

CHAPTER XXII

JUST before the dinner hour I met Slatterly on the lower floor, and we had a moment's talk together. "You've been in on most everything that's happened around here," he said. "You might as well be with us to-night. We're going to watch the lagoon."

The truth was I had made other plans for this evening—plans that included Edith Neelman—so I made no immediate answer. The official noticed my hesitancy, and of course misunderstood.

"Speak right up, if you don't want to do it," he said, not unkindly. The sheriff was a man of human sympathies, after all. "I wouldn't hold it against any man living if he didn't want to sit out there in the dark watching—after what's happened the last three nights. I don't know that I'd do it myself if it wasn't in line of duty."

"I don't think I'd be afraid," I told him.

"It isn't a question of being afraid. It's simply a matter of human make-up. To tell

the truth, I'm afraid myself—and I'm not ashamed of it. More than once I've had to conquer fear in my work. A man who ain't afraid, one time or another, hasn't any imagination. Some men are cold as ice, I've had deputies that were—and they wouldn't mind this a bit. I know, Killdare, that you'd come in a pinch. Any man here, I think—any white man—would be down there with me to-night if something vital—some one's life or something—depended on it. But I don't want to take any one that it will be hard for, that—that is any one to whom it would be a real ordeal. I'm picking my bunch with some care.

“Who is going?”

“Weldon, Nopp, you and myself—if you want to come. If not, don't mind saying so.”

“I want to come!” We smiled at each other, in the hall. After all, no other decision could be made. The high plans I had made for an evening with Edith would have to be given over. In the first place the night might solve the mystery into which I had been drawn. In the second it was the kind of offer that most men, over the earth, find it impossible to refuse. Human beings, as a whole, are not particularly brave. They are still too close to the caves and the witch-doctors of the young world. They are

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written in his face. Nopp had nerves of steel; but the house and its mystery had got to him, just the same. The sunset rays slanted in over the veranda, poured through the big windows, and showed his face in startling detail. The inroads that had been made upon it struck me with a sudden sense of shock.

The man looked older. The lines of his face seemed more deeply graven, the flesh-sacks were swollen under his eyes, he was some way shaken and haggard. Yet you didn't get the idea of impotence. The hands at his side had a man's grasp in them. Nopp was still able to handle most of the problems that confronted him.

Slatterly, too, had not escaped unscathed. The danger and his own failure to solve the mystery had killed some of the man's conceit, and he was more tolerant and sympathetic. There was a peculiar, excited sparkle in his eyes, too.

Slatterly turned to Nopp. "He says he's got a pistol."

The second that ensued had an unmistakable quality of drama. Nopp turned to me, exhaling heavily. "Killdare, we've beat the devil around the stump all along—and it's time to stop," he said. "I don't like to talk like a crazy man, but

we've got to look this infernal matter in the face. When you come out to-night come armed with the biggest gun you can find—a high-powered rifle."

No man argued with another, at a time like this. "I don't know where I can get a rifle," I told him.

"Every man in the house has got some kind or another. I'm going to be frank and tell you what I'm carrying—a big .405, the biggest quick-shooting arm I could get hold of. Whatever comes to-night—we've got to stop."

We gathered again at the big mahogany table, dined quietly, and the four of us excused ourselves just before dessert. The twilight was already falling—like gray shadows of wings over land and sea—and we wanted to be at our post. We didn't desire that the peril of the lagoon should strike in our absence. And we left a more hopeful spirit among the other occupants of the manor house.

They were all glad that armed men would guard the lagoon shore that night. I suppose it gave them some sense of security otherwise not known. The four of us procured our rifles, and walked, a grim company, down to the shore of the lagoon.

"We want to guard as much of the shore line as we can, and still keep each other in

sight," Slatterly said. "And there's no getting away from it that we want to be in easy rifle range of each other."

He posted us at fifty-yard intervals along the craggy margin. I was placed near the approach of the rock wall, overlooking a wide stretch of the shore, Weldon's post was fifty yards above mine, the sheriff's next, and Nopp's most distant of all. Then we were left to watch the tides and the night and the stars probing through the darkening mantle of the sky.

We had no definite orders. We were simply to watch, to fire at will in case of an emergency, to guard the occupants of the manor house against any danger that might emerge from the depths of the lagoon. The tide, at the lowest ebb at the hour of our arrival, began soon to flow again. The glassy surface was fretted by the beat and crash of oncoming waves against the rocky barrier. We saw the little rivulets splash through; the water's edge crept slowly up the craggy shore. The dusk deepened, and soon it was deep night.

We were none too close together. I could barely make out the tall figure of Weldon, standing statuesque on a great, gray crag beside the lagoon. His figure was so dim that it was

hard to believe in its reality, the gun at his shoulder was but a fine penciled line, and with the growing darkness, it was hard to make him out at all. Soon it took a certain measure of imagination to conceive of that darker spot in the mist of darkness as the form of a fellow man.

The sense of isolation increased. We heard no sound from each other, but the night itself was full of little, hushed noises. From my camp fire beside Manatee Marsh I had often heard the same sounds, but they were more compelling now, they held the attention with unswerving constancy, and they seemed to penetrate further into the spirit. Also I found it harder to identify them—at least to believe steadfastly the identifications that I made.

We hadn't heard a beginning of the sounds when we had listened from the verandas. They had been muffled there, dim and hushed, but here they seemed to speak just in your ear. Sea-birds called and shrieked, owls uttered their mournful complaints, brush cracked and rustled as little, eager-eyed furry things crept through. Once I started and the gun leaped upward in my arms as some great sea-fish, likely a tarpon, leaped and splashed just beyond the rock wall.

"What is it, Killdare?" Weldon called. His voice was sharp and urgent.

"Some fish jumped, that was all," I answered. And again the silence dropped down.

The tide-waves burst with ever-increasing fury. The stars were ever brighter, and their companies ever larger, in the deep, violet spaces of the sky. The hours passed. The lights in the great colonial house behind us winked out, one by one.

There was no consolation in glancing at my watch. It served to make the time pass more slowly. The hour drew to midnight, after a hundred years or so of waiting; the night had passed its apex and had begun its swift descent to dawn. And all at once the thickets rustled and stirred behind me.

No man can be blamed for whipping about, startled in the last, little nerve, in such a moment as this. Some one was hastening down to the shore of the lagoon—some one that walked lightly, yet with eagerness. I could even hear the long, wet grass lashing against her ankles.

"Who is it?" I asked quietly.

"Edith," some one answered from the gloom.

Many important things in life are forgotten, and small ones kept; and my memory will har-

bor always the sound of that girlish voice, so clear and full in the darkness. Though she spoke softly her whole self was reflected in the tone. It was sweet, tender, perhaps even a little startled and fearful. In a moment she was at my side.

"What do you mean by coming here alone?" I demanded.

"The phone rang—in the upper corridor," she told me almost breathlessly. "The negroes were afraid to answer it. I went—and it was a telegram for you. I thought I'd better bring it—it was only two hundred yards, and four men here. You're not angry, are you?"

No man could be angry at such a time; and she handed me a written copy of the message she had received over the wire. I scratched a match, saw her pretty, sober face in its light and read:

Am sending picture of George Florey, brother of murdered man. Watch him closely. Am writing.

It wasn't an urgent message. The picture would have reached me, just the same, and I had every intention of watching closely the man I believed was the dead butler's brother. Yet

I was glad enough she had seen fit to bring it to me. We would have our moment together, after all.

What was said beside that craggy, mysterious margin, what words were all but obscured by the sound of the tide-waves breaking against the natural wall of rock, what oaths were given, and what breathless, incredible happiness came upon us as if from the far stars, has little part in the working out of the mystery of Kastle Krag. Certain moments passed, indescribably fleet, and certain age-old miracles were re-enacted. Life doesn't yield many such moments. But then—not many are needed to pay for life.

After a while we told each other good-night, and I scratched a match to look again into her face. Some way, I had expected the miraculous softening of every tender line and the unspeakable luster in her blue eyes that the flaring light revealed. They were merely part of the night and its magic, and the joy I had in the sight was incomparable with any other earthly thing. But what surprised me was a curious look of intentness and determination, almost a zealot's enthusiasm in her face, that the match-light showed and the darkness concealed again.

She went away, as quietly as she had come. Whether Weldon had seen her I did not know.

There was something else I didn't know, either, and the thought of it was a delight through all the long hours of my watch. Edith Nealman had worlds of common sense. I wondered how she had been able to convince herself that the message was of such importance that she needs must carry it through the darkness of the gardens to me at once.