

## CHAPTER XVIII

GROVER NEALMAN had disappeared, and no search could bring him back to Kastle Krag. The hope that we all had, that some way, some how he would reappear—destroying in a moment that strange, ghastly tradition that these last two nights had established—died in our souls as the daylight hours sped by. Even if we could have found him dead it would have been some relief. In that case we could ascribe his death to something we could understand—a sudden sickness, a murderer's blow, perhaps even his own hand at his throat, all of which were within our bourne of human experience. But it was vaguely hard for us to have two men go, on successive nights, and have no knowledge whence or how they had gone.

Of course no man hinted at this hardship. It was simply the sort of thing that could not be discussed by intelligent men. Yet we were human, only a few little generations from the tribal fire and the witch-doctors, and it got under our skins.

Grover Nealman's body was not lying in some unoccupied part of the house, nor did we find him

in the gardens. Telephone messages were sent, but Nealman had not been seen. And after six hours of patient search, under that Floridan sun, it was no longer easy to believe that he lay at the bottom of the lagoon.

The sheriff's men dragged tirelessly, widening out their field of search until it covered most of the lagoon, but they found neither Nealman nor Florey. Some of the work was done in the flow-tide, when the waves breaking on the rocky barrier made the lagoon itself choppy and rough. They came in tired and discouraged, ready to give up.

In the meantime Van Hope had heard from Lacone—but his message was not very encouraging either. It would likely be forty hours, he said, before he could arrive at Kastle Krag. Of course Van Hope and his friends agreed that there was nothing to do but wait for him.

The sun reached high noon and then began his long, downward drift to the West. The shadows slowly lengthened almost imperceptibly at first, but with gradually increasing speed. The heat of the day climbed, reached its zenith; the diamond-back slept heavily in the shade, a deadly slumber that was evil to look upon; and the water moccasin hung lifelessly in his thickets—and then, so slowly as to pass belief, the little winds from the

West sprang up, bringing relief. It would soon be night at Kastle Krag. The afternoon was almost gone.

Not one of those northern men mentioned the fact. They were Anglo-Saxons, and that meant there were certain iron-clad restraints on their speech. Because of this inherent reserve they had to bottle up their thoughts, harbor them in silence, with the risk of a violent nerve explosion in the end. Insanity is not common among the Latin peoples. They find easy expression in words for all the thoughts that plague them, thus escaping that strain and tension that works such havoc on the nervous system. Slatterly and Weldon, native Floridans, had learned a certain sociability and ease of expression under that tropical sun, impossible to these cold, northern men; and consequently the day passed easier for them. Likely they talked over freely the mystery of Kastle Krag, relieved themselves of their secret dreads, and awaited the falling of the night with healthy, unburdened minds. They were naturally more superstitious than the Northerners. They had listened to Congo myths in the arms of colored mammies in infancy. But superstition, while a retarding force to civilization, is sometimes a mighty consolation to the spirit. The tribes of Darkest Africa, seeing many things that



in their barbarism they can not understand, find it wiser to turn to superstition than to go mad. Thus they escape that bitter, nerve-wracking struggle of trying to adjust some inexplicable mystery with their every-day laws of matter and space and time. They likely find it happier to believe in witchcraft than to fight hopelessly with fear in silence.

A little freedom, a little easy expression of secret thoughts might have redeemed those long, silent hours just before nightfall. But no man told another what he was really thinking, and every man had to win his battle for himself. The result was inevitable: a growing tension and suspense in the very air.

It was a strange atmosphere that gathered over Kastle Krags in those early evening hours. Some way it gave no image of reality. It was vaguely hard to talk—the mind moved along certain channels and could not be turned aside. We couldn't disregard the fact that the night was falling. The hours of darkness were even now upon us. And no man could keep from thinking of their possibilities.

I noticed a certain irritability on the part of all the guests. Their nerves were on edge, their tempers—almost forgotten in their years of social intercourse—excitable and uncertain. They

were all pre-occupied, busy with their own thoughts—and a man started when another spoke to him.

It couldn't be truly said that they had been conquered by fear. These were self-reliant, masterful men, trained from the ground up to be strong in the face of danger. Yet the mystery of Kastle Krags was getting to them. They couldn't forget that for two nights running some power that dwelt on that eerie shore had claimed one of the occupants of the manor house—and that a third night was even now encroaching over the forest. Any legend however strange concerning the old house could not wake laughter now. It was true that from time to time one of the guests laughed at another's sallies, but always the sound rang shockingly loud over the verandas and was some way disquieting to every one that heard it. Nor did we hear any happy, carefree laughter such as had filled the halls that first night. Rather these were nervous, excited sounds, conveying no image of mirth, and jarring unpleasantly on us all.

The hot spell of the previous night was fortunately broken, yet some of us chose to sit on the verandas. Through rifts in the trees we could watch the darkness creeping over the sea and the lagoon. There was no pleasure here—but it was

some way better than staying in our rooms and letting the night creep upon us unawares. It seemed better to face it and watch it, staring away into it with rather bright, wide-open eyes. . . .

The trees blurred on the lawns. The trunks faded until they seemed like the trunks of ghost-trees, haunting that ancient shore. It was no longer possible to distinguish twig from twig where the branches overlapped.

The green grass became a strange, dusky blue; the gray sand of the shore whitened; the blue-green waters turned to ink except for their silver-white caps of foam. Watching closely, our eyes gradually adjusted themselves to the fading light, conveying the impression that the twilight was of unusual length. Perhaps we didn't quite know when the twilight ended and the night began.

The usual twilight sounds reached us with particular vividness from the lagoon and the forest and the shore. We heard the plover, as ever; and deeper voices—doubtless those of passing sea-birds, mingled with theirs. But the sounds came intermittently, sharp and penetrating out of the darkness and the silence, and they always startled us a little. Sometimes the thickets rustled in the gardens—little, hushed noises none of us pretended to hear. A frog croaked, and the



hushed little wind creaked the tree-limbs together. Once some wild creature—possibly a wildcat, but more likely a great owl—filled the night with his weird, long-drawn cry. We all turned, and Van Hope, sitting near by, smiled wanly in the gloom.

Darkness had already swept the verandas, and Van Hope's was the only face I could see. The others were already blurred, and even their forms were mere dark blotches of shadow. A vague count showed that there was six of us here—and I was suddenly rather startled by the thought that I didn't know just who they were. The group had changed from time to time throughout the evening, some of the men had gone and others had taken their chairs, and now the darkness concealed their identities. It shouldn't have made any difference, yet I found myself dwelling, with a strange persistency, on the subject.

The reason got down to the simple fact that, in this house of mystery, a man instinctively wanted to keep track of all his fellows. He wanted to know where they were and what they were doing. He found himself worrying when one of them was gone. I suppose it was the instinct of protection—a feeling that a man's absence might any moment result in a shrill scream of fear or death in the darkness. Van Hope sat

to my left, a little further to the right was Weldon, the coroner. There were three chairs further to the right, but which of the five remaining guests occupied them I did not know.

Three white men—two of the guests and the sheriff—were unaccounted for. My better intelligence told me that they were either in the living-room or the library, perhaps in their own rooms, yet it was impossible to forget that these men were of the white race, largely free from the superstition that kept the blacks safely from the perilous shores of the lagoon. Any one of a dozen reasons might send them walking down through the gardens to those gray crags from which they might never return.

I found myself wondering about Edith, too. She had excused herself and had gone to her room, ostensibly to bed, but I couldn't forget our conversation of the previous night and her resolve to fathom the mystery of her uncle's disappearance. Would she remain in the security of her room, or must I guard her, too?

How slow the time passed! The darkness deepened over land and sea. The moon had not yet risen—indeed it would not appear until after midnight. The great, white Floridan stars, however, had pushed through the dark blue canopy of the night, and their light lay softly over the gar-



dens. The guests talked in muffled tones, their excited laughter ringing out at ever longer intervals. The coals of their cigars glowed like fireflies in the gloom.

By ten o'clock two of the six chairs were vacant. Two of the guests had tramped away heavily to their rooms, not passing so near that I could make sure of their identity. Soon after this a very deep and curious silence fell over the veranda.

The two men to my right, Weldon the coroner and one of the guests, were smoking quietly, evidently in a lull in their conversation. I didn't particularly notice them. Their silence was some way natural and easy, nothing to startle the heart or arrest the breath. If they had been talking, however, perhaps the moment would have never got hold of me as it did. The silence seemed to deepen with an actual sense of motion, like something growing, and a sensation as inexplicable as it was unpleasant slowly swept over me.

It was a creepy, haunting feeling that had its origin somewhere beyond the five senses. Outwardly there was nothing to startle me, unless it was that curious, deepening silence. The darkness, the shore, the starlit gardens were just the same. Nor was it a perceptible, abrupt start. It

came slowly, growing, creeping through me. I had no inclination to make any perceptible motion, or to show that anything was different than it was before. I turned slowly to Van Hope, sitting to my left.

Instinctively I knew that here was the source of my alarm. It was something that my subconscious self had picked up from him. He was sitting motionless in his chair, his hand that held his cigar half raised to his lips, staring away into the distant gardens.

There is something bad for the spirit in the sight of an entirely motionless figure. The reason is simply that it is out of accord with nature—that the very soul of things, from the tree on the hill to the stars in the sky, is motion never ending. A figure suddenly changed to stone focuses the attention much more surely than any sudden sound or movement. Perhaps it has its origin in the deep-hidden instincts, harking back to those long ago times when the sudden arresting of all motion on the part of the companion indicated the presence of some great danger and an attempt to escape its gaze. Even to-day it indicates a thought so compelling that the half-unconscious physical functions are suspended: a fear or a sensation so violent that life seems to die in the body.

Van Hope couldn't get his cigar to his lips. He

held it between his fingers, a few inches in front. He was watching so intently that his face looked absolutely blank. A little shiver that was some way related to fear passed over me, and I had all the sensations of being violently startled. Then Van Hope suddenly got to his feet with a short, low exclamation.

Our nerves on edge, instantly all three of us were beside him—Weldon, myself, and Joe Nopp. All of us tried to follow his gaze into the gloom. "What is it?" Weldon asked.

Van Hope, seemingly scarcely aware of us before, instantly rallied his faculties and turned to us. In a single instant he had wrenched back complete self-control—an indication of self-mastery such as I had rarely seen surpassed. He smiled a little, in the gloom, and dropped his hand to his side.

"I suppose it was nothing," he answered. "I guess I'm jumpy. Maybe half asleep. But I saw some one—walking through the gardens down by the lagoon."

Van Hope spoke rather lightly, in a wholly commonplace voice. He had not been, however, half asleep. The frozen face I had seen was of complete wakefulness.

"A man, you say—down by the lagoon?" Weldon asked.



"Yes. Of course there's always a chance for a mistake. Probably it wouldn't be anything anyway—just one of the men getting a little air. Watch a minute—maybe you'll see him again."

We watched in silence, and listened to one another's breathing. But the faint shadows, in that starlit vista, were unwavering.

"It wasn't likely anything——" Van Hope said apologetically. "I was thinking, though, that any stranger ought to be investigated——"

"He had, too," Weldon agreed. "Not just any stranger. Any one who goes walking down there in the darkness ought to be questioned—whether he's one of us or not. But are you sure you saw anything?"

"Not sure at all. I thought I did, though. I thought I saw him step, distinctly, through a rift in the trees. Excuse me for bothering you."

None of us felt any embarrassment on Van Hope's account, or any superciliousness if he had been unnecessarily alarmed. It was wholly natural, this third night of three, to wonder and be stirred by any moving thing in the darkened gardens.

But we waited and watched in vain. There were no cries from the shore of the lagoon. The silence remained unbroken, and after awhile the thought turned to other channels.

Van Hope rose at last, hurled his cigar stub to the lawns and for a breath stood watching its glowing end pale and die. The disappearance of his old friend had gone hard with him. You could see it in the stoop of his shoulders. He looked several years older.

“Nothing to do now—but go to bed,” he commented quietly. “Maybe we can get some sleep to-night.”

“The third night’s the charm,” Nopp answered grimly. “How do we know but that before this night is over we’ll be gathered out here again.” He paused, and we tried to smile at him in the darkness. Nopp was speaking with a certain grim humor, yet whatever his intentions, none of us got the idea that he was jesting. “It’s worked two nights—why not three. I’d believe anything could happen at this goblin house——”

We listened to him with relief. It was some way good for our spirits to have one of us speak out what we had all been thinking and had strained so hard to hide. Nor did we think less of him for his frankness. We knew at first, and we knew now, that Nopp’s nerve was as good or better than any man in the gathering, and he had never showed it better than in speaking frankly now.

“Bunk, Nopp,” Van Hope answered. “You’re

mixing coincidence up with atmosphere. It was a strange and a devilish thing that those two crimes should have happened two nights running, but it will work out perfectly plausible—mark my words. And coincidences don't happen three times in a row."

Nopp lifted his face to the starlit skies. "My boy," he said, rather superciliously, "*anything* could happen at Kastle Krag's."