

CHAPTER XXI

THE sheriff had finished his investigations by noon of the following day, and after lunch I was free to work upon the problem that I felt was the key to the whole mystery—the cryptogram beside Florey's body. Lately I had been thinking that in all probability to procure the script had been the direct motive of the murder; and the fact of its theft from my room seemed to bear me out.

Why wasn't it reasonable to presume that in the last instant of Florey's life, just before the attack was made, he had attempted to conceal the script. He had thrown it from him; his death-cry had aroused the household so that the murderer had no time to seek and procure it. Then from a hiding place, or even from among a group of the guests, he had seen me pick it up.

To work out that cryptogram, to read its hidden meaning was the first and the best thing I could do in the way to solve the mystery of Kastle Krag. Written originally on parchment, sixty or seventy years before, it doubtless referred and was in explanation of the secret of

the old manor house—the legend of the treasure, supposedly hidden by Godfrey Jason in the long ago. I had just toyed with it before. Perhaps I had had little faith that it was of any real importance. But now, other avenues had failed, and I was resolved to know the truth if it was humanly possible to do so. I copied the script again, with great care:

aned
dqbo
aqcd
trkm
fipj
dqbo
seho
ohuy
wvyn
dljn
dtht

Then I began to make a systematic analysis. I noticed first that the second and the sixth words were identical, indicating—considering the brevity of the entire message—that it must represent a word of most frequent use. Of course the articles “a” and “the” occur most often in any English writing, yet I found it hard to believe that “dqbo” represented either. In the first place, in a message of that length

it is reasonable to assume that all articles and words not absolutely necessary to the meaning had been omitted.

Weeks that seemed years before Nealman had told me that, after careful study, he had been convinced that there was some truth in the legend of buried treasure. Was it not within the bounds of reason to assume that this cryptic message revealed the hiding place of the treasure? Working on this assumption, I made up an imaginary description of some hiding place, just to see what words occurred with the greatest frequency. I found at once that the word that would be most likely to be used twice in a description of that kind would be some measurement—either feet, yards, meters, rods, or something of the kind. If I could convince myself that “dqbo” represented some English measurement I might find the key and system of the code.

Either “feet,” “yard” or “rods” were words of four letters—either one of which might be represented by “dqbo.” Then I tested each one to see if I could establish a pattern.

I tried first the old code-system of having each letter in the word represent some other letter a certain number of spaces backward or forward in the alphabet. Suppose a man wanted

to disguise the word "cab." He might do so, very easily, by spelling it "dbc"—using, instead of the right letter, the letter immediately following it in the alphabet, "d" for "c," "b" for "a," etc. Testing for "feet" as a possible interpretation of "dqbo" I saw that "f" was the second letter in the alphabet beyond the letter "d"—first letter in the script-word—but I found that such a relation could not possibly hold with "e" and "q" respectively, the second letters. "Yard" or "rods" failed the same test. Nor by any juggling of this simple code, counting so many spaces backwards or forwards, could I make it come out true.

Some time before I had decided that it was unlikely to the verge of impossibility that any message could be made up completely of four letter words. It seemed likely, at first, that letters had been cut from each word in order to make them of four letters. Working on this hypothesis I tested for "meters" but the word "dqbo" could not be made to conform.

At that point it was necessary to begin on another tack. I smoked a while in silence, hoping that some idea, some little inspiration that so often furnished the key for such a mystery as this, would come to me. I had a dim thought that, since the words were all of

four letters and could not be made intelligible by any shifting of the alphabet, that perhaps it had undergone some double transformation—changed first from words into some other symbol form, and then back into words. But I couldn't seem to get hold.

If I could only see the key! Possibly it was extremely simple, just before my eyes if I could only grasp it. It wasn't reasonable, I thought, for a lone man to leave a hidden message without giving some key, however adroit, for the reader to translate it. Jason hadn't written that message for his own amusement. He had inscribed it to be read by some one who came after—perhaps by himself when old age had dulled his memory.

Working from this point of view I set myself to remember what had been written on the parchment beside the column of figures. Perhaps the key had been there also; I had simply failed to observe it. At the bottom of the message had appeared the words "At F. T." And at first this seemed to offer the most interesting possibilities.

Certainly the word and letters had some meaning. In the first place this, and the sentence above the script, indicated that the writer did his thinking in English—not in Spanish or

Portuguese or any other language. But "F. T." did not convey any meaning to my mind. I simply couldn't catch it.

I tried to make the letters "F" and "T" a starting point in the alphabet for rearranging the letters in the column of words, on the same theory that I had worked at first, but nothing came of it. And at that point my hopes and confidence, falling steadily for the past hour, was at its lowest ebb. I didn't see but that I would have to give up the venture after all.

My mind slipped easily to the message in English above the column—"Sworn by the Book," or something after that nature. Taking these words simply as they seemed, an oath on the part of the writer that the ensuing message was true, I hadn't taken the trouble to copy them from the original parchment. Fortunately I remembered them, approximately at least. And I felt a little quickening of hope as I contemplated them.

The more I looked at them the more they seemed to be "dragged in by the heels." I didn't think that one with knowledge of hidden treasure, conveying its hiding place to some one else, would have taken the trouble to declare the truth of his statement by oath. Nor was such a pious beginning, on the part of that

iniquitous murderer and cut-throat, Jason, quite in character. He would have been more likely to have begun with a sentence of piratical profanity. He had some reason for bringing in the "Book"—and when I knew what it was, I believed I would know the key to the cryptogram.

The "Book" was the Bible of course—a name still in wide use. And the whole volume of my blood seemed to spurt through the veins when I remembered what an important place the Bible had taken in the events of the past few days!

Nealman had had a Bible, wide open, in his room. Edith had been seen to carry it to him through the corridor—and this business with it had been of such a character that he had ordered Edith's silence in regard to the errand. Whether or not Florey had possessed a copy I wasn't able to remember for certain.

It must have been a grim old joke to Jason—to use the Holy Word to transmit the record of his iniquity! In an instant I was burrowing, not a little excited, into the bottom of my bag for a small copy of the Bible that I carried with me on every journey.

Apart from religious reasons, there is no better traveling companion for a knowledge-loving man than King James' Bible. The font of all

literature, the mighty well of inspiration, the record of the ages—it was beloved not only of the scientist and historian, but the literati and the esthete. Hardly a week had passed that I hadn't referred to it, in one capacity or another. And now I felt that I was on the right track at last.

There is no book in such common usage, published with such fidelity as to the position of every word, so easily procured in any place or time, as the Holy Bible. It would be the perfect code-book. Certainly it could be used to the greatest advantage as the key to a cryptogram.

But what had been the method of its use? In what way could these four-letter words, none of which were intelligible, be made through the agency of the Bible to present an intelligent meaning? Again I found myself relying on inductive reasoning. I worked backward, just as I had done before, trying to see some way to convey a secret meaning through the agency of this universally read book.

All at once I saw the way. The Bible contained almost every word in the present English vocabulary. In all probability each one of the words in the column represented some English word to be found somewhere in

the Bible, and the column of them, written out, would be the message in full.

How to find that word was the only problem that remained. True, it looked formidable enough at first. Yet I saw in a moment that the four-letter words could not represent the words of the message themselves, but only their *position* in the Bible.

My mind was working clearly now, leaping from one conclusion to another; and reasoning deductively I tried to work out some method of secret writing whereby I could reveal to another person the position of a certain word I wanted him to know. Suppose, for instance, that Jason wished to use the word "feet" in his message. Looking through the Bible he found the word—say on page 86, third line, fourth word. It was conceivable that he might send the numbers "86-3-4" to some other person; and the latter, aware that the Bible acted as the key, looked up the place in the Book and learned what the word was.

The number of pages vary, however, in Bibles of different size. It was natural that the location must be a constant in order that the recipient of the note could always find it. So I began again:

Suppose Jason, looking through his Bible,

found the word "feet" in the book of Genesis, the first chapter, the third verse, and the fourth word of the verse. If he should send the symbols "Gen. 1, 3, 4" to his friend, the man could easily look up the place and see what he meant. And in this case he wouldn't have to have any certain edition of the Bible. The fourth word of the third verse of the first chapter of Genesis is the same in all copies of King James' Bible over all the world.

Now I was working on sure ground. I had no doubt but that "dqbo" represented a certain point in the Bible—the letter "d" probably representing the book, "q" the chapter, "b" the verse and "o" the word. Once more my attention was called, with particular vividness, to the fact that all the words in the column were of four letters, proving in my mind that this last contention was true.

My heart was racing as I moved to the next step in working out the cryptogram. It was simply that of finding what method had been used to transform such a symbol as "Gen. 1, 3, 4" into such a sign as "dqbo." If instead of four-letter words I was working with sequences of numbers such as "1, 1, 3, 4" I would have felt that the problem was solved. "1, 1, 3, 4" would have plainly meant the first book,

the first chapter, the third verse, and the fourth word.

To transform letters into numbers—that was all that remained. Again I went back to “dqbo” and took the simplest method of transformation. “D” was the fourth letter in the alphabet. “Q” was the seventeenth letter in the alphabet. “B” was the second letter in the alphabet. “O” was the fifteenth letter in the alphabet. I wrote down the numbers:

4-17-2-15

And I felt sure that they meant the fourth book, the seventeenth chapter, the second verse and the fifteenth word in the Holy Bible.

Shaken, so nervous I could hardly hold my hands still, I stopped a moment to rest. This was the crisis. I was either at the verge of absolute success or hopeless failure. If when I looked up the place I found some word that couldn't possibly be used in such a message I wouldn't have the spirit to seek further. And it would be a real blow to all my hopes.

I opened the Bible. The fourth book proved to be “Numbers.” I turned to the seventeenth chapter, the second verse. And there I read as follows:

Speak unto the children of Israel and take one of them a *rod* according to the house of their fathers.

The fifteenth word was *rod*—used as a staff in this case but undoubtedly used as a term of measurement in the script.

From then on my fingers flew through the pages of the Book. “Aned,” the very first word in the column, represented—finding the alphabetical position of each letter—the numbers 1-14-5-4. It was a simple matter to look up the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the fourteenth chapter, the fifth verse, and the fourth word. The verse in this case began:

“And in the *fourteenth* year came Chedor-laomer, and the kings that were with him.”

The fourth word of the verse was *fourteenth*—and the first word of the finished script.

It was easy to find the other words. I worked them all out in fifteen minutes. “Aqcd,” the third in the column, proved to be the first, seventeenth, third, and fourth letters of the alphabet, respectively, and 1-17-3-4 meant first book, seventeenth chapter, third verse, fourth word, as plain as could be. The word proved

to be "on." Swiftly I went down the list. And at last I had the whole column translated:

fourteen
rod
on
wall
three
rod
straight
right
fastened
white
rock

Writing it out, I had:

Fourteen rod on wall three rod straight right fastened white rock.

In clearer language, it meant simply and unmistakably, that to find the missing object— unquestionably Jason's treasure—go fourteen rods out on the natural rock wall, turn straight right into the lagoon for three rods, and there I would find it—fastened to a white rock.

The thing was done. I came to myself to find my fingers toying with the pencil, and my thoughts soaring far away. In spite of the grim record of death already made, the deadly

precedent that had been set, in spite of all the dictates of ordinary intelligence, I knew what my future course would be. The lure of gold had hold of me. As soon as the opportunity offered, I was going to follow the thing through to its end, and see with my own eyes that which lay hidden in the depths of the lagoon.