

## CHAPTER XII

NEALMAN was of course the most important witness. Further testimony was really only in corroboration of his. The coroner called on Marten next.

This man spoke bluntly, answering all questions in a vigorous, rather masterful voice. Financier, he said simply, in answer to the question as to his occupation.

"You were with Mr. Nealman when you heard Florey's scream?"

"Yes."

"Who else was there?"

"Mr. Van Hope and Mr. Killdare."

"Do you know the exact location of any other of the guests at the time of the murder?"

"No, not exactly. They were all in rooms adjoining the living-room."

"You're sure of that?"

"Practically sure. They came in and out every few minutes."

"Did you have any previous acquaintance with the dead man?"

"None whatever."

In reply to the coroner's questions, he testified as to the finding of the body, the nature of the scream we had heard and gave a similar report as to the appearance of the wound. He had observed no suspicious actions on the part of any one."

"You led the search, I believe, through the gardens?"

"Yes."

"You were the one man that was armed. May I ask how you happened to have a pistol in the pocket of dinner clothes?"

"I was held up, once," Marten replied straightforwardly. "Several years ago. I've carried a pistol ever since."

The coroner nodded. "Did your party stay together in searching the gardens, or did they scatter out?" he asked.

"We scattered out. We couldn't have hoped to find any one if we had stayed together. We called back and forth, however."

"You kept track of one another all the time?"

"I can't say that. The gardens and grounds are large and full of shrubbery."

"The search lasted—how long?"

"Only a few minutes."

The coroner dismissed him at this point, calling on Mr. Van Hope. The latter told of his long acquaintance with Nealman, and verified in every detail the story that his friend had told.

"And where were you, Mr. Dell, when the scream was heard?" the coroner asked.

"In the library," was the reply. Major Dell spoke evenly, but his keen, flushed face showed that he was taking the most keen and lively interest in the proceedings.

"Why weren't you with the others in the party?"

"We were all running all over the house. I was trying to find Mr. Nealman's copy of Jordan's work on fish. Fargo and I had got into an argument about black bass."

"Mr. Fargo was not with you at the time?"

"I was alone. I had left Mr. Fargo at the billiard table."

Weldon's voice changed in tone. "And how did the argument come out, may I ask?"

Major Dell smiled dryly. "It isn't concluded yet," he said.

The coroner paused, then took a new tack. "You heard the sound distinctly?"

"Distinctly, but probably not so clearly as Mr. Nealman heard it. The library is back of the lounging-room."

"Then what did you do?"

"I ran outside. I joined Nealman and some of the other guests on the grounds, and went down with them to investigate."

"You took part in the hunt through the grounds?"

"Yes. I beat back and forth with the rest."

"And saw or heard nothing suspicious?"

"Something moved in the shrubbery, but we couldn't locate it. Nealman thought afterward it was a racoon or some other small animal."

"You knew Mr. Florey?"

"I had never set eyes upon him before."

"You've had long acquaintance with Mr. Nealman, however?"

Major Dell hesitated, just an instant. "No. I had never met Mr. Nealman until last night."

The coroner's interest quickened. "You didn't? How did you happen to be included among his guests?"

"I was a great friend of his friend, Mr. Van Hope. I was invited through his kindness. He wanted me to have a taste of shooting and fishing."

"What is your occupation, Mr. Dell?"

"I am interested in finance, in a modest way."

"You saw, heard or knew of nothing con-

nected with this murder that you haven't testified."

"No." Dell paused, considering. "Nothing, I'm sure."

"I say 'murder.' Testimony has gone to show that Florey was dead, not just severely wounded, when you and the others reached his side. Mr. Dell, do you think there is any possibility that life remained in his body when you saw him beside the inlet?"

Dell spoke clearly. "None whatever," he said.

"You speak very sure."

"I am sure. I've seen too many dead men ever to make a mistake. The position of the body, the features—everything told it as plain as day."

The coroner leaned forward. His eyes gleamed. "And where and how did you happen to see all these dead men, may I ask?"

There was an instant's second of strain throughout the room. All of us, I think, were siding with Major Dell—from the sheer instinctive distrust of constituted authority that seems to be implanted in our bodies at birth. Dell looked down, and his face was gray.

"In the Argonne," he said, quietly. The room was deathly still.

Fargo, called immediately after, testified as to his argument with Dell as to the nature of black bass. Dell had left him, he said, to go into the library.

"You were alone in the billiard room when you heard the cry?"

"Yes. But I ran outdoors and joined the others."

Van Hope testified as to his acquaintance with Major Dell, saying that they had known each other for several months, and that Dell belonged to one of his clubs. He verified Nealman's story perfectly.

"And what is your occupation, Mr. Pescini?" the coroner asked.

"I am in the publishing business, in New York."

"You have a long acquaintance with Mr. Nealman?"

"Something over four years."

"Where were you when you heard David Florey scream?"

"On the veranda."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone. I had been with Mr. Van Hope and Nealman a few moments before. I was rather hot, and I went out on the veranda for a breath of air. I rushed out toward the

sound, and Nealman and his party caught up with me."

He testified that he had taken part in the search, and was utterly baffled as to the solution of the mystery.

Nopp was in the music room, he said, looking for a certain record that he wished his friends to hear. He had been in the billiard room a few seconds before. He had heard the cry but faintly, and had not been especially alarmed. The shouts of the other guests, he said, rather than the scream of the dying man, had caused him to rush out and join in the investigation. He had known Nealman a long time, was an architect by profession, and had been one of those to partake in the hunt through the gardens.

Last of all the white men, he called on me. I told of my relations with Nealman, the work I had been hired to do and, my own reactions to the fearful scream in the darkness. I had been with Marten, Van Hope and Nealman and had sent through the calls to Ochakee.

"You saw or heard nothing beyond that which these other gentlemen have testified?"

"Nothing at all," I answered.

"You have made no subsequent discoveries?"

Just for a moment I was silent, conjecturing

what my answer should be. Was I to tell of the cryptogram I had found beside the body, and its theft during the night?

I couldn't see how the least good would come of it. Indeed, if last night's intruder was in the room, listening to my testimony, he would be very glad to know if I had discovered the theft. I had resolved to work out the case in my own way, employing the methods of a naturalist, and these agents of the law were not my allies.

"Nothing has come to my observation," I told him simply.

If he had pressed the matter he might have got the admission out of me; but fortunately he turned to other subjects.

There was quite a little stir of interest throughout the circle when he began to question Edith. None of us will forget the picture of that golden head, graced by the sunlight slanting through the leaded panes of the window, the flushed, lovely face, the frank eyes and the girlish figure, lost in the big chair. She was in such contrast to the rest of us. Except for the housekeeper, buxom and fifty, she was the only white woman present; and she could have been the daughter of any one of the gray men in the circle.

She had gone to her room about ten, she



said, and had read for perhaps an hour. Her room was just over the front hall. About eleven she went to bed, and the coroner's questions brought out the interesting fact that seemingly she had been the last of the household—unless the murderer himself was to be included thus—to have seen Florey alive. Her bed stood just beside the front window, and just before she had retired she had seen him walking out toward the lagoon.

The whole circle, tired of the dull testimony of the past hour, leaned forward in rapt attention. "He was alone?" the coroner asked.

"Yes. I think I heard the door close behind him—I'm not sure. Then I saw his form in the moonlight on the front lawn."

"You recognized him at once?"

"Not at once. I thought perhaps it was one of the guests. But in a bright patch of moonlight I saw him plain."

"Where did he go?"

"He turned down the driveway toward the lagoon. I didn't see him again."

At the sound of the piercing scream she got up and put on a dressing-gown, but she did not come down at once. She was afraid, she said—she didn't know what to do. She had no knowledge as to the activities and the positions of the

other members of the household at the time of the crime.

She had come to work as her uncle's secretary but a few weeks before; and she verified perfectly Nealman's testimony in regard to the dead servant. If he had had enemies in the household she had not been aware of it, she knew of no chronic malady, and she did not think that he carried any large amount of money on his person. The scream had seemed to her to be one of unfathomable fear.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Gentry, was the last of the white people to be called upon; and her testimony threw no new light upon the problem. She was in bed and asleep, and the shouts of the men without had wakened her.

The coroner called on the negroes in turn, and I was a little amazed at the ease with which he wrung their testimony out of them. He knew these dark people: no northern man could have hoped to have been so successful. Sometimes he shouted at them as if in fury, sometimes he wheedled or jested with them.

Not one of them but could prove an alibi. They were all in their own quarters, they said, at the moment of the tragedy. Because this was the South and they were black, they did not know Florey, a white man, very well. And they had

all been frightened nearly out of their wits by the events of the night.

One by one he questioned them, but the inquest ended just as it began—with the affair of Florey's murder as great a mystery as ever. At the end of the fatiguing afternoon we were face to face with the baffling fact that only four men had proven satisfactory alibis—Lemuel Marten, Van Hope, Nealman and myself—and that any one of the dozen or more men and women in that great, rambling house might have done the deed.