

CHAPTER XX

It wasn't easy to steady Wilkson so that he could tell an intelligent story. His own dark superstitions had hold of him, and his shambling search through the darkened corridors had stretched his nerves to the absolute breaking-point. It was evident at once that there was nothing to do but let him take his time and get the story out the best he could. After all, immediate action had never helped matters in this affair of Kastle Krag. There had been a grim finality about everything that had occurred. Those who were gone had not been brought back by prompt search.

He did not respond to any of the ruses so often used to get a colored man to talk—scorn or incredulity or sternness. He was aware of nothing but his own terror, and the image in those fear-widened eyes no man could guess.

"You say a telgram came for him, Wilkson?" I asked gently. "Some one phoned it in?"

"De phone bell rung, jus' off de su'vant's rooms," he explained. "It was a message fo'

Majo' Dell. 'Get him up to get dis telegram,' some white gen'lman said, so I done went to get him up. He ain't in his room. Bed not been slept in. I called and no one answered. Den I ask Mrs. Gentry—she saw him go down the hall hour ago, all dressed, and seen him turn in yo' room——”

“He's not here. He hasn't been here.” I slipped on a dressing-gown and slippers, then stood a moment with Wilkson in the darkened hall. It was curious that the housekeeper should have made such an odd mistake—thinking that Dell had turned into my door. Perhaps at the distance she had observed she confused the door either to the right or left with mine.

There was no need for panic yet. Any one of a dozen things might have explained his temporary absence from his room in the dead of night. He might be in the room to my right—Fargo's room—in some conference with his friend. Yet there was no light under the door.

I knocked loudly. Fargo called sharply from his bed.

“Have you seen Major Dell?” I asked.

“Dell? No! Good Lord, he hasn't disappeared, too?”

“We can't find him.” I heard Fargo spring from his bed, and I turned to the room to my

left. Yet in an instant I remembered and halted on the threshold. This was Nealman's room, dark and chill with shadows. I scratched a match and lifted it high.

But no one was here. My voice rang with a hollow sound back to me. Our shouts had aroused Nopp, and in a moment he came out in the hall to join us. I think Nopp was a steadying influence on us both. He walked, rather than ran, he was perfectly composed, wholly himself, and his voice when he spoke was low and even. Yet there was no tone or note of an attempt to belittle our alarm. He acted as I have seen strong men act in the presence of some great disaster—calmly, soberly, rather white-faced and silent, but unflinching and steadfast.

There was no amazement in Nopp's face. Evidently he had expected just such a development.

"Another gone, eh?" he said. "I wish these devils would stay in their rooms, where they belong. What's taking them out there, Kill-dare?"

"How do I know? Maybe they just can't sleep—want to walk——"

"They wouldn't want to walk in that part of the grounds, if they're human, unless they've

got business there. But no matter. We've got to look around for him at least. I don't suppose it will do any good——"

He spoke with an unmistakable fatalism. "You don't mean—that he's gone like the rest ——"

I heard our low breathing as I waited for his answer. "What's the use of fooling ourselves any more, Killdare?" he replied quietly. "We're up against something—God knows what. Of course he's gone—just like the rest. Where else could he be?"

We turned once more into his room. Wilkinson had reported rightly—his bed had not been slept in, and there was not the slightest sign of disorder. His coat—a well-made garment of some gray, cotton cloth hung on the back of his chair, and the butts of two cigars lay on his smoking stand. He was not in his bathroom, nor did we hear his voice from some adjoining room.

And now all the other guests, all of whom slept on this same floor, were gathering about us, wakened by the sound of our voices. Marten came, swearing under his breath, and Van Hope's brow was beaded with perspiration that glistened in the dim light. But none of them knew where Major Dell was. Indeed none of

them had seen him since he had gone to his room.

There was a curious, dream-like quality about the little session that we had together at the door of Dell's room. It was all rather dim, obscure, the voices that we heard seemed to come from some place far off, and that ring of faces no longer looked clear-cut and sharp. I suppose the answer lay in the great preoccupation that was upon us all, a struggle for understanding that engulfed our minds.

There were no excited, frenzied voices. The men spoke rather quietly and slowly, as if measuring their words, and Van Hope was smiling, faintly. It wasn't a mirthful smile, but rather a wan smile such as a man gives when some incredible disaster, long expected, has fallen upon him. None of us liked to see it. There was nothing to believe but that the mystery had gone home to him more fully than to any one else—and we all wished that he could be spared the tragic, vain hour of search that awaited us. Because none of us had the least hope, in our own hearts, that we would ever see Major Dell again. We had got past the point where we could deceive ourselves. The truth was all too self-evident. We would search through the grounds, as a matter

of duty we would call and run back and forth. But the end was already sure.

Indeed, there was no look of surprise on any one of those white faces. Rather they had a helpless, almost fatalistic expression, as men have when at last they are crushed to earth by the inevitable. I have heard a detachment of soldiers, seemingly trapped by death, speak in the same quiet way, and have seen the same baffled, resigned expression on their faces.

I didn't try to keep track of who was there and who was absent. It was impossible to think of such things now. But bitter, blasting fear surged through me when I thought of Edith—wondering if she was safe in her room.

There was a moment of stress, a sudden, momentary explosion of suppressed excitement, when Slatterly the sheriff joined us in the hall. We heard his running feet in the corridor, and we turned to watch him, his dressing-gown flopping about him. Evidently he had heard our words from his room in the upper corridor. Certain exclamations were on his lips—whether they were profane oaths I do not know.

“What is it?” he demanded in an irritable, rasping voice. “Why are you all gathered here?”

Silently we waited for Nopp to speak—

Nopp who had become the strongest arm in the affair. "We're not having any late evening gossip," he answered. "Kastle Krag's has its tail up again. We're here—to find out what has become of Major Dell."

"Major Dell! Good God, don't tell me he's gone too."

Instantly the sudden, deadly surge of wrath we had all felt toward the sheriff died in our breasts. That cry he made, the hopeless, defeated way in which he spoke, made him, in an instant, one of us—subject to the same fear and despair, a crushed and impotent human being like ourselves.

"He's gone," Nopp told him quietly. "He's not in his room. He doesn't seem to be any place else."

"Have you searched? I don't suppose there's any use of it, but we've got to search. Oh, why didn't I guard him—why did I ever take such a criminal risk!"

None of us could forget his rugged, brown face in the wan electric light. Whether it was regret or fear that swept it we didn't know. It was ashen, almost expressionless, and his eyes were lifeless under his heavy brows. His hands hung, fingers slightly apart, at his side.

"Wait just a minute before we begin an

indiscriminate search," Nopp said. "Slatterly, we've got to face facts. Do you think—there's any place in these grounds that none of us *ought to go?*"

We knew what he meant. He wanted to guard against further loss of life.

"The thing seems to run according to rule," the sheriff replied, rather grimly. "Just one gone—every night. But keep together when you're down near the lagoon."

There was not the least good in searching further through the house. Most of the household had gathered around us, by now, and no one had seen Major Dell. We walked the length of the corridor and down the stairs, and then we went out into the still darkness. The hour was evidently shortly after midnight—the tide was almost at its flood.

Just a moment more we stood just below the great veranda, and no man knew the other's thoughts. The moon was rising—we could see its argent gleam through nebulous clouds to the East. Far away the gray shore stretched to the darkened sea, and the natural rock wall showed a faint, gray line. Then we headed out into the grounds.

But there was no answer to the calls we made, and only such little people as moles and

gophers, burrowers in the ground, stirred in the thickets as we crushed through. We hunted aimlessly, more to satisfy our own sense of duty than through any expectation of finding the missing man. The moon came out more vividly, but its light did not bring success. At last we collected, a silent, rather breathless group, in front of the house.

"What now, Slatterly?" Nopp asked. "Is there anything more we can do?"

"Nothing more." His old confidence was gone from his voice. "I wish I'd done something long ago, instead of being so sure. But this thing can't happen to-morrow night."

"Slatterly, you're a brave man to say that *anything* can't happen to-morrow night. I thought you'd learned your lesson——"

"I have. Never fear for that. To-morrow night I'm going to watch beside that lagoon with a loaded gun—and I am going to see this thing through."