

CHAPTER XIX

AFTER I went to my room I worked for an hour on the cryptogram, found beside Florey's body. The mysterious column of four-letter words, however, did not respond to any methods of translation that I knew. For another hour thereafter I lay awake in my bed beside the window.

It was one of the few spots in the house that offered a fairly clear glimpse of the lagoon. The trees opened, like curtains: I could see the water darkly blue in the starlight, and the faint, gray line, like a crayon mark, that was the natural rock wall. The tide was coming in now: I could see the white manes of the sea-horses as they charged over the barrier. The whole surface of the lagoon was fretted by them.

Had Nopp spoken true—could there be a recurrence of last night's tragedy? Could any situation arise in human affairs that would result in three murders, one after another, all under practically the same and the most mysterious conditions? It was possible, by a long stretch of the

imagination, to conceive of two such crimes occurring on successive nights—the murderer striking again, through some unknown movement of events, to hide his first crime—but coincidences do not happen thrice! If indeed these disappearances could be wholly attributed to human activities, human designs and human passions, there was no need of lying awake and expectant this third night. Surely no super-criminal had declared remorseless war against *all* of the occupants of that house. Certainly we could sleep in peace to-night!

But I could n't get away from the same thought that haunted me before—that these crimes lay somehow without the bourne of human event and circumstance, that they were some way native to this strange, old manor-house beside the sea. It wasn't easy to lose one's self in sleep. I felt no shame at my own uneasiness. It was true that the crimes had both occurred, evidently, on the shore of or near the lagoon, but could the curse that lay upon the old estate extend its baleful influence into the house itself? Anything could happen at Kastle Krag, Nopp had said, and it became increasingly difficult to disbelieve him.

Since the intrusion of two nights before I had slept with a chair blocked firmly against my door,

knowing that no one could enter from the corridor, at least without waking me. My own pistol lay just under my mattress where the hand could reach it in an instant. Both these things were an immense consolation now. I would not be so helpless in case of another midnight visitor.

Yet I had no after-image of terror in thinking upon the intruder of two nights before. Strangely, that hand reaching in the flashlight was the one redeeming feature of this affair of Kastle Krag. That hand was flesh and blood, and thus the whole mystery seemed of flesh and blood too. If this incident did not confine the mystery to the realm of human affairs, at least it showed that there were human motives and human agents playing their parts in it.

Was that intruder Pescini? The hand could easily have been his—firm, strong, aristocratic, sensitive and white. After all, there was quite a case to be made against Pescini. "Find George Florey and you'll find the murderer," William Noyes had written. And the whole business of proving that Pescini was George Florey was simply that of proving his handwriting and that of the "George" notes we had found in the butler's room were the same.

"They have been bitter enemies since youth." Rich, proud, distinguished, had this bearded man

carried a life-long hatred for the humble servitor of Kastle Krag? What boyhood rivalry, what malice, what blinding, bitter jealousy had awakened such a hatred as this? Yet who can trace the slightest action from its origin to its consummation, much less such a complex human drama as this. No man can see truly into the human heart. It seemed fairly credible that this gray servant might hate, with that bitter hatred born of jealousy, his richer, more distinguished brother—yet human relations, in their fullness, are beyond the ken of the wisest men. It would be easy to prove or disprove whether or not Pescini and Florey were brothers: the "George" letters were secure in the hands of the State, and a copy of Pescini's handwriting could be procured with ease. Besides their lives and origins would likely be easy to trace.

Florey's letter to his sister was further proof of Pescini's guilt. I made an entirely different interpretation of it than that of the officials. I did not think that he was referring to any physical disease. I believed, at the first hearing, and I believed still that he had written in veiled language of the persecutions of his brother:

"My old malady, G—— is troubling me again," Florey had written. "I don't think I will ever be rid of it. It is certainly the

Florey burden—going through all our family. I can't hardly sleep and don't know how I'll ever get rid of it. I'm deeply discouraged, yet I know"

I did not share the sheriff's view that "G——" referred to some long-named malady that, either for the sake of abbreviation or because he could not spell it, he had neglected to write out in full. I felt sure it meant "George" and nothing else. "The Florey burden——"—what was more reasonable than that his family had been cursed by feuds within. I hadn't forgotten my talk with Nealman. He had spoken of the hatred sometimes borne by one brother for another; and had named the Jason family, main characters in the treasure legend of the old manor house, as a case in point. But Florey had got rid of his burden at last. He had got rid of it by death.

Could I make myself believe that Pescini had lured his brother to the shore, killed him, seized an opportunity to hurl his body into the lagoon, from which, by the thousandth chance, our drag-hooks had failed to find it; and the following night, to conceal his guilt, had struck down his host? Perhaps the former was true, and that the crime, coming just previous to his own financial failure, had suggested suicide to Nealman's mind. No one had track of Pescini the night of the

crime. For that matter, unlike Van Hope, Major Dell, and several others, he was not undressed and in his room when Nealman had disappeared. And the coroner had suggested a motive for murder in the matter of Pescini's suit for divorce.

It wasn't easy to believe that such an obviously distinguished and cultured man could stoop to murder. There is such a thing, criminologists say, as a criminal face; but Pescini had not the least semblance of it. Criminologists admit, however, in the same breath that they are constantly amazed at the varied types that are brought before them, charged with the most heinous crimes. Pescini looked kind, self-mastered, not given to outlaw impulses. Yet who could say for sure.

I was already falling to sleep. . . . It was hard to keep the sequence of thought; absurd fancies swept between. Ever my hold on wakefulness was less. It was pleasant to believe that the mystery would soon be unraveled, all with a commonplace explanation. . . . At first I gave no heed to a rapid footfall in the corridor.

Yet in an instant I was wide awake. In the silent hall the footfall was perfectly distinct, carrying through the walls of my room, and

echoing somewhere in the wall behind me. In any quiet home, in any land, it would have been impossible to disregard those footsteps. There was a distinct tone of urgency behind them that simply could not be denied. In this dark house of mystery the senses rallied, quickened, and seemed to lie waiting to contend with any emergency.

The steps were not only hurried and urgent. They were *frenzied*—although they were not running footsteps. At the same time they gave the image of some one trying to hurry, some one trying to conquer himself, and yet not move too loudly. It was as if he was some way fearful to waken the poignant silence of that shadowed corridor.

“He is coming to my door,” I told myself. It was wholly likely that I spoke the words aloud; at least, I believed them as unwaveringly as if the man outside had thus announced his intentions. No man can ever tell how such knowledge comes to him. Perhaps it is coincidence—that he expects such a summons on a hundred different occasions before it ever comes to him in reality. Yet many things already proven true are a thousand times harder to believe than telepathy—the transmission of messages according to no known laws of matter and space.

The tread itself was peculiar. It had an odd, shuffling quality that was hard to analyze. Then some one rapped excitedly on my door.

"What is it?" I asked.

I was already out of bed, groping for my light switch.

"It's me—Wilkson," was the reply. "Boss, will ye open de do'?"

I knew Nealman's colored janitor—a middle-aged servant of an old-fashioned, almost departed glory—but for an instant I found it almost incredible that this was his voice. The tones were blurred, lifeless, spoken as if from drawn lips. There was only one thing to believe, and I fought it off as long as I could: that the man outside my door was simply stricken and almost dead with fear.

It wasn't easy to open the door to hear what he had to tell. A scream in the night is one thing; a chattering fellow man, just on the other side of a pine door, is quite another. But I took away the chair and turned the knob.

The man's face was almost as hard to recognize as his voice. It was Wilkson, beyond possibility of doubt, but he was no longer the tranquil, genial serving-man. His face had the strangest gray hue pen ever tried to describe. I could see the whites of his eyes, his lips were

rounded, he was almost unconscious from sheer terror.

At that moment I began to strive hard to remember certain truths—one of them being that little things, laughed away by an Anglo-Saxon, have been known to instill the most unfathomable depths of fear into an unlettered southern negro. What seemed terrible to him might be only laughable to me. I thought of these things in order to brace myself for what he had to tell.

At that moment I knew the inroads that the events of the last two nights had made upon me—likely upon every man and woman in the house. I could have met that gray face much more bravely the night previous, and would have likely been largely unmoved by it two nights before. But mystery, the lack of sleep, the terrible possibilities to which both crimes had pointed, had over-stretched the nerves and taken the pith from the thews. The sight of that terrified face sent a sharp chill of fear through every avenue of my nerves. I felt its icy touch in my veins. Kastle Krag was getting to me—denial of that fact was impossible even to myself.

“Iscuse me, Boss,” he said humbly, pathetically, if I had ever known what pathos was. In his terror he wanted to propitiate the whole

world, and was begging my indulgence of his intrusion. "Boss, is Majo' Del in yo' room?"

"No." I didn't reprove him for failing to notice that my light was out. "Where is he?"

"Boss, he am gone. He's gone just like them other two am gone." His voice died and a low moan escaped his lips. "Boss, who'll they be takin' nex'? Gawd, who'll they be takin' nex'——?"

I seized his arm, trying to steady him. "Listen, Wilkson," I commanded. "How do you know he's gone——"

"Telephone message come for him, Boss. Telegram, from Ochakee. And he ain't here to get it. He's gone—just like dem oder two men has gone befo' him."