

CHAPTER XVII

As soon as daylight came the coroner held another inquest. Again the occupants of the great manor house, black and white, were gathered in the living-room, and the coroner called on each person in turn. Possible suspects had been numerous in the case of Florey's death: in regard to this second mystery they seemingly included almost every one in the house.

I was able to state positively that Major Dell and Van Hope were in their own rooms at the time, or such a short time afterward as to preclude them from any possible connection with the crime. I had seen the latter on his threshold: both of us had encountered Major Dell as he emerged from his room, his trousers slipped on over his pajamas. The court had to take each man's word in every other instance.

The coroner questioned Fargo particularly closely. I had testified that we had met him, at the lower hallway, fully dressed, and evidently

the official attributed sinister importance to the fact. Fargo stood tightly by his guns, however, testifying that he sat in the same chair in the library from shortly after the dinner hour until he had heard the scream.

"What was the nature of the scream, Mr. Fargo?" the coroner asked.

"It was very high and loud—I would say a very frantic scream."

"You would say it was a cry of agony? Like some one mortally wounded?"

"I wouldn't hardly think so."

"And why not?"

"I don't think a wounded man could have uttered that scream. It was too loud and strong—given by a man whose strength was still largely unimpaired.."

The coroner leaned nearer. "How further would you describe it?"

"It was a distinct cry for help," Fargo answered. "The word he said was 'Help'—I heard it distinctly. But it wasn't a cry of any one mortally injured. If anything, it was a cry of—fear."

"Where did it come from?"

"From the lagoon."

The coroner's eyes snapped. "If you knew it was from the lagoon why did you ask Mr. Kill-

dare, when he encountered you last night, where it was from."

Fargo stiffened, meeting his gaze. "I wasn't sure last night, Mr. Weldon," he answered. "I knew it was somewhere in that direction. When Mr. Killdare said it was from the lagoon I instantly knew he was right. I can't say just how I knew. All the testimony I've heard to-day proves the same thing."

"No one wants you to tell what other people have testified, Mr. Fargo," the coroner reproved him. "We want to know what you saw with your own eyes and heard with your own ears and what you thought at the time, not now. To go further. You think that the cry was uttered by a man whose strength was unimpaired. A strong, full-lunged cry. Moreover, it was given in deadly fear. Does that suggest anything in your mind?"

"I don't see what you are getting at."

"You say it was a long- full-voiced cry. Or did you say it was long?"

"I don't think I said so. It was rather long-drawn, though. It's impossible to give a full-lunged cry without having it give the effect of being long-drawn."

"You would say it lasted—how long?"

"A second, I should say. Certainly not more. Just about a second."

"A second is a long time, isn't it, Mr. Fargo, when a man stands at the brink of death. Often the tables can be turned in as long a time as a second. Many times a second has given a man time to save his life—to prepare a defense—even to flee. Does it seem to you unusual that a man would give that much energy and time to cry for help when he was still uninjured, and still had a second of life."

"Not at all—under certain circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"It would depend on the nature of the force. A man might see—that while he still had strength left to fight, he wouldn't have the least chance to win."

"Exactly. Yet if a man had time to call out that way, he'd at least have time to run. A man can take a big jump in a second, Fargo."

Fargo's voice fell. "Perhaps he couldn't run."

"Ah!" The coroner paused. "Because he was in the grasp of his assailant?"

"Yes."

"Yet he still had his strength left. Nealman was a man among men, wasn't he, Fargo?"

"Indeed he was!" Fargo's eyes snapped. "I'd like to see any one deny it."

"He wasn't a coward then. He'd fight as long as he had a chance, instead of giving all his en-

ergies to yelling for help—help that could not reach him short of many seconds. In other words, Neelman knew that he didn't have the least kind of a fighting chance. He was in the grasp of his assailant so he couldn't run. And his assailant was strong—and powerful enough—that there was no use to fight him."

It was curious how his voice rang in that silent room. Fargo had leaned back in his chair, as if the words struck him like physical blows. A negro janitor at one side inhaled with a sharp, distinct sound.

"It might have been more than one man," Fargo suggested uneasily.

"Do you believe it was?"

"I don't know. It's wholly a blank to me."

"Have you any theory where the body is?"

"I suppose—in the lagoon."

"Would you say that cry was given while he was in the water?"

"I hardly think so. I'm slightly known as a swimmer, Mr. Weldon—was once, anyway, and I know something about the water. A drowning man can't call that loud. Mr. Neelman was a corking good swimmer himself—nothing fancy at all, but fairly well able to take care of himself. When he disappeared the tide was running out—the lagoon on this side of the rock wall was still

as glass. If Mr. Nealman, through some accident or other, fell in that lagoon he'd swim out—unless he was held in. At least he'd try to swim out. And by the time he found out he couldn't make the shore, he'd be so tired he couldn't cry out like he did last night."

"I see your point. I don't know that it would always work out. Occasionally a man—simply loses his nerve."

"Not Nealman—in still water, most of which isn't over five feet deep."

"'Unless he was held in,' you say. What do you think held him in?"

Fargo's hands gripped his chair-arms. "Mr. Weldon, I don't know what you want me to say," he answered clearly. "I feel the same way about this mystery that I felt about the other—that human enemies did him to death. I don't think anything held him in. I think he was dead before ever he was thrown into the water. I think two or three men—perhaps only one—surrounded him—probably pointed a gun at him. He yelled for help, and they killed him—probably with a knife or black-jack. That's the whole story."

The coroner dismissed him, then slowly gazed about the circle. For the first time I began to realize that these mysteries of Kastle Krags were pricking under his skin. He looked baffled, irri-

tated, his temper was lost, as gone as the missing men themselves.

Ever his attitude was more belligerent, pugnacious. His lips were set in a fighting line, his eyes scowled, and evidently he intended to wring the testimony from his witnesses by third degree methods. Suddenly he whirled to Pescini.

"How did you happen to be fully dressed at the time of Nealman's disappearance last night?" he demanded.

Pescini met his gaze coolly and easily. Perhaps little points of light glittered in his eyes, but his pale face was singularly impassive. "I hadn't gone to bed," he answered simply.

"How did that happen? Do you usually wait till long after midnight to go to bed?"

"Not always. I have no set hour. Last night I was reading."

"Some book that was in your room?"

"A book I had carried with me. 'The diary of a Peruvian Princess' was the title. An old book—but exceedingly interesting."

He spoke gravely, yet it was good to hear him. "I'll make a note of it," the coroner said, falling into his mood. But at once he got back to business. "You didn't remove your coat?"

"No. I got so interested that I forgot to make any move towards bed."

The coroner paused, then took another tack. "You've known Nealman for a long time, have you not, Pescini?"

"Something over four years, I should judge."

"You knew him in a business way?"

"More in a social way. We had few business dealings."

"Ah!" The coroner seemed to be studying the pattern of the rugs. "The inquiry of the other day showed you and he from the same city. I suppose you moved largely in the same circle. Belonged to the same clubs, and all that? Mr. Pescini, was Nealman a frequent visitor to your house?"

The witness seemed to stiffen. The coroner leaned forward in his chair.

"He came quite often," the former replied quietly. "He was a rather frequent dinner guest. He and I liked to talk over various subjects."

"You will pardon me, Mr. Pescini, if I have to venture into personal subjects—subjects that will be unpleasant for you to discuss. This inquiry, however, takes the place of a formal inquest. Two men have disappeared. It is the duty of the state, whose representative I am, to spare no man's sensibilities in finding out the truth. We've got to get down to cases. You understand that, I suppose."

"Perfectly." Pescini leaned back, folding his hands. "Perfectly," he said again.

"I believe you recently filed and won a suit for divorce against your wife, Marie Pescini. Isn't this true?"

The witness nodded. None of us heard him speak.

"May I ask what was your grounds, stated in your complaint?"

"I don't see that it makes any difference. The grounds were the only ones by which divorce can be granted in the State of New York."

"Infidelity, I believe?"

"Yes. Infidelity."

"You named certain co-respondents?"

"Yes."

"I ask you this. Was there any man whom you regarded as one of those that had helped to break up your home that, for any reason in the world, you did not name in your complaint?"

"There was not. You are absolutely off on the wrong track."

The coroner dismissed him pre-emptorily, then turned to Edith Nealman. He asked her the usual questions, with considerable care and in rather surprising detail—how long she had worked as Nealman's secretary, whether he had any enemies; he sounded her as to the missing

man's habits, his finances, his most intimate life.

"When did you last see Mr. Nealman?" he asked quickly.

"Just before yesterday's inquest—when he went to his room."

"He didn't call you for any work?"

"No."

"You didn't see him in the corridor—in his room—in the study adjoining his room—or anywhere else?"

"No." Edith's face was stark white, and her voice was very low. Not one of us could ever forget how she looked—that slim, girlish figure in the big chair, the frightened eyes, the pale, sober face. The coroner smiled, a little, grim smile that touched some unpleasant part of me, then abruptly turned to Mrs. Gentry, the housekeeper.

"I'll have to ask you to give publicly, Mrs. Gentry, the testimony you gave me before this inquest."

"I didn't tell you that to speak out in court," the woman replied, angrily. "There wasn't nothin' to it, anyway. I'm sorry I told you——"

"That's for me to decide—whether there was anything to it. It won't injure any one who is innocent, Mrs. Gentry. What happened, about ten-thirty or eleven o'clock."

The woman answered as if under compulsion

—in the helpless voice of one who, in a long life's bitter struggle, has learned the existence of many masters. Mrs. Gentry had learned to yield. To her this trivial court was a resistless power, many of which existed in her world.

"I was at the end of the corridor on the second floor—tendin' to a little work. Then I saw Miss Edith come stealin' out of her room."

"You say she was 'stealing.' Describe how she came. Did she give the impression of trying to go—unseen?"

"Yes. I don't think she wanted any one to see her. She went on tip-toe."

"Did she carry anything in her hands?"

"Yes. She had a black book, not big and not little either. She had it under her arm. She crept along the hall, and a door opened to let her in."

"What door was it?"

"The door of Mr. Nealman's suite—a little hall, with one door leading into his chamber—the other to his study."

"Nealman opened the door for her, then?"

"Yes. I saw his sleeve as he closed it behind her."

The coroner's face grew stern, and he turned once more to Edith. To all outward appearance she hadn't heard the testimony. She leaned easily

in her big chair, and her palm rested under her chin. Her eyes were shadowy and far-away.

"How can you account for that, Miss Nealman?" Weldon asked.

"There's nothing I can say about it," was her quiet answer.

"You admit it's true, then?"

"I can't make Mrs. Gentry out a liar." It seemed to me that a dim smile played at her lips; but it was a thing even closely watching eyes might easily mistake. "It's perfectly true."

"Then why, Miss Nealman, did you tell us a few minutes ago you hadn't seen Mr. Nealman since afternoon? That was a lie, was it not? I didn't ask you to take formal oath when you gave me your testimony. I presumed you'd stay by the truth. Why did you tell us what you did?"

"I didn't see any use in trying to explain. I didn't tell you—because Mr. Nealman asked me not to."

A little shiver of expectancy passed over the court. "What do you mean?"

"Just that—he asked me to tell no one about my visit to the little study adjoining his room. The whole thing was simply this—there's certainly no good in withholding it any more. About eleven he rang for me. There is a bell, you know, that connects that study with my

room. I answered it as I've always done. He asked me if I had a Bible—and I told him I did. He asked me to get it for him, as quietly as possible.

“I got it—quietly as possible—just as he said. There was nothing very peculiar about it—he often wants some book out of the library. I gave him the book and he dismissed me, first asking me to tell no one, under any conditions, that he had asked for it. I didn't know why he asked it, but he is my employer, and I complied with his request. Mrs. Gentry saw me as I was coming down the hall with the Bible under my arm. I didn't tell you about it because he asked me not to.”

“It was your Bible, then, that we found in his room?”

“Of course.”

“Mr. Neelman was given to reading the Bible at various times?”

“On the contrary I don't think he ever read it. He didn't have a copy. He was not, outwardly, according to the usual manifestations, a highly religious man.”

“Yet you say he was intrinsically religious? At least, that he had religious instincts?”

“He had very fine instincts. He had a great deal of natural religion.”

"You often brought him books, you say. Yet you must have thought it peculiar—that he would ask for the Bible—in the dead of night."

"Yes." Her voice dropped a tone. "Of course it was peculiar."

"Then why didn't you notify some one about it?"

"Because he told me not to."

The coroner seemed baffled—but only for an instant. "Did it occur to you that he was perhaps trying to get some religious consolation—just before he took some important or tragic step? Did the thought of—suicide ever occur to you?"

"No. It didn't occur to me. My uncle didn't commit suicide."

"You have only your beliefs as to that?"

"Yes, but they are enough. I know him too well. I'm sure he didn't commit suicide."

"How did he appear when you talked to him—excited, frenzied? Did he seem changed at all?"

"I think he was somewhat excited. His eyes were very bright. I wouldn't call him desperate, however. He was dressed in the flannels he had worn when he went to his room. Of course he looked dreadfully worn and tired—he had been through a great deal that day. As you know he

had just heard about his frightful losses on the stock exchange, wiping out his entire fortune and even leaving some few debts."

"You went away quietly—at once? Leaving him to read the Bible?"

"Very soon. We talked a few minutes, perhaps."

Then the coroner began upon a series of questions that were abhorrent to every man in the room. There was nothing to do, however, but to listen to them in silence. The man was within his rights.

"You say that Nealman was your uncle?" he asked.

The girl's eyes fastened on his, and narrowed as we watched her. "Of course. My father's brother."

"A blood relative, eh?" The coroner spoke more slowly, carefully. "I suppose you could prove that point to the satisfaction of a court."

"With a little time. I'd have to go back to the records of my own old home. What are you getting at?"

"What was your father's name, may I ask?"

"Henry H. Nealman."

"Older or younger than Grover Nealman?"

"Nearly ten years older, or thereabouts."

"Where was Mr. Nealman born?"

"In Rensselaer, New York. His father was named Henry H. Nealman, also. He was a rug manufacturer. There was also one sister that died many years ago—Grace Nealman. Are you satisfied that I am really his niece, Mr. Weldon?"

"Perfectly." The coroner nodded, slowly. "Perfectly satisfied."

He dismissed her, but it came about that I failed to hear the testimony given immediately thereafter. One of Slatterly's men that had been sent for to help him drag the lake brought me in a telegram.

It was the belated answer to the wire I had sent to Mrs. Noyes, of New Hampshire the previous day, and signed by the woman's husband. It read as follows:

MY WIFE DIED LAST MONTH
LEAVING ME TO MOURN. THE
LETTERS WERE UNQUESTION-
ABLY FROM GEORGE FLOREY
DAVID'S BROTHER. THEY HAVE
BEEN BITTER ENEMIES SINCE
YOUTH OVER SOME SECRET BUSI-
NESS. FIND GEORGE FLOREY AND
YOU WILL FIND THE MURDERER.
I HAVEN'T EVER SEEN HIM AND
SO FAR HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO
FIND PHOTO. IF ONE TURNS UP I
WILL SEND IT ON.

WILLIAM NOYES.