

CHAPTER IV

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——”

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 Krag 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.

“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."

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.

"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.’

“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.

“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.

“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.

“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.

"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 be-

yond 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.

“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."