

CHAPTER XIII

Two telegrams had come for Mr. Nealman during the inquest; but the negro messenger who had brought them had been too frightened by the august session in the living-room to disturb him. It came about that Nealman didn't get them until he and Van Hope left the room together.

The yellow envelopes were lying on a little table in the hall, and Nealman started, perceptibly, at the sight of them. Except for that nervous reflex through his body I wouldn't have given the messages a second thought. Nealman picked them up, and still carrying on a fragmentary conversation with his friend, tore out the messages.

He did not merely tear off the edges. In his eagerness his clawing fingers ripped the envelopes wide open, endangering the messages themselves within. He opened one of them, and his eye leaped over the script.

He took one curious, short breath, then opened the second message, more carefully now.

Then he crowded both of them into his outer coat pocket.

At that point his conversation with Van Hope took a curious trend. He still seemed to be trying to talk in his usual casual voice; yet a preoccupation so deep, so engrossing was upon him that his friend's words must have seemed to reach him from another sphere. It was a brave effort; but his disjointed sentences, his blurred perceptions, told the truth only too plainly.

Nealman had received disastrous news. His lips were smiling, but his eyes were filled with some alien light. What that light was neither Van Hope nor I could tell. It might have been frenzy. Quite likely it was fear.

"Bad news, old man?" Van Hope blurted out at last, impulsively. They were old friends—he was risking the charge of ill-bred curiosity to offer sympathy to the other.

"Not very good, old man. I'll see you later about it. If you'll excuse me I'll go to my room—and answer 'em."

He turned up the stairs—Van Hope walked out onto the verandas. I waited for Edith, and in a moment we were walking under the magnolias, listening to the twilight boomings of a bittern on the lagoon.

"And what do you think of it?" I asked her.

No human memory could forget her lustrous eyes, solemn and yet lighted by the beauty of her thoughts, as she gazed out over the waters, troubled by the flowing tide.

"I can't make anything out of it," she told me at last. "It doesn't seem to make good sense. Yet there have been hundreds of more baffling mysteries, and they all were cleared up at last. Cleared up intelligently, too, if you know what I mean."

"You mean—with credible motives and actions behind them."

"Yes, and *human* actions. I'm thinking about—you know what. Human agents were the only agents in this crime. In the end it will prove out that way."

"Then you aren't at all superstitious about—this." I indicated that eery, desolate lagoon with its craggy margin, stretching away like a ghost-lake in the gray light. As always the tidal waves were bursting with ferocious, lunging onslaughts on the natural rock wall, and the foam gleamed incredibly white against the dark water.

"Not in the least," she answered me. "I don't like the place when the tide's rolling in—it's too rough and too fierce—but it's lovely in

the ebb tide! Did you ever see anything so still as it is then—the water's edge creeping inward, and such a wonderful blue-green? No, I'm not superstitious about it at all. I'm going swimming, one of these nights, when the tide's going out. I'd cross it to-night in an emergency."

"You're a strong swimmer, then."

"I can swim well enough—nothing to boast of though. Ned"—for we had got to the first name stage, long since—"this whole matter will be cleared up in a few days more. Such things always do come out right. I wouldn't be surprised if that poor man's body should be found any day, dragged into some thicket. The rocks are full of caves—perhaps the drag hooks simply failed to find it."

"And your uncle—he feels the way you do?"

"Of course. If you are talking about that silly legend—it gives him only the keenest delight as a big story to tell his friends. He has no more superstitious fear about this lagoon than I have."

"Have you talked to him since the inquest?"

"You know I haven't."

"He got two telegrams to-day. They seemed to go mighty hard with him. I was wondering—whether you ought to go to him now."

A little line came between her straight brows.

"I can't imagine what they could be——" she said.

"The loss of some friend? Financial loss. perhaps——?"

"I don't know. The latter, if anything. For I do know he's been buying certain stocks—awfully heavy."

"Playing the stock market, eh——?"

"I don't think I should have told you that. But I know you won't say anything about it. Oh, I do hope he hasn't had any real misfortune——"

Our talk veered to other subjects, and for a while we stood and watched the twilight descending over the lagoon. The crags were never so mysterious. They seemed to take weird shapes in the half-light, and the water sucked and lapped about their stony feet.

In a little while her hand stole into mine. It rested softly, and neither of us felt the need of words. The twilight deepened into that pale darkness of the early Floridan night.

"How I'd like to help him, if he's in trouble," she said at last, almost whispering. "And how I'd like to help you—do all the things you want to do."

"I'm glad—that you care about it," I told

her, not daring to look down into that sober, wistful face.

"I *do* care about it," she declared. She bent, until her lips were close to my ear. "And I believe I see the way."