

CHAPTER XIV

NEALMAN did not come down to dinner. He sent his apologies to the guests, pleading a headache, and through some mayhap of circumstance the coroner took his place at the head of the great, red-mahogany table. There was a grim symbolism in the thing. No one mentioned it, not one of those aristocratic sportsmen were calloused enough to jest about it, but we all felt it in the secret places of our souls.

The session at Kastle Kraggs was no longer one of revelry. I could fancy the wit, the repartee, the gaiety and laughter that had reigned over the board the evening previous; but Nealman's guests were a sober group to-night. At the unspoken dictates of good taste no man talked of last night's tragedy. Rather the men talked quietly to one another or else sat in silence. A burly negro, rigged out in a dinner coat of ancient vintage, helped with the serving in Florey's place.

After dinner I halted the sheriff in the hall, and we had a single moment of conversation. "Slatterly," I said, "I want you to give me some authority."

"You do, eh?" He paused, studying my face. "What do you want to do?"

"I want your permission—to go about this house and grounds where and when I want to—and no complications in case I am caught at it. Maybe even go into some of the private rooms and effects of the guests. I want to follow up some ideas that I have in mind."

"And when do you want to do it?"

"Any time the opportunity offers. I'm not going to do anything indiscreet. I won't get in your way. But I'm deeply interested in this thing, I've had scientific training, and I want to see if I can't do some good."

His eyes swept once from my shoes to my head. "From amateur detectives, as a rule—Good Lord deliver us," he said with quiet good humor. "But Killdare—I don't see why you shouldn't. Two heads are better than one—and I don't seem to be getting anywhere. Really, the more intelligent help we can get—from people we can co-operate with, of course—the better."

"I'm free, then, to go ahead?"

"Of course with reasonable limits. But ask my advice before you make any accusations—or do anything rash."

By previous arrangement Mrs. Gentry, the

housekeeper, was waiting for me on the upper floor. There could be no better chance to search the guests' rooms. All of the men were on the lower floor, smoking their after-dinner cigars and talking in little groups in the lounging-room and the veranda. Of course Nealman was in his room, but even had he been absent, a decent sense of restraint would have kept me from his threshold. And of course Marten and Van Hope had established perfect alibis at the inquest.

We entered Fargo's room first. It was cluttered with his bags, his guns and rods, but the thing I was seeking did not reveal itself. I looked in the inner pockets of his coat, in the drawers of his desk, even in the waste-paper basket without result. Such personal documents as Fargo had with him were evidently on his person at that moment.

Nopp's room was next, but I was less than twenty seconds across his threshold. He had been writing a letter, it lay open on his desk, and I needed to glance but once at the script. If my theory was right Nopp could be permanently dropped from the list of suspects of Florey's murder.

But the next room yielded a clew of seemingly inestimable importance. After the drawers

had been opened and searched, and the desk examined with minute care, I searched the inner pocket of a white linen coat that the occupant of the room had worn at the time of his arrival. In it I found a letter, addressed to some New York firm, sealed, stamped, and ready to send.

How familiar was the bold, free hand in which the address was written! Not a little excited, I compared it with the script of the "George" letter I had taken from Florey's room. As far as my inexperienced eye could tell the handwriting was identical.

The room was that of Lucious Pescini. If I had not been mistaken in the handwriting, I had proven a previous relationship and acquaintance, extending practically over the whole lifetime of both men, between the distinguished, bearded man that came as Neelman's guest and the gray butler who had died on the lagoon shore the previous night.

I put the letter back in the man's coat-pocket; then joined Mrs. Gentry in the hall. She went to her own room. I turned down the broad stairs to the hall. And the question before me now was whether to report my discovery to the officials of the law.

I had started down the stairs with the inten-

tion of telling them all I knew. By the time I had reached the hall I had begun to have serious doubts as to the wisdom of such a course. After all I had learned nothing conclusive. Handwriting evidence is at best uncertain; even experts have made mistakes in comparing signatures. In this regard it was quite different from finger-prints—those tell-tale stains that never lie. True, the handwriting looked identical to the naked eye, but a microscope might prove it entirely dissimilar. Was I to cast suspicion on a distinguished man on such fragile and uncertain grounds?

Pescini had been in the lounging-room only a few minutes before the crime was committed. It seemed doubtful that he would have had time to cover the distance between the house and the lagoon, strike Florey low, and get back to the place where we met him in the short time of his absence.

Besides, I wanted to work alone. I couldn't bring myself to share my discoveries with Slat-terly and Weldon.

The hall below was deserted and half in darkness. I met Marten and Nopp on the way to their rooms: passing into the library I found Hal Fargo seated under a reading-lamp, deep in "Floridan fauna." Major Dell was smok-

ing quietly on the veranda, gazing out over the moonlit lawns. Van Hope and Pescini himself were seated at the far end of the lounging-room, evidently in earnest conversation.

I sat down across the room where from time to time I could glance up and observe the bearded face of my suspect. How animated he was, how effective the gestures of his firm, strong hands. Was that the hand I had seen in the flash-light over my table the preceding night? He had rather thin, esthetic lips, half concealed by his mustache. Yet it wasn't a cruel or degenerate face.

But soon I forgot about Pescini to marvel at the growing, oppressive heat of the night. The chill that usually drops over the West coast in the first hours of darkness, did not manifest itself to-night. It was the kind of heat that brings a flush to the face and a ghastly crawling to the brain, swelling the neck glands until the linen collar chokes like strangling fingers, and heightens the temper clear to the explosion-point. Van Hope and Pescini tore at their collars, seemingly at first unaware as to the source of their discomfort.

In reality the heat wave had overspread us rather swiftly, and what was its source and by what siftings of the air currents it had been sent

to harry us was mostly beyond the wit of man to tell. The temperature must have been close to a hundred in that big, coolly furnished room, and the veranda outside seemed to offer no relief. The dim warmth from the electric lights above, added to the sweltering heat of the air, was wholly perceptible on the heated brain, and seemed to stretch the over-taut nerves to the breaking-point.

"Isn't this the devil?" Van Hope exclaimed as I came out. "It wasn't half so hot at sunset. For Heaven's sake let's have a drink."

"Whiskey'd only make us hotter, would it not?"

"The English don't think so—but they're full of weird ideas. Have that big coon bring us some lemonade then—iced tea—anything. This is the kind of night that sets men crazy."

Men who have spent July in India, when the humidity is on the land, could appreciate such heat, but it passed ordinary understanding. It harassed the brain and fevered the blood, and warned us all of lawless demons that lived just under our skins. A man wouldn't be responsible, to-night. The devil inside of him, recognizing a familiar temperature, escaped his bonds and stood ready to take any advantage of openings.

It was a curious thing that there was no perceptible wind over the lagoon. Perhaps the reason was that we invariably associate wind with coolness, rather than any sort of a hushed movement of the air—and the impulse that brushed up on the veranda to us was as warm as a child's breath on the face. There was simply no whisper of sound on shore or sea or forest. The curlews were stilled, the wild creatures were likely lying motionless, trying to escape the heat, the little rustlings and murmurings of stirring vegetation was gone from the gardens. But that first silence, remarkable enough, seemed to deepen as we waited.

There is a point, in temperature, that seems the utter limit of cold. Mushers along certain trails in the North had known that point—when there seems simply no heat left in the bitter, crackling, biting air. The temperature, at such times, registers forty—fifty—sixty below. Yet the scientist, in his laboratory, with his liquid hydrogen vaporizing in a vacuum, can show that this temperature is not the beginning of the fearful scale of cold. To-night it was the same way with the silence. There simply seemed no sound left. But as we waited the silence grew and swelled until the brain ceased to believe the senses and the image of reality was

gone. It gave you the impression of being fast asleep and in a dream that might easily turn to death.

The mind kept dwelling on death. It was a great deal more plausible than life. The image of life was gone from that bleak manor house by the sea—the sea was dead, the air, all the elements by which men view their lives. The forest, lost in its silence, its most whispered voices stilled, was a dead forest, incomprehensible as living.

I went upstairs soon after. I thought it might be cooler there. Sometimes, if you go a few feet off the ground, you find it cooler—quite in opposition to the fact that hot air rises. There was no appreciable difference, however; but here, at least, I could take off my outer clothes. Then I got into a dressing-gown and slippers and waited, with a breathlessness and impatience not quite healthy and normal, for the late night sea breeze to spring up.

Seemingly it had been delayed. The hour was past eleven, the sweltering heat still remained. There was no way under Heaven to pass the time. One couldn't read, for the reason that the mental effort of following the lines of type was incomprehensibly fatiguing. I had neither the energy nor the interest to work upon

the cryptogram—that baffling column of four-lettered words. Yet the brain was inordinately active. Ungoverned thought swept through it in ordered trains, in sudden, lunging waves, and in swirling eddies. Yet the thoughts were not clean-cut, wholly true—they overlapped with the bizarre and elfin impulses of the fancy, and the fine edge of discrimination between reality and dreams was some way dulled. It wasn't easy to hold the brain in perfect bondage.

To that fact alone I try to ascribe the curious flood of thoughts that swept me in those midnight hours. Except for the heat, perhaps in a measure for the silence, I wouldn't have known them at all. I got to thinking about last night's crime, and I couldn't get it out of mind. The conceptions I had formed of it, the theories and decisions, seemed less and less convincing as I sat overlooking those shadowed, silent grounds. So much depends on the point of view. Ordinarily, our will gives us strength to believe wholly what we want to believe and nothing else. But the powers of the will were unstable to-night, the whole seat of being was shaken, and my fine theories in regard to Pescini seemed to lack the stuff of truth. I suppose every man present provided some satisfactory theory to fit the facts, for no other reason than

that we didn't want to change our conception of Things as They Are. Such a course was essential to our own self-comfort and security. But my Pescini theory seemed far-fetched. In that silence and that heat, anything could be true at Kastle Krag's!

From this point my mind led logically to the most disquieting and fearful thing of all. What was to prevent last night's crime from recurring?

It isn't hard to see the basis for such a thought. Some way, in these last, stifling, almost maddening hours, it had become difficult to rely implicitly on our rational interpretation of things. Certain things are credible to the every-day man in the every-day mood—things such as aeronautics and wireless, that to a savage mind would seem a thousand times more incredible than mere witch-craft and magic—and certain things simply can not and will not be believed. Society itself, our laws, our customs, our basic attitude towards life depends on a fine balance of what is credible and what is not, an imperious disbelief in any manifestation out of the common run of things. It is altogether good for society when this can be so. Men can not rise up from savagery until it is so. As long as black magic and witchcraft haunt the souls of men, there is nothing to trust,

nothing to hold to or build towards, nothing permanent or infallible on which to rely, and hope can not escape from fear, and there is no promise that to-day's work will stand till to-morrow. Men are far happier when they may master their own beliefs. There is nothing so destructive to happiness, so favorable to the dominion of Fear, as an indiscriminate credulity. Those African explorers who have seen the curse of fear in the Congo tribes need not be told this fact.

But to-night this fine scorn of the supernatural and the bizarre was some way gone from my being. It wasn't so easy to reject them now. Those hide-and-seek, half-glimpsed, eerie phantasies that are hidden deep in every man's subconscious mind were in the ascendancy to-night. They had been implanted in the germ-plasm a thousand thousand generations gone, they were a dim and mystic heritage from the childhood days of the race, the fear and the dreads and horrors of those dark forests of countless thousands of years ago, and they still lie like a shadow over the fear-cursed minds of some of the more savage peoples. Civilization has mostly got away from them, it has strengthened itself steadily against them, building with the high aim of wholly escaping from them, yet no

man in this childlike world is wholly unknown to them. The blind, ghastly fear of the darkness, of the unknown, of the whispering voice or the rustling of garments of one who returns from beyond the void is an experience few human beings can deny.

The cold logic with which I looked on life was in some way shaken and uncertain. The fanciful side of myself crept in and influenced all my thought-processes. It was no longer possible to accept, with implicit faith, that last night's crime was merely the expression of ordinary, familiar moods and human passions, that it would all work out according to the accepted scheme of things. Indeed the crime seemed no longer *human* at all. Rather it seemed just some deadly outgrowth of these wierd sands beside the mysterious lagoon.

The crime had seemed a thing of human origin before, to be judged by human standards, but now it had become associated, in my mind, with inanimate sand and water. It was as if we had beheld the sinister expression of some inherent quality in the place itself rather than the men who had gathered there. It was hard to believe, now, that Florey had been a mere actor in some human drama that in the end had led to murder. He had been little and gray and

obscure, seemingly apart from human drama as the mountains are apart from the sea, and it was easier to believe that he had been merely the unsuspecting victim of some outer peril that none of us knew. Slain, with a ragged, downward cut through the breast—and his body dragged into the lagoon!

What was to prevent the same thing from happening again? Before the week was done other of the occupants of that house might find themselves walking in the gardens at night, down by the craggy shore of the lagoon! Neaman, others of the servants, any one of the guests—Edith herself—wouldn't circumstance, sooner or later, take them into the shadow of that curse? Who could tell but that the whole thing might be reenacted before this dreadful, sweltering night was done!

The occupants of the house wouldn't be able to sleep to-night. Some of them would go walking in the gardens, rambling further down the beguiling garden paths that would take them at last to that craggy margin of the inlet. Some of them might want a cool glimpse of the lagoon itself. Would we hear that sharp, agonized, fearful scream again streaming through the windows, gripping the heart and freezing

the blood in the veins? Any hour—any moment—such a thing might occur.

But at that point I managed a barren and mirthless laugh. I was letting childlike fancies carry me away—and I had simply tried to laugh them to scorn. Surely I need not yield to such a mood as this, to let the sweltering heat and the silence change me into a superstitious savage. The thing to do was to move away from the window and direct my thought in other channels. Yet I knew, as I argued with myself, that I was curiously breathless and inwardly shaken. But these were nothing in comparison with the fact that I was some way *expectant*, too, with a dreadful expectancy beyond the power of naming.

Then my laugh was cut short. And I don't know what half-strangled utterance, what gagging expression of horror or regret or fulfilled dread took its place on my lips as a distinct scream for help, agonized and fearful, came suddenly, ripped through the darkness from the direction of the lagoon.