

## CHAPTER XI

IN midafternoon the coroner called all the occupants of the manor house together in the big living-room. He had us draw chairs to make a half circle about him, and the sheriff took a chair at his side. He began at once upon a patient, systematic questioning of every one present.

None of us could read the thoughts behind his rather swarthy face. His coal-black eyes were alike unfathomable: whether he believed that the murderer was then sitting in our circle we could not guess. "Of course this is not an official inquest," he told us. "The real inquest can't be held until there is a body to hold it over. I'm doing this in co-operation with the sheriff. And of course I needn't tell you that all of you are held here, with orders not to leave the immediate grounds, until a formal inquest can be held."

"But what if you never find the body?" Marten asked. "Some of us—can't stay forever."

"The law takes heed of no man's business," the coroner answered, somewhat sternly. "How-

ever, I'll have counsel from the state in a few days, and then we can tell what to do. The district attorney will be here just as soon as his work will permit."

He called Nealman first. Except for a strange and startling deepening of the worry-line between his brows I would have thought that he was wholly unshaken. Weldon asked his name, place of birth, thirdly his occupation.

"I can't hardly say—I'm interested in finance," Nealman said in reply to the third question.

"And how long have you occupied this house?"

"Less than a month. I bought it last winter, but it has been under the charge of—of a caretaker until that time."

"Who was the caretaker?"

Nealman's voice fell a note. "Florey—the man murdered last night."

"Ah." The coroner paused an instant, as if deep in thought. "And how did he happen to come into your employ?"

"He was employed at this house by its previous owner, just a few days or weeks before I purchased it. He asked for work here when I came to take possession. He was an experienced butler, he said."

"Then that's all you know about the dead man?"

"Absolutely all."

"His full name?"

"I made out his check to David Florey. I assumed he was an Englishman."

"You didn't know that, for sure?"

"No." Nealman hesitated, as if secretly startled. "I really didn't know it, when I come to think about it. I always assumed that he was."

"He was a good servant?"

"Excellent. I can go further. The best, most conscientious butler I ever had."

"Did you ever get the idea he had any enemies?"

"No. He seemed the most peaceable of men."

"None of the other servants were jealous of him?"

"On the contrary, they seemed to like him very much."

"He stayed close to his work?"

"He scarcely ever went to town. Once or twice he asked me for permission to go with my chauffeur—for a hair cut, and so on."

"What did you observe about his health? Did it seem to be good?"

"It seemed so. Very good."

The coroner's interest quickened. "You weren't aware, then, that he had an incurable malady?"

"No. And I don't think he had. At least I never saw the least sign of it. None of the other servants ever mentioned it."

"Did he look like a man in good health?"

"He was rather gray—from his indoor life, I suppose. But he never looked sick to me."

"You think he was murdered, then?"

"Good Heavens, I don't see how we can think anything else!"

"You can ascribe no reason for his murder."

"Absolutely none."

"You can't, eh." The coroner paused, several seconds. "To come back to yourself. You were here less than a month. May I ask what was your idea in buying this manor house?"

"I hardly understand——"

"What did you get it for, a home?"

"I can't hardly say a home. I got it more for a winter shooting and fishing lodge. My home is on the Hudson. I'm very fond of fishing and shooting. I loved the place on sight."

"I take it, then, that you are a man of large financial means—able to indulge your whims

even to the extent of buying a shooting and fishing lodge such as this?"

Nealman stiffened slightly. "I don't see how that point can possibly have any bearing on this case."

"The merest detail of the lives of any one of the actors involved often throws light upon a crime." The coroner spoke slowly, seemingly choosing his words with care.

"I am not a man of great wealth, if that's what you want to know," Nealman answered at last. "I feel—I felt able at the time to buy this house."

"No great financial disaster has overtaken you since, I judge?"

Nealman's voice dropped a tone, and he spoke with a curious hesitancy. "No. I shouldn't say that there had."

The coroner halted, gazing absently at the carpet, and then began on a new tack. "This butler of yours—I suppose you paid him a good wage?"

"It would be considered so, among the men of his occupation."

"Do you know if he had any large amount of money saved, or if he carried any large amount on his person?"

"Not that I know of. He was very non-committal about his affairs."

"He was a good butler," the coroner commented.

"Yes. Excellent. If you mean, did he carry enough money on his person to invite robbery, I should say that I don't think he did. Of course I don't know for certain. However, I know that he had banking connections in Ochakee."

"What of your other employees. Do you know anything about them?"

"They all came recommended. I know nothing further except, of course, in regard to my housekeeper and chauffeur."

"Your chauffeur is a colored man?"

"Yes. He has been with me for four years. A man of good character and habits."

"Do you know where he was at the time of the murder?"

"I do not."

"Your housekeeper—she has been in your employ a long time, also?"

"About two years."

"Was she well known to the murdered man?"

"Her acquaintance began with him at the same time as my own—less than a month ago."

"How old is this lady?"

"She sits in the circle. You can ask her if you like. I have never put the question to her."

Every one smiled at this sally. The house-keeper, a buxom woman of fifty years, flushed and giggled alternately.

"Where were your other servants at the time of the murder?"

"I suppose most of them were in bed. Sam, the negro boy, was in the kitchen, helping me to serve my guests."

"Then David Florey was not on duty that night?"

"I didn't watch Mr. Florey closely, Mr. Weldon. He was the kind of servant that didn't seem to require watching. He helped me serve some cold drinks immediately after dinner. I didn't see him again."

"You don't know at what hour he ventured out into the lawns?"

"I do not. I was under the impression that he was in the pantry or hall for several hours after dinner. I can not say definitely."

"And now will you describe the crime—that is, what you yourself heard and saw?"

"Beginning where?"

"At the beginning. Where you were, who was with you, and all you can tell me."

"I was in this room. I don't know the exact

time—it must have been close to midnight. My guests were here with me.”

“All of them?”

Nealman paused, seemingly considerably disturbed. “I can’t say that all of them were in my immediate sight,” he replied at last. “My guests were free of the house—some of them were at the billiard tables, others in the library, and so on. I can say definitely that Mr. Marten, Mr. Van Hope, and Mr. Killdare were in the room. Mr. Pescini was with us until just before we heard the sound.”

“How long before?”

“I can’t say for certain. It didn’t seem to me more than a minute or two.”

“You don’t know where the others were?”

“Not exactly. I had left Mr. Fargo in the billiard room a moment before. Major Dell and Mr. Nopp had been talking on the veranda.”

“None of these men indicated any previous acquaintance with the butler?”

“None whatever. They were all northern men, from my own part of the country.”

“All of them were your friends?”

“Yes.” His face changed expression, ever so little. “Yes, of course.”

“You four men were in the lounging-room—



and you heard a certain sound. Will you describe the sound?"

"It was a scream—I can't describe it any further."

"Rather a long-drawn scream, or just a sharp utterance?"

"I would say it was rather long—and very loud."

"You knew at once it was the scream of a man?"

"I thought at first it might be some wild thing—perhaps a panther or a lynx—even a water bird."

"Yet it must have been a very distressing sound, was it not? Would you say it was a cry of agony or of fear?"

"Both. Yes—I would say it was a cry of both fear and agony."

"Then what did you do? Tell exactly what happened."

"We went out to investigate. My other guests ran out the same time."

"You didn't see them run out?"

"No, but I met most of them outside. At such times one doesn't observe closely. We ran down to the shore of the lagoon, at the place we've indicated to you, and there we found

David Florey, lying dead. There was no one near, and no weapons were lying beside him—at least I didn't see any. He was lying on his side, and his vest and shirt were torn and wet with blood. Some of us went at once to telephone—Mr. Killdare, Mr. Van Hope, Mr. Nopp and myself. The others began to beat through the garden in search of the murderer."

"No one stayed with the body?"

"No."

"You're perfectly certain Mr. Florey was dead, Mr. Nealman."

"I didn't dream of anything else at the time, Mr. Weldon. He lay huddled, his face drawn, and certainly there was a terrible wound in his breast."

"These men that hunted through the gardens and lawns. Were they armed?"

"Mr. Marten had a pistol. The others were unarmed."

"They stayed close together?"

"I don't think they did. I can't say for sure."

"Then what happened?"

"We telephoned, met the searching party, and all of us went back to the body. It was gone."

"No action or word of any of your guests wakened your suspicions?"

"None whatever."

"You suspect no one?"

"No one. I am absolutely in the dark."

"Remember, as the occupant of the house, you are in a better position to give us a right steer than any one else. I want you to think hard. You observed, at no time, any suspicious circumstances?"

"None whatever." Nealman's voice was firm.

"What weapon, would you say, inflicted the wound?"

"I don't know. It wasn't a pistol, of course. We didn't hear a shot. We didn't examine the wound carefully, but I would say it was some metal instrument, not overly sharp. It might have been a dull knife."

"Would a knife likely have torn the shirt and vest as you describe?"

"It doesn't seem likely, unless the murderer gave a furious, downward stroke."

The coroner paused again, and the room was utterly silent. "You have never heard any story, any legend—any set of facts connected with this house and its occupants that might explain the murder?"

Nealman waited a long time before he answered. "None that are the least credible."

"You've got something on your mind, Nealman. Credible or not, I want to hear it."

"I can't bring myself to repeat such a silly story. All old houses have various legends. This particular legend is not worth hearing."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Nealman, but I must be the judge of that. You have the same as admitted that the story has occurred to your mind. What was it, please?"

Nealman's voice lowered perceptibly, and he answered with evident difficulty. "A silly thing about a buried treasure—and a sea-monster—a giant octopus or something like that—that had been set to guard it—in the lagoon."

As we waited we heard the faint scream of the plover on the shore and the lapping waves of the tide. Most of the white men were smiling grimly—the negroes were gray as ashes.

"You will admit that the tragedy of last night, the nature of the wound and the disappearance of the body, brought the legend forcibly to your memory?"

"I couldn't help but remember it," Nealman answered. "But it's inane and silly—just the same."