

CHAPTER VII

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.”

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 Krag.

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 shout-

ing 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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

*“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.

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."

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.

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.

“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.