

CHAPTER X

THE sheriff and the coroner arrived from Ochakee in a roadster soon after dawn. All of us felt relieved at their coming: they represented the best and most intelligent type of southern citizenry. Sheriff Slatterly was scarcely older than I was, and had been given his office for meritorious services in the late war. He was a broad-shouldered large-headed man, with keen, good-natured eyes, a firm mouth, and rather prominent chin. We scraped up an acquaintance at once on the strength of our Legion buttons.

"I'm glad theya's a suvice man heah," he confessed to me. "It's sho' a mess of a case—and my deputy is busy. I've neveh wo'ked among these millionaih Yankee spo'ts befo', but I suppose they ah all right. Now tell me what you think of it all."

"I don't think," I confessed. "It doesn't make good sense."

He asked me questions in the vernacular of the South, and I answered them the best I could. Then he introduced me to the coroner.

Mr. Weldon was a man of about forty years,

intelligent, forceful, not in the least the mournful type so often sees among undertakers. He was rather careless in speech, but I did not ascribe it to lack of education. He had rather a Semitic countenance, and a very deep, manly voice.

"Of course the first thing is to drag the lagoon," he said. "We've got to have a body before we can hold anything but a semblance of an inquest—and of course that's where the body is. It couldn't be nowhere's else."

All of us agreed with him. There was simply nothing else to do. The body had lain but thirty feet from the water's edge: it was conceivable that for some mysterious reason the murderer had seen fit to return and drag his dead into the water. The idea of him carrying it in any other direction was incredible.

While we waited for drag hooks to be sent out from town the sheriff made a minute examination of the scene of the crime. He searched the ground for clews; and it seemed to me the little puzzled line between his brows deepened with every moment of the search. He stood up at last, breathing hard.

"The murderer made a clean get away, that's certain," he observed. "It isn't often a man can commit a crime like this and not leave a

few trails. I can't find a trace or a button. And if he left any tracks they are mixed up with those you gentlemen made last night.

He went carefully over the rocks between the place where the body had lain and the water; but there was little for him here. Once or twice he paused, studying the rocks with a careful scrutiny, but he did not tell us what he found.

About ten the drag-hooks came, and I helped Nealman bring his duckboat from the marshy end of the lagoon. Then the sheriff, the coroner and myself began the slow, tiresome work of dragging.

Of course we began along the shore, close to the scene of the crime. We worked from the natural wall and back to a point a hundred yards beyond the starting-place. Then we turned back, just the width of the drag hooks beyond. We reached the Bridge again without result.

As the moments passed the coroner's annoyance increased. Noon came and passed—already we had dragged carefully a spot a full hundred square yards in extent. The tide flowed again, beat against the Bridge and fretted the water, making our work increasingly difficult. And at last the sheriff rested, cursing softly, on his oars.

"Well, Weldon?" he asked.

The coroner's eyes looked rather bright as he turned to answer him. I got the impression that for all his outer complacency he was secretly excited. "Nothing, Slatterly," he said. "What do you think yourself?"

"I think we're face to face with the worst deal, the biggest mystery that's come our way in years. In the first place, there isn't any use of looking and dragging any more."

"But man, the body's got to be here somewhere."

"Got, nothing! We've got to begin again, and not take anything for granted. This is still water, except for these waves the tide makes, breaking over the rocks—and you know a body doesn't move much in still water, especially the first night. For that matter the place was still as a slough, they say, while the tide was going out—most of the night. We've looked for a hundred yards about the spot. It's not there. And the murderer couldn't swim with it clear across the lagoon."

"He might, a strong swimmer."

"But what's the sense of it? Besides, a dead body ain't easy to manage. The thing to do is to search Florey's rooms for any evidence, then to get all the niggers and the white folks as well

and have an unofficial inquest. Then we might see where we're at."

"Good." The coroner turned to me. "Is there any use of hunting up Mr. Nealman to show us Florey's room?" he asked. "Can't you take us up there?"

I was glad enough of the chance to be on hand for that search, so I didn't hesitate to answer. "You are the law. You can go where you like—wherever you think best."

We went together up the stairs to Florey's room. There was not the least sign that tragedy had overtaken its occupant. It was scrupulously kept: David Florey must have been the neatest of men. The search, however, was largely unavailing.

In a little desk at one corner we found a number of papers and letters. Some of them pertained to household matters, there was a note from some friend in Charleston, a folder issued by a steamship plying out of Tampa, and a letter from Mrs. Noyes, of New Hampshire, who seemed to be the dead man's sister. At least the salutation was "Dear Brother Dave." and the letter itself dealt with the fortunes of common relatives. Then there were a few short letters from one who signed himself "George."

These was nothing of particular interest.

Mostly they were notifications of arrivals and departures in various cities, and they seemed to concern various business ventures. "I've got a good lead," one of them said, "but it may turn out like the rest." "Things are brightening up," another went. "I believe I see a rift in the clouds."

"George" was unquestionably a traveler. One of the notes had been written from Washington, D. C., one from Tampa, the third from some obscure port in Brazil. They were written in a rather bold, rugged, but not unattractive hand.

The only document that gave any kind of a key to the mystery was a half-finished letter that protruded beneath the blotter pad on his desk. It was addressed "My dear Sister," and was undoubtedly in answer to the "Mrs. Noyes" letter. The sheriff read it aloud:

My dear Sister:

I got the place here and like it very much. Mr. Nealman is a fine man to work for. I get on with my work very well. The house is located on a lagoon, cut off from the open sea by a natural rock wall—a very lovely place.

But you will be sorry to hear that my old malady, g——, is troubling me again. I don't think I will ever be rid of it. It

is certainly the Florey burden, going through all our family. I can't hardly sleep, and don't know that I'll ever get rid of it, short of death. I'm deeply discouraged, yet I know——

At that point the letter ended. The sheriff's voice died away so slowly and tonelessly that it gave almost the effect of a start. Then he laid the letter on the desk and smoothed it out with his hands.

"Weldon?" he asked jerkily. "Do you s'pose we've got off on the wrong foot, altogether?"

"What d'ye mean?"

"Do you suppose that poor devil did himself in? At least we've got a motive for suicide, and a good one—and there's none whatever for murder. You know what old Bampus used to say—find the motive first."

"Of course you mean the disease he writes of. Why didn't he spell it out?"

"He was likely just given to abbreviations. Lots of men are. The word might have been a long one, and hard to spell."

"Most invalids. I've noticed, rejoice in the long names of their diseases!"

"Not a bad remark, from an undertaker. I suppose you mean they get your hopes all

aroused by their diseases when they ain't got 'em, you old buzzard. But seriously, Weldon. He writes here that his old malady has come back on him, some disease that runs through his family—that he's discouraged, that he doesn't think he'll ever be rid of it. You know that ill-health is the greatest cause for suicide—that more men blow out their own brains because they are incurably sick than for any other reason. He says he can't sleep. And what leads to suicide faster than that!"

"All true enough. But it don't hold water. Where's the knife? What became of the body? Suicides don't eat the knife that killed them, lay dead, and then crawl away. You'll have to do better."

"He might not have been quite dead. Even doctors have been deceived before now, and crawled into the water to end his own misery. You can bet I'm going to keep the matter in mind."

And it was a curious thing that this little handful of letters also set me off on a new tack. A possibility so bizarre and so terrible that it seemed almost beyond the pale of credibility flashed to my mind. I watched my chance, and slipped one of the "George" letters into my pocket.

The idea I had was vague, not overly convincing, and it left a great part of the mystery still unsolved—but yet it was a clew. I waited impatiently until the search was concluded. Then I sought the telephone.

A few minutes later a telegraphic message was clicking over the wires to Mrs. Noyes, in New Hampshire, notifying her of her brother's murder and disappearance, and asking a certain question. There was nothing to do but wait patiently for the answer.