

CHAPTER VI

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 Ocha-kee 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.

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. . . .

Most of the guests arrived on the same train at the little town of Ochakee, and motored over to Kastle Krag. 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 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.

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-sportsmen as any one would care to know. Nealman introduced him to me, and his handshake was firm and cordial.

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.

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.

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 Krags.