Florey," he said.

CHAPTER VIII

[Pg 64]

There was nothing in particular to say or do. We simply stood looking down, that huddled body from which life had been struck as if by a meteor, in the center. From time to time we looked up from it to stare out over the ensilvered waters of the lagoon.

We all shared this same inclination—to look away into the misty distance, past the lagoon, past the gray shore, into the sea so mysterious and still. The tide was running out now, so there was no tumult of breaking waves on the Bridge. At intervals, and at a great distance, we could hear the high-pitched shriek of plover.

Of course the mood lasted just an instant. It was as if we had all been stricken silent and lifeless, unable to speak, unable to act, with only the power left to look and to wonder and to dream. I suppose the finding of that huddled body, under those conditions, was a severe nervous shock to us all. Joe Nopp, he of the true eye and the steady nerve, was the first to get back on an everyday footing with life.

"It's a fiendish crime," he said in the stillness. He spoke rather slowly, without particular emphasis. "Of all the people to murder—that gray, inoffensive little butler of yours! Nealman, let's get busy. Maybe we can catch the devil yet." [Pg 65]

Nealman came to himself with a start. "Sure, Joe. Tell us what to do. We need a directing head at a time like this."

Nealman had dropped his accent. He spoke tersely, more like a man in the street than the aristocrat he had come to believe himself to be.

"The first thing is to get word into town—Ochakee, you call it. Get hold of the constable, or any other authority, and tell him to notify the sheriff."

"Ochakee's the county seat—we can reach the sheriff himself."

"Good. Tell him to take steps to guard all roads for suspicious characters. Get out posses, if they would help. Get the coroner and all the official help we can get out here." He turned to me, with a whip-like, emphatic movement. "Killdare, you might help us here. You likely know the roads. Tell us what to do."

"You've said what to do," I told him. "There's not enough white men in this part of the country to make a posse—and a posse couldn't find any one that wanted to hide in the cypress swamps. The thing to do—is to cut off the murderer's escape and starve him out. Nealman, isn't yours the only road——"

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"As far as I know——"

"The marshes are almost impassible to the left, and on the other side is the river. If we can keep him from getting as far as Nixon's——"

"Who's Nixon——"

"Next planter up the road, five miles up. Get a phone to him right away. Young Nixon will watch all night and stop any one who tries to pass. The sheriff can put a man there to-morrow. Let's find a phone."

Hal Fargo, seemingly as cold as a blade, started to bend over the body for further examination of the wound, but two of the men caught his arm.

"Don't touch him, Hal," Major Dell advised, quietly. "The less we track up the spot and muss things up the better. The detective'll have a better chance for thumb prints, and things like that."

"You're right, Dell," the man agreed. "And now let's get to a phone."

"Good." It was Joe Nopp's cool, self-reliant voice again. "In the meantime, have any of you got a gun?"

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Lemuel Marten alone responded—he carried a little automatic pistol in the pocket of his dinner coat. "Here," he said. He drew the thing out, and it made blue fire in the moonlight in his hand.

"Then, Marten, you head a hunt through these grounds. The murderer might still be hiding in the shrubbery. Stop every one—shoot 'em if they don't stop. Now Nealman, Van Hope, Killdare—where's the phone?"

Nopp, Nealman, and myself started for the house; Fargo, Major Dell, and Pescini and Van Hope followed Marten into the more shadowed parts of the gardens and lawns. Before ever we reached the house we heard their excited shouts but we paused only an instant. "They can handle him if they've got him," Nopp said. "We'd better go and do our work."

We divided in the hall. Nopp and I went to the phone, Nealman and Van Hope, at Nopp's suggestion, to round up all the servants. "Keep 'em in one room, and watch 'em," Nopp advised. "We'll like enough find the murderer among them—some domestic jealousy, or something like that. Don't give any of 'em a chance to get away or to destroy evidence."

I telephoned to Nixon's first. The sleepy, country Central rang long and often, and at last a drowsy voice answered the ring.

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"This Charley Nixon?" I asked.

"Yes." He awakened vividly at the sound of his own name.

"This is Ned Killdare—I met you on the way out. I'm at Nealman's—Kastle Kraggs. A man has been murdered here, just a few minutes ago! I want you to watch the road with your dogs—that strip between the river and marsh, and not let any one go through from this way. Can you handle it?"

Charley Nixon had borne arms in France, his father had ridden with the Clansmen of long ago, and his answer was clear and unhesitating over the wire. "Any one who tries to get by me will be S. O. L.," he said.

A moment later I reached the coroner at Ochakee. He promised he could start for the scene at once, in his car, bringing the sheriff or his deputy, and that he would take all the precautions he could to cut off the murderer's escape. Then Nopp and I returned to the living-room.

It was an unforgettable picture—that scene in the big living-room where Nealman's guests had been so merry a few minutes before. A bottle of whiskey still stood on the table in the center, half-filled glasses, in which the ice had not yet melted, stood beside it and on the window-sills and smoking stands. Little, unwavering filaments of blue smoke streamed up from half-burned cigarettes. In the places of the revelers stood a group of sobbing, terrified negroes.

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We were not native southerners, accustomed to seeing the black people in their paroxysms of fear, and the sight went straight home to all of us. These were the "cotton field niggers" of which old-time planters speak, slaves to the blackest superstitions that ever cursed the tribes of the Congo, and the night's crime had gone hard with them. Their faces were gray, rather than black, the whites of their eyes were plainly visible, and they made a confused babble of sound. The women, particularly, were sobbing and praying alternately; most of the men were either stuttering or apoplectic with sheer terror. Some of them cowered, shrieking, as we opened the door.

"Shut up that noise," Nopp demanded. A dead silence followed his words. "No one is going to hurt you as long as you stay in here and shut up. Where's the boss."

One of them pointed, rather feebly, to the next room. And I took the instant's interval to reach the side of some one that sat, alone and silent, in a big chair in the chimney-corner.

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It was Edith Nealman, and she had been rounded up with the rest of the house employees. Her bare feet were in slippers, and she wore a long dressing-gown over her night-dress. Her hair hung in two golden braids over her shoulders.

I was glad to see that the terror of the blacks had not passed, in the least degree, to her. Of course she was pale and shaken, her eyes were wide, but her voice when she spoke was subdued and calm, and there was not the slightest trace of hysteria about her. "It's a dreadful thing, isn't it?" she said. "Poor little Florey—who'd want to murder him!"

"Nobody knows—but we're going to get him, anyway," I promised rashly. And what transpired thereafter did not come out in the inquest.

It was only a little thing, but it meant teeming worlds to me. One of her hands groped out to mine, and I pressed it in reassurance.

Besides the native southern blacks that acted as gardeners and chambermaids and table hands about the place, Nealman had rounded up his mulatto chauffeur. Mrs. Gentry, his white housekeeper, sat a little to one side of the group of negroes.

In a moment Nealman and Van Hope rejoined us, and we turned once more through the still hall that had been Florey's particular domain. An instant later we were out on the moonlit driveway. [Pg 71]

"I wonder if those birds will have sense enough to stay away from the body," Nopp said gruffly. "It would be easy to mess up and destroy every bit of evidence——"

"Major Dell warned them," I said. "I think they'll remember."

"Nevertheless, I think we'd better post a guard over it." He paused, eyeing an approaching figure. It was Marten, and he was almost out of breath.

"Any luck?" Nealman asked.

"Nothing." Marten paused, fighting for breath. "Something stirred over in the thicket—we chased it down and tried to round it up. I guess it wasn't anything—certainly if it had been a man we'd scared it out. Have you a dog?"

"Haven't shipped my dogs down here yet, but coons and such things come out of the woods every once in a while. Where are your men——"

"They'll round up here in a minute. We've been beating through the grounds."

In a moment Major Dell and Fargo approached us from opposite sides of the garden, and once more we headed down toward the lagoon. A voice called after us, and Pescini caught up. [Pg 72]

"No trace of anything?" he asked.

"Not a trace," some one replied.

We walked with ever-decreasing pace, a rather uncertain group, down toward the crags of the shore. All of us, I think, were busy with our own thoughts. All of us paused, at last, forty yards from the scene of the tragedy.

"There's really nothing further we can do," Nopp said. "If the murderer is among the servants we've got him—you found 'em all, didn't you, Nealman?"

"All of 'em. No suspicious circumstances."

"Good. If he is some outsider, we'll round him up. I rather think the former—it's too early to make a guess. But I think we'd better appoint a guard over the body—to keep any curious persons from coming near and tramping out footprints, and so on. There's apt to be a crowd of the curious here to-morrow."

All of us nodded. Lemuel Marten whispered an oath.

Nopp turned to him. "Would you mind taking that post to-night, Marten?" he asked. Because he already knew the man's answer, he turned to us. "Lem's the best man for the post," he explained. "You chaps know we'll all have to give an account of our actions to-night. It's customary at such times. And you know that Lem was busy singing his pirate song when the thing occurred." [Pg 73]

"That's an unnecessary point, Joe," Marten answered. "None of us will be in the least suspected. This poor chap—that none of us knew. However, I'll gladly enough act as guard."

"You've still got your gun?"

"I made Pescini carry it. He's a shot."

Pescini handed him back the weapon, and Marten walked on across the lawn to his post. The rest of us waited an instant in the road, talking quietly to one another, and two or three of the men were getting out their cigarettes. It was our first breathing-spell. Then we started slowly back toward the house.

But we halted at the sound of Marten's voice. "Wait a minute, will you?" he called.

It is hard to explain why we all stopped in our tracks. Van Hope, whom I had never suspected of nerves, let his cigarette fall to the ground, a red streak. The voice out of the gloom was wholly

quiet, subdued, perfectly calm, seemingly nothing to waken alarm or even especial interest. Perhaps what held us and startled us was the realization of an effort of will behind those commonplace, unruffled tones.

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"What is it, Lem?" Nopp asked.

There was an instant's interval of unfathomable silence. "I wish you'd come here," Marten replied. "I'm a little balled up—as to where I am. These trees and shrubs are so near alike. I can't exactly find—the place."

Nopp did get there, but he didn't go alone. All of us turned, half-running. And for a vague, bewildered, half-remembered moment we searched frantically up and down the craggy shore of the lagoon.

Then in the moonlight I saw Nopp and Nealman come together, and Nopp seized the other's arms.

"My God, Grover!" he said hoarsely. "The body has disappeared!"

CHAPTER IX

[Pg 75]

There was no further possibility of a mistake. Marten's inability to find the body could not be further attributed to a mere confusion as to its correct location. In the few minutes we had been phoning and while the remainder of the guests had been searching for the murderer, the body of the murdered man had vanished from the shore of the lagoon. Nor had any mysterious over-sweeping of the water carried it away. We found, easily enough, the place where it had lain, and we knew it by the crushed vegetation and an ominous stain on the earth.

For a moment we all stood speechless, almost motionless, gazing down on the place where the body had been. The guest's faces all looked oddly white in the moonlight. Then I heard Nealman and Nopp talking in a subdued voice at my side.

"You see what it means," Nealman said. "The murderer came back to the body—that's the only explanation! That means he's still on the grounds—perhaps within a few hundred yards."

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"But what did he do with the thing? I wish I did know what it meant. It makes no sense. But there's nothing we can do——"

His words blurred in my consciousness, and I suddenly ceased to hear him. The reason was simply that my own thoughts were now too busy to admit external impressions. If there was one thing needed in this affair it was careful investigation and research—the very key and basis of my own life's work. I was a scientist—at least I had gone a distance into scientific work—and scientific methods were needed now. Why shouldn't I direct the same method that made me a successful naturalist into the unraveling of this mystery?

Science has explored the lightless mysteries of the deep, has measured the stars and traced the comets through the heavens: there was no cause to believe it couldn't conquer now. I was of a branch of science that mainly studied externals, my methods were simply accurate observation, tireless investigation, and logical deduction—the methods of all naturalists the world over; and they were just what was needed here.

Presently I forgot the shaken men about me and began really to observe. First, I tried to fix in my mind the exact way the body had lain. It had been curiously huddled, lying rather on the right side—and the torn, stained shirt-front had been plainly visible. Its location was not far above high-tide mark, at the edge of the lawns—and because the craggy margin of the lagoon was rather precipitous at that place, not more than twenty feet from the water's edge at low tide.

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It was impossible even to hazard a guess what kind of a weapon had inflicted the death wound. But it had not been a clean, stabbing wound to the heart. The wound itself must have been a long gash downward along the breast, for the shirt and waistcoat had been curiously ripped and torn. And possibly the weapon might be found in the grass where the body had lain.

I quietly moved back and forth among the group of men, searching for the gleam of moonlight upon a knife blade. It didn't reveal itself, however, and there seemed no course but to wait for daylight. But as I was about to give up the search my eye caught the glimpse of something white, half-hidden in the grass in the direction of the house.

I quietly picked it up, saw that it was a folded piece of heavy paper or parchment, and slipped it into my pocket. Then I rejoined the little crowd of guests.

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"Good Lord, what can we do...?" Pescini was saying excitedly. "The lake can't be dragged until tomorrow. There's no use to post guards around this big house—the thickets are so heavy that any one could steal through almost any place. We've got the road guarded—and the officers won't come till to-morrow. It's true that a couple of us could stand guard here——"

"I don't see what good it would do," Nopp replied. "The murderer would have no cause to come back again. I suggest we go to the house and get what rest we can. We may have to make some

posses in the morning.”

In the privacy of my own room I took from my pocket the paper I had found. It proved to be of heavy parchment, whitened by time; and I felt at once I was running on a true scent.

There could be little doubt as to the age of the document. The ink was fading, the handwriting itself was in the style of long ago. The fact that the script was scratchy and uncertain, indicated that a man of meager education had written it. It was, however, perfectly legible. I judged that the date of the missive was at least ten or twenty years prior to the civil war.

Across the top of the page were written the words, referring evidently to the script beneath, “Sworn by the Book.” At the very bottom was the cryptic phrase “int F. T.” And the following, mysterious column lay between:

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aned
dqbo
aqcd
trkm
fipj
dqbo
scno
ohuy
wvyn
dljn
dtht

Of course no kind of an explanation presented itself at first. I took it to a mirror, tried to read it backward, then sat down to give it a careful analysis.

I copied the column carefully, then tried to rearrange the letters to make sense. But no such simple treatment was availing. The fourth, ninth, tenth, and last words, for instance, were made up entirely of consonants, and no word of any language, known to me, entirely omits vowels. Four of the remaining seven words contained but one vowel.

But I was in no mood to go further to-night. The events of the past few hours had been a mighty strain on the entire nervous system, and my mind could not cope with the problem. I spread the original parchment on the little table in the center of the room, then quickly undressed, turned out my lights, and went to bed.

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Sleep came at once, heavy and dreamless. I barely remember the welcome chill that the pre-dawn hours brought to the room. But it wasn't written that there should be many hours of refreshing sleep for me that night.

In hardly a moment, it seemed to me, I came to myself with a start. Wakefulness shot through me as if by an electric shock. It was that fast-flying hour just before dawn: the cool caress of the wind against my face and the pale-blue quality of the darkness on the window-pane told that fact with entire plainness. It had been wakened by a hushed sound from across the room.

It was useless to try to tell myself that the sound was a dream only, an imagined voice that had no basis in reality. For all that it was subdued, the sound was entirely sharp and clear, impossible to mistake. And instantly I knew its source.

Some one had opened my door. There was no other possible explanation. Nor had it been merely the harmless mistake of one of the guests, confusing my room with his own. I heard the door open, but I did not hear it close. Nor did I hear departing steps along the corridor.

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My nightly visitor had come in stealth, and there was nothing to believe but at that instant he was waiting in the darkness on the other side of the room.

It isn't easy to decide what to do at a time like this. I was perfectly willing to simulate slumber if by so doing I could increase my own safety. Florey's affair was still fresh in my mind. A cruel and cold-blooded murder had been committed at Kastle Kraggs earlier this same night: this tip-toeing visitor in my room was in all likelihood a desperate man, willing to repeat his crime if his own safety demanded it. My possessions were few: it was better to let them go than take such a risk.

Yet a wiser, saner self told me that this was no business of thievery. The thing went deeper, further than I could see or guess. I lay listening: from time to time I could hear the boards settle beneath his feet. Evidently he was groping about the darkened room, in search of something.... Then a faint jar told me that his hand was on the iron railing of my bed.

It wasn't a reassuring thought that he had been groping about the room solely to find my bed. My muscles set for a desperate leap in case I felt him groping nearer.... There was a long, ominous instant of silence. Then a little triangle of light danced out over my table-top.

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It was a ray from a flashlight, and it came and went so soon that there was no chance to make accurate observation. I did, however, see just the edge of his hand as he reached for something on the flat surface of the table. It was a white, strong hand—long, sensitive fingers—evidently the hand of a well-bred, middle-aged man.

The light flashed out. Steps sounded softly on the floor. Then my door closed with a slight shock.

There is no use trying to justify my inactivity during his presence in the room. At such times a man is guided by instinct—and my instinct had been to lie still and let him do his work. The action might condemn me in some eyes, but I felt no shame for it. And as soon as the door closed I sprang to the floor.

Groping, I found the light, and the white beams flooded the room. Presently I opened the door and gazed down the gloomy hall.

It was still as a tomb. There were a dozen doors along it, and any one of them might have closed behind the intruder. It was the hall of a well-ordered country manor, rather commonplace in the subdued light of a single globe that burned over the stairway. The opportunity to overtake the intruder was irredeemably past.

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It wasn't hard to tell what had been taken. The sheet of parchment, on which was written the mysterious cryptogram, was gone from the table. The only satisfaction I had was that the thief had failed to see and procure the copy of the document I had made just before retiring.

CHAPTER X

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The sheriff and the coroner arrived from Ochakee in a roadster soon after dawn. All of us felt relieved at their coming: they represented the best and most intelligent type of southern citizenry. Sheriff Slatterly was scarcely older than I was, and had been given his office for meritorious services in the late war. He was a broad-shouldered large-headed man, with keen, good-natured eyes, a firm mouth, and rather prominent chin. We scraped up an acquaintance at once on the strength of our Legion buttons.

"I'm glad theya's a suvice man heah," he confessed to me. "It's sho' a mess of a case—and my deputy is busy. I've neveh wo'ked among these millionaih Yankee spo'ts befo', but I suppose they ah all right. Now tell me what you think of it all."

"I don't think," I confessed. "It doesn't make good sense."

He asked me questions in the vernacular of the South, and I answered them the best I could. Then he introduced me to the coroner.

Mr. Weldon was a man of about forty years, intelligent, forceful, not in the least the mournful type so often seen among undertakers. He was rather careless in speech, but I did not ascribe it to lack of education. He had rather a Semitic countenance, and a very deep, manly voice.

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"Of course the first thing is to drag the lagoon," he said. "We've got to have a body before we can hold anything but a semblance of an inquest—and of course thet's where the body is. It couldn't be nowhere's else."

All of us agreed with him. There was simply nothing else to do. The body had lain but thirty feet from the water's edge: it was conceivable that for some mysterious reason the murderer had seen fit to return and drag his dead into the water. The idea of him carrying it in any other direction was incredible.

While we waited for drag hooks to be sent out from town the sheriff made a minute examination of the scene of the crime. He searched the ground for clues; and it seemed to me the little puzzled line between his brows deepened with every moment of the search. He stood up at last, breathing hard.

"The murderer made a clean get away, that's certain," he observed. "It isn't often a man can commit a crime like this and not leave a few trails. I can't find a trace or a button. And if he left any tracks they are mixed up with those you gentlemen made last night."

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He went carefully over the rocks between the place where the body had lain and the water; but there was little for him here. Once or twice he paused, studying the rocks with a careful scrutiny, but he did not tell us what he found.

About ten the drag-hooks came, and I helped Neelman bring his duckboat from the marshy end of the lagoon. Then the sheriff, the coroner and myself began the slow, tiresome work of dragging.

Of course we began along the shore, close to the scene of the crime. We worked from the natural wall and back to a point a hundred yards beyond the starting-place. Then we turned back, just the width of the drag hooks beyond. We reached the Bridge again without result.

As the moments passed the coroner's annoyance increased. Noon came and passed—already we had dragged carefully a spot a full hundred square yards in extent. The tide flowed again, beat against the Bridge and fretted the water, making our work increasingly difficult. And at last the sheriff rested, cursing softly, on his oars.

"Well, Weldon?" he asked.

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The coroner's eyes looked rather bright as he turned to answer him. I got the impression that for all his outer complacency he was secretly excited. "Nothing, Slatterly," he said. "What do you think yourself?"

"I think we're face to face with the worst deal, the biggest mystery that's come our way in years. In the first place, there isn't any use of looking and dragging any more."

"But man, the body's got to be here somewhere."

"Got, nothing! We've got to begin again, and not take anything for granted. This is still water, except for these waves the tide makes, breaking over the rocks—and you know a body doesn't move much in still water, especially the first night. For that matter the place was still as a slough, they say, while the tide was going out—most of the night. We've looked for a hundred yards about the spot. It's not there. And the murderer couldn't swim with it clear across the lagoon."

"He might, a strong swimmer."

"But what's the sense of it? Besides, a dead body ain't easy to manage. The thing to do is to search Florey's rooms for any evidence, then to get all the niggers and the white folks as well and have an unofficial inquest. Then we might see where we're at."

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"Good." The coroner turned to me. "Is there any use of hunting up Mr. Nealman to show us Florey's room?" he asked. "Can't you take us up there?"

I was glad enough of the chance to be on hand for that search, so I didn't hesitate to answer. "You are the law. You can go where you like—wherever you think best."

We went together up the stairs to Florey's room. There was not the least sign that tragedy had overtaken its occupant. It was scrupulously kept: David Florey must have been the neatest of men. The search, however, was largely unavailing.

In a little desk at one corner we found a number of papers and letters. Some of them pertained to household matters, there was a note from some friend in Charleston, a folder issued by a steamship plying out of Tampa, and a letter from Mrs. Noyes, of New Hampshire, who seemed to be the dead man's sister. At least the salutation was "Dear Brother Dave," and the letter itself dealt with the fortunes of common relatives. Then there were a few short letters from one who signed himself "George."

There was nothing of particular interest. Mostly they were notifications of arrivals and departures in various cities, and they seemed to concern various business ventures. "I've got a good lead," one of them said, "but it may turn out like the rest." "Things are brightening up," another went. "I believe I see a rift in the clouds."

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"George" was unquestionably a traveler. One of the notes had been written from Washington, D. C., one from Tampa, the third from some obscure port in Brazil. They were written in a rather bold, rugged, but not unattractive hand.

The only document that gave any kind of a key to the mystery was a half-finished letter that protruded beneath the blotter pad on his desk. It was addressed "My dear Sister," and was undoubtedly in answer to the "Mrs. Noyes" letter. The sheriff read it aloud:

My dear Sister:

I got the place here and like it very much. Mr. Nealman is a fine man to work for. I get on with my work very well. The house is located on a lagoon, cut off from the open sea by a natural rock wall—a very lovely place.

But you will be sorry to hear that my old malady, g—, is troubling me again. I don't think I will ever be rid of it. It is certainly the Florey burden, going through all our family. I can't hardly sleep, and don't know that I'll ever get rid of it, short of death. I'm deeply discouraged, yet I know—

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At that point the letter ended. The sheriff's voice died away so slowly and tonelessly that it gave almost the effect of a start. Then he laid the letter on the desk and smoothed it out with his hands.

"Weldon?" he asked jerkily. "Do you s'pose we've got off on the wrong foot, altogether?"

"What d'ye mean?"

"Do you suppose that poor devil did himself in? At least we've got a motive for suicide, and a good one—and there's none whatever for murder. You know what old Bampus used to say—find the motive first."

"Of course you mean the disease he writes of. Why didn't he spell it out."

"He was likely just given to abbreviations. Lots of men are. The word might have been a long one, and hard to spell."

"Most invalids, I've noticed, rejoice in the long names of their diseases!"

"Not a bad remark, from an undertaker. I suppose you mean they get your hopes all aroused by their diseases when they ain't got 'em, you old buzzard. But seriously, Weldon. He writes here that his old malady has come back on him, some disease that runs through his family—that he's discouraged, that he doesn't think he'll ever be rid of it. You know that ill-health is the greatest cause for suicide—that more men blow out their own brains because they are incurably sick than for any other reason. He says he can't sleep. And what leads to suicide faster than that!"

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"All true enough. But it don't hold water. Where's the knife? What became of the body? Suicides don't eat the knife that killed them, lay dead, and then crawl away. You'll have to do better."

"He might not have been quite dead. Even doctors have been deceived before now, and crawled into the water to end his own misery. You can bet I'm going to keep the matter in mind."

And it was a curious thing that this little handful of letters also set me off on a new tack. A possibility so bizarre and so terrible that it seemed almost beyond the pale of credibility flashed to my mind. I watched my chance, and slipped one of the "George" letters into my pocket.

The idea I had was vague, not overly convincing, and it left a great part of the mystery still unsolved—but yet it was a clew. I waited impatiently until the search was concluded. Then I sought the telephone. [Pg 92]

A few minutes later a telegraphic message was clicking over the wires to Mrs. Noyes, in New Hampshire, notifying her of her brother's murder and disappearance, and asking a certain question. There was nothing to do but wait patiently for the answer.

CHAPTER XI

[Pg 93]

In midafternoon the coroner called all the occupants of the manor house together in the big living-room. He had us draw chairs to make a half circle about him, and the sheriff took a chair at his side. He began at once upon a patient, systematic questioning of every one present.

None of us could read the thoughts behind his rather swarthy face. His coal-black eyes were alike unfathomable: whether he believed that the murderer was then sitting in our circle we could not guess. "Of course this is not an official inquest," he told us. "The real inquest can't be held until there is a body to hold it over. I'm doing this in co-operation with the sheriff. And of course I needn't tell you that all of you are held here, with orders not to leave the immediate grounds, until a formal inquest can be held."

"But what if you never find the body?" Marten asked. "Some of us—can't stay forever."

"The law takes heed of no man's business," the coroner answered, somewhat sternly. "However, I'll have counsel from the state in a few days, and then we can tell what to do. The district attorney will be here just as soon as his work will permit." [Pg 94]

He called Nealman first. Except for a strange and startling deepening of the worry-line between his brows I would have thought that he was wholly unshaken. Weldon asked his name, place of birth, thirdly his occupation.

"I can't hardly say—I'm interested in finance," Nealman said in reply to the third question.

"And how long have you occupied this house?"

"Less than a month. I bought it last winter, but it has been under the charge of—of a caretaker until that time."

"Who was the caretaker?"

Nealman's voice fell a note. "Florey—the man murdered last night."

"Ah." The coroner paused an instant, as if deep in thought. "And how did he happen to come into your employ?"

"He was employed at this house by its previous owner, just a few days or weeks before I purchased it. He asked for work here when I came to take possession. He was an experienced butler, he said."

"Then that's all you know about the dead man?" [Pg 95]

"Absolutely all."

"His full name?"

"I made out his check to David Florey. I assumed he was an Englishman."

"You didn't know that, for sure?"

"No." Nealman hesitated, as if secretly startled. "I really didn't know it, when I come to think about it. I always assumed that he was."

"He was a good servant?"

"Excellent. I can go further. The best, most conscientious butler I ever had."

"Did you ever get the idea he had any enemies?"

"No. He seemed the most peaceable of men."

"None of the other servants were jealous of him?"

"On the contrary, they seemed to like him very much."

"He stayed close to his work?"

"He scarcely ever went to town. Once or twice he asked me for permission to go with my chauffeur—for a hair cut, and so on."

"What did you observe about his health? Did it seem to be good?"

"It seemed so. Very good."

The coroner's interest quickened. "You weren't aware, then, that he had an incurable malady?" [Pg 96]

"No. And I don't think he had. At least I never saw the least sign of it. None of the other servants ever mentioned it."

"Did he look like a man in good health?"

"He was rather gray—from his indoor life, I suppose. But he never looked sick to me."

"You think he was murdered, then?"

"Good Heavens, I don't see how we can think anything else!"

"You can ascribe no reason for his murder."

"Absolutely none."

"You can't, eh." The coroner paused, several seconds. "To come back to yourself. You were here less than a month. May I ask what was your idea in buying this manor house?"

"I hardly understand—"

"What did you get it for, a home?"

"I can't hardly say a home. I got it more for a winter shooting and fishing lodge. My home is on the Hudson. I'm very fond of fishing and shooting. I loved the place on sight."

"I take it, then, that you are a man of large financial means—able to indulge your whims even to the extent of buying a shooting and fishing lodge such as this?" [Pg 97]

Nealman stiffened slightly. "I don't see how that point can possibly have any bearing on this case."

"The merest detail of the lives of any one of the actors involved often throws light upon a crime." The coroner spoke slowly, seemingly choosing his words with care.

"I am not a man of great wealth, if that's what you want to know," Nealman answered at last. "I feel—I felt able at the time to buy this house."

"No great financial disaster has overtaken you since, I judge?"

Nealman's voice dropped a tone, and he spoke with a curious hesitancy. "No. I shouldn't say that there had."

The coroner halted, gazing absently at the carpet, and then began on a new tack. "This butler of yours—I suppose you paid him a good wage?"

"It would be considered so, among the men of his occupation."

"Do you know if he had any large amount of money saved, or if he carried any large amount on his person?"

"Not that I know of. He was very non-committal about his affairs." [Pg 98]

"He was a good butler," the coroner commented.

"Yes. Excellent. If you mean, did he carry enough money on his person to invite robbery, I should say that I don't think he did. Of course I don't know for certain. However, I know that he had banking connections in Ochakee."

"What of your other employees. Do you know anything about them?"

"They all came recommended. I know nothing further except, of course, in regard to my housekeeper and chauffeur."

"Your chauffeur is a colored man?"

"Yes. He has been with me for four years. A man of good character and habits."

"Do you know where he was at the time of the murder?"

"I do not."

"Your housekeeper—she has been in your employ a long time, also?"

"About two years."

"Was she well known to the murdered man?"

"Her acquaintance began with him at the same time as my own—less than a month ago."

"How old is this lady?"

"She sits in the circle. You can ask her if you like. I have never put the question to her."

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Every one smiled at this sally. The housekeeper, a buxom woman of fifty years, flushed and giggled alternately.

"Where were your other servants at the time of the murder?"

"I suppose most of them were in bed. Sam, the negro boy, was in the kitchen, helping me to serve my guests."

"Then David Florey was not on duty that night?"

"I didn't watch Mr. Florey closely, Mr. Weldon. He was the kind of servant that didn't seem to require watching. He helped me serve some cold drinks immediately after dinner. I didn't see him again."

"You don't know at what hour he ventured out into the lawns?"

"I do not. I was under the impression that he was in the pantry or hall for several hours after dinner. I can not say definitely."

"And now will you describe the crime—that is, what you yourself heard and saw?"

"Beginning where?"

"At the beginning. Where you were, who was with you, and all you can tell me."

"I was in this room. I don't know the exact time—it must have been close to midnight. My guests were here with me."

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"All of them?"

Nealman paused, seemingly considerably disturbed. "I can't say that all of them were in my immediate sight," he replied at last. "My guests were free of the house—some of them were at the billiard tables, others in the library, and so on. I can say definitely that Mr. Marten, Mr. Van Hope, and Mr. Killdare were in the room. Mr. Pescini was with us until just before we heard the sound."

"How long before?"

"I can't say for certain. It didn't seem to me more than a minute or two."

"You don't know where the others were?"

"Not exactly. I had left Mr. Fargo in the billiard room a moment before. Major Dell and Mr. Nopp had been talking on the veranda."

"None of these men indicated any previous acquaintance with the butler?"

"None whatever. They were all northern men, from my own part of the country."

"All of them were your friends?"

"Yes." His face changed expression, ever so little. "Yes, of course."

"You four men were in the lounging-room—and you heard a certain sound. Will you describe the sound?"

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"It was a scream—I can't describe it any further."

"Rather a long-drawn scream, or just a sharp utterance?"

"I would say it was rather long—and very loud."

"You knew at once it was the scream of a man?"

"I thought at first it might be some wild thing—perhaps a panther or a lynx—even a water bird."

"Yet it must have been a very distressing sound, was it not? Would you say it was a cry of agony or of fear?"

"Both. Yes—I would say it was a cry of both fear and agony."

"Then what did you do? Tell exactly what happened."

"We went out to investigate. My other guests ran out the same time."

"You didn't see them run out?"

"No, but I met most of them outside. At such times one doesn't observe closely. We ran down to the shore of the lagoon, at the place we've indicated to you, and there we found David Florey, lying dead. There was no one near, and no weapons were lying beside him—at least I didn't see

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any. He was lying on his side, and his vest and shirt were torn and wet with blood. Some of us went at once to telephone—Mr. Killdare, Mr. Van Hope, Mr. Nopp and myself. The others began to beat through the garden in search of the murderer.”

“No one stayed with the body?”

“No.”

“You’re perfectly certain Mr. Florey was dead, Mr. Nealman.”

“I didn’t dream of anything else at the time, Mr. Weldon. He lay huddled, his face drawn, and certainly there was a terrible wound in his breast.”

“These men that hunted through the gardens and lawns. Were they armed?”

“Mr. Marten had a pistol. The others were unarmed.”

“They stayed close together?”

“I don’t think they did. I can’t say for sure.”

“Then what happened?”

“We telephoned, met the searching party, and all of us went back to the body. It was gone.”

“No action or word of any of your guests wakened your suspicions?”

“None whatever.”

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“You suspect no one?”

“No one. I am absolutely in the dark.”

“Remember, as the occupant of the house, you are in a better position to give us a right steer than any one else. I want you to think hard. You observed, at no time, any suspicious circumstances?”

“None whatever.” Nealman’s voice was firm.

“What weapon, would you say, inflicted the wound?”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t a pistol, of course. We didn’t hear a shot. We didn’t examine the wound carefully, but I would say it was some metal instrument, not overly sharp. It might have been a dull knife.”

“Would a knife likely have torn the shirt and vest as you describe?”

“It doesn’t seem likely, unless the murderer gave a furious, downward stroke.”

The coroner paused again, and the room was utterly silent. “You have never heard any story, any legend—any set of facts connected with this house and its occupants that might explain the murder?”

Nealman waited a long time before he answered. “None that are the least credible.”

“You’ve got something on your mind, Nealman. Credible or not, I want to hear it.”

[Pg 104]

“I can’t bring myself to repeat such a silly story. All old houses have various legends. This particular legend is not worth hearing.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Nealman, but I must be the judge of that. You have the same as admitted that the story has occurred to your mind. What was it, please?”

Nealman’s voice lowered perceptibly, and he answered with evident difficulty. “A silly thing about a buried treasure—and a sea-monster—a giant octopus or something like that—that had been set to guard it—in the lagoon.”

As we waited we heard the faint scream of the plover on the shore and the lapping waves of the tide. Most of the white men were smiling grimly—the negroes were gray as ashes.

“You will admit that the tragedy of last night, the nature of the wound and the disappearance of the body, brought the legend forcibly to your memory?”

“I couldn’t help but remember it,” Nealman answered. “But it’s inane and silly—just the same.”

CHAPTER XII

[Pg 105]

Nealman was of course the most important witness. Further testimony was really only in corroboration of his. The coroner called on Marten next.

This man spoke bluntly, answering all questions in a vigorous, rather masterful voice. Financier, he said simply, in answer to the question as to his occupation.

"You were with Mr. Nealman when you heard Florey's scream?"

"Yes."

"Who else was there?"

"Mr. Van Hope and Mr. Killdare."

"Do you know the exact location of any other of the guests at the time of the murder?"

"No, not exactly. They were all in rooms adjoining the living-room."

"You're sure of that?"

"Practically sure. They came in and out every few minutes."

"Did you have any previous acquaintance with the dead man?"

"None whatever."

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In reply to the coroner's questions, he testified as to the finding of the body, the nature of the scream we had heard and gave a similar report as to the appearance of the wound. He had observed no suspicious actions on the part of any one.

"You led the search, I believe, through the gardens?"

"Yes."

"You were the one man that was armed. May I ask how you happened to have a pistol in the pocket of dinner clothes?"

"I was held up, once," Marten replied straightforwardly. "Several years ago. I've carried a pistol ever since."

The coroner nodded. "Did your party stay together in searching the gardens, or did they scatter out?" he asked.

"We scattered out. We couldn't have hoped to find any one if we had stayed together. We called back and forth, however."

"You kept track of one another all the time?"

"I can't say that. The gardens and grounds are large and full of shrubbery."

"The search lasted—how long?"

"Only a few minutes."

The coroner dismissed him at this point, calling on Mr. Van Hope. The latter told of his long acquaintance with Nealman, and verified in every detail the story that his friend had told.

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"And where were you, Mr. Dell, when the scream was heard?" the coroner asked.

"In the library," was the reply. Major Dell spoke evenly, but his keen, flushed face showed that he was taking the most keen and lively interest in the proceedings.

"Why weren't you with the others in the party?"

"We were all running all over the house. I was trying to find Mr. Nealman's copy of Jordan's work on fish. Fargo and I had got into an argument about black bass."

"Mr. Fargo was not with you at the time?"

"I was alone. I had left Mr. Fargo at the billiard table."

Weldon's voice changed in tone. "And how did the argument come out, may I ask?"

Major Dell smiled dryly. "It isn't concluded yet," he said.

The coroner paused, then took a new tack. "You heard the sound distinctly?"

"Distinctly, but probably not so clearly as Mr. Nealman heard it. The library is back of the lounging-room."

"Then what did you do?"

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"I ran outside. I joined Nealman and some of the other guests on the grounds, and went down with them to investigate."

"You took part in the hunt through the grounds?"

"Yes. I beat back and forth with the rest."

"And saw or heard nothing suspicious?"

"Something moved in the shrubbery, but we couldn't locate it. Nealman thought afterward it was a raccoon or some other small animal."

"You knew Mr. Florey?"

"I had never set eyes upon him before."

"You've had long acquaintance with Mr. Nealman, however?"

Major Dell hesitated, just an instant. "No. I had never met Mr. Nealman until last night."

The coroner's interest quickened. "You didn't? How did you happen to be included among his guests?"

"I was a great friend of his friend, Mr. Van Hope. I was invited through his kindness. He wanted me to have a taste of shooting and fishing."

"What is your occupation, Mr. Dell?"

"I am interested in finance, in a modest way."

"You saw, heard or knew of nothing connected with this murder that you haven't testified." [Pg 109]

"No." Dell paused, considering. "Nothing, I'm sure."

"I say 'murder.' Testimony has gone to show that Florey was dead, not just severely wounded, when you and the others reached his side. Mr. Dell, do you think there is any possibility that life remained in his body when you saw him beside the inlet?"

Dell spoke clearly. "None whatever," he said.

"You speak very sure."

"I am sure. I've seen too many dead men ever to make a mistake. The position of the body, the features—everything told it as plain as day."

The coroner leaned forward. His eyes gleamed. "And where and how did you happen to see all these dead men, may I ask?"

There was an instant's second of strain throughout the room. All of us, I think, were siding with Major Dell—from the sheer instinctive distrust of constituted authority that seems to be implanted in our bodies at birth. Dell looked down, and his face was gray.

"In the Argonne," he said, quietly. The room was deathly still.

Fargo, called immediately after, testified as to his argument with Dell as to the nature of black bass. Dell had left him, he said, to go into the library. [Pg 110]

"You were alone in the billiard room when you heard the cry?"

"Yes. But I ran outdoors and joined the others."

Van Hope testified as to his acquaintance with Major Dell, saying that they had known each other for several months, and that Dell belonged to one of his clubs. He verified Nealman's story perfectly.

"And what is your occupation, Mr. Pescini?" the coroner asked.

"I am in the publishing business, in New York."

"You have a long acquaintance with Mr. Nealman?"

"Something over four years."

"Where were you when you heard David Florey scream?"

"On the veranda."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone. I had been with Mr. Van Hope and Nealman a few moments before. I was rather hot, and I went out on the veranda for a breath of air. I rushed out toward the sound, and Nealman and his party caught up with me." [Pg 111]

He testified that he had taken part in the search, and was utterly baffled as to the solution of the mystery.

Nopp was in the music room, he said, looking for a certain record that he wished his friends to hear. He had been in the billiard room a few seconds before. He had heard the cry but faintly, and had not been especially alarmed. The shouts of the other guests, he said, rather than the scream of the dying man, had caused him to rush out and join in the investigation. He had known Nealman a long time, was an architect by profession, and had been one of those to partake in the hunt through the gardens.

Last of all the white men, he called on me. I told of my relations with Nealman, the work I had been hired to do and, my own reactions to the fearful scream in the darkness. I had been with Marten, Van Hope and Nealman and had sent through the calls to Ochakee.

"You saw or heard nothing beyond that which these other gentlemen have testified?"

"Nothing at all," I answered.

"You have made no subsequent discoveries?"

Just for a moment I was silent, conjecturing what my answer should be. Was I to tell of the cryptogram I had found beside the body, and its theft during the night? [Pg 112]

I couldn't see how the least good would come of it. Indeed, if last night's intruder was in the room, listening to my testimony, he would be very glad to know if I had discovered the theft. I had resolved to work out the case in my own way, employing the methods of a naturalist, and these agents of the law were not my allies.

"Nothing has come to my observation," I told him simply.

If he had pressed the matter he might have got the admission out of me; but fortunately he turned to other subjects.

There was quite a little stir of interest throughout the circle when he began to question Edith. None of us will forget the picture of that golden head, graced by the sunlight slanting through the leaded panes of the window, the flushed, lovely face, the frank eyes and the girlish figure, lost in the big chair. She was in such contrast to the rest of us. Except for the housekeeper, buxom and fifty, she was the only white woman present; and she could have been the daughter of any one of the gray men in the circle.

She had gone to her room about ten, she said, and had read for perhaps an hour. Her room was just over the front hall. About eleven she went to bed, and the coroner's questions brought out the interesting fact that seemingly she had been the last of the household—unless the murderer himself was to be included thus—to have seen Florey alive. Her bed stood just beside the front window, and just before she had retired she had seen him walking out toward the lagoon. [Pg 113]

The whole circle, tired of the dull testimony of the past hour, leaned forward in rapt attention. "He was alone?" the coroner asked.

"Yes. I think I heard the door close behind him—I'm not sure. Then I saw his form in the moonlight on the front lawn."

"You recognized him at once?"

"Not at once. I thought perhaps it was one of the guests. But in a bright patch of moonlight I saw him plain."

"Where did he go?"

"He turned down the driveway toward the lagoon. I didn't see him again."

At the sound of the piercing scream she got up and put on a dressing-gown, but she did not come down at once. She was afraid, she said—she didn't know what to do. She had no knowledge as to the activities and the positions of the other members of the household at the time of the crime. [Pg 114]

She had come to work as her uncle's secretary but a few weeks before; and she verified perfectly Nealman's testimony in regard to the dead servant. If he had had enemies in the household she had not been aware of it, she knew of no chronic malady, and she did not think that he carried any large amount of money on his person. The scream had seemed to her to be one of unfathomable fear.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Gentry, was the last of the white people to be called upon; and her testimony threw no new light upon the problem. She was in bed and asleep, and the shouts of the men without had wakened her.

The coroner called on the negroes in turn, and I was a little amazed at the ease with which he wrung their testimony out of them. He knew these dark people: no northern man could have hoped to have been so successful. Sometimes he shouted at them as if in fury, sometimes he wheedled or jested with them.

Not one of them but could prove an alibi. They were all in their own quarters, they said, at the moment of the tragedy. Because this was the South and they were black, they did not know Florey, a white man, very well. And they had all been frightened nearly out of their wits by the events of the night. [Pg 115]

One by one he questioned them, but the inquest ended just as it began—with the affair of Florey's murder as great a mystery as ever. At the end of the fatiguing afternoon we were face to face with the baffling fact that only four men had proven satisfactory alibis—Lemuel Marten, Van Hope, Nealman and myself—and that any one of the dozen or more men and women in that great, rambling house might have done the deed.

CHAPTER XIII

[Pg 116]

Two telegrams had come for Mr. Nealman during the inquest; but the negro messenger who had brought them had been too frightened by the august session in the living-room to disturb him. It came about that Nealman didn't get them until he and Van Hope left the room together.

The yellow envelopes were lying on a little table in the hall, and Nealman started, perceptibly, at the sight of them. Except for that nervous reflex through his body I wouldn't have given the messages a second thought. Nealman picked them up, and still carrying on a fragmentary conversation with his friend, tore out the messages.

He did not merely tear off the edges. In his eagerness his clawing fingers ripped the envelopes wide open, endangering the messages themselves within. He opened one of them, and his eye leaped over the script.

He took one curious, short breath, then opened the second message, more carefully now. Then he crowded both of them into his outer coat pocket. [Pg 117]

At that point his conversation with Van Hope took a curious trend. He still seemed to be trying to talk in his usual casual voice; yet a preoccupation so deep, so engrossing was upon him that his friend's words must have seemed to reach him from another sphere. It was a brave effort; but his disjointed sentences, his blurred perceptions, told the truth only too plainly.

Nealman had received disastrous news. His lips were smiling, but his eyes were filled with some alien light. What that light was neither Van Hope nor I could tell. It might have been frenzy. Quite likely it was fear.

"Bad news, old man?" Van Hope blurted out at last, impulsively. They were old friends—he was risking the charge of ill-bred curiosity to offer sympathy to the other.

"Not very good, old man. I'll see you later about it. If you'll excuse me I'll go to my room—and answer 'em."

He turned up the stairs—Van Hope walked out onto the verandas. I waited for Edith, and in a moment we were walking under the magnolias, listening to the twilight boomings of a bittern on the lagoon.

"And what do you think of it?" I asked her. [Pg 118]

No human memory could forget her lustrous eyes, solemn and yet lighted by the beauty of her thoughts, as she gazed out over the waters, troubled by the flowing tide.

"I can't make anything out of it," she told me at last. "It doesn't seem to make good sense. Yet there have been hundreds of more baffling mysteries, and they all were cleared up at last. Cleared up intelligently, too, if you know what I mean."

"You mean—with credible motives and actions behind them."

"Yes, and *human* actions. I'm thinking about—you know what. Human agents were the only agents in this crime. In the end it will prove out that way."

"Then you aren't at all superstitious about—this." I indicated that eery, desolate lagoon with its craggy margin, stretching away like a ghost-lake in the gray light. As always the tidal waves were bursting with ferocious, lunging onslaughts on the natural rock wall, and the foam gleamed incredibly white against the dark water.

"Not in the least," she answered me. "I don't like the place when the tide's rolling in—it's too rough and too fierce—but it's lovely in the ebb-tide! Did you ever see anything so still as it is then—the water's edge creeping inward, and such a wonderful blue-green? No, I'm not superstitious about it at all. I'm going swimming, one of these nights, when the tide's going out. I'd cross it to-night in an emergency." [Pg 119]

"You're a strong swimmer, then."

"I can swim well enough—nothing to boast of though. Ned"—for we had got to the first name stage, long since—"this whole matter will be cleared up in a few days more. Such things always do come out right. I wouldn't be surprised if that poor man's body should be found any day, dragged into some thicket. The rocks are full of caves—perhaps the drag hooks simply failed to find it."

"And your uncle—he feels the way you do?"

"Of course. If you are talking about that silly legend—it gives him only the keenest delight as a big story to tell his friends. He has no more superstitious fear about this lagoon than I have."

"Have you talked to him since the inquest?"

"You know I haven't."

"He got two telegrams to-day. They seemed to go mighty hard with him. I was wondering—whether you ought to go to him now."

A little line came between her straight brows. "I can't imagine what they could be——" she said. [Pg 120]

"The loss of some friend? Financial loss, perhaps——?"

"I don't know. The latter, if anything. For I do know he's been buying certain stocks—awfully heavy."

"Playing the stock market, eh——?"

"I don't think I should have told you that. But I know you won't say anything about it. Oh, I do hope he hasn't had any real misfortune—"

Our talk veered to other subjects, and for a while we stood and watched the twilight descending over the lagoon. The crags were never so mysterious. They seemed to take weird shapes in the half-light, and the water sucked and lapped about their stony feet.

In a little while her hand stole into mine. It rested softly, and neither of us felt the need of words. The twilight deepened into that pale darkness of the early Floridan night.

"How I'd like to help him, if he's in trouble," she said at last, almost whispering. "And how I'd like to help you—do all the things you want to do."

"I'm glad—that you care about it," I told her, not daring to look down into that sober, wistful face. [Pg 121]

"I *do* care about it," she declared. She bent, until her lips were close to my ear. "And I believe I see the way."

CHAPTER XIV

[Pg 122]

Nealman did not come down to dinner. He sent his apologies to the guests, pleading a headache, and through some mayhap of circumstance the coroner took his place at the head of the great, red-mahogany table. There was a grim symbolism in the thing. No one mentioned it, not one of those aristocratic sportsmen were calloused enough to jest about it, but we all felt it in the secret places of our souls.

The session at Kastle Krags was no longer one of revelry. I could fancy the wit, the repartee, the gaiety and laughter that had reigned over the board the evening previous; but Nealman's guests were a sober group to-night. At the unspoken dictates of good taste no man talked of last night's tragedy. Rather the men talked quietly to one another or else sat in silence. A burly negro, rigged out in a dinner coat of ancient vintage, helped with the serving in Florey's place.

After dinner I halted the sheriff in the hall, and we had a single moment of conversation. "Slatterly," I said, "I want you to give me some authority."

"You do, eh?" He paused, studying my face. "What do you want to do?" [Pg 123]

"I want your permission—to go about this house and grounds where and when I want to—and no complications in case I am caught at it. Maybe even go into some of the private rooms and effects of the guests. I want to follow up some ideas that I have in mind."

"And when do you want to do it?"

"Any time the opportunity offers. I'm not going to do anything indiscreet. I won't get in your way. But I'm deeply interested in this thing, I've had scientific training, and I want to see if I can't do some good."

His eyes swept once from my shoes to my head. "From amateur detectives, as a rule—Good Lord deliver us," he said with quiet good humor. "But Killdare—I don't see why you shouldn't. Two heads are better than one—and I don't seem to be getting anywhere. Really, the more intelligent help we can get—from people we can co-operate with, of course—the better."

"I'm free, then, to go ahead?"

"Of course with reasonable limits. But ask my advice before you make any accusations—or do anything rash."

By previous arrangement Mrs. Gentry, the housekeeper, was waiting for me on the upper floor. There could be no better chance to search the guests' rooms. All of the men were on the lower floor, smoking their after-dinner cigars and talking in little groups in the lounging-room and the veranda. Of course Nealman was in his room, but even had he been absent, a decent sense of restraint would have kept me from his threshold. And of course Marten and Van Hope had established perfect alibis at the inquest. [Pg 124]

We entered Fargo's room first. It was cluttered with his bags, his guns and rods, but the thing I was seeking did not reveal itself. I looked in the inner pockets of his coat, in the drawers of his desk, even in the waste-paper basket without result. Such personal documents as Fargo had with him were evidently on his person at that moment.

Nopp's room was next, but I was less than twenty seconds across his threshold. He had been writing a letter, it lay open on his desk, and I needed to glance but once at the script. If my theory was right Nopp could be permanently dropped from the list of suspects of Florey's murder.

But the next room yielded a clew of seemingly inestimable importance. After the drawers had been opened and searched, and the desk examined with minute care, I searched the inner pocket of a white linen coat that the occupant of the room had worn at the time of his arrival. In it I found a letter, addressed to some New York firm, sealed, stamped, and ready to send. [Pg 125]

How familiar was the bold, free hand in which the address was written! Not a little excited, I compared it with the script of the "George" letter I had taken from Florey's room. As far as my inexperienced eye could tell the handwriting was identical.

The room was that of Lucius Pescini. If I had not been mistaken in the handwriting, I had proven a previous relationship and acquaintance, extending practically over the whole lifetime of both men, between the distinguished, bearded man that came as Neelman's guest and the gray butler who had died on the lagoon shore the previous night.

I put the letter back in the man's coat-pocket; then joined Mrs. Gentry in the hall. She went to her own room. I turned down the broad stairs to the hall. And the question before me now was whether to report my discovery to the officials of the law.

I had started down the stairs with the intention of telling them all I knew. By the time I had reached the hall I had begun to have serious doubts as to the wisdom of such a course. After all I had learned nothing conclusive. Handwriting evidence is at best uncertain; even experts have made mistakes in comparing signatures. In this regard it was quite different from finger-prints—those tell-tale stains that never lie. True, the handwriting looked identical to the naked eye, but a microscope might prove it entirely dissimilar. Was I to cast suspicion on a distinguished man on such fragile and uncertain grounds?

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Pescini had been in the lounging-room only a few minutes before the crime was committed. It seemed doubtful that he would have had time to cover the distance between the house and the lagoon, strike Florey low, and get back to the place where we met him in the short time of his absence.

Besides, I wanted to work alone. I couldn't bring myself to share my discoveries with Slatterly and Weldon.

The hall below was deserted and half in darkness. I met Marten and Nopp on the way to their rooms: passing into the library I found Hal Fargo seated under a reading-lamp, deep in "Floridan fauna." Major Dell was smoking quietly on the veranda, gazing out over the moonlit lawns. Van Hope and Pescini himself were seated at the far end of the lounging-room, evidently in earnest conversation.

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I sat down across the room where from time to time I could glance up and observe the bearded face of my suspect. How animated he was, how effective the gestures of his firm, strong hands. Was that the hand I had seen in the flashlight over my table the preceding night? He had rather thin, esthetic lips, half concealed by his mustache. Yet it wasn't a cruel or degenerate face.

But soon I forgot about Pescini to marvel at the growing, oppressive heat of the night. The chill that usually drops over the West coast in the first hours of darkness, did not manifest itself to-night. It was the kind of heat that brings a flush to the face and a ghastly crawling to the brain, swelling the neck glands until the linen collar chokes like strangling fingers, and heightens the temper clear to the explosion-point. Van Hope and Pescini tore at their collars, seemingly at first unaware as to the source of their discomfort.

In reality the heat wave had overspread us rather swiftly, and what was its source and by what shiftings of the air currents it had been sent to harry us was mostly beyond the wit of man to tell. The temperature must have been close to a hundred in that big, coolly furnished room, and the veranda outside seemed to offer no relief. The dim warmth from the electric lights above, added to the sweltering heat of the air, was wholly perceptible on the heated brain, and seemed to stretch the over-taut nerves to the breaking-point.

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"Isn't this the devil?" Van Hope exclaimed as I came out. "It wasn't half so hot at sunset. For Heaven's sake let's have a drink."

"Whiskey'd only make us hotter, would it not?"

"The English don't think so—but they're full of weird ideas. Have that big coon bring us some lemonade then—iced tea—anything. This is the kind of night that sets men crazy."

Men who have spent July in India, when the humidity is on the land, could appreciate such heat, but it passed ordinary understanding. It harassed the brain and fevered the blood, and warned us all of lawless demons that lived just under our skins. A man wouldn't be responsible, to-night. The devil inside of him, recognizing a familiar temperature, escaped his bonds and stood ready to take any advantage of openings.

It was a curious thing that there was no perceptible wind over the lagoon. Perhaps the reason was that we invariably associate wind with coolness, rather than any sort of a hushed movement of the air—and the impulse that brushed up on the veranda to us was as warm as a child's breath on the face. There was simply no whisper of sound on shore or sea or forest. The curlews were stilled, the wild creatures were likely lying motionless, trying to escape the heat, the little rustlings and murmurings of stirring vegetation was gone from the gardens. But that first silence, remarkable enough, seemed to deepen as we waited.

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There is a point, in temperature, that seems the utter limit of cold. Mushers along certain trails in the North had known that point—when there seems simply no heat left in the bitter, crackling, biting air. The temperature, at such times, registers forty—fifty—sixty below. Yet the scientist, in his laboratory, with his liquid hydrogen vaporizing in a vacuum, can show that this temperature

is not the beginning of the fearful scale of cold. To-night it was the same way with the silence. There simply seemed no sound left. But as we waited the silence grew and swelled until the brain ceased to believe the senses and the image of reality was gone. It gave you the impression of being fast asleep and in a dream that might easily turn to death.

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The mind kept dwelling on death. It was a great deal more plausible than life. The image of life was gone from that bleak manor house by the sea—the sea was dead, the air, all the elements by which men view their lives. The forest, lost in its silence, its most whispered voices stilled, was a dead forest, incomprehensible as living.

I went upstairs soon after. I thought it might be cooler there. Sometimes, if you go a few feet off the ground, you find it cooler—quite in opposition to the fact that hot air rises. There was no appreciable difference, however; but here, at least, I could take off my outer clothes. Then I got into a dressing-gown and slippers and waited, with a breathlessness and impatience not quite healthy and normal, for the late night sea breeze to spring up.

Seemingly it had been delayed. The hour was past eleven, the sweltering heat still remained. There was no way under Heaven to pass the time. One couldn't read, for the reason that the mental effort of following the lines of type was incomprehensibly fatiguing. I had neither the energy nor the interest to work upon the cryptogram—that baffling column of four-lettered words. Yet the brain was inordinately active. Ungoverned thought swept through it in ordered trains, in sudden, lunging waves, and in swirling eddies. Yet the thoughts were not clean-cut, wholly true—they overlapped with the bizarre and elfin impulses of the fancy, and the fine edge of discrimination between reality and dreams was some way dulled. It wasn't easy to hold the brain in perfect bondage.

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To that fact alone I try to ascribe the curious flood of thoughts that swept me in those midnight hours. Except for the heat, perhaps in a measure for the silence, I wouldn't have known them at all. I got to thinking about last night's crime, and I couldn't get it out of mind. The conceptions I had formed of it, the theories and decisions, seemed less and less convincing as I sat overlooking those shadowed, silent grounds. So much depends on the point of view. Ordinarily, our will gives us strength to believe wholly what we want to believe and nothing else. But the powers of the will were unstable to-night, the whole seat of being was shaken, and my fine theories in regard to Pescini seemed to lack the stuff of truth. I suppose every man present provided some satisfactory theory to fit the facts, for no other reason than that we didn't want to change our conception of Things as They Are. Such a course was essential to our own self-comfort and security. But my Pescini theory seemed far-fetched. In that silence and that heat, anything could be true at Kastle Krag's!

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From this point my mind led logically to the most disquieting and fearful thing of all. What was to prevent last night's crime from recurring?

It isn't hard to see the basis for such a thought. Some way, in these last, stifling, almost maddening hours, it had become difficult to rely implicitly on our rational interpretation of things. Certain things are credible to the every-day man in the every-day mood—things such as aeronautics and wireless, that to a savage mind would seem a thousand times more incredible than mere witchcraft and magic—and certain things simply can not and will not be believed. Society itself, our laws, our customs, our basic attitude towards life depends on a fine balance of what is credible and what is not, an imperious disbelief in any manifestation out of the common run of things. It is altogether good for society when this can be so. Men can not rise up from savagery until it is so. As long as black magic and witchcraft haunt the souls of men, there is nothing to trust, nothing to hold to or build towards, nothing permanent or infallible on which to rely, and hope can not escape from fear, and there is no promise that to-day's work will stand till to-morrow. Men are far happier when they may master their own beliefs. There is nothing so destructive to happiness, so favorable to the dominion of Fear, as an indiscriminate credulity. Those African explorers who have seen the curse of fear in the Congo tribes need not be told this fact.

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But to-night this fine scorn of the supernatural and the bizarre was some way gone from my being. It wasn't so easy to reject them now. Those hide-and-peek, half-glimpsed, eerie phantasies that are hidden deep in every man's subconscious mind were in the ascendancy to-night. They had been implanted in the germ-plasm a thousand thousand generations gone, they were a dim and mystic heritage from the childhood days of the race, the fear and the dreads and horrors of those dark forests of countless thousands of years ago, and they still lie like a shadow over the fear-cursed minds of some of the more savage peoples. Civilization has mostly got away from them, it has strengthened itself steadily against them, building with the high aim of wholly escaping from them, yet no man in this childlike world is wholly unknown to them. The blind, ghastly fear of the darkness, of the unknown, of the whispering voice or the rustling of garments of one who returns from beyond the void is an experience few human beings can deny.

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The cold logic with which I looked on life was in some way shaken and uncertain. The fanciful side of myself crept in and influenced all my thought-processes. It was no longer possible to accept, with implicit faith, that last night's crime was merely the expression of ordinary, familiar moods and human passions, that it would all work out according to the accepted scheme of things. Indeed the crime seemed no longer *human* at all. Rather it seemed just some deadly outgrowth of these weird sands beside the mysterious lagoon.

The crime had seemed a thing of human origin before, to be judged by human standards, but now

it had become associated, in my mind, with inanimate sand and water. It was as if we had beheld the sinister expression of some inherent quality in the place itself rather than the men who had gathered there. It was hard to believe, now, that Florey had been a mere actor in some human drama that in the end had led to murder. He had been little and gray and obscure, seemingly apart from human drama as the mountains are apart from the sea, and it was easier to believe that he had been merely the unsuspecting victim of some outer peril that none of us knew. Slain, with a ragged, downward cut through the breast—and his body dragged into the lagoon!

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What was to prevent the same thing from happening again? Before the week was done other of the occupants of that house might find themselves walking in the gardens at night, down by the craggy shore of the lagoon! Neelman, others of the servants, any one of the guests—Edith herself—wouldn't circumstance, sooner or later, take them into the shadow of that curse? Who could tell but that the whole thing might be reënacted before this dreadful, sweltering night was done!

The occupants of the house wouldn't be able to sleep to-night. Some of them would go walking in the gardens, rambling further down the beguiling garden paths that would take them at last to that craggy margin of the inlet. Some of them might want a cool glimpse of the lagoon itself. Would we hear that sharp, agonized, fearful scream again streaming through the windows, gripping the heart and freezing the blood in the veins? Any hour—any moment—such a thing might occur.

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But at that point I managed a barren and mirthless laugh. I was letting childlike fancies carry me away—and I had simply tried to laugh them to scorn. Surely I need not yield to such a mood as this, to let the sweltering heat and the silence change me into a superstitious savage. The thing to do was to move away from the window and direct my thought in other channels. Yet I knew, as I argued with myself, that I was curiously breathless and inwardly shaken. But these were nothing in comparison with the fact that I was some way *expectant*, too, with a dreadful expectancy beyond the power of naming.

Then my laugh was cut short. And I don't know what half-strangled utterance, what gagging expression of horror or regret or fulfilled dread took its place on my lips as a distinct scream for help, agonized and fearful, came suddenly, ripped through the darkness from the direction of the lagoon.

CHAPTER XV

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The most outstanding thing about that sound was its amazing loudness. It was hard to believe that a human voice could develop such penetration and volume. It had an explosive quality, bursting upon the eardrums with no warning whatsoever, and the man who had cried out had evidently given the full power of his lungs. It was probably true that the moist, hot atmosphere, hanging almost without motion, was a perfect medium for transmitting sound. Besides, my windows were open, facing the lagoon.

I heard the sound die away. The silence dropped down again to find me standing wholly motionless before the window, one hand resting on the sill, seemingly with all power of action gone. It was a shattering blow to spirit and hope that there was no further sound from that deathly still lagoon. Further calls would indicate that the outcome of the affair was still in doubt, that there was still use to hope and struggle. But there was a sense of dreadful finality in that unbroken silence. The drama that had raged on that craggy shore was already closed and done.

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The sound had not been only a cry for help. It had been charged full of the knowledge of impending death.

Motion came back to my body; and I sprang to the door. The interlude of inactivity couldn't have been more than a second in duration. That still, upper corridor was coming to life. Some one flashed on a light at the end of the hall, and the door of the room just opposite mine flew open. Van Hope, also in dressing-gown and slippers, stood on the threshold.

He saw me, and pushed through into the hall. His face had an almost incredible pallor in the soft light. In a moment his strong hand had seized my arm.

"Good God, I didn't dream that, did I?" he cried. "I was dozing—you heard it, didn't you——"

"Of course I heard——"

"Some one screamed for help! I heard the word plain. Good Lord, it's last night's work done over ——"

What he said thereafter I didn't hear. I was running down the hall toward the stairway, and at the head of the stairs I almost collided with Major Dell, just emerging from his room. He had evidently gone to bed, and he had just had time to jerk on his trousers over his pajamas and slip on a pair of romeos. The light was brighter here, and I got a clear picture of his face.

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It is a curious thing what details imprint themselves ineffaceably on the memory in a moment of crisis. Perhaps—as in the world of beasts—all the senses are incalculably sharpened, the thought processes are clean-cut and infallible, and images have a clarity unequalled at any other time. I

got the idea that Dell had been terribly moved by that scream in the darkness. His emotion had seemingly been so violent that it gave the impression of no emotion. His face looked blank as a sheet of white paper.

I rushed by him, and I heard him and Van Hope descending the stairs just behind me. The hall was still lighted, but long shadows lay across the broad veranda. Fargo, his book still in his hand, stood just outside the door.

"What was it, Killdare?" he asked me. "I couldn't tell from where it was——"

"The lagoon!" I answered. In the instant Van Hope and Dell caught up with me, and the four of us raced down the driveway.

Instinctively we went first to the place on the shore where Florey had been slain the night before. The action was a clear indication of what was in our minds—that this matter was in some way darkly related to the crime of the night before. But the sand was bare, and the grass unshadowed in the moonlight.

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For a moment we stood, aghast and shaken, gazing out over the lagoon. It was still as glass. The tide was running out, and not a wave stirred in all its darkened expanse. We saw the image of the moon far out, scarcely wavering, and the long, bright trail that it made across the water to our eyes. The night was still stifling hot, and the lagoon conveyed an image of coolness.

"Don't stand here!" Fargo cried. "We've got to make a search. Some poor devil is likely lying somewhere in these gardens——"

The house was lighted now, and in an uproar, and some of the other guests were racing down the driveway to us. In this regard it might have been last night's tragedy reenacted. There was, however, one significant change.

The iron self-control, the coolness, the perfect discipline of mind and muscle that had marked the finding of the dead body on the shore the preceding night was no longer entirely manifest. These northern men, cold as flint ordinarily, were no longer wholly self-mastered. One glance at their faces, loose and pale in the moonlight, and the first sound of their voices told this fact only too plainly. It was not, however, that they were completely broken. Their training and their manhood was too good for that.

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We didn't stop to answer their queries. We began to search through the gardens, examining every shadow, peering into every covert. We tried to direct each other according to our several ideas as to the source of the sound. We all agreed, however, that the sound had seemed to come from the immediate vicinity of the natural rock wall that formed the lagoon.

The next few moments were not very coherent. We called back and forth, encountered one another in the shadows, knew moments of apprehension when the brush walls cut us off from our fellows, but we found nothing that might have explained that desperate cry of a few moments before. At last some one called out commandingly from the shores of the lagoon.

"Come here, every one," he said. The voice rose above our confused utterances, and all of us, recognizing a leader, hurried to him. Pescini was standing beside the craggy shore, a strange and imposing figure in the wealth of moonlight, at the edge of that tranquil water.

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Pescini, after all, was showing himself one of the most self-mastered men among us. Any one could read the fact in his voice. How white his skin looked in the moonlight, how raven-black his mustache and beard! He was still in the garb he had worn at dinner, immaculate and unruffled.

"We're not getting anywhere," he said. "Is every one here?"

"Here!" It was Joe Nopp's voice, and he immediately joined us. We waited an instant, seeing if any further searchers were yet to come in. But the thickets were as hushed as the lagoon itself.

"Let's take another tack," Pescini said. "There's nothing in these gardens. If there is we'll find it in an organized search. Remember—our search got us nowhere last night. Let's count up, and see if we're all all right."

We waited for him to continue. All of us breathed deeply and hard.

"Then let's go up to the house to do it," Nopp suggested. "We know we're not all here now—there's no use getting alarmed before we're sure. Go up to the living-room."

His voice was oddly penetrative, wakening a whole flood of unwelcome thoughts.... We were not all here, he said—seemingly not even all the white occupants of Kastle Krag's had obeyed the common instinct to answer and investigate that cry! Yet it all might come to nothing, after all. A close tabulation might account for every one—and that the remainder of our party had merely not yet wakened. Stranger things have happened. We told ourselves, in silent ways, that we had heard of men sleeping through more fearful sounds than that! I agreed with Nopp that the thing to do was to go to the living-room, make a careful count, and then see where we stood.

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In a moment we had started back. We were not afraid we had left some of our party still searching through the gardens. No man cared to be alone out there to-night, and all of us kept close track of our fellows. Edith was standing just before the veranda, on the driveway, as we came up. The coroner, who had taken time fully to dress, met us half-way down the lawns.

We walked almost in silence; and quietly, rather grimly, Joe Nopp flashed on all the lights of the big living-room.

"Go ahead, Slatterly," he said to the sheriff, "See that we're all here."

"Let Killdare do it. I don't know you all, you know—"

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So I made the count, just as sometimes we did after raids over No Man's Land. The sheriff and the constable were both present, Mrs. Gentry, the housekeeper, was standing, pale but remarkably self-possessed, at the inner door of the room. Of course I couldn't count up the blacks. Most of them were evidently hiding in their rooms. And every one of the six guests answered his name.

"There's just one more name to give," Nopp said at last.

"But there's no use naming it," some one answered in a queer, flat voice. "He's not here."

Nopp turned, and bounded like a deer up the stairs. All of us knew what he had gone to do: to see if the missing man was in his room. And there was nothing for us but to wait for his report.

But in a moment we heard his step on the stairs. He sprang down among us, and evidently his fine self-mastery was breaking within him. His fine eyes held vivid points of light.

"My God, he's gone," he said. "Not a sign of him."

"It can't be true," Pescini answered.

"It is. His bed is rumped—but not thrown back or slept in."

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Von Hope, the missing man's closest friend, suddenly gasped aloud. "But I won't believe it—not until we make a search!" he cried. "It can't be true."

"Believe it or not. Search through the grounds or call through the house. Nealman's gone just as Florey's body went last night."

CHAPTER XVI

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We searched through the house, grimly and purposefully; but Nealman, the genial host of Kastle Kraggs, was neither revealed to our eyes or gave answer to our calls. It was no longer possible to doubt but that it was his voice that had uttered that fearful cry for help.

While the coroner, whose special province is death, led the guests in a detailed search through the grounds, Sheriff Slatterly and I examined the missing man's room. And here I was to learn the contents of those mysterious telegrams that had reached Nealman after the inquest of the preceding day.

They were lying on his desk, one of them torn in two as if in a fit of anger, the other rumped from a hundred readings. I read aloud to the sheriff:

BLAIR COMBINE FORCING I. S. AND H. TO BOTTOM. MOVE QUICK IF YOU CAN.

The second read:

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I. S. AND H. DOWN TO 28. ALL YOUR INDUSTRIALS SMASHED WIDE OPEN. FLETCHER NEALMAN GOES DOWN IN SMASH.

The sheriff halted in his search and took the messages from my hand. "I'm not much up on the stock market," he said. "Do you know what these mean—"

"Not exactly. I know that I. S. and H. stock has taken a fearful drop—if he had bought heavily on margin his whole fortune might have been wiped out. Blair is a prominent speculator on the exchange. Industrials refer, of course, to industrial stocks. Fletcher Nealman was Mr. Nealman's uncle, supposed to be a man of great wealth—"

"Then you think—Nealman was ruined financially?" He paused, seemingly studying his hands. "I wonder if it could be true."

"You mean of course—the same thing that you guessed about Florey. Suicide?"

"Yes. I'll admit there's plenty against it."

"If suicide—why did he cry for help?"

"Many a man cries for help after he's started to do himself in. The darkness scares 'em, when it's too late to turn back. That wouldn't puzzle me at all. Killdare, do you know the importance of example?"

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"I know that what one man does, another's likely to do."

"I'm not saying that Nealman killed himself, but listen how much there is to say for such a theory."

You're right—what one man does, another's likely to do. A curious thing about suicides, Weldon tells me, is that they usually come in droves. One man sets an example for another. Say you're worrying to death about something, sick perhaps, or financially ruined, and you hear of some fellow—some chap you know, perhaps, a man you respect almost as much as you respect yourself—suddenly getting out of all his difficulties all nice and quiet—with one little click to the head? Isn't it likely you'd begin thinking about the same thing for yourself? Call it mob psychology—I only know it happens in fact.

"I'm more confident than ever that Florey did himself in, on account of his sickness. Here was Nealman, worried to death over money matters, holding a lot of options on a falling market. It's true that we didn't find Florey's knife, but who can say but maybe Nealman himself threw it into the lagoon, and dragged the body afterward, so that no one would guess it was suicide. He liked Florey—he didn't want any one to know he had done himself in. Maybe he was thinking already about doing the same thing to himself, and in such a case he'd been glad enough to have some one hide the evidence of suicide. To-day he gets word of a final smash, and he stays all day in his room, brooding about it. To-night comes this heat—enough to drive a man crazy. Maybe he just called out to make us think it was murder. Proud men don't usually want the world to know that they've killed themselves.

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"Then there's one other thing—more important still. What's that book, open, on the table?"

I glanced at its leathern cover. "The Bible," I told him.

"The Holy Book. And how often do you find a worldly man like this Nealman getting out the Bible and reading it? Doesn't it show that he was planning something mighty serious—that he wanted to give his soul every chance before he took the last step? It's a common thing for suicides to read the Bible the last thing. And what are these?"

He showed me a rumpled sheet of paper, procured from the waste-basket, on which had been written a number of unrelated figures.

"I can't say," I told him. "Probably he was doing some figuring about his losses."

"Looks to me like he was out of his head—was just writin' any old figures down. But maybe you're right."

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It was true that the bed had not been slept in. Nealman had lain down on it, however, and disarranged the spread. Many cigarette and cigar stubs filled the smoking stand, and a half-filled whiskey-and-soda glass stood on the window sill.

No other clues were revealed, so we went down to the study. The guests of Kastle Krags had not gone back to their beds. They sat in a little white-faced group beside the window, talking quietly. Marten beckoned the sheriff to his side.

"What have you found out, Slatterly?" he asked.

He spoke like a man used to having his questions answered. There was a note of impatience in his voice, too, perhaps of distrust. Slatterly straightened.

"Nothing definite. Nealman has unquestionably vanished. His bed hasn't been slept in, but is ruffled. Undoubtedly it was his voice we heard. I think I'll be able to give you something definite in a little while."

"I'd like something definite now, if you could possibly give it. That's two men that have disappeared in two nights—and we seem to be no nearer an explanation than we were at first. This isn't a business that can be delayed, Mr. Slatterly."

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"If you must know—I think both men committed suicide."

"You do!"

"It certainly is the most reasonable theory, in spite of all there is against it." Then he told of Nealman's financial disaster, of the Bible open on his desk, and all the other points he had to back his theory.

"And I suppose Florey swallowed his knife, and threw his own body into the lagoon!" Fargo commented grimly.

Slatterly turned to him, his eyes hard and bright. "We'll have your jokes to-morrow," he reproved him sternly. "Of course some one else did that. I've got a theory—not yet proven—to explain it, but I can't give it out yet."

"How do you account for Florey's body not being found in the lagoon?" Marten asked quietly.

"I can't account for it. We might have missed it—I don't see how we could, but we might have done so. I'm going to have men dragging the lagoon all day, over and over again—until we find *both* bodies."

"You are convinced that Nealman, too, lies dead in the lagoon?"

"Where else could he be? Did you hear that cry a few hours ago?"

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"Good Heavens! Could I ever forget it? My old friend——"

"Was it faked? Could any man have faked a cry like that?"

"Heavens, no! It had the fear and the agony of death right in it. There can't be any hope of that, Slatterly."

The sheriff gazed about the little circle of white faces. No one dissented. That cry was real, and there had been tragic need and extremity behind it: we knew that fact if we knew that we lived. Evidently the sheriff had completely given over the theory that he had suggested, half-heartedly, to me—that Nealman might have cried out to hide the fact of his own suicide.

"No man could have cried out like that to deceive, and then disappear. No, Mr. Marten, the man that gave that cry is dead, in all probability in the lagoon, and there seems no doubt but that Nealman was the man."

"Yet you think he was a suicide."

"A suicide often cries out for help when it is too late to back out. But of course—I can't say for sure."

"You're mistaken in that, Slatterly." Van Hope drew himself together with a perceptible effort. "I've known this man for years—and in the end, you'll see it isn't suicide. He wasn't the type that commits suicide. He's young, he'd be getting himself together to meet that Blair gang that ruined him and chase 'em into their holes. The suicide theory is far-fetched, at best." [Pg 153]

"It may be," the sheriff agreed. "I only wish there could be some light thrown on this affair——"

"There will be, Slatterly." Marten's voice dropped almost to a monotone. "This is too big a deal for one man—or two men either. We've been talking, and we've decided to send for some one to help you out."

"You have, eh?" Slatterly stiffened. "If I need help I can send through my own channels—get some state or national detectives——"

"That's all right. Get 'em if you want to. The more the better. But you haven't got any help yet—even the district attorney has failed to come and won't come for at least a day or two more. We've got a private detective in mind—one of the biggest in America. His name's Lacone—you've heard of him. It won't be an official matter at all. Van Hope is hiring him—a wholly private enterprise. I know you'll all be glad to have his co-operation."

"If it's a private venture, I have nothing further to say," Slatterly told him stiffly. "When do you expect him?" [Pg 154]

"He's operating in the Middle West. He can't possibly make it until day after to-morrow——"

"Twenty-four hours, eh?"

"It's after midnight now. Probably not for forty-eight hours."

"By that time, I hope to have the matter solved." Then his business took him elsewhere, and he strode away.

There was one thing more I could do. It was an obligation, and yet, because it was in the way of service, it was a happiness too. I climbed the broad stairs and stopped at last before Edith's door.

She called softly in answer to my knock. And in a moment she had opened the door.

She was fully dressed, waiting ready for any call that might be made upon her. And the picture that she made, framed in the doorway, went straight to my heart.

Her eyes were still lustrous with tears, and the high girlish color and the light of happiness was gone from her face. It was wistful, like that of a grief-stricken child. Her voice was changed too, in spite of all her struggle to make it sound the same. And at first I stood helpless, not knowing what to say or do. [Pg 155]

"I came—just to see if I could be of any aid—in any way."

"I don't think you can," she answered. "It's so good of you, though, to remember——"

"There's no one to notify—no telegrams to send——"

"I don't think so, yet. We're not sure yet. Ned, is there any chance for him to be alive——"

"Not any."

Her hand touched my arm. "You haven't any idea how he died?"

"No. It's absolutely baffling. But try not to think about it. Everything will come out right for you, in the end."

I hadn't meant to say just that—to recall her to the uncertainty of her own future now that her uncle, financially ruined, had disappeared.

"I'm not thinking—about what will happen to me." She suddenly straightened, and her eyes kindled. "About the other—Ned, I'm not going to try to keep from thinking about it. I'm going to think about it all I can, until I see it through. Only thought, and keen, true thought, can help us

now. I've had to do a lot of thinking in my life, overcoming difficulties. And there's no one really vitally interested but me—I was the closest relative, except for his uncle, that Neelman had. I'm going to find out the mystery of that lagoon! Perhaps, in finding it, I can solve a lot of other problems too—perhaps the one you just mentioned. Uncle Grover was kind to me, he gave me his protection and shelter—and I'm going to know what killed him!"

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I found myself staring into her blazing, determined eyes. She meant what she said. The fire of a zealot was in her face. "Good Heavens, Edith! That isn't work for a woman——"

"It's work for anybody, with a clear enough brain to see the truth, and courage to prove it out ——"

In some mysterious way her hands had got into mine. We were standing face to face in the shadowed hall. "But promise me—you won't go into danger!"

"I promise—that I'll take every precaution—to preserve myself."

CHAPTER XVII

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As soon as daylight came the coroner held another inquest. Again the occupants of the great manor house, black and white, were gathered in the living-room, and the coroner called on each person in turn. Possible suspects had been numerous in the case of Florey's death: in regard to this second mystery they seemingly included almost every one in the house.

I was able to state positively that Major Dell and Van Hope were in their own rooms at the time, or such a short time afterward as to preclude them from any possible connection with the crime. I had seen the latter on his threshold: both of us had encountered Major Dell as he emerged from his room, his trousers slipped on over his pajamas. The court had to take each man's word in every other instance.

The coroner questioned Fargo particularly closely. I had testified that we had met him, at the lower hallway, fully dressed, and evidently the official attributed sinister importance to the fact. Fargo stood tightly by his guns, however, testifying that he sat in the same chair in the library from shortly after the dinner hour until he had heard the scream.

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"What was the nature of the scream, Mr. Fargo?" the coroner asked.

"It was very high and loud—I would say a very frantic scream."

"You would say it was a cry of agony? Like some one mortally wounded?"

"I wouldn't hardly think so."

"And why not?"

"I don't think a wounded man could have uttered that scream. It was too loud and strong—given by a man whose strength was still largely unimpaired."

The coroner leaned nearer. "How further would you describe it?"

"It was a distinct cry for help," Fargo answered. "The word he said was 'Help'—I heard it distinctly. But it wasn't a cry of any one mortally injured. If anything, it was a cry of—fear."

"Where did it come from?"

"From the lagoon."

The coroner's eyes snapped. "If you knew it was from the lagoon why did you ask Mr. Killdare, when he encountered you last night, where it was from."

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Fargo stiffened, meeting his gaze. "I wasn't sure last night, Mr. Weldon," he answered. "I knew it was somewhere in that direction. When Mr. Killdare said it was from the lagoon I instantly knew he was right. I can't say just how I knew. All the testimony I've heard to-day proves the same thing."

"No one wants you to tell what other people have testified, Mr. Fargo," the coroner reproved him. "We want to know what you saw with your own eyes and heard with your own ears and what you thought at the time, not now. To go further. You think that the cry was uttered by a man whose strength was unimpaired. A strong, full-lunged cry. Moreover, it was given in deadly fear. Does that suggest anything in your mind?"

"I don't see what you are getting at."

"You say it was a long, full-voiced cry. Or did you say it was long?"

"I don't think I said so. It was rather long-drawn, though. It's impossible to give a full-lunged cry without having it give the effect of being long-drawn."

"You would say it lasted—how long?"

"A second, I should say. Certainly not more. Just about a second."

"A second is a long time, isn't it, Mr. Fargo, when a man stands at the brink of death. Often the tables can be turned in as long a time as a second. Many times a second has given a man time to save his life—to prepare a defense—even to flee. Does it seem to you unusual that a man would give that much energy and time to cry for help when he was still uninjured, and still had a second of life."

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"Not at all—under certain circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"It would depend on the nature of the force. A man might see—that while he still had strength left to fight, he wouldn't have the least chance to win."

"Exactly. Yet if a man had time to call out that way, he'd at least have time to run. A man can take a big jump in a second, Fargo."

Fargo's voice fell. "Perhaps he couldn't run."

"Ah!" The coroner paused. "Because he was in the grasp of his assailant?"

"Yes."

"Yet he still had his strength left. Nealman was a man among men, wasn't he, Fargo?"

"Indeed he was!" Fargo's eyes snapped. "I'd like to see any one deny it."

"He wasn't a coward then. He'd fight as long as he had a chance, instead of giving all his energies to yelling for help—help that could not reach him short of many seconds. In other words, Nealman knew that he didn't have the least kind of a fighting chance. He was in the grasp of his assailant so he couldn't run. And his assailant was strong—and powerful enough—that there was no use to fight him."

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It was curious how his voice rang in that silent room. Fargo had leaned back in his chair, as if the words struck him like physical blows. A negro janitor at one side inhaled with a sharp, distinct sound.

"It might have been more than one man," Fargo suggested uneasily.

"Do you believe it was?"

"I don't know. It's wholly a blank to me."

"Have you any theory where the body is?"

"I suppose—in the lagoon."

"Would you say that cry was given while he was in the water?"

"I hardly think so. I'm slightly known as a swimmer, Mr. Weldon—was once, anyway, and I know something about the water. A drowning man can't call that loud. Mr. Nealman was a corking good swimmer himself—nothing fancy at all, but fairly well able to take care of himself. When he disappeared the tide was running out—the lagoon on this side of the rock wall was still as glass. If Mr. Nealman, through some accident or other, fell in that lagoon he'd swim out—unless he was held in. At least he'd try to swim out. And by the time he found out he couldn't make the shore, he'd be so tired he couldn't cry out like he did last night."

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"I see your point. I don't know that it would always work out. Occasionally a man—simply loses his nerve."

"Not Nealman—in still water, most of which isn't over five feet deep."

"'Unless he was held in,' you say. What do you think held him in?"

Fargo's hands gripped his chair-arms. "Mr. Weldon, I don't know what you want me to say," he answered clearly. "I feel the same way about this mystery that I felt about the other—that human enemies did him to death. I don't think anything held him in. I think he was dead before ever he was thrown into the water. I think two or three men—perhaps only one—surrounded him—probably pointed a gun at him. He yelled for help, and they killed him—probably with a knife or black-jack. That's the whole story."

The coroner dismissed him, then slowly gazed about the circle. For the first time I began to realize that these mysteries of Kastle Krags were pricking under his skin. He looked baffled, irritated, his temper was lost, as gone as the missing men themselves.

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Ever his attitude was more belligerent, pugnacious. His lips were set in a fighting line, his eyes scowled, and evidently he intended to writing the testimony from his witnesses by third degree methods. Suddenly he whirled to Pescini.

"How did you happen to be fully dressed at the time of Nealman's disappearance last night?" he demanded.

Pescini met his gaze coolly and easily. Perhaps little points of light glittered in his eyes, but his pale face was singularly impassive. "I hadn't gone to bed," he answered simply.

"How did that happen? Do you usually wait till long after midnight to go to bed?"

"Not always. I have no set hour. Last night I was reading."

"Some book that was in your room?"

"A book I had carried with me. 'The diary of a Peruvian Princess' was the title. An old book—but exceedingly interesting."

He spoke gravely, yet it was good to hear him. "I'll make a note of it," the coroner said, falling into his mood. But at once he got back to business. "You didn't remove your coat?"

"No. I got so interested that I forgot to make any move towards bed."

The coroner paused, then took another tack. "You've known Nealman for a long time, have you not, Pescini?" [Pg 164]

"Something over four years, I should judge."

"You knew him in a business way?"

"More in a social way. We had few business dealings."

"Ah!" The coroner seemed to be studying the pattern of the rugs. "The inquiry of the other day showed you and he from the same city. I suppose you moved largely in the same circle. Belonged to the same clubs, and all that? Mr. Pescini, was Nealman a frequent visitor to your house?"

The witness seemed to stiffen. The coroner leaned forward in his chair.

"He came quite often," the former replied quietly. "He was a rather frequent dinner guest. He and I liked to talk over various subjects."

"You will pardon me, Mr. Pescini, if I have to venture into personal subjects—subjects that will be unpleasant for you to discuss. This inquiry, however, takes the place of a formal inquest. Two men have disappeared. It is the duty of the state, whose representative I am, to spare no man's sensibilities in finding out the truth. We've got to get down to cases. You understand that, I suppose."

"Perfectly." Pescini leaned back, folding his hands. "Perfectly," he said again. [Pg 165]

"I believe you recently filed and won a suit for divorce against your wife, Marie Pescini. Isn't this true?"

The witness nodded. None of us heard him speak.

"May I ask what was your grounds, stated in your complaint?"

"I don't see that it makes any difference. The grounds were the only ones by which divorce can be granted in the State of New York."

"Infidelity, I believe?"

"Yes. Infidelity."

"You named certain co-respondents?"

"Yes."

"I ask you this. Was there any man whom you regarded as one of those that had helped to break up your home that, for any reason in the world, you did not name in your complaint?"

"There was not. You are absolutely off on the wrong track."

The coroner dismissed him pre-emptorily, then turned to Edith Nealman. He asked her the usual questions, with considerable care and in rather surprising detail—how long she had worked as Nealman's secretary, whether he had any enemies; he sounded her as to the missing man's habits, his finances, his most intimate life. [Pg 166]

"When did you last see Mr. Nealman?" he asked quickly.

"Just before yesterday's inquest—when he went to his room."

"He didn't call you for any work?"

"No."

"You didn't see him in the corridor—in his room—in the study adjoining his room—or anywhere else?"

"No." Edith's face was stark white, and her voice was very low. Not one of us could ever forget how she looked—that slim, girlish figure in the big chair, the frightened eyes, the pale, sober face. The coroner smiled, a little, grim smile that touched some unpleasant part of me, then abruptly turned to Mrs. Gentry, the housekeeper.

"I'll have to ask you to give publicly, Mrs. Gentry, the testimony you gave me before this inquest."

"I didn't tell you that to speak out in court," the woman replied, angrily. "There wasn't nothin' to it, anyway. I'm sorry I told you—"

"That's for me to decide—whether there was anything to it. It won't injure any one who is innocent, Mrs. Gentry. What happened, about ten-thirty or eleven o'clock."

The woman answered as if under compulsion—in the helpless voice of one who, in a long life's bitter struggle, has learned the existence of many masters. Mrs. Gentry had learned to yield. To her this trivial court was a resistless power, many of which existed in her world. [Pg 167]

"I was at the end of the corridor on the second floor—tendin' to a little work. Then I saw Miss Edith come stealin' out of her room."

"You say she was 'stealing.' Describe how she came. Did she give the impression of trying to go—unseen?"

"Yes. I don't think she wanted any one to see her. She went on tip-toe."

"Did she carry anything in her hands?"

"Yes. She had a black book, not big and not little either. She had it under her arm. She crept along the hall, and a door opened to let her in."

"What door was it?"

"The door of Mr. Nealman's suite—a little hall, with one door leading into his chamber—the other to his study."

"Nealman opened the door for her, then?"

"Yes. I saw his sleeve as he closed it behind her."

The coroner's face grew stern, and he turned once more to Edith. To all outward appearance she hadn't heard the testimony. She leaned easily in her big chair, and her palm rested under her chin. Her eyes were shadowy and far-away. [Pg 168]

"How can you account for that, Miss Nealman?" Weldon asked.

"There's nothing I can say about it," was her quiet answer.

"You admit it's true, then?"

"I can't make Mrs. Gentry out a liar." It seemed to me that a dim smile played at her lips; but it was a thing even closely watching eyes might easily mistake. "It's perfectly true."

"Then why, Miss Nealman, did you tell us a few minutes ago you hadn't seen Mr. Nealman since afternoon? That was a lie, was it not? I didn't ask you to take formal oath when you gave me your testimony. I presumed you'd stay by the truth. Why did you tell us what you did?"

"I didn't see any use in trying to explain. I didn't tell you—because Mr. Nealman asked me not to."

A little shiver of expectancy passed over the court. "What do you mean?"

"Just that—he asked me to tell no one about my visit to the little study adjoining his room. The whole thing was simply this—there's certainly no good in withholding it any more. About eleven he rang for me. There is a bell, you know, that connects that study with my room. I answered it as I've always done. He asked me if I had a Bible—and I told him I did. He asked me to get it for him, as quietly as possible. [Pg 169]

"I got it—quietly as possible—just as he said. There was nothing very peculiar about it—he often wants some book out of the library. I gave him the book and he dismissed me, first asking me to tell no one, under any conditions, that he had asked for it. I didn't know why he asked it, but he is my employer, and I complied with his request. Mrs. Gentry saw me as I was coming down the hall with the Bible under my arm. I didn't tell you about it because he asked me not to."

"It was your Bible, then, that we found in his room?"

"Of course."

"Mr. Nealman was given to reading the Bible at various times?"

"On the contrary I don't think he ever read it. He didn't have a copy. He was not, outwardly, according to the usual manifestations, a highly religious man."

"Yet you say he was intrinsically religious? At least, that he had religious instincts?"

"He had very fine instincts. He had a great deal of natural religion."

"You often brought him books, you say. Yet you must have thought it peculiar—that he would ask for the Bible—in the dead of night." [Pg 170]

"Yes." Her voice dropped a tone. "Of course it was peculiar."

"Then why didn't you notify some one about it?"

"Because he told me not to."

The coroner seemed baffled—but only for an instant. "Did it occur to you that he was perhaps trying to get some religious consolation—just before he took some important or tragic step? Did the thought of—suicide ever occur to you?"

"No. It didn't occur to me. My uncle didn't commit suicide."

"You have only your beliefs as to that?"

"Yes, but they are enough. I know him too well. I'm sure he didn't commit suicide."

"How did he appear when you talked to him—excited, frenzied? Did he seem changed at all?"

"I think he was somewhat excited. His eyes were very bright. I wouldn't call him desperate, however. He was dressed in the flannels he had worn when he went to his room. Of course he looked dreadfully worn and tired—he had been through a great deal that day. As you know he had just heard about his frightful losses on the stock exchange, wiping out his entire fortune and even leaving some few debts."

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"You went away quietly—at once? Leaving him to read the Bible?"

"Very soon. We talked a few minutes, perhaps."

Then the coroner began upon a series of questions that were abhorrent to every man in the room. There was nothing to do, however, but to listen to them in silence. The man was within his rights.

"You say that Nealman was your uncle?" he asked.

The girl's eyes fastened on his, and narrowed as we watched her. "Of course. My father's brother."

"A blood relative, eh?" The coroner spoke more slowly, carefully. "I suppose you could prove that point to the satisfaction of a court."

"With a little time. I'd have to go back to the records of my own old home. What are you getting at?"

"What was your father's name, may I ask?"

"Henry H. Nealman."

"Older or younger than Grover Nealman?"

"Nearly ten years older, or thereabouts."

"Where was Mr. Nealman born?"

"In Rensselaer, New York. His father was named Henry H. Nealman, also. He was a rug manufacturer. There was also one sister that died many years ago—Grace Nealman. Are you satisfied that I am really his niece, Mr. Weldon?"

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"Perfectly." The coroner nodded, slowly. "Perfectly satisfied."

He dismissed her, but it came about that I failed to hear the testimony given immediately thereafter. One of Slatterly's men that had been sent for to help him drag the lake brought me in a telegram.

It was the belated answer to the wire I had sent to Mrs. Noyes, of New Hampshire the previous day, and signed by the woman's husband. It read as follows:

MY WIFE DIED LAST MONTH LEAVING ME TO MOURN. THE LETTERS WERE UNQUESTIONABLY FROM GEORGE FLOREY DAVID'S BROTHER. THEY HAVE BEEN BITTER ENEMIES SINCE YOUTH OVER SOME SECRET BUSINESS. FIND GEORGE FLOREY AND YOU WILL FIND THE MURDERER. I HAVEN'T EVER SEEN HIM AND SO FAR HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO FIND PHOTO. IF ONE TURNS UP I WILL SEND IT ON.

WILLIAM NOYES.

CHAPTER XVIII

[Pg 173]

Grover Nealman had disappeared, and no search could bring him back to Kastle Kraggs. The hope that we all had, that some way, some how he would reappear—destroying in a moment that strange, ghastly tradition that these last two nights had established—died in our souls as the daylight hours sped by. Even if we could have found him dead it would have been some relief. In that case we could ascribe his death to something we could understand—a sudden sickness, a murderer's blow, perhaps even his own hand at his throat, all of which were within our bourne of human experience. But it was vaguely hard for us to have two men go, on successive nights, and have no knowledge whence or how they had gone.

Of course no man hinted at this hardship. It was simply the sort of thing that could not be discussed by intelligent men. Yet we were human, only a few little generations from the tribal fire and the witch-doctors, and it got under our skins.

Grover Nealman's body was not lying in some unoccupied part of the house, nor did we find him in the gardens. Telephone messages were sent, but Nealman had not been seen. And after six hours of patient search, under that Floridan sun, it was no longer easy to believe that he lay at the bottom of the lagoon.

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The sheriff's men dragged tirelessly, widening out their field of search until it covered most of the lagoon, but they found neither Nealman nor Florey. Some of the work was done in the flow-tide, when the waves breaking on the rocky barrier made the lagoon itself choppy and rough. They came in tired and discouraged, ready to give up.

In the meantime Van Hope had heard from Lacone—but his message was not very encouraging either. It would likely be forty hours, he said, before he could arrive at Kastle Kraggs. Of course Van Hope and his friends agreed that there was nothing to do but wait for him.

The sun reached high noon and then began his long, downward drift to the West. The shadows slowly lengthened almost imperceptibly at first, but with gradually increasing speed. The heat of the day climbed, reached its zenith; the diamond-back slept heavily in the shade, a deadly slumber that was evil to look upon; and the water-moccasin hung lifelessly in his thickets—and then, so slowly as to pass belief, the little winds from the West sprang up, bringing relief. It would soon be night at Kastle Kraggs. The afternoon was almost gone.

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Not one of those northern men mentioned the fact. They were Anglo-Saxons, and that meant there were certain iron-clad restraints on their speech. Because of this inherent reserve they had to bottle up their thoughts, harbor them in silence, with the risk of a violent nerve explosion in the end. Insanity is not common among the Latin peoples. They find easy expression in words for all the thoughts that plague them, thus escaping that strain and tension that works such havoc on the nervous system. Slatterly and Weldon, native Floridians, had learned a certain sociability and ease of expression under that tropical sun, impossible to these cold, northern men; and consequently the day passed easier for them. Likely they talked over freely the mystery of Kastle Kraggs, relieved themselves of their secret dreads, and awaited the falling of the night with healthy, unburdened minds. They were naturally more superstitious than the Northerners. They had listened to Congo myths in the arms of colored mammies in infancy. But superstition, while a retarding force to civilization, is sometimes a mighty consolation to the spirit. The tribes of Darkest Africa, seeing many things that in their barbarism they can not understand, find it wiser to turn to superstition than to go mad. Thus they escape that bitter, nerve-wracking struggle of trying to adjust some inexplicable mystery with their every-day laws of matter and space and time. They likely find it happier to believe in witchcraft than to fight hopelessly with fear in silence.

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A little freedom, a little easy expression of secret thoughts might have redeemed those long, silent hours just before nightfall. But no man told another what he was really thinking, and every man had to win his battle for himself. The result was inevitable: a growing tension and suspense in the very air.

It was a strange atmosphere that gathered over Kastle Kraggs in those early evening hours. Some way it gave no image of reality. It was vaguely hard to talk—the mind moved along certain channels and could not be turned aside. We couldn't disregard the fact that the night was falling. The hours of darkness were even now upon us. And no man could keep from thinking of their possibilities.

I noticed a certain irritability on the part of all the guests. Their nerves were on edge, their tempers—almost forgotten in their years of social intercourse—excitable and uncertain. They were all pre-occupied, busy with their own thoughts—and a man started when another spoke to him.

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It couldn't be truly said that they had been conquered by fear. These were self-reliant, masterful men, trained from the ground up to be strong in the face of danger. Yet the mystery of Kastle Kraggs was getting to them. They couldn't forget that for two nights running some power that dwelt on that eerie shore had claimed one of the occupants of the manor house—and that a third night was even now encroaching over the forest. Any legend however strange concerning the old house could not wake laughter now. It was true that from time to time one of the guests laughed at another's sallies, but always the sound rang shockingly loud over the verandas and was some way disquieting to every one that heard it. Nor did we hear any happy, carefree laughter such as had filled the halls that first night. Rather these were nervous, excited sounds, conveying no image of mirth, and jarring unpleasantly on us all.

The hot spell of the previous night was fortunately broken, yet some of us chose to sit on the verandas. Through rifts in the trees we could watch the darkness creeping over the sea and the lagoon. There was no pleasure here—but it was some way better than staying in our rooms and letting the night creep upon us unawares. It seemed better to face it and watch it, staring away into it with rather bright, wide-open eyes....

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The trees blurred on the lawns. The trunks faded until they seemed like the trunks of ghost-trees, haunting that ancient shore. It was no longer possible to distinguish twig from twig where the branches overlapped.

The green grass became a strange, dusky blue; the gray sand of the shore whitened; the blue-green waters turned to ink except for their silver-white caps of foam. Watching closely, our eyes gradually adjusted themselves to the fading light, conveying the impression that the twilight was of unusual length. Perhaps we didn't quite know when the twilight ended and the night began.

The usual twilight sounds reached us with particular vividness from the lagoon and the forest and the shore. We heard the plover, as ever; and deeper voices—doubtless those of passing sea-birds, mingled with theirs. But the sounds came intermittently, sharp and penetrating out of the darkness and the silence, and they always startled us a little. Sometimes the thickets rustled in the gardens—little, hushed noises none of us pretended to hear. A frog croaked, and the hushed little wind creaked the tree-limbs together. Once some wild creature—possibly a wildcat, but more likely a great owl—filled the night with his weird, long-drawn cry. We all turned, and Van Hope, sitting near by, smiled wanly in the gloom.

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Darkness had already swept the verandas, and Van Hope's was the only face I could see. The others were already blurred, and even their forms were mere dark blotches of shadow. A vague count showed that there was six of us here—and I was suddenly rather startled by the thought that I didn't know just who they were. The group had changed from time to time throughout the evening, some of the men had gone and others had taken their chairs, and now the darkness concealed their identities. It shouldn't have made any difference, yet I found myself dwelling, with a strange persistency, on the subject.

The reason got down to the simple fact that, in this house of mystery, a man instinctively wanted to keep track of all his fellows. He wanted to know where they were and what they were doing. He found himself worrying when one of them was gone. I suppose it was the instinct of protection—a feeling that a man's absence might any moment result in a shrill scream of fear or death in the darkness. Van Hope sat to my left, a little further to the right was Weldon, the coroner. There were three chairs further to the right, but which of the five remaining guests occupied them I did not know.

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Three white men—two of the guests and the sheriff—were unaccounted for. My better intelligence told me that they were either in the living-room or the library, perhaps in their own rooms, yet it was impossible to forget that these men were of the white race, largely free from the superstition that kept the blacks safely from the perilous shores of the lagoon. Any one of a dozen reasons might send them walking down through the gardens to those gray crags from which they might never return.

I found myself wondering about Edith, too. She had excused herself and had gone to her room, ostensibly to bed, but I couldn't forget our conversation of the previous night and her resolve to fathom the mystery of her uncle's disappearance. Would she remain in the security of her room, or must I guard her, too?

How slow the time passed! The darkness deepened over land and sea. The moon had not yet risen—indeed it would not appear until after midnight. The great, white Floridan stars, however, had pushed through the dark blue canopy of the night, and their light lay softly over the gardens. The guests talked in muffled tones, their excited laughter ringing out at ever longer intervals. The coals of their cigars glowed like fireflies in the gloom.

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By ten o'clock two of the six chairs were vacant. Two of the guests had tramped away heavily to their rooms, not passing so near that I could make sure of their identity. Soon after this a very deep and curious silence fell over the veranda.

The two men to my right, Weldon the coroner and one of the guests, were smoking quietly, evidently in a lull in their conversation. I didn't particularly notice them. Their silence was some way natural and easy, nothing to startle the heart or arrest the breath. If they had been talking, however, perhaps the moment would have never got hold of me as it did. The silence seemed to deepen with an actual sense of motion, like something growing, and a sensation as inexplicable as it was unpleasant slowly swept over me.

It was a creepy, haunting feeling that had its origin somewhere beyond the five senses. Outwardly there was nothing to startle me, unless it was that curious, deepening silence. The darkness, the shore, the starlit gardens were just the same. Nor was it a perceptible, abrupt start. It came slowly, growing, creeping through me. I had no inclination to make any perceptible motion, or to show that anything was different than it was before. I turned slowly to Van Hope, sitting to my left.

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Instinctively I knew that here was the source of my alarm. It was something that my subconscious self had picked up from him. He was sitting motionless in his chair, his hand that held his cigar half raised to his lips, staring away into the distant gardens.

There is something bad for the spirit in the sight of an entirely motionless figure. The reason is simply that it is out of accord with nature—that the very soul of things, from the tree on the hill to the stars in the sky, is motion never ending. A figure suddenly changed to stone focuses the attention much more surely than any sudden sound or movement. Perhaps it has its origin in the deep-hidden instincts, harking back to those long ago times when the sudden arresting of all motion on the part of the companion indicated the presence of some great danger and an attempt to escape its gaze. Even to-day it indicates a thought so compelling that the half-unconscious physical functions are suspended: a fear or a sensation so violent that life seems to die in the body.

Van Hope couldn't get his cigar to his lips. He held it between his fingers, a few inches in front. He was watching so intently that his face looked absolutely blank. A little shiver that was some way related to fear passed over me, and I had all the sensations of being violently startled. Then Van Hope suddenly got to his feet with a short, low exclamation.

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Our nerves on edge, instantly all three of us were beside him—Weldon, myself, and Joe Nopp. All of us tried to follow his gaze into the gloom. "What is it?" Weldon asked.

Van Hope, seemingly scarcely aware of us before, instantly rallied his faculties and turned to us. In a single instant he had wrenched back complete self-control—an indication of self-mastery such as I had rarely seen surpassed. He smiled a little, in the gloom, and dropped his hand to his side.

"I suppose it was nothing," he answered. "I guess I'm jumpy. Maybe half asleep. But I saw some one—walking through the gardens down by the lagoon."

Van Hope spoke rather lightly, in a wholly commonplace voice. He had not been, however, half asleep. The frozen face I had seen was of complete wakefulness.

"A man, you say—down by the lagoon?" Weldon asked.

"Yes. Of course there's always a chance for a mistake. Probably it wouldn't be anything anyway—just one of the men getting a little air. Watch a minute—maybe you'll see him again."

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We watched in silence, and listened to one another's breathing. But the faint shadows, in that starlit vista, were unwavering.

"It wasn't likely anything——" Van Hope said apologetically. "I was thinking, though, that any stranger ought to be investigated——"

"He had, too," Weldon agreed. "Not just any stranger. Any one who goes walking down there in the darkness ought to be questioned—whether he's one of us or not. But are you sure you saw anything?"

"Not sure at all. I thought I did, though. I thought I saw him step, distinctly, through a rift in the trees. Excuse me for bothering you."

None of us felt any embarrassment on Van Hope's account, or any superciliousness if he had been unnecessarily alarmed. It was wholly natural, this third night of three, to wonder and be stirred by any moving thing in the darkened gardens.

But we waited and watched in vain. There were no cries from the shore of the lagoon. The silence remained unbroken, and after awhile the thought turned to other channels.

Van Hope rose at last, hurled his cigar stub to the lawns and for a breath stood watching its glowing end pale and die. The disappearance of his old friend had gone hard with him. You could see it in the stoop of his shoulders. He looked several years older.

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"Nothing to do now—but go to bed," he commented quietly. "Maybe we can get some sleep to-night."

"The third night's the charm," Nopp answered grimly. "How do we know but that before this night is over we'll be gathered out here again." He paused, and we tried to smile at him in the darkness. Nopp was speaking with a certain grim humor, yet whatever his intentions, none of us got the idea that he was jesting. "It's worked two nights—why not three. I'd believe anything could happen at this goblin house——"

We listened to him with relief. It was some way good for our spirits to have one of us speak out what we had all been thinking and had strained so hard to hide. Nor did we think less of him for his frankness. We knew at first, and we knew now, that Nopp's nerve was as good or better than any man in the gathering, and he had never showed it better than in speaking frankly now.

"Bunk, Nopp," Van Hope answered. "You're mixing coincidence up with atmosphere. It was a strange and a devilish thing that those two crimes should have happened two nights running, but it will work out perfectly plausible—mark my words. And coincidences don't happen three times in a row."

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Nopp lifted his face to the starlit skies. "My boy," he said, rather superciliously, "*anything* could happen at Kastle Krag's."

CHAPTER XIX

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After I went to my room I worked for an hour on the cryptogram, found beside Florey's body. The mysterious column of four-letter words, however, did not respond to any methods of translation that I knew. For another hour thereafter I lay awake in my bed beside the window.

It was one of the few spots in the house that offered a fairly clear glimpse of the lagoon. The trees opened, like curtains: I could see the water darkly blue in the starlight, and the faint, gray line, like a crayon mark, that was the natural rock wall. The tide was coming in now: I could see

the white manes of the sea-horses as they charged over the barrier. The whole surface of the lagoon was fretted by them.

Had Nopp spoken true—could there be a recurrence of last night’s tragedy? Could any situation arise in human affairs that would result in three murders, one after another, all under practically the same and the most mysterious conditions? It was possible, by a long stretch of the imagination, to conceive of two such crimes occurring on successive nights—the murderer striking again, through some unknown movement of events, to hide his first crime—but coincidences do not happen thrice! If indeed these disappearances could be wholly attributed to human activities, human designs and human passions, there was no need of lying awake and expectant this third night. Surely no super-criminal had declared remorseless war against *all* of the occupants of that house. Certainly we could sleep in peace to-night!

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But I couldn’t get away from the same thought that haunted me before—that these crimes lay somehow without the bourne of human event and circumstance, that they were some way native to this strange, old manor-house beside the sea. It wasn’t easy to lose one’s self in sleep. I felt no shame at my own uneasiness. It was true that the crimes had both occurred, evidently, on the shore of or near the lagoon, but could the curse that lay upon the old estate extend its baleful influence into the house itself? Anything could happen at Kastle Krags, Nopp had said, and it became increasingly difficult to disbelieve him.

Since the intrusion of two nights before I had slept with a chair blocked firmly against my door, knowing that no one could enter from the corridor, at least without waking me. My own pistol lay just under my mattress where the hand could reach it in an instant. Both these things were an immense consolation now. I would not be so helpless in case of another midnight visitor.

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Yet I had no after-image of terror in thinking upon the intruder of two nights before. Strangely, that hand reaching in the flashlight was the one redeeming feature of this affair of Kastle Krags. That hand was flesh and blood, and thus the whole mystery seemed of flesh and blood too. If this incident did not confine the mystery to the realm of human affairs, at least it showed that there were human motives and human agents playing their parts in it.

Was that intruder Pescini? The hand could easily have been his—firm, strong, aristocratic, sensitive and white. After all, there was quite a case to be made against Pescini. “Find George Florey and you’ll find the murderer,” William Noyes had written. And the whole business of proving that Pescini was George Florey was simply that of proving his handwriting and that of the “George” notes we had found in the butler’s room were the same.

“They have been bitter enemies since youth.” Rich, proud, distinguished, had this bearded man carried a life-long hatred for the humble servitor of Kastle Krags? What boyhood rivalry, what malice, what blinding, bitter jealousy had wakened such a hatred as this? Yet who can trace the slightest action from its origin to its consummation; much less such a complex human drama as this. No man can see truly into the human heart. It seemed fairly credible that this gray servant might hate, with that bitter hatred born of jealousy, his richer, more distinguished brother—yet human relations, in their fullness, are beyond the ken of the wisest men. It would be easy to prove or disprove whether or not Pescini and Florey were brothers: the “George” letters were secure in the hands of the State, and a copy of Pescini’s handwriting could be procured with ease. Besides their lives and origins would likely be easy to trace.

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Florey’s letter to his sister was further proof of Pescini’s guilt. I made an entirely different interpretation of it than that of the officials. I did not think that he was referring to any physical disease. I believed, at the first hearing, and I believed still that he had written in veiled language of the persecutions of his brother:

“My old malady, G— is troubling me again,” Florey had written. “I don’t think I will ever be rid of it. It is certainly the Florey burden—going through all our family. I can’t hardly sleep and don’t know how I’ll ever get rid of it. I’m deeply discouraged, yet I know....”

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I did not share the sheriff’s view that “G—” referred to some long-named malady that, either for the sake of abbreviation or because he could not spell it, he had neglected to write out in full. I felt sure it meant “George” and nothing else. “The Florey burden—” —what was more reasonable than that his family had been cursed by feuds within. I hadn’t forgotten my talk with Nealman. He had spoken of the hatred sometimes borne by one brother for another; and had named the Jason family, main characters in the treasure legend of the old manor house, as a case in point. But Florey had got rid of his burden at last. He had got rid of it by death.

Could I make myself believe that Pescini had lured his brother to the shore, killed him, seized an opportunity to hurl his body into the lagoon, from which, by the thousandth chance, our drag-hooks had failed to find it; and the following night, to conceal his guilt, had struck down his host? Perhaps the former was true, and that the crime, coming just previous to his own financial failure, had suggested suicide to Nealman’s mind. No one had track of Pescini the night of the crime. For that matter, unlike Van Hope, Major Dell, and several others, he was not undressed and in his room when Nealman had disappeared. And the coroner had suggested a motive for murder in the matter of Pescini’s suit for divorce.

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It wasn’t easy to believe that such an obviously distinguished and cultured man could stoop to murder. There is such a thing, criminologists say, as a criminal face; but Pescini had not the least semblance of it. Criminologists admit, however, in the same breath that they are constantly

amazed at the varied types that are brought before them, charged with the most heinous crimes. Pescini looked kind, self-mastered, not given to outlaw impulses. Yet who could say for sure.

I was already falling to sleep.... It was hard to keep the sequence of thought; absurd fancies swept between. Ever my hold on wakefulness was less. It was pleasant to believe that the mystery would soon be unraveled, all with a commonplace explanation.... At first I gave no heed to a rapid footfall in the corridor.

Yet in an instant I was wide awake. In the silent hall the footfall was perfectly distinct, carrying through the walls of my room, and echoing somewhere in the wall behind me. In any quiet home, in any land, it would have been impossible to disregard those footsteps. There was a distinct tone of urgency behind them that simply could not be denied. In this dark house of mystery the senses rallied, quickened, and seemed to lie waiting to contend with any emergency.

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The steps were not only hurried and urgent. They were *frenzied*—although they were not running footsteps. At the same time they gave the image of some one trying to hurry, some one trying to conquer himself, and yet not move too loudly. It was as if he was some way fearful to waken the poignant silence of that shadowed corridor.

“He is coming to my door,” I told myself. It was wholly likely that I spoke the words aloud; at least, I believed them as unwaveringly as if the man outside had thus announced his intentions. No man can ever tell how such knowledge comes to him. Perhaps it is coincidence—that he expects such a summons on a hundred different occasions before it ever comes to him in reality. Yet many things already proven true are a thousand times harder to believe than telepathy—the transmission of messages according to no known laws of matter and space.

The tread itself was peculiar. It had an odd, shuffling quality that was hard to analyze. Then some one rapped excitedly on my door.

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“What is it?” I asked.

I was already out of bed, groping for my light switch.

“It’s me—Wilkson,” was the reply. “Boss, will ye open de do’?”

I knew Nealman’s colored janitor—a middle-aged servant of an old-fashioned, almost departed glory—but for an instant I found it almost incredible that this was his voice. The tones were blurred, lifeless, spoken as if from drawn lips. There was only one thing to believe, and I fought it off as long as I could: that the man outside my door was simply stricken and almost dead with fear.

It wasn’t easy to open the door to hear what he had to tell. A scream in the night is one thing; a chattering fellow man, just on the other side of a pine door, is quite another. But I took away the chair and turned the knob.

The man’s face was almost as hard to recognize as his voice. It was Wilkson, beyond possibility of doubt, but he was no longer the tranquil, genial serving-man. His face had the strangest gray hue pen ever tried to describe. I could see the whites of his eyes, his lips were rounded, he was almost unconscious from sheer terror.

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At that moment I began to strive hard to remember certain truths—one of them being that little things, laughed away by an Anglo-Saxon, have been known to instill the most unfathomable depths of fear into an unlettered southern negro. What seemed terrible to him might be only laughable to me. I thought of these things in order to brace myself for what he had to tell.

At that moment I knew the inroads that the events of the last two nights had made upon me—likely upon every man and woman in the house. I could have met that gray face much more bravely the night previous, and would have likely been largely unmoved by it two nights before. But mystery, the lack of sleep, the terrible possibilities to which both crimes had pointed, had over-stretched the nerves and taken the pith from the thews. The sight of that terrified face sent a sharp chill of fear through every avenue of my nerves. I felt its icy touch in my veins. Kastle Kraggs was getting to me—denial of that fact was impossible even to myself.

“Iscuse me, Boss,” he said humbly, pathetically, if I had ever known what pathos was. In his terror he wanted to propitiate the whole world, and was begging my indulgence of his intrusion.

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“Boss, is Majo’ Del in yo’ room?”

“No.” I didn’t reprove him for failing to notice that my light was out. “Where is he?”

“Boss, he am gone. He’s gone just like them other two am gone.” His voice died and a low moan escaped his lips. “Boss, who’ll they be takin’ nex’? Gawd, who’ll they be takin’ nex’—?”

I seized his arm, trying to steady him. “Listen, Wilkson,” I commanded. “How do you know he’s gone—?”

“Telephone message come for him, Boss. Telegram, from Ochakee. And he ain’t here to get it. He’s gone—just like dem oder two men has gone befo’ him.”

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CHAPTER XX

It wasn't easy to steady Wilkson so that he could tell an intelligent story. His own dark superstitions had hold of him, and his shambling search through the darkened corridors had stretched his nerves to the absolute breaking-point. It was evident at once that there was nothing to do but let him take his time and get the story out the best he could. After all, immediate action had never helped matters in this affair of Kastle Krags. There had been a grim finality about everything that had occurred. Those who were gone had not been brought back by prompt search.

He did not respond to any of the ruses so often used to get a colored man to talk—scorn or incredulity or sternness. He was aware of nothing but his own terror, and the image in those fear-widened eyes no man could guess.

"You say a telegram came for him, Wilkson?" I asked gently. "Some one phoned it in?"

"De phone bell rung, jus' off de su'vant's rooms," he explained. "It was a message fo' Majo' Dell. 'Get him up to get dis telegram,' some white gen'lman said, so I done went to get him up. He ain't in his room. Bed not been slept in. I called and no one answered. Den I ask Mrs. Gentry—she saw him go down the hall hour ago, all dressed, and seen him turn in yo' room—"

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"He's not here. He hasn't been here." I slipped on a dressing-gown and slippers, then stood a moment with Wilkson in the darkened hall. It was curious that the housekeeper should have made such an odd mistake—thinking that Dell had turned into my door. Perhaps at the distance she had observed she confused the door either to the right or left with mine.

There was no need for panic yet. Any one of a dozen things might have explained his temporary absence from his room in the dead of night. He might be in the room to my right—Fargo's room—in some conference with his friend. Yet there was no light under the door.

I knocked loudly. Fargo called sharply from his bed.

"Have you seen Major Dell?" I asked.

"Dell? No! Good Lord, he hasn't disappeared, too?"

"We can't find him." I heard Fargo spring from his bed, and I turned to the room to my left. Yet in an instant I remembered and halted on the threshold. This was Nealman's room, dark and chill with shadows. I scratched a match and lifted it high.

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But no one was here. My voice rang with a hollow sound back to me. Our shouts had aroused Nopp, and in a moment he came out in the hall to join us. I think Nopp was a steadying influence on us both. He walked, rather than ran, he was perfectly composed, wholly himself, and his voice when he spoke was low and even. Yet there was no tone or note of an attempt to belittle our alarm. He acted as I have seen strong men act in the presence of some great disaster—calmly, soberly, rather white-faced and silent, but unflinching and steadfast.

There was no amazement in Nopp's face. Evidently he had expected just such a development.

"Another gone, eh?" he said. "I wish these devils would stay in their rooms, where they belong. What's taking them out there, Killdare?"

"How do I know? Maybe they just can't sleep—want to walk—"

"They wouldn't want to walk in that part of the grounds, if they're human, unless they've got business there. But no matter. We've got to look around for him at least. I don't suppose it will do any good—"

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He spoke with an unmistakable fatalism. "You don't mean—that he's gone like the rest—"

I heard our low breathing as I waited for his answer. "What's the use of fooling ourselves any more, Killdare?" he replied quietly. "We're up against something—God knows what. Of course he's gone—just like the rest. Where else could he be?"

We turned once more into his room. Wilkson had reported rightly—his bed had not been slept in, and there was not the slightest sign of disorder. His coat—a well-made garment of some gray, cotton cloth hung on the back of his chair, and the butts of two cigars lay on his smoking stand. He was not in his bathroom, nor did we hear his voice from some adjoining room.

And now all the other guests, all of whom slept on this same floor, were gathering about us, wakened by the sound of our voices. Marten came, swearing under his breath, and Van Hope's brow was beaded with perspiration that glistened in the dim light. But none of them knew where Major Dell was. Indeed none of them had seen him since he had gone to his room.

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There was a curious, dream-like quality about the little session that we had together at the door of Dell's room. It was all rather dim, obscure, the voices that we heard seemed to come from some place far off, and that ring of faces no longer looked clear-cut and sharp. I suppose the answer lay in the great preoccupation that was upon us all, a struggle for understanding that engulfed our minds.

There were no excited, frenzied voices. The men spoke rather quietly and slowly, as if measuring

their words, and Van Hope was smiling, faintly. It wasn't a mirthful smile, but rather a wan smile such as a man gives when some incredible disaster, long expected, has fallen upon him. None of us liked to see it. There was nothing to believe but that the mystery had gone home to him more fully than to any one else—and we all wished that he could be spared the tragic, vain hour of search that awaited us. Because none of us had the least hope, in our own hearts, that we would ever see Major Dell again. We had got past the point where we could deceive ourselves. The truth was all too self-evident. We would search through the grounds, as a matter of duty we would call and run back and forth. But the end was already sure.

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Indeed, there was no look of surprise on any one of those white faces. Rather they had a helpless, almost fatalistic expression, as men have when at last they are crushed to earth by the inevitable. I have heard a detachment of soldiers, seemingly trapped by death, speak in the same quiet way, and have seen the same baffled, resigned expression on their faces.

I didn't try to keep track of who was there and who was absent. It was impossible to think of such things now. But bitter, blasting fear surged through me when I thought of Edith—wondering if she was safe in her room.

There was a moment of stress, a sudden, momentary explosion of suppressed excitement, when Slatterly the sheriff joined us in the hall. We heard his running feet in the corridor, and we turned to watch him, his dressing-gown flopping about him. Evidently he had heard our words from his room in the upper corridor. Certain exclamations were on his lips—whether they were profane oaths I do not know.

"What is it?" he demanded in an irritable, rasping voice. "Why are you all gathered here?"

Silently we waited for Nopp to speak—Nopp who had become the strongest arm in the affair. "We're not having any late evening gossip," he answered. "Kastle Krags has its tail up again. We're here—to find out what has become of Major Dell."

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"Major Dell! Good God, don't tell me he's gone too."

Instantly the sudden, deadly surge of wrath we had all felt toward the sheriff died in our breasts. That cry he made, the hopeless, defeated way in which he spoke, made him, in an instant, one of us—subject to the same fear and despair, a crushed and impotent human being like ourselves.

"He's gone," Nopp told him quietly. "He's not in his room. He doesn't seem to be any place else."

"Have you searched? I don't suppose there's any use of it, but we've got to search. Oh, why didn't I guard him—why did I ever take such a criminal risk!"

None of us could forget his rugged, brown face in the wan electric light. Whether it was regret or fear that swept it we didn't know. It was ashen, almost expressionless, and his eyes were lifeless under his heavy brows. His hands hung, fingers slightly apart, at his side.

"Wait just a minute before we begin an indiscriminate search," Nopp said. "Slatterly, we've got to face facts. Do you think—there's any place in these grounds that none of us *ought to go*?"

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We knew what he meant. He wanted to guard against further loss of life.

"The thing seems to run according to rule," the sheriff replied, rather grimly. "Just one gone—every night. But keep together when you're down near the lagoon."

There was not the least good in searching further through the house. Most of the household had gathered around us, by now, and no one had seen Major Dell. We walked the length of the corridor and down the stairs, and then we went out into the still darkness. The hour was evidently shortly after midnight—the tide was almost at its flood.

Just a moment more we stood just below the great veranda, and no man knew the other's thoughts. The moon was rising—we could see its argent gleam through nebulous clouds to the East. Far away the gray shore stretched to the darkened sea, and the natural rock wall showed a faint, gray line. Then we headed out into the grounds.

But there was no answer to the calls we made, and only such little people as moles and gophers, burrowers in the ground, stirred in the thickets as we crushed through. We hunted aimlessly, more to satisfy our own sense of duty than through any expectation of finding the missing man. The moon came out more vividly, but its light did not bring success. At last we collected, a silent, rather breathless group, in front of the house.

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"What now, Slatterly?" Nopp asked. "Is there anything more we can do?"

"Nothing more." His old confidence was gone from his voice. "I wish I'd done something long ago, instead of being so sure. But this thing can't happen to-morrow night."

"Slatterly, you're a brave man to say that *anything* can't happen to-morrow night. I thought you'd learned your lesson—"

"I have. Never fear for that. To-morrow night I'm going to watch beside that lagoon with a loaded gun—and I am going to see this thing through."

The sheriff had finished his investigations by noon of the following day, and after lunch I was free to work upon the problem that I felt was the key to the whole mystery—the cryptogram beside Florey's body. Lately I had been thinking that in all probability to procure the script had been the direct motive of the murder; and the fact of its theft from my room seemed to bear me out.

Why wasn't it reasonable to presume that in the last instant of Florey's life, just before the attack was made, he had attempted to conceal the script. He had thrown it from him; his death-cry had aroused the household so that the murderer had no time to seek and procure it. Then from a hiding place, or even from among a group of the guests, he had seen me pick it up.

To work out that cryptogram, to read its hidden meaning was the first and the best thing I could do in the way to solve the mystery of Kastle Krags. Written originally on parchment, sixty or seventy years before, it doubtless referred and was in explanation of the secret of the old manor house—the legend of the treasure, supposedly hidden by Godfrey Jason in the long ago. I had just toyed with it before. Perhaps I had had little faith that it was of any real importance. But now, other avenues had failed, and I was resolved to know the truth if it was humanly possible to do so. I copied the script again, with great care:

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aned
dqbo
aqcd
trkm
fipj
dqbo
seho
ohuy
wvyn
dljn
dtth

Then I began to make a systematic analysis. I noticed first that the second and the sixth words were identical, indicating—considering the brevity of the entire message—that it must represent a word of most frequent use. Of course the articles "a" and "the" occur most often in any English writing, yet I found it hard to believe that "dqbo" represented either. In the first place, in a message of that length it is reasonable to assume that all articles and words not absolutely necessary to the meaning had been omitted.

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Weeks that seemed years before Nealman had told me that, after careful study, he had been convinced that there was some truth in the legend of buried treasure. Was it not within the bounds of reason to assume that this cryptic message revealed the hiding place of the treasure? Working on this assumption, I made up an imaginary description of some hiding place, just to see what words occurred with the greatest frequency. I found at once that the word that would be most likely to be used twice in a description of that kind would be some measurement—either feet, yards, meters, rods, or something of the kind. If I could convince myself that "dqbo" represented some English measurement I might find the key and system of the code.

Either "feet," "yard" or "rods" were words of four letters—either one of which might be represented by "dqbo." Then I tested each one to see if I could establish a pattern.

I tried first the old code-system of having each letter in the word represent some other letter a certain number of spaces backward or forward in the alphabet. Suppose a man wanted to disguise the word "cab." He might do so, very easily, by spelling it "dbc"—using, instead of the right letter, the letter immediately following it in the alphabet, "d" for "c," "b" for "a," etc. Testing for "feet" as a possible interpretation of "dqbo" I saw that "f" was the second letter in the alphabet beyond the letter "d"—first letter in the script-word—but I found that such a relation could not possibly hold with "e" and "q" respectively, the second letters. "Yard" or "rods" failed the same test. Nor by any juggling of this simple code, counting so many spaces backwards or forwards, could I make it come out true.

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Some time before I had decided that it was unlikely to the verge of impossibility that any message could be made up completely of four letter words. It seemed likely, at first, that letters had been cut from each word in order to make them of four letters. Working on this hypothesis I tested for "meters" but the word "dqbo" could not be made to conform.

At that point it was necessary to begin on another tack. I smoked a while in silence, hoping that some idea, some little inspiration that so often furnished the key for such a mystery as this, would come to me. I had a dim thought that, since the words were all of four letters and could not be made intelligible by any shifting of the alphabet, that perhaps it had undergone some double transformation—changed first from words into some other symbol form, and then back into words. But I couldn't seem to get hold.

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If I could only see the key! Possibly it was extremely simple, just before my eyes if I could only grasp it. It wasn't reasonable, I thought, for a lone man to leave a hidden message without giving some key, however adroit, for the reader to translate it. Jason hadn't written that message for his own amusement. He had inscribed it to be read by some one who came after—perhaps by himself when old age had dulled his memory.

Working from this point of view I set myself to remember what had been written on the parchment beside the column of figures. Perhaps the key had been there also; I had simply failed to observe it. At the bottom of the message had appeared the words "At F. T." And at first this seemed to offer the most interesting possibilities.

Certainly the word and letters had some meaning. In the first place this, and the sentence above the script, indicated that the writer did his thinking in English—not in Spanish or Portuguese or any other language. But "F. T." did not convey any meaning to my mind. I simply couldn't catch it.

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I tried to make the letters "F" and "T" a starting point in the alphabet for rearranging the letters in the column of words, on the same theory that I had worked at first, but nothing came of it. And at that point my hopes and confidence, falling steadily for the past hour, was at its lowest ebb. I didn't see but that I would have to give up the venture after all.

My mind slipped easily to the message in English above the column—"Sworn by the Book," or something after that nature. Taking these words simply as they seemed, an oath on the part of the writer that the ensuing message was true, I hadn't taken the trouble to copy them from the original parchment. Fortunately I remembered them, approximately at least. And I felt a little quickening of hope as I contemplated them.

The more I looked at them the more they seemed to be "dragged in by the heels." I didn't think that one with knowledge of hidden treasure, conveying its hiding place to some one else, would have taken the trouble to declare the truth of his statement by oath. Nor was such a pious beginning, on the part of that iniquitous murderer and cut-throat, Jason, quite in character. He would have been more likely to have begun with a sentence of piratical profanity. He had some reason for bringing in the "Book"—and when I knew what it was, I believed I would know the key to the cryptogram.

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The "Book" was the Bible of course—a name still in wide use. And the whole volume of my blood seemed to spurt through the veins when I remembered what an important place the Bible had taken in the events of the past few days!

Nealman had had a Bible, wide open, in his room. Edith had been seen to carry it to him through the corridor—and this business with it had been of such a character that he had ordered Edith's silence in regard to the errand. Whether or not Florey had possessed a copy I wasn't able to remember for certain.

It must have been a grim old joke to Jason—to use the Holy Word to transmit the record of his iniquity! In an instant I was burrowing, not a little excited, into the bottom of my bag for a small copy of the Bible that I carried with me on every journey.

Apart from religious reasons, there is no better traveling companion for a knowledge-loving man than King James' Bible. The font of all literature, the mighty well of inspiration, the record of the ages—it was beloved not only of the scientist and historian, but the literati and the esthete. Hardly a week had passed that I hadn't referred to it, in one capacity or another. And now I felt that I was on the right track at last.

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There is no book in such common usage, published with such fidelity as to the position of every word, so easily procured in any place or time, as the Holy Bible. It would be the perfect code-book. Certainly it could be used to the greatest advantage as the key to a cryptogram.

But what had been the method of its use? In what way could these four-letter words, none of which were intelligible, be made through the agency of the Bible to present an intelligent meaning? Again I found myself relying on inductive reasoning. I worked backward, just as I had done before, trying to see some way to convey a secret meaning through the agency of this universally read book.

All at once I saw the way. The Bible contained almost every word in the present English vocabulary. In all probability each one of the words in the column represented some English word to be found somewhere in the Bible, and the column of them, written out, would be the message in full.

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How to find that word was the only problem that remained. True, it looked formidable enough at first. Yet I saw in a moment that the four-letter words could not represent the words of the message themselves, but only their *position* in the Bible.

My mind was working clearly now, leaping from one conclusion to another; and reasoning deductively I tried to work out some method of secret writing whereby I could reveal to another person the position of a certain word I wanted him to know. Suppose, for instance, that Jason wished to use the word "feet" in his message. Looking through the Bible he found the word—say on page 86, third line, fourth word. It was conceivable that he might send the numbers "86-3-4" to some other person; and the latter, aware that the Bible acted as the key, looked up the place in the Book and learned what the word was.

The number of pages vary, however, in Bibles of different size. It was natural that the location must be a constant in order that the recipient of the note could always find it. So I began again:

Suppose Jason, looking through his Bible, found the word "feet" in the book of Genesis, the first chapter, the third verse, and the fourth word of the verse. If he should send the symbols "Gen. 1,

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3, 4" to his friend, the man could easily look up the place and see what he meant. And in this case he wouldn't have to have any certain edition of the Bible. The fourth word of the third verse of the first chapter of Genesis is the same in all copies of King James' Bible over all the world.

Now I was working on sure ground. I had no doubt but that "dqbo" represented a certain point in the Bible—the letter "d" probably representing the book, "q" the chapter, "b" the verse and "o" the word. Once more my attention was called, with particular vividness, to the fact that all the words in the column were of four letters, proving in my mind that this last contention was true.

My heart was racing as I moved to the next step in working out the cryptogram. It was simply that of finding what method had been used to transform such a symbol as "Gen. 1, 3, 4" into such a sign as "dqbo." If instead of four-letter words I was working with sequences of numbers such as "1, 1, 3, 4" I would have felt that the problem was solved. "1, 1, 3, 4" would have plainly meant the first book, the first chapter, the third verse, and the fourth word. [Pg 216]

To transform letters into numbers—that was all that remained. Again I went back to "dqbo" and took the simplest method of transformation. "D" was the fourth letter in the alphabet. "Q" was the seventeenth letter in the alphabet. "B" was the second letter in the alphabet. "O" was the fifteenth letter in the alphabet. I wrote down the numbers:

4-17-2-15

And I felt sure that they meant the fourth book, the seventeenth chapter, the second verse and the fifteenth word in the Holy Bible.

Shaken, so nervous I could hardly hold my hands still, I stopped a moment to rest. This was the crisis. I was either at the verge of absolute success or hopeless failure. If when I looked up the place I found some word that couldn't possibly be used in such a message I wouldn't have the spirit to seek further. And it would be a real blow to all my hopes.

I opened the Bible. The fourth book proved to be "Numbers." I turned to the seventeenth chapter, the second verse. And there I read as follows:

Speak unto the children of Israel and take one of them a *rod* according to the house of their fathers. [Pg 217]

The fifteenth word was *rod*—used as a staff in this case but undoubtedly used as a term of measurement in the script.

From then on my fingers flew through the pages of the Book. "Aned," the very first word in the column, represented—finding the alphabetical position of each letter—the numbers 1-14-5-4. It was a simple matter to look up the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the fourteenth chapter, the fifth verse, and the fourth word. The verse in this case began:

"And in the *fourteenth* year came Chedorlaomer, and the kings that were with him."

The fourth word of the verse was *fourteenth*—and the first word of the finished script.

It was easy to find the other words. I worked them all out in fifteen minutes. "Aqcd," the third in the column, proved to be the first, seventeenth, third, and fourth letters of the alphabet, respectively, and 1-17-3-4 meant first book, seventeenth chapter, third verse, fourth word, as plain as could be. The word proved to be "on." Swiftly I went down the list. And at last I had the whole column translated: [Pg 218]

fourteen
rod
on
wall
three
rod
straight
right
fastened
white
rock

Writing it out, I had:

Fourteen rod on wall three rod straight right fastened white rock.

In clearer language, it meant simply and unmistakably, that to find the missing object—unquestionably Jason's treasure—go fourteen rods out on the natural rock wall, turn straight right into the lagoon for three rods, and there I would find it—fastened to a white rock.

The thing was done. I came to myself to find my fingers toying with the pencil, and my thoughts soaring far away. In spite of the grim record of death already made, the deadly precedent that had been set, in spite of all the dictates of ordinary intelligence, I knew what my future course would be. The lure of gold had hold of me. As soon as the opportunity offered, I was going to follow the thing through to its end, and see with my own eyes that which lay hidden in the depths of the lagoon. [Pg 219]

Just before the dinner hour I met Slatterly on the lower floor, and we had a moment's talk together. "You've been in on most everything that's happened around here," he said. "You might as well be with us to-night. We're going to watch the lagoon."

The truth was I had made other plans for this evening—plans that included Edith Nealman—so I made no immediate answer. The official noticed my hesitancy, and of course misunderstood.

"Speak right up, if you don't want to do it," he said, not unkindly. The sheriff was a man of human sympathies, after all. "I wouldn't hold it against any man living if he didn't want to sit out there in the dark watching—after what's happened the last three nights. I don't know that I'd do it myself if it wasn't in line of duty."

"I don't think I'd be afraid," I told him.

"It isn't a question of being afraid. It's simply a matter of human make-up. To tell the truth, I'm afraid myself—and I'm not ashamed of it. More than once I've had to conquer fear in my work. A man who ain't afraid, one time or another, hasn't any imagination. Some men are cold as ice, I've had deputies that were—and they wouldn't mind this a bit. I know, Killdare, that you'd come in a pinch. Any man here, I think—any white man—would be down there with me to-night if something vital—some one's life or something—depended on it. But I don't want to take any one that it will be hard for, that—that is any one to whom it would be a real ordeal. I'm picking my bunch with some care."

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"Who is going?"

"Weldon, Nopp, you and myself—if you want to come. If not, don't mind saying so."

"I want to come!" We smiled at each other, in the hall. After all, no other decision could be made. The high plans I had made for an evening with Edith would have to be given over. In the first place the night might solve the mystery into which I had been drawn. In the second it was the kind of offer that most men, over the earth, find it impossible to refuse. Human beings, as a whole, are not particularly brave. They are still too close to the caves and the witch-doctors of the young world. They are inordinately, incredibly shy, also, and like little children, sometimes, in their dreads and superstitions. Yet through some blessing they have a high-born capacity to conquer the fear that emburdens them.

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No white man in the manor house would have refused Slatterly's offer. Mostly, when men see that they are up against a certain hard deal, some proposition that stirs the deep-buried, inherent instinct that is nothing more or less than a sense of duty—that deep-lying sense of obligation that makes the whole world beautiful and justifiable—they simply stand up and face it. No normal young man likes war. Yet they all go. And of course this work to-night promised excitement—and the love of excitement is a siren that has drawn many a good man to his doom.

"Good," the sheriff told me simply, not in the least surprised. "What kind of a gun can you scare up?"

"I can get a gun, all right. I've got a pistol of my own."

Nopp came up then, and he and the sheriff exchanged significant glances. And the northern man suddenly turned to me, about to speak.

Until that instant I hadn't observed the record that the events of the past three nights had written in his face. Nopp had nerves of steel; but the house and its mystery had got to him, just the same. The sunset rays slanted in over the veranda, poured through the big windows, and showed his face in startling detail. The inroads that had been made upon it struck me with a sudden sense of shock.

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The man looked older. The lines of his face seemed more deeply graven, the flesh-sacks were swollen under his eyes, he was some way shaken and haggard. Yet you didn't get the idea of impotence. The hands at his side had a man's grasp in them. Nopp was still able to handle most of the problems that confronted him.

Slatterly, too, had not escaped unscathed. The danger and his own failure to solve the mystery had killed some of the man's conceit, and he was more tolerant and sympathetic. There was a peculiar, excited sparkle in his eyes, too.

Slatterly turned to Nopp. "He says he's got a pistol."

The second that ensued had an unmistakable quality of drama. Nopp turned to me, exhaling heavily. "Killdare, we've beat the devil around the stump all along—and it's time to stop," he said. "I don't like to talk like a crazy man, but we've got to look this infernal matter in the face. When you come out to-night come armed with the biggest gun you can find—a high-powered rifle."

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No man argued with another, at a time like this. "I don't know where I can get a rifle," I told him.

"Every man in the house has got some kind or another. I'm going to be frank and tell you what I'm carrying—a big .405, the biggest quick-shooting arm I could get hold of. Whatever comes to-

night—we've got to stop."

We gathered again at the big mahogany table, dined quietly, and the four of us excused ourselves just before dessert. The twilight was already falling—like gray shadows of wings over land and sea—and we wanted to be at our post. We didn't desire that the peril of the lagoon should strike in our absence. And we left a more hopeful spirit among the other occupants of the manor house.

They were all glad that armed men would guard the lagoon shore that night. I suppose it gave them some sense of security otherwise not known. The four of us procured our rifles, and walked, a grim company, down to the shore of the lagoon.

"We want to guard as much of the shore line as we can, and still keep each other in sight," Slatterly said. "And there's no getting away from it that we want to be in easy rifle range of each other."

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He posted us at fifty-yard intervals along the craggy margin. I was placed near the approach of the rock wall, overlooking a wide stretch of the shore, Weldon's post was fifty yards above mine, the sheriff's next, and Nopp's most distant of all. Then we were left to watch the tides and the night and the stars probing through the darkening mantle of the sky.

We had no definite orders. We were simply to watch, to fire at will in case of an emergency, to guard the occupants of the manor house against any danger that might emerge from the depths of the lagoon. The tide, at the lowest ebb at the hour of our arrival, began soon to flow again. The glassy surface was fretted by the beat and crash of oncoming waves against the rocky barrier. We saw the little rivulets splash through; the water's edge crept slowly up the craggy shore. The dusk deepened, and soon it was deep night.

We were none too close together. I could barely make out the tall figure of Weldon, standing statuesque on a great, gray crag beside the lagoon. His figure was so dim that it was hard to believe in its reality, the gun at his shoulder was but a fine penciled line, and with the growing darkness, it was hard to make him out at all. Soon it took a certain measure of imagination to conceive of that darker spot in the mist of darkness as the form of a fellow man.

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The sense of isolation increased. We heard no sound from each other, but the night itself was full of little, hushed noises. From my camp fire beside Manatee Marsh I had often heard the same sounds, but they were more compelling now, they held the attention with unswerving constancy, and they seemed to penetrate further into the spirit. Also I found it harder to identify them—at least to believe steadfastly the identifications that I made.

We hadn't heard a beginning of the sounds when we had listened from the verandas. They had been muffled there, dim and hushed, but here they seemed to speak just in your ear. Sea-birds called and shrieked, owls uttered their mournful complaints, brush cracked and rustled as little, eager-eyed furry things crept through. Once I started and the gun leaped upward in my arms as some great sea-fish, likely a tarpon, leaped and splashed just beyond the rock wall.

"What is it, Killdare?" Weldon called. His voice was sharp and urgent.

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"Some fish jumped, that was all," I answered. And again the silence dropped down.

The tide-waves burst with ever-increasing fury. The stars were ever brighter, and their companies ever larger, in the deep, violet spaces of the sky. The hours passed. The lights in the great colonial house behind us winked out, one by one.

There was no consolation in glancing at my watch. It served to make the time pass more slowly. The hour drew to midnight, after a hundred years or so of waiting; the night had passed its apex and had begun its swift descent to dawn. And all at once the thickets rustled and stirred behind me.

No man can be blamed for whipping about, startled in the last, little nerve, in such a moment as this. Some one was hastening down to the shore of the lagoon—some one that walked lightly, yet with eagerness. I could even hear the long, wet grass lashing against her ankles.

"Who is it?" I asked quietly.

"Edith," some one answered from the gloom.

Many important things in life are forgotten, and small ones kept; and my memory will harbor always the sound of that girlish voice, so clear and full in the darkness. Though she spoke softly her whole self was reflected in the tone. It was sweet, tender, perhaps even a little startled and fearful. In a moment she was at my side.

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"What do you mean by coming here alone?" I demanded.

"The phone rang—in the upper corridor," she told me almost breathlessly. "The negroes were afraid to answer it. I went—and it was a telegram for you. I thought I'd better bring it—it was only two hundred yards, and four men here. You're not angry, are you?"

No man could be angry at such a time; and she handed me a written copy of the message she had received over the wire. I scratched a match, saw her pretty, sober face in its light and read:

Am sending picture of George Florey, brother of murdered man. Watch him closely. Am writing.

It wasn't an urgent message. The picture would have reached me, just the same, and I had every intention of watching closely the man I believed was the dead butler's brother. Yet I was glad enough she had seen fit to bring it to me. We would have our moment together, after all.

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What was said beside that craggy, mysterious margin, what words were all but obscured by the sound of the tide-waves breaking against the natural wall of rock, what oaths were given, and what breathless, incredible happiness came upon us as if from the far stars, has little part in the working out of the mystery of Kastle Krags. Certain moments passed, indescribably fleet, and certain age-old miracles were reenacted. Life doesn't yield many such moments. But then—not many are needed to pay for life.

After a while we told each other good-night, and I scratched a match to look again into her face. Some way, I had expected the miraculous softening of every tender line and the unspeakable luster in her blue eyes that the flaring light revealed. They were merely part of the night and its magic, and the joy I had in the sight was incomparable with any other earthly thing. But what surprised me was a curious look of intentness and determination, almost a zealot's enthusiasm in her face, that the match-light showed and the darkness concealed again.

She went away, as quietly as she had come. Whether Weldon had seen her I did not know. There was something else I didn't know, either, and the thought of it was a delight through all the long hours of my watch. Edith Nealman had worlds of common sense. I wondered how she had been able to convince herself that the message was of such importance that she needs must carry it through the darkness of the gardens to me at once.

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CHAPTER XXIII

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The tide reached its full, shortly after two o'clock, and then began to ebb. Almost at once the little waves of the lagoon smoothed out, they lapped no more against the craggy margin, and the water lay like a sheet of gray glass. I had seen the same transformation on several previous occasions, but to-night it seemed to get hold of me as never before.

Seemingly it partook of a miraculous quality to-night—as if winds had been suddenly stilled by a magician's art. The water was of course flowing out between the crevices of the rock wall, yet there was no sense of motion. The water-line dropped slowly down.

It is an unescapable fact that the whole atmosphere of the Ochakee country is one of death. The moss-draped forests seem without life, the rivers convey no sense of motion, the air is dead, and vegetation rots underfoot. To-night the lagoon was without any image or indication of life. The whole vista seemed like some dead, forgotten wasteland in a dream—a place where living things had never come and was forever incompatible with life.

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It was a mysterious hour. The half-crescent moon rose at last, at first a silver tinting of the skyline, a steadily growing wave of light and then the sharply outlined moon itself above the eastern forest. The dark shadows that were my companions took form, strengthened; again I could see their erect figures on the gray crags and the gleam of their rifles in their arms. The perspective widened, the rock wall seemed to extend, stretch ever further across the lagoon, and now the sky was graying in the East.

A moment later I heard Weldon's voice, ringing full in the hush of the dying night, as he spoke Slatterly's name. The latter answered at once.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Let's go in. The night's over and nothing's happened. It's pretty near bright day already."

It was true that the eastern sky had begun to be tinged with gray. I could see the lines of my hands and the finer mechanisms of the rifle. The hour, however, seemed later than it really was, simply because of the effulgence of the moon. The dread atmosphere of Kastle Krags had in a moment been wholly destroyed. Instead of a place of mystery and peril, it was simply an old-time manor-house fronting the sea, built between the forest and a calm lagoon.

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There didn't seem any use of watching further. If the night was not yet, in fact, completely over, the moon and the graying east gave the effect of morning. Perhaps the fact that the outgoing tide had stilled the lagoon had its effect too. The ominous sound of breaking waves was gone, and it gave a perfect image of quietude and peace.

Slatterly waited an instant before he answered. "Wait a little more," he said in a resigned tone. "But you're right—it's almost morning."

I don't think it was five minutes later that I saw Weldon leave his post and saunter over to the sheriff's side. I suppose, bored with his task, the time seemed much longer to him. True, the lagoon was gray, the shadows of the garden had lost their mystery, and there didn't seem any use of waiting. Indeed, I don't think any of us escaped a sense of inner embarrassment—something akin to ignominy and chagrin—that we should be standing beside that quiet water-body, with high-powered rifles in our hands. It made us feel secretly ridiculous.

Nopp called over, cheerily, "Through for the night?"

"Might as well," Slatterly answered. "It was a fool party anyway."

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Very glad that the watch was over, I left my own post, and we had a cigarette apiece beside the still lagoon. Then we went through the gardens to the house.

"We've disrupted the regular schedule, anyway," Nopp said. "I think we've come to the end of our trouble, and nothing more to fear. Man, do you think to-day will clear the thing up?"

"What chance is there to clear up such a mess in one day?" The sheriff spoke moodily.

"Because you're going to have some real help—not a lot of bungling amateurs. You know who's coming?"

"Lacone—Van Hope's detective."

"Yes. He's a distinguished man—a real scientist in the study of crime. He may do wonders, even in one day."

"I only hope he does! I don't care who clears it up—as long as it's cleared. Now to get a little sleep."

Tired out, we went to our rooms. The cool of early morning had swept through the halls, and the first glimmer of dawn was at the windows. How white the moon was in the sky, how mysteriously gray the whole sweep of shore and sea! So tired I dreaded the work of undressing, I sat down a moment before the window that overlooked the lagoon.

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The moonlight and the dawn gave the appearance of a mist, a gray mist as is sometimes seen over water when the sky is overcast with heavy clouds. At that moment it was impossible to conceive of anything but grayness. The whole conception that the brain had, the only interpretation that the senses made was of this same, lifeless hue. If an artist had tried to paint the picture that was spread before my window he would have needed but one tube of paint.

It was in some way vaguely startling. It went home to some dark knowledge within a man, and left him fearful and expectant. The shore and the sea were gray, the gardens were swept with grayness, the lagoon itself had lost its many colors and only the same neutral tint remained. The only way that the eye could distinguish shore from sea, and garden from shore, was the gradations of the same hue.

Surely dawn was almost at hand. The moon looked less vivid in the sky. And nothing remained but to find what sleep I could.

But at that instant my senses quickened. I could hardly call it a start—it was just a sudden wakening of mind and body. I wasn't the least sure.... Perhaps in a moment the old lull, the well-remembered sense of well-being and security would return. It had seemed to me that a swift shadow glided through the grayness at the shore of the lagoon.

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The window afforded a remarkably wide glimpse of that particular part of the estate. The rift in the trees permitted a view of scattered segments of the rock wall itself. And it wasn't to be that I could turn and leave them to the gray of morning. In that mysterious, eerie light I saw the whisking shadow again.

It was not merely some little creeping thing from the forest—some living creature such as stirs about at the first ray of dawn. The shadow was much too large. I would have thought, at the first glance, that it was the shadow of a man. But at that instant the figure emerged into the open, and I knew the truth.

The trim form on the shore of the lagoon was that of Edith Nealman. I could see her outline with entire plainness, dark against the gray. Some errand of stealth had taken her down to the shore of the lagoon the moment that it was left unguarded.

In an instant she disappeared, and in the interval I found out how deeply and inexplicably startled I was. And then I saw her again, walking out on the natural rock bridge, and carrying some heavy object, that dragged on the rocks, in her arms.

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I could see her stooped figure, and the shadow of the thing that dragged. And there is no telling under Heaven the thoughts and the terrors that swept through me as to what that dragging thing might be.

But in an instant I saw what it was. It was a rather long, heavy plank, certainly of wood. She was about two hundred feet out on the rock wall by now, and I saw that she was launching the plank to the right of the wall, in the water of the lagoon. Before I could wonder or exclaim she herself had slipped in with it, her arms pale white from the shoulders of her dark bathing suit, wading out and guiding the heavy plank beside her.

No man who had read that mysterious script could doubt what her purpose was. She had gone fourteen rods out on the wall, and then she had turned to the right into the lagoon. Plainly she was searching for Jason's treasure.

She, too, knew the key. In that same flash of time, I understood the look of intent I had seen on her face earlier that night. She had kept her resolve—even now she was herself trying to sound the mystery of her uncle's disappearance. I understood her own exultation when I had talked of my many scientific plans, and how I lacked means to carry them out. Even then she had likely

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been working on the cryptogram. It was wholly possible that either Nealman or herself had encountered a copy of the script in the old house, and they had worked on it together.

But there had been some sort of a guard put over Jason's treasure! With what right had we been so smugly certain that the old legend was not true—that there was not still some evil, tentacled monster of the deep left to slay and drag to his cavern those that dared to penetrate the lagoon. Even now she was wading further and further from the rock wall. I could see just her head and the top of her shoulders above water, the heavy plank still guided beside her.

Fear is an emotion that speeds like lightning through the avenues of the nerves. In the instant that these thoughts went home—thoughts that would have taken moments to narrate in speech but which whipped through the mind in the twinkling of an eye—I plumbed the utter depths of fear. There can be no other word. The gray expanse seemed the waters of death itself; the whole scene, in the gray of dawn, was eerie, savage, unutterably dreadful. And the girl that had come to be my own life was even now wholly within the power of any monstrous foe that should leave its cavern to attack her.

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Why had we been so sure! Why hadn't we guarded those deadly waters every hour, day and night. Every day teaches that many things that seemed incredible a day ago are true: how had we dared to be so arrogant in regard to the legend of the lagoon. Even when three men, one after another, had disappeared without trace we had refused to change our ancient habits of thought: we had still refused to believe. I knew now the fate of the missing men. They had gone in search of Jason's chest—and the treasure guard that dwelt in the lagoon had put them to death. And just before my eyes the girl I loved was following the path they made, making the same quest.

And in that breathless, never-to-be-forgotten moment, I heard a resounding splash of water. Against the craggy, opposite shore the water flew far and white as some living thing that had been concealed in the far crags dived toward her through the still waters of the lagoon.

The whole scene had seemingly occupied less than a second. Already, before I could breathe, I was leaping down the corridor towards the stairs. I called once for help—a door behind me opened. Then I was out in the gray dawn, racing toward the lagoon.

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There seemed no interlude of time between the instant that I saw that splashing water and that in which I had plunged full into the gray depths myself. In reality there was a space of several seconds—the gray light showed me that the drama of the lagoon had progressed immeasurably further. The girl was fifty or sixty feet from the rock wall now, just her head showing above water, her arms locked tight about the plank and facing her approaching foe. And something that swam swiftly made streaming ripples toward her.

I swam with amazing ease and swiftness. The terror, innate love of life, were all forgotten in the hope that I might reach Edith's side in time. And now, by the gray light of dawn, I saw that her foe was upon her.

They were struggling with a desperate frenzy, and for an instant the splashing water almost obscured them. The plank had been torn from her grasp, and by some circumstance had been sped hopelessly out of her reach. And now, the water clearing from my eyes, I could determine the identity of her assailant. No matter what further fate the lagoon had in store for her, this foe was human, at least. Terrible and drawn with passion as it was, I saw the face of Major Kenneth Dell, the man who had disappeared the preceding night.

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I yelled, trying to give hope. Already I was almost upon them; and Dell had released his hold of the girl. Whatever had been his purpose it had been forgotten in the face of some greater extremity. Their fight was no more with each other: rather they seemed at death grips with some resistless foe that tore at them from beneath the waves.

I saw Dell's face. An unspeakable terror, that of one who in wickedness goes down to an awful death, was on his face. It was such a terror as men can know but once, for they never live to tell of it, and which blasts the heart of any one that beholds it. No artist, delving into the abnormal, could have portrayed that fear. It was a thing never to forget, but ever to see again in dreams.

Edith was terrified too, but such a terror as Dell knew was impossible for her. The fear of death that curses a godless man is perhaps the most dreadful retributive force in this world or the next, and Dell knew it to the full. No one who had seen his face could doubt but that all the iniquity of a long life had been atoned for, in one little moment, in the scales of justice. But only a measure of it could oppress her. The only fear that her fine young soul could know was that born of the elemental love of life. And with what seemed to be a final effort she raised her head to call a warning to me.

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But even if I had heeded it, it would have come too late. I saw the heads of the man and woman in front of me go down as if drawn by quicksand. And there was no escape for me. The death that dwelt in the lagoon had already seized me in its resistless grasp.

But the guard over Jason's treasure was not merely some monster implanted from the sea, a mortal thing that years could claim or muscular strength oppose. Rather it was a power that had dwelt there since the world's young days, ever claiming tribute, and which would continue on until the very sea itself was changed. The demon that had hold of me was merely that of rushing waters. They swept me forward and sucked me down with remorseless force.

There was a sink-hole in the floor of the lagoon. No wonder the water that rushed in at high-tide

had seemed to go so quietly away. I was being carried down a subterranean outlet, through some water passage under the rock wall, and into the open sea.

CHAPTER XXIV

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The water surrounding the underground outlet was not of great depth—an inch or so over five feet—but the suction of the sink-hole was irresistible. Once caught in those sinking waters meant to go down with them; and a moth would have struggled to equal advantage. If fate had given me the choice of fighting to save myself it would not have changed the outcome in the least. The plank had floated too far away to seize. The water was deep enough that if, by a mighty wrench of muscles, I was able to seize with my hands some immovable rock on the lagoon floor my head would have been under water.

Fate, however, didn't give me that fighting choice. Edith Nealman had already gone down, a single instant before. Loss of life itself couldn't possibly mean more. There was nothing open but to follow through.

But while the trap itself was infallible, irresistible to human strength, there might be fighting aplenty in the darkness of the channel and beyond. The time hadn't come to give up. The slightest fighting chance was worth every ounce of mortal strength. And as the waters seized me I gave the most powerful swimming stroke I knew, a single, mighty wrench of the whole muscular system, in an attempt to get my lips above water for a last breath.

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Partly because I have always been a strong swimmer, but mostly by good fortune, I won that instant's reprieve. I had already exhaled; and in the instant that my lips were above the smooth surface of the lagoon I filled my lungs to their utmost capacity, breathing sharp and deep, with the cool, sweet, morning air. The force of my leap carried me over and down, the descending waters seized me as the sluice in a sink might seize an insect, and slowly, steadily, as if by a giant's hand, drew me into darkness.

I had been drawn into the subterranean outlet of the lagoon, the passageway of the waters of the outgoing tide. Life itself depended on how long that under-water channel was. I only knew that I was headed under the rock wall and toward the open sea.

At such times the mental mechanics function abnormally, if at all. I was not drowning yet. The thousand thoughts and memories and regrets that haunt the last moments of the lost did not come to me. The whole consciousness was focussed on two points: one of them a resolve to do what I could for Edith, and the other was fear.

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Besides the seeming certainty of death, it was unutterably terrible to be swept through this dark, mysterious channel under the sea. Perhaps the terror lay most in the darkness of the passage. It was a darkness simply inconceivable, beyond any that the imagination could conjure up—such absolute absence of light as shadow the unfathomable caverns on the ocean floor or fill the great, empty spaces between one constellation and another. In the darkest night there is always some fine, almost imperceptible degree of light. Here light was a thing forgotten and undreamed of.

The waters did not move with particular swiftness. They flowed rather easily and quietly, like the contents of a great aqueduct. Perhaps it would have been better for the human spirit if they had moved with a rush and a roar, blunting the consciousness with their tumult, and hurling their victim to an instantaneous death. The death in that undersea channel was deliberate and unhurried, and the imagination had free play. Already we three were like departed souls, lost in the still, murky waters of Lethe—drifting, helpless, fearful as children in the darkness. It was such an experience that from sheer, elemental fear—fear that was implanted in the germ-plasm in darkness tragedies in the caves of long ago—may poison and dry up the life-sustaining fluids of the nerves, causing death before the first physical blow is struck.

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It was an old fear, this of darkened waters. Perhaps it was remembered from those infinite eons before the living organisms from which we sprang ever emerged from the gray spaces of the sea. And I knew it to the full.

But I didn't float supinely down that Cimmerian stream. The race was certainly to the swift. Knowing that the only shadow of hope lay in reaching the end of the passage before the air in my lungs was exhausted, I swam down that stream with the fastest stroke I knew. Carried also by the waters, I must have traveled at a really astounding pace, at momentary risk of striking my head against the rock walls of the channel.

An interminable moment later my arms swept about Edith's form. I felt her long tresses streaming in the flood, but her slender arms had already lost all power to seize and hold me. Had death already claimed her? Yet I could not give her the little store of life-giving air that still sustained me. Holding her in one arm and swimming with every ounce of strength I had, we sped together through that darkened channel.

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No swimmer knows the power and speed that is in him until a crisis such as this. No under-water swimmer can dream of what distances he is capable until death, or something more than death, is the stake for which he races. The passage seemed endless. Slowly the breath sped from my lungs. And the darkness was still unbroken when the last of it was gone.

The trial was almost done. I could struggle on a few yards more, until the oxygen-enriched air in my blood had made its long wheel through my body.

What happened thereafter was dim as a dream. There was a certain period of bluntness, almost insensibility; and then of tremendous stress and conflict that seemed interminable. It must have been that even through this phase I fought on, arms and legs thrashing in what was practically an involuntary effort to fight on to the open sea. The last images that drowning men know, that queer, vivid cinema of memories and regrets began to sweep through the disordered brain. There was nothing to do further. The trial was done. I gave one more convulsive wrench....

And that final impulse carried me into a strange, gray place that the senses at first refused to credit. It was hard to believe, at first, that this was not merely the gray borderland of death. Yet in an instant I knew the truth. I was heading toward light: the subterranean blackness of the channel was fading, as the gloom of a tunnel fades as the train rushes into open air. And a second later I shot to the surface of the open sea.

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It was through no conscious effort of mine that I did not lose my life in the moment of deliverance from the channel. At such times the body struggles on unguided by the brain; instinct, long forgotten and neglected, comes into its own again. As I came up my lips opened, I took a great, sobbing breath.

I must have submerged again. At least the blue water seemed to linger over my eyes for interminable seconds thereafter. But there were no walls of stone to imprison me now, and I again rose, and this time came up to stay. The life-giving air was already sweeping through me, borne on the corpuscles of the blood.

In an instant I had found my stroke—padding just enough to keep afloat. Edith still lay insensible in my arms. Only a glance was needed to see where I was. A gray line back of me stretched the rock wall, and beyond it the lagoon. I had been swept from the latter, through a submarine water passage under the wall and a hundred yards into the open sea. Dell, who had gone through the channel ahead of us, was nowhere to be seen.

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As soon as I had breath I shouted for help to the little file of men who were already streaming through the gardens toward the lagoon. They must come soon, if at all. Tired out, I couldn't hold on much longer. In the pauses between my shouts I gazed at the stark-white face of the girl in my arms. My senses were quickening now, and a darkness as unfathomable as that of the undersea passage itself swept over me at the thought that I had lost, after all—that the girl I had carried through was already past resuscitation.

But the men on the shore had heard me now—I was aware of the splash of oars and the hum of the motor of Nealman's launch. Some one shouted hope—and already the dark outline of the motorboat came sweeping towards me. It was none too soon.... The dead weight in my arms was forcing me down, and my feeble strokes were no longer availing. But now strong arms had hold of me, dragging me and my burden into the boat.

There are no memories whatever of the next hour. I must have lain unconscious on the sand of the shore while Nopp and his men fought the fight for Edith's life. At least I was there when at last, after lifetimes were done, a strong hand shook my shoulder. Van Hope and Nopp were beside me, and they were smiling.

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"A piece of news for you," Nopp told me, happily. "You put up a good fight—and you'll be glad to know that your girl will live."

CHAPTER XXV

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Though we were out of the water, we were not yet out of the woods. There were many explanations to be made and many guesses that took the place of explanations. No questions could be put to the butler, Florey, nor Nealman, host of Kastle Kraggs, nor to Major Kenneth Dell. All of these had been swept down the sink-hole and through the subterranean channel into the sea.

Perhaps we would never have got anywhere, for a certainty, if it hadn't been for the letter and the photograph that William Noyes sent me from Vermont, and which arrived the day following our journey through the passage. Short though it was, it served to clear up many matters to our complete satisfaction. It was addressed to me:

I am sending photo of that scoundrel, George Florey, brother of the dead man. I hope it helps you catch him. He always hated his brother, and my late wife told me that as far back as you want to go in her family you'll find one brother hating another. I don't know where to tell you to look for George. He and his brother both had spent most of their lives looking for a chest of treasure that was hidden by their grandfather down where you are—in Florida. They just took this name of Florey the last generation. Before that it was Hendrickson, my wife told me—and before that Heaven knows what. Mostly they were a bad lot.

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After I had read it I showed it to Nopp; and he breathed deeply. But he made but one comment.

"Human nature is a winner, isn't it, Killdare?" he observed. "Will we ever see the head and tail of it? Now let me see the picture."

Neither Nopp nor Edith nor any one who looked at it could mistake the likeness presented in the photograph. It was not that of my suspect, Mr. Pescini. One glance established that fact. The well-bred, rather aristocratic face was none other than that of Major Kenneth Dell, he who had got himself invited to Kastle Krags, and who had died in the trap his grandfather had set nearly eighty years before.

Edith and I went over the case together, and we managed to fill up the breaks in each other's story. We talked it over in the early evening, sitting in a secluded corner of the veranda.

She had already mostly recovered from the experience of the day before. She was still weak and shaken, but seemingly all serious complications had been averted. And she resolutely refused to stay in bed.

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"It's been a tragic thing, all the way through," she began in the voice I loved. "It's over now—but Heaven knows it cost enough lives. All for a treasure that no one knows for sure is a reality.

"I'm going over the case simply, Ned—and you tell me if I have it right. The letter shows that both George Florey and David Florey, the butler, were the grandsons of Hendrickson, who once owned this house—who of course was no one but the original Godfrey Jason. Jason too had hated his brother enough to kill him, and as the legend says, it was Jason who first buried the treasure in the lagoon.

"He put it near, perhaps just beside a dangerous sink-hole through which the tidal waters swept under the wall to the open sea. And when he died he left two, and perhaps more, copies of a cryptogram to show where the chest was hidden.

"As you say, Dave Florey, one of the two brothers of this generation of the Jason family, unquestionably got hold of one of the copies. He secured the position of butler at this house on purpose to hunt for and secure the chest. Meanwhile George Florey—we can call him Major Dell, the name he assumed, from now on—got track of the hiding-place of the treasure. The letters show that he had sought for it and traced it from Brazil to Washington, D. C.—at the latter place he possibly consulted old marine records. He evidently had considerable money, and was earning some in questionable ways, and through his acquaintance with Van Hope he got himself invited to this house.

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"Here he found his brother. It must have been a disagreeable surprise to him—the fact that you saw him so shaken and seemingly alarmed in the hall would indicate that it was. As the Jason brothers had done before them, these two men hated each other as only brothers can—jealously and terribly. And through some series of events that will never be known, they met that night beside the lagoon.

"George Florey—rather, Major Dell—must have been a thoroughly wicked man. I guess he inherited all of his grandfather Jason's wickedness—otherwise he wouldn't have been able to play the part he did. To me it was a dramatic thing—this heritage of wickedness, generation after generation: this blood lust and hatred that was the curse of all his breed. It was Cain and Abel again—the same, old tragic story.

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"They met on the lagoon shore, beside the crags, and perhaps Major Dell made an attempt to wrest the copy of the cryptogram from his brother. It's even possible, but it doesn't seem likely, that it was the other way 'round. At least, they were working at cross purposes, both of them seemed just about to triumph—and hating each other like two serpents, they came to grips. And here Dell struck a fatal blow—likely with some terrible, hooked instrument that he had brought to grapple for the chest.

"Florey cried out in his death agony and his fear, and Dell was obliged to flee without getting hold of the cryptogram. While the hunt was going on through the gardens, he came back to the body, likely searched the pockets of the victim, and for some reason that can never be exactly known, dragged the body into the lagoon.

"Perhaps he thought the character of the wound would give him away. There's little doubt that he threw it there with the idea of destroying evidence—at least its presence some way interfered with his plans. And of course before the night was done it had drifted to the sink-hole and through the channel to the open sea.

"Dell likely saw you pick up the script, and that accounts for his presence in your room that night. Meanwhile Nealman and I were working on a copy of it I had found in an old book. The book was the Bible, by the way, and it gave me the first key to the truth. Nealman offered to divide the treasure with me, if he was able to find it. That promise is on paper. It isn't necessary now, however—and you know why."

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I knew why—well enough. As his niece, Edith inherited all that Grover Nealman left, including this Floridan estate. It was true, however, that his debts just about wiped out all his other possessions.

"As you know, a deal in the stock market practically ruined him," she went on. "The only way out he could see was the chest that both of us felt was hidden in the lagoon. He never took the monster legend seriously, but always before he had been willing to wait until he could procure

some safe appliance to rescue the chest. At that time both of us knew almost exactly where it was. And when the crash came, the sudden need for money and his desperation sent him out in the darkness to procure it. He too was caught in the undersea channel.

"Of course Major Dell was never even menaced by the sink-hole. Likely he had some knowledge of it. He vanished the third night, because first, he realized that Noyes' testimony would sooner or later convict him of his brother's murder, and second, because the disappearance of Florey and Nealman had set a good example for him. Some secret business took him into my uncle's room first, as you guessed. I have no doubt that he was hiding in the dense thickets on the other side of the lagoon all the time—waiting for his chance to procure the treasure and make his escape.

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"I don't know that you'll believe it, but by this time I had guessed the secret of the lagoon. I didn't know just how it worked, but I felt there was some kind of an underground outlet that would sweep away any one who tried to wade in the proximity of the treasure. Of course I didn't suspect Dell—I thought he had merely gone as Uncle Grover had gone, through the sink-hole to his death. When I made my attempt, I went prepared."

"But how dared you attempt it?" I demanded.

She laughed at my anger. "I wanted to know the truth!" she exclaimed. "I owed it to Uncle Grover—to find out what became of him. I needed the treasure chest, too—for his securities won't quite balance, he told me, the demands that will be made upon the estate. And finally—maybe there was another reason, too. Perhaps you know what it was."

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The narration could not go on at once. It was one of those moments that a man always remembers, and holds dear when most earthly treasures are as dust. She hadn't forgotten my own dreams—the plans I had made but which seemed so impossible of fulfillment.

"But how did you dare take the risk?" I demanded.

"There wasn't any risk—at least, I didn't think there was. I felt sure that a sink-hole in the bed of the lagoon was the explanation. The plank I dragged out there was plenty big enough to hold me up. You know a floating cake of soap doesn't go down the sluice as long as the bathtub is any way near full of water. The plank would have held me easily if Dell hadn't interfered and torn it from my hands.

"Why did he interfere? Of course we can only guess at that. I think he was waiting for a chance to take the treasure himself—and he saw my intention. I suppose he had dreamed about his grandfather's gold until it was a veritable passion with him—a mania—and he was willing to risk death in the sink-hole sooner than let it go? Likely he meant to tear my hands from the plank but hang on to it himself. Of course it got away from us both. That's the whole story. Your own wonderful endurance and mastery of swimming saved me. Doesn't that seem to clear up everything?"

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"Almost everything. Yet I don't see why Dell waited—why he hadn't got the treasure out some time night before last—or yesterday——"

"Of course he couldn't work in daylight. Most of the night after his disappearance the lagoon was guarded. Yet it isn't easy to see why he didn't make the attempt the night of his disappearance——"

"I suppose he was waiting for a favorable time. He had to have certain equipment, I suppose—to keep from being carried down. Perhaps there are certain periods when the flow through the channel is less, and there isn't so much suction——"

A sudden light in the girl's face arrested me and held me. Her eyes were sparkling like blue seas in the sunlight. "'At F. T.,'" she quoted. "Ned, Ned, what stupid we are! Don't you see——"

"I can't say that I do. I saw 'At F. T.' at the bottom of the script, but I don't know what it meant——"

"'At flood tide'—that's what it meant! Just as a sailor would say it. He told on his own directions the way to safety. When the tide flows the water movement is probably in the other direction through the underground channel, and the lagoon is as safe as a lake; and it's only in the ebb-tide that the suction exists. And of course the ignorant treasure-seeker would make his search in the ebb-tide, when the surface of the lagoon is still."

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Exultant over this, a discovery that, if the treasure was a reality, assured its procurance, neither of us noticed the dignified, courteous approach of Pescini from the hallway. He was distinguished as ever, his dinner-jacket unruffled, his linen gleaming white in the dying light.

"Have you seen Sheriff Slatterly anywhere?" he asked me. "I'm in a sort of quandary—I've got a letter on my hands and don't know what to do with it."

"A letter?" I repeated. The skin was twitching on my back.

"Yes. I hardly know whether to send it on—or whether he will want it for the investigations. It's one that Major Dell gave me a few days ago to mail, but which I dropped in my pocket and forgot."

The guests refused to go back to their city homes until they had seen the contents of the chest that had brought such woe to Kastle Krag; and there was nothing to do but to make an immediate search. When daylight came again Edith announced that she had fully recovered from the adventure of two days before, and was ready to help me recover the chest.

"I can't wait to see if it's really there," she confessed.

We went in flow-tide, and we guided a boat over the place. But we weren't trusting entirely to our theory that the sink-hole was only dangerous when the tide was running out. A stout rope was attached to the prow of the boat, and I lashed it about my waist before I stepped off into the water.

We had guessed right about the underground channel. At flood tide a swimmer could pass directly over it in safety. I located a great limestone boulder that I thought was undoubtedly the "white rock" of the script, but as the surface was rough and choppy from the tidal waves breaking against the rock wall, it was impossible to find the chest by power of vision alone. I found I had to dive again and again, groping with my hands.

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But in scarcely a moment my foot encountered an iron chain at the base of the rock. In a moment more the search was ended. A small, iron-bound chest, hardly of twelve inch dimensions, was fastened to the chain, which in turn was hooked securely in a crevice of the boulder.

It was a rather wide-eyed, sober group that rowed back to the shore. In the first place it was almost impossible to believe that such a seeming legendary thing was actually in our hands, a thing of weight and substance and unquestioned reality.

The chest had been made of some sort of very hard wood, chemically treated, and showed not the slightest sign of decay in the eighty years it had lain in the water. How many little crafts had passed over it! What a scarlet trail it had left since the *Arganil* had borne it from Rio de Janeiro, so long ago. "But naked treasures breed murder!" Nealman had said—speaking truer than he knew.... "They get home to human imagination and human wickedness as nothing else can."

The boat touched the shore. Nopp lifted the chest easily on the ground. "Don't be too hopeful," he advised Edith quietly. "If it's gold that's in it, you couldn't have much over a thousand. It only weighs nine or ten pounds, box and all."

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It was true. And the box itself, bound with iron, could easily weigh that much. Had we been hoaxed by an empty chest?

Somehow or other, nervous and fumbling, we got the thing open. Some of the rods we broke, others we bent back. And at first we only stared in blank surprise.

It did not look like gold—the contents of the chest. Nor was it a string of precious jewels. It seemed merely a bent, shapeless object of some dark-colored metal, and a few dull stones, some of which were as large as hickory nuts, loose in the bottom. Certain words were said as we looked down, certain questions asked—but all of them were dim and lost in a great, wondering preoccupation that dropped over me.

Nopp reached a big hand, took one of the stones, and rubbed it on his trouser leg. Looking at it, he rubbed it again with added vigor. Then he stared at it in sudden, fascinated *wonder*.

"Good Heavens!" he suddenly exclaimed in tremendous excitement. "Do you know what this is?"

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We turned to him, staring blankly. "What is it?" Edith asked. Her voice was quiet; only the bright sparkle in her eyes revealed how excited she really was.

"It's an emerald. That's what it is. One of the finest in this country. It's worth a whole chest of gold. Killdare, the story was that it was a *Portuguese* ship—bound out from Rio?"

"Yes—"

"And the chest was the property of some noble family, Portuguese princes at the time the court of Portugal was located in Rio de Janeiro?"

"Something like that—"

"The property of a noble family! Edith, it was unquestionably the property of the ruling house itself. Wait just a minute."

He took the shapeless thing of metal, rubbed it until a little of the tarnish was gone, revealing yellow gold beneath, and slowly bent it in his hands. It took a circular shape. Then he showed us little sockets, set at various points, that had been the settings for the jewels. We saw the truth at once.

"A crown!" Edith said.

"Unquestionably the famous crown that the Portuguese king wore at his Brazilian court—one of the richest courts in history. The jewels came from Brazil, from Peruvian temples—Heaven knows

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where. And for Heaven's sake, Edith, send it away and get it changed into securities. It's death—that's all it is. It's the kind of thing that drives men insane."

We took the yellow thing, and in a wonderful, elated mood, we set it on her own golden curls. But she removed it quickly. We were all instantly sobered as she put it into my hands.

"It's bad luck to wear it," she said. "It makes me creep to think what wickedness it has caused—clear through the centuries. I'm an American—and being a queen has never appealed to me."

Nopp smiled quietly, into the depths of the lagoon. "But you intend to be *somebody's* queen, don't you, Edith?" he asked.

And thus the matter of Kastle Krags came to a new beginning. Edith changed the jewels into securities, just as Nopp advised, and a tenth of them paid the obligations that were left after Nealman's estate was settled up. The rest provided an annual income that, while it would have been considered moderate by such great financiers as Marten and his fellows, seemed of kingly proportions to me. At least it provided for the maintenance of the old southern manor-house according to its best traditions. [Pg 266]

And when Edith and I go sailing away to strange lands beyond the sea, bent on scientific research and adventure, we often wonder what haughty princes and bearded pirates, lurking in the shadows of the deck are saying among themselves. Things have taken a great turn, they whisper together, when the jewels for which they lived and fought, did murder and died, have gone to sustain a rich man's secretary and a penniless schoolmaster! Perhaps lovely Portuguese princesses watch with contempt; and ear-ringed villains, scornful of such science as mine, swear evil oaths and wonder how the times have tamed!

But perhaps they are glad that their watch of the lagoon is over! There is nothing to hold these restless spirits now, and you can hear them rustling no more in the forest, or feel their tragic presence in the gardens. Some way, the house is more cheerful, and the sea no longer conveys the image of desolation and mystery. When our young friends visit us, to play golf on our links and shoot and fish in the lakes and rivers, they invariably speak of its homely charm and cheer. We have, however, made certain improvements in the grounds. [Pg 267]

We have huge, black-lettered signs posted here and there along the lagoon, giving certain advice concerning swimming at ebb-tide.

THE END.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES:

1. Minor changes have been made to correct typesetters' errors; otherwise, every effort has been made to remain true to the author's words and intent.
2. The original of this book did not have a Table of Contents; one has been added for the reader's convenience.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KASTLE KRAGS: A STORY OF MYSTERY ***

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