

CHAPTER VIII

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 every-day 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! Neelman, let's get busy. Maybe we can catch the devil yet."

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

Neelman 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——”

“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 tomorrow. 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?"

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.

"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 Krag. 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.

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.

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.

"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.

"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, Neelman?"

"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."

"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.

"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!"