

## CHAPTER XVI

WE searched through the house, grimly and purposefully; but Nealman, the genial host of Kastle Krag, was neither revealed to our eyes or gave answer to our calls. It was no longer possible to doubt but that it was his voice that had uttered that fearful cry for help.

While the coroner, whose special province is death, led the guests in a detailed search through the grounds, Sheriff Slatterly and I examined the missing man's room. And here I was to learn the contents of those mysterious telegrams that had reached Nealman after the inquest of the preceding day.

They were lying on his desk, one of them torn in two as if in a fit of anger, the other crumpled from a hundred readings. I read aloud to the sheriff:

BLAIR COMBINE FORCING I. S.  
AND H. TO BOTTOM. MOVE QUICK  
IF YOU CAN.

The second read:

I. S. AND H. DOWN TO 28. ALL  
YOUR INDUSTRIALS SMASHED  
WIDE OPEN. FLETCHER NEAL-  
MAN GOES DOWN IN SMASH.

The sheriff halted in his search and took the messages from my hand. "I'm not much up on the stock market," he said. "Do you know what these mean——"

"Not exactly. I know that I. S. and H. stock has taken a fearful drop—if he had bought heavily on margin his whole fortune might have been wiped out. Blair is a prominent speculator on the exchange. Industrials refer, of course, to industrial stocks. Fletcher Nealman was Mr. Nealman's uncle, supposed to be a man of great wealth——"

"Then you think—Nealman was ruined financially?" He paused, seemingly studying his hands. "I wonder if it could be true."

"You mean of course—the same thing that you guessed about Florey. Suicide?"

"Yes. I'll admit there's plenty against it."

"If suicide—why did he cry for help?"

"Many a man cries for help after he's started to do himself in. The darkness scares 'em, when it's too late to turn back. That wouldn't

puzzle me at all. Killdare, do you know the importance of example?"

"I know that what one man does, another's likely to do."

"I'm not saying that Nealman killed himself, but listen how much there is to say for such a theory. You're right—what one man does, another's likely to do. A curious thing about suicides, Weldon tells me, is that they usually come in droves. One man sets an example for another. Say you're worrying to death about something, sick perhaps, or financially ruined, and you hear of some fellow—some chap you know, perhaps, a man you respect almost as much as you respect yourself—suddenly getting out of all his difficulties all nice and quiet—with one little click to the head? Isn't it likely you'd begin thinking about the same thing for yourself? Call it mob psychology—I only know it happens in fact.

"I'm more confident than ever that Florey did himself in, on account of his sickness. Here was Nealman, worried to death over money matters, holding a lot of options on a falling market. It's true that we didn't find Florey's knife, but who can say but maybe Nealman himself threw it into the lagoon, and dragged the body afterward, so that no one would guess it was suicide. He liked Florey—he didn't want any one to know

he had done himself in. Maybe he was thinking already about doing the same thing to himself, and in such a case he'd been glad enough to have some one hide the evidence of suicide. To-day he gets word of a final smash, and he stays all day in his room, brooding about it. To-night comes this heat—enough to drive a man crazy. Maybe he just called out to make us think it was murder. Proud men don't usually want the world to know that they've killed themselves.

"Then there's one other thing—more important still. What's that book, open, on the table?"

I glanced at its leathern cover. "The Bible," I told him.

"The Holy Book. And how often do you find a worldly man like this Neelman getting out the Bible and reading it? Doesn't it show that he was planning something mighty serious—that he wanted to give his soul every chance before he took the last step? It's a common thing for suicides to read the Bible the last thing. And what are these?"

He showed me a rumped sheet of paper, procured from the waste-basket, on which had been written a number of unrelated figures.

"I can't say," I told him. "Probably he was doing some figuring about his losses."

"Looks to me like he was out of his head—

was just writin' any old figures down. But maybe you're right."

It was true that the bed had not been slept in. Nealman had lain down on it, however, and disarranged the spread. Many cigarette and cigar stubs filled the smoking stand, and a half-filled whiskey-and-soda glass stood on the window sill.

No other clues were revealed, so we went down to the study. The guests of Kastle Kraggs had not gone back to their beds. They sat in a little white-faced group beside the window, talking quietly. Marten beckoned the sheriff to his side.

"What have you found out, Slatterly?" he asked.

He spoke like a man used to having his questions answered. There was a note of impatience in his voice, too, perhaps of distrust. Slatterly straightened.

"Nothing definite. Nealman has unquestionably vanished. His bed hasn't been slept in, but is ruffled. Undoubtedly it was his voice we heard. I think I'll be able to give you something definite in a little while."

"I'd like something definite now, if you could possibly give it. That's two men that have disappeared in two nights—and we seem to be no nearer an explanation than we were at first. This

isn't a business that can be delayed, Mr. Slatterly."

"If you must know—I think both men committed suicide."

"You do!"

"It certainly is the most reasonable theory, in spite of all there is against it." Then he told of Nealman's financial disaster, of the Bible open on his desk, and all the other points he had to back his theory.

"And I suppose Florey swallowed his knife, and threw his own body into the lagoon!" Fargo commented grimly.

Slatterly turned to him, his eyes hard and bright. "We'll have your jokes to-morrow," he reproved him sternly. "Of course some one else did that. I've got a theory—not yet proven—to explain it, but I can't give it out yet."

"How do you account for Florey's body not being found in the lagoon?" Marten asked quietly.

"I can't account for it. We might have missed it—I don't see how we could, but we might have done so. I'm going to have men dragging the lagoon all day, over and over again—until we find *both* bodies."

"You are convinced that Nealman, too, lies dead in the lagoon?"

"Where else could he be? Did you hear that cry a few hours ago?"

"Good Heavens! Could I ever forget it? My old friend——"

"Was it faked? Could any man have faked a cry like that?"

"Heavens, no! It had the fear and the agony of death right in it. There can't be any hope of that, Slatterly."

The sheriff gazed about the little circle of white faces. No one dissented. That cry was real, and there had been tragic need and extremity behind it: we knew that fact if we knew that we lived. Evidently the sheriff had completely given over the theory that he had suggested, half-heartedly, to me—that Nealman might have cried out to hide the fact of his own suicide.

"No man could have cried out like that to deceive, and then disappear. No, Mr. Marten, the man that gave that cry is dead, in all probability in the lagoon, and there seems no doubt but that Nealman was the man."

"Yet you think he was a suicide."

"A suicide often cries out for help when it is too late to back out. But of course—I can't say for sure."

"You're mistaken in that, Slatterly." Van Hope drew himself together with a perceptible

effort. "I've known this man for years—and in the end, you'll see it isn't suicide. He wasn't the type that commits suicide. He's young, he'd be getting himself together to meet that Blair gang that ruined him and chase 'em into their holes. The suicide theory is far-fetched, at best."

"It may be," the sheriff agreed. "I only wish there could be some light thrown on this affair——"

"There will be, Slatterly." Marten's voice dropped almost to a monotone. "This is too big a deal for one man—or two men either. We've been talking, and we've decided to send for some one to help you out."

"You have, eh?" Slatterly stiffened. "If I need help I can send through my own channels—get some state or national detectives——"

"That's all right. Get 'em if you want to. The more the better. But you haven't got any help yet—even the district attorney has failed to come and won't come for at least a day or two more. We've got a private detective in mind—one of the biggest in America. His name's Lacone—you've heard of him. It won't be an official matter at all. Van Hope is hiring him—a wholly private enterprise. I know you'll all be glad to have his co-operation."

"If it's a private venture, I have nothing fur-

ther to say," Slatterly told him stiffly. "When do you expect him?"

"He's operating in the Middle West. He can't possibly make it until day after tomorrow——"

"Twenty-four hours, eh?"

"It's after midnight now. Probably not for forty-eight hours."

"By that time, I hope to have the matter solved." Then his business took him elsewhere, and he strode away.

There was one thing more I could do. It was an obligation, and yet, because it was in the way of service, it was a happiness too. I climbed the broad stairs and stopped at last before Edith's door.

She called softly in answer to my knock. And in a moment she had opened the door.

She was fully dressed, waiting ready for any call that might be made upon her. And the picture that she made, framed in the doorway, went straight to my heart.

Her eyes were still lustrous with tears, and the high girlish color and the light of happiness was gone from her face. It was wistful, like that of a grief-stricken child. Her voice was changed too, in spite of all her struggle to make it sound

the same. And at first I stood helpless, not knowing what to say or do.

"I came—just to see if I could be of any aid—in any way."

"I don't think you can," she answered. "It's so good of you, though, to remember——"

"There's no one to notify—no telegrams to send——"

"I don't think so, yet. We're not sure yet. Ned, is there any chance for him to be alive——"

"Not any."

Her hand touched my arm. "You haven't any idea how he died?"

"No. It's absolutely baffling. But try not to think about it. Everything will come out right for you, in the end."

I hadn't meant to say just that—to recall her to the uncertainty of her own future now that her uncle, financially ruined, had disappeared.

"I'm not thinking—about what will happen to me." She suddenly straightened, and her eyes kindled. "About the other—Ned, I'm not going to try to keep from thinking about it. I'm going to think about it all I can, until I see it through. Only thought, and keen, true thought, can help us now. I've had to do a lot of thinking in my life, overcoming difficulties. And there's no one really vitally interested but me—I was the closest

relative, except for his uncle, that Nealman had. I'm going to find out the mystery of that lagoon! Perhaps, in finding it, I can solve a lot of other problems too—perhaps the one you just mentioned. Uncle Grover was kind to me, he gave me his protection and shelter—and I'm going to know what killed him!"

I found myself staring into her blazing, determined eyes. She meant what she said. The fire of a zealot was in her face. "Good Heavens, Edith! That isn't work for a woman——"

"It's work for anybody, with a clear enough brain to see the truth, and courage to prove it out——"

In some mysterious way her hands had got into mine. We were standing face to face in the shadowed hall. "But promise me—you won't go into danger!"

"I promise—that I'll take every precaution—to preserve myself."