CHAPTER III

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 Krags.

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 coraline 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.

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.

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 Krags 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.

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 unforgetable 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.

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 Krags.

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.

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.

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 madnesses, 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.

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, 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.