

## CHAPTER IX

THERE was no further possibility of a mistake. Marten's inability to find the body could not be further attributed to a mere confusion as to its correct location. In the few minutes we had been phoning and while the remainder of the guests had been searching for the murderer, the body of the murdered man had vanished from the shore of the lagoon. Nor had any mysterious over-sweeping of the water carried it away. We found, easily enough, the place where it had lain, and we knew it by the crushed vegetation and an ominous stain on the earth.

For a moment we all stood speechless, almost motionless, gazing down on the place where the body had been. The guest's faces all looked oddly white in the moonlight. Then I heard Nealman and Nopp talking in a subdued voice at my side.

"You see what it means," Nealman said. "The murderer came back to the body—that's the only explanation! That means he's still on

the grounds—perhaps within a few hundred yards.”

“But what did he do with the thing? I wish I did know what it meant. It makes no sense. But there’s nothing we can do——”

His words blurred in my consciousness, and I suddenly ceased to hear him. The reason was simply that my own thoughts were now too busy to admit external impressions. If there was one thing needed in this affair it was careful investigation and research—the very key and basis of my own life’s work. I was a scientist—at least I had gone a distance into scientific work—and scientific methods were needed now. Why shouldn’t I direct the same method that made me a successful naturalist into the unraveling of this mystery?

Science has explored the lightless mysteries of the deep, has measured the stars and traced the comets through the heavens: there was no cause to believe it couldn’t conquer now. I was of a branch of science that mainly studied externals, my methods were simply accurate observation, tireless investigation, and logical deduction—the methods of all naturalists the world over; and they were just what was needed here.

Presently I forgot the shaken men about me

and began really to observe. First, I tried to fix in my mind the exact way the body had lain. It had been curiously huddled, lying rather on the right side—and the torn, stained shirt-front had been plainly visible. Its location was not far above high-tide mark, at the edge of the lawns—and because the craggy margin of the lagoon was rather precipitous at that place, not more than twenty feet from the water's edge at low tide.

It was impossible even to hazard a guess what kind of a weapon had inflicted the death wound. But it had not been a clean, stabbing wound to the heart. The wound itself must have been a long gash downward along the breast, for the shirt and waistcoat had been curiously ripped and torn. And possibly the weapon might be found in the grass where the body had lain.

I quietly moved back and forth among the group of men, searching for the gleam of moonlight upon a knife blade. It didn't reveal itself, however, and there seemed no course but to wait for daylight. But as I was about to give up the search my eye caught the glimpse of something white, half-hidden in the grass in the direction of the house.

I quietly picked it up, saw that it was a folded piece of heavy paper or parchment, and slipped



it into my pocket. Then I rejoined the little crowd of guests.

"Good Lord, what can we do . . .?" Pescini was saying excitedly. "The lake can't be dragged until to-morrow. There's no use to post guards around this big house—the thickets are so heavy that any one could steal through almost any place. We've got the road guarded—and the officers won't come till tomorrow. It's true that a couple of us could stand guard here——"

"I don't see what good it would do," Nopp replied. "The murderer would have no cause to come back again. I suggest we go to the house and get what rest we can. We may have to make some posses in the morning."

In the privacy of my own room I took from my pocket the paper I had found. It proved to be of heavy parchment, whitened by time; and I felt at once I was running on a true scent.

There could be little doubt as to the age of the document. The ink was fading, the handwriting itself was in the style of long ago. The fact that the script was scratchy and uncertain, indicated that a man of meager education had written it. It was, however, perfectly legible. I judged that the date of the missive was at least ten or twenty years prior to the civil war?

Across the top of the page were written the words, referring evidently to the script beneath, "Sworn by the Book." At the very bottom was the cryptic phrase "int F. T." And the following, mysterious column lay between:

aned  
dqbo  
aqcd  
trkm  
fipj  
dqbo  
scno  
ohuy  
wvyn  
dljn  
dtht

Of course no kind of an explanation presented itself at first. I took it to a mirror, tried to read it backward, then sat down to give it a careful analysis.

I copied the column carefully, then tried to rearrange the letters to make sense. But no such simple treatment was availing. The fourth, ninth, tenth, and last words, for instance, were made up entirely of consonants, and no word of any language, known to me, entirely omits vowels. Four of the remaining seven words contained but one vowel.

But I was in no mood to go further to-night.

The events of the past few hours had been a mighty strain on the entire nervous system, and my mind could not cope with the problem. I spread the original parchment on the little table in the center of the room, then quickly undressed, turned out my lights, and went to bed.

Sleep came at once, heavy and dreamless. I barely remember the welcome chill that the pre-dawn hours brought to the room. But it wasn't written that there should be many hours of refreshing sleep for me that night.

In hardly a moment, it seemed to me, I came to myself with a start. Wakefulness shot through me as if by an electric shock. It was that fast-flying hour just before dawn: the cool caress of the wind against my face and the pale-blue quality of the darkness on the window-pane told that fact with entire plainness. It had been awakened by a hushed sound from across the room.

It was useless to try to tell myself that the sound was a dream only, an imagined voice that had no basis in reality. For all that it was subdued, the sound was entirely sharp and clear, impossible to mistake. And instantly I knew its source.

Some one had opened my door. There was no other possible explanation. Nor had it been

merely the harmless mistake of one of the guests, confusing my room with his own. I heard the door open, but I did not hear it close. Nor did I hear departing steps along the corridor.

My nightly visitor had come in stealth, and there was nothing to believe but at that instant he was waiting in the darkness on the other side of the room.

It isn't easy to decide what to do at a time like this. I was perfectly willing to simulate slumber if by so doing I could increase my own safety. Florey's affair was still fresh in my mind. A cruel and cold-blooded murder had been committed at Kastle Krag's earlier this same night: this tiptoeing visitor in my room was in all likelihood a desperate man, willing to repeat his crime if his own safety demanded it. My possessions were few: it was better to let them go than take such a risk.

Yet a wiser, saner self told me that this was no business of thievery. The thing went deeper, further than I could see or guess. I lay listening: from time to time I could hear the boards settle beneath his feet. Evidently he was groping about the darkened room, in search of something. . . . Then a faint jar told me that his hand was on the iron railing of my bed.



It wasn't a reassuring thought that he had been groping about the room solely to find my bed. My muscles set for a desperate leap in case I felt him groping nearer. . . . There was a long, ominous instant of silence. Then a little, triangle of light danced out over my table-top.

It was a ray from a flashlight, and it came and went so soon that there was no chance to make accurate observation. I did, however, see just the edge of his hand as he reached for something on the flat surface of the table. It was a white, strong hand—long, sensitive fingers—evidently the hand of a well-bred, middle-aged man.

The light flashed out. Steps sounded softly on the floor. Then my door closed with a slight shock.

There is no use trying to justify my inactivity during his presence in the room. At such times a man is guided by instinct—and my instinct had been to lie still and let him do his work. The action might condemn me in some eyes, but I felt no shame for it. And as soon as the door closed I sprang to the floor.

Groping, I found the light, and the white beams flooded the room. Presently I opened the door and gazed down the gloomy hall.



It was still as a tomb. There were a dozen doors along it, and any one of them might have closed behind the intruder. It was the hall of a well-ordered country manor, rather commonplace in the subdued light of a single globe that burned over the stairway. The opportunity to overtake the intruder was irredeemably past.

It wasn't hard to tell what had been taken. The sheet of parchment, on which was written the mysterious cryptogram, was gone from the table. The only satisfaction I had was that the thief had failed to see and procure the copy of the document I had made just before retiring.