

CHAPTER XV

THE most outstanding thing about that sound was its amazing loudness. It was hard to believe that a human voice could develop such penetration and volume. It had an explosive quality, bursting upon the eardrums with no warning whatsoever, and the man who had cried out had evidently given the full power of his lungs. It was probably true that the moist, hot atmosphere, hanging almost without motion, was a perfect medium for transmitting sound. Besides, my windows were open, facing the lagoon.

I heard the sound die away. The silence dropped down again to find me standing wholly motionless before the window, one hand resting on the sill, seemingly with all power of action gone. It was a shattering blow to spirit and hope that there was no further sound from that deathly still lagoon. Further calls would indicate that the outcome of the affair was still in doubt, that there was still use to hope and struggle. But there was a sense of dreadful

finality in that unbroken silence. The drama that had raged on that craggy shore was already closed and done.

The sound had not been only a cry for help. It had been charged full of the knowledge of impending death.

Motion came back to my body; and I sprang to the door. The interlude of inactivity couldn't have been more than a second in duration. That still, upper corridor was coming to life. Some one flashed on a light at the end of the hall, and the door of the room just opposite mine flew open. Van Hope, also in dressing-gown and slippers, stood on the threshold.

He saw me, and pushed through into the hall. His face had an almost incredible pallor in the soft light. In a moment his strong hand had seized my arm.

"Good God, I didn't dream that, did I?" he cried. "I was dozing—you heard it, didn't you——"

"Of course I heard——"

"Some one screamed for help! I heard the word plain. Good Lord, it's last night's work done over——"

What he said thereafter I didn't hear. I was running down the hall toward the stairway, and at the head of the stairs I almost collided

with Major Dell, just emerging from his room. He had evidently gone to bed, and he had just had time to jerk on his trousers over his pajamas and slip on a pair of romeos. The light was brighter here, and I got a clear picture of his face.

It is a curious thing what details imprint themselves ineffaceably on the memory in a moment of crisis. Perhaps—as in the world of beasts—all the senses are incalculably sharpened, the thought processes are clean-cut and infallible, and images have a clarity unequalled at any other time. I got the idea that Dell had been terribly moved by that scream in the darkness. His emotion had seemingly been so violent that it gave the impression of no emotion. His face looked blank as a sheet of white paper.

I rushed by him, and I heard him and Van Hope descending the stairs just behind me. The hall was still lighted, but long shadows lay across the broad veranda. Fargo, his book still in his hand, stood just outside the door.

“What was it, Killdare?” he asked me. “I couldn’t tell from where it was——”

“The lagoon!” I answered. In the instant Van Hope and Dell caught up with me, and the four of us raced down the driveway.

Instinctively we went first to the place on the

shore where Florey had been slain the night before. The action was a clear indication of what was in our minds—that this matter was in some way darkly related to the crime of the night before. But the sand was bare, and the grass unshadowed in the moonlight.

For a moment we stood, aghast and shaken, gazing out over the lagoon. It was still as glass. The tide was running out, and not a wave stirred in all its darkened expanse. We saw the image of the moon far out, scarcely wavering, and the long, bright trail that it made across the water to our eyes. The night was still stifling hot, and the lagoon conveyed an image of coolness.

“Don’t stand here!” Fargo cried. “We’ve got to make a search. Some poor devil is likely lying somewhere in these gardens——”

The house was lighted now, and in an uproar, and some of the other guests were racing down the driveway to us. In this regard it might have been last night’s tragedy re-enacted. There was, however, one significant change.

The iron self-control, the coolness, the perfect discipline of mind and muscle that had marked the finding of the dead body on the shore the preceding night was no longer entirely manifest. These northern men, cold as flint

ordinarily, were no longer wholly self-mastered. One glance at their faces, loose and pale in the moonlight, and the first sound of their voices told this fact only too plainly. It was not, however, that they were completely broken. Their training and their manhood was too good for that.

We didn't stop to answer their queries. We began to search through the gardens, examining every shadow, peering into every covert. We tried to direct each other according to our several ideas as to the source of the sound. We all agreed, however, that the sound had seemed to come from the immediate vicinity of the natural rock wall that formed the lagoon.

The next few moments were not very coherent. We called back and forth, encountered one another in the shadows, knew moments of apprehension when the brush walls cut us off from our fellows, but we found nothing that might have explained that desperate cry of a few moments before. At last some one called out commandingly from the shores of the lagoon.

"Come here, every one," he said. The voice rose above our confused utterances, and all of us, recognizing a leader, hurried to him. Pescini was standing beside the craggy shore, a

strange and imposing figure in the wealth of moonlight, at the edge of that tranquil water.

Pescini, after all, was showing himself one of the most self-mastered men among us. Any one could read the fact in his voice. How white his skin looked in the moonlight, how raven-black his mustache and beard! He was still in the garb he had worn at dinner, immaculate and unruffled.

"We're not getting anywhere," he said. "Is every one here?"

"Here!" It was Joe Nopp's voice, and he immediately joined us. We waited an instant, seeing if any further searchers were yet to come in. But the thickets were as hushed as the lagoon itself.

"Let's take another tack," Pescini said. "There's nothing in these gardens. If there is we'll find it in an organized search. Remember—our search got us nowhere last night. Let's count up, and see if we're all all right."

We waited for him to continue. All of us breathed deeply and hard.

"Then let's go up to the house to do it," Nopp suggested. "We know we're not all here now—there's no use getting alarmed before we're sure. Go up to the living-room."

His voice was oddly penetrative, wakening a

whole flood of unwelcome thoughts. . . . We were not all here, he said—seemingly not even all the white occupants of Kastle Krags had obeyed the common instinct to answer and investigate that cry! Yet it all might come to nothing, after all. A close tabulation might account for every one—and that the remainder of our party had merely not yet wakened. Stranger things have happened. We told ourselves, in silent ways, that we had heard of men sleeping through more fearful sounds than that! I agreed with Nopp that the thing to do was to go to the living-room, make a careful count, and then see where we stood.

In a moment we had started back. We were not afraid we had left some of our party still searching through the gardens. No man cared to be alone out there to-night, and all of us kept close track of our fellows. Edith was standing just before the veranda, on the driveway, as we came up. The coroner, who had taken time fully to dress, met us half-way down the lawns.

We walked almost in silence; and quietly, rather grimly, Joe Nopp flashed on all the lights of the big living-room.

“Go ahead, Slatterly,” he said to the sheriff, “See that we’re all here.”

"Let Killdare do it. I don't know you all, you know——"

So I made the count, just as sometimes we did after raids over No Man's Land. The sheriff and the constable were both present, Mrs. Gentry, the housekeeper, was standing, pale but remarkably self-possessed, at the inner door of the room. Of course I couldn't count up the blacks. Most of them were evidently hiding in their rooms. And every one of the six guests answered his name.

"There's just one more name to give," Nopp said at last.

"But there's no use naming it," some one answered in a queer, flat voice. "He's not here."

Nopp turned, and bounded like a deer up the stairs. All of us knew what he had gone to do: to see if the missing man was in his room. And there was nothing for us but to wait for his report.

But in a moment we heard his step on the stairs. He sprang down among us, and evidently his fine self-mastery was breaking within him. His fine eyes held vivid points of light.

"My God, he's gone," he said. "Not a sign of him."

"It can't be true," Pescini answered.

“It is. His bed is rumped—but not thrown back or slept in.”

Von Hope, the missing man’s closest friend, suddenly gasped aloud. “But I won’t believe it—not until we make a search!” he cried. “It can’t be true.”

“Believe it or not. Search through the grounds or call through the house. Nealman’s gone just as Florey’s body went last night.”