

CHAPTER XXV

THOUGH we were out of the water, we were not yet out of the woods. There were many explanations to be made and many guesses that took the place of explanations. No questions could be put to the butler, Florey, nor Nealman, host of Kastle Krag, nor to Major Kenneth Dell. All of these had been swept down the sink-hole and through the subterranean channel into the sea.

Perhaps we would never have got anywhere, for a certainty, if it hadn't been for the letter and the photograph that William Noyes sent me from Vermont, and which arrived the day following our journey through the passage. Short though it was, it served to clear up many matters to our complete satisfaction. It was addressed to me:

I am sending photo of that scoundrel, George Florey, brother of the dead man. I hope it helps you catch him. He always hated his brother, and my late wife told me that as far back as you want to go in her family you'll find one brother hating an-

other. I don't know where to tell you to look for George. He and his brother both had spent most of their lives looking for a chest of treasure that was hidden by their grandfather down where you are—in Florida. They just took this name of Florey the last generation. Before that it was Hendrickson, my wife told me—and before that Heaven knows what. Mostly they were a bad lot.

After I had read it I showed it to Nopp; and he breathed deeply. But he made but one comment.

“Human nature is a winner, isn't it, Killdare?” he observed. “Will we ever see the head and tail of it? Now let me see the picture.”

Neither Nopp nor Edith nor any one who looked at it could mistake the likeness presented in the photograph. It was not that of my suspect, Mr. Pescini. One glance established that fact. The well-bred, rather aristocratic face was none other than that of Major Kenneth Dell, he who had got himself invited to Kastle Krag, and who had died in the trap his grandfather had set nearly eighty years before.

Edith and I went over the case together, and we managed to fill up the breaks in each other's story. We talked it over in the early evening, sitting in a secluded corner of the veranda.

She had already mostly recovered from the experience of the day before. She was still weak and shaken, but seemingly all serious complications had been averted. And she resolutely refused to stay in bed.

"It's been a tragic thing, all the way through," she began in the voice I loved. "It's over now—but Heaven knows it cost enough lives. All for a treasure that no one knows for sure is a reality.

"I'm going over the case simply, Ned—and you tell me if I have it right. The letter shows that both George Florey and David Florey, the butler, were the grandsons of Hendrickson, who once owned this house—who of course was no one but the original Godfrey Jason. Jason too had hated his brother enough to kill him, and as the legend says, it was Jason who first buried the treasure in the lagoon.

"He put it near, perhaps just beside a dangerous sink-hole through which the tidal waters swept under the wall to the open sea. And when he died he left two, and perhaps more, copies of a cryptogram to show where the chest was hidden.

"As you say, Dave Florey, one of the two brothers of this generation of the Jason family, unquestionably got hold of one of the copies.

He secured the position of butler at this house on purpose to hunt for and secure the chest. Meanwhile George Florey—we can call him Major Dell, the name he assumed, from now on—got track of the hiding-place of the treasure. The letters show that he had sought for it and traced it from Brazil to Washington, D. C.—at the latter place he possibly consulted old marine records. He evidently had considerable money, and was earning some in questionable ways, and through his acquaintance with Van Hope he got himself invited to this house.

“Here he found his brother. It must have been a disagreeable surprise to him—the fact that you saw him so shaken and seemingly alarmed in the hall would indicate that it was. As the Jason brothers had done before them, these two men hated each other as only brothers can—jealously and terribly. And through some series of events that will never be known, they met that night beside the lagoon.

George Florey—rather, Major Dell—must have been a thoroughly wicked man. I guess he inherited all of his grandfather Jason’s wickedness—otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to play the part he did. To me it was a dramatic thing—this heritage of wickedness, generation after generation: this blood lust and hatred that

was the curse of all his breed. It was Cain and Abel again—the same, old tragic story.

“They met on the lagoon shore, beside the crags, and perhaps Major Dell made an attempt to wrest the copy of the cryptogram from his brother. It’s even possible, but it doesn’t seem likely, that it was the other way ’round. At least, they were working at cross purposes, both of them seemed just about to triumph—and hating each other like two serpents, they came to grips. And here Dell struck a fatal blow—likely with some terrible, hooked instrument that he had brought to grapple for the chest.

“Florey cried out in his death agony and his fear, and Dell was obliged to flee without getting hold of the cryptogram. While the hunt was going on through the gardens, he came back to the body, likely searched the pockets of the victim, and for some reason that can never be exactly known, dragged the body into the lagoon.

“Perhaps he thought the character of the wound would give him away. There’s little doubt that he threw it there with the idea of destroying evidence—at least its presence some way interfered with his plans. And of course before the night was done it had drifted to the sink-hole and through the channel to the open sea.

"Dell likely saw you pick up the script, and that accounts for his presence in your room that night. Meanwhile Nealman and I were working on a copy of it I had found in an old book. The book was the Bible, by the way, and it gave me the first key to the truth. Nealman offered to divide the treasure with me, if he was able to find it. That promise is on paper. It isn't necessary now, however—and you know why."

I knew why—well enough. As his niece, Edith inherited all that Grover Nealman left, including this Floridan estate. It was true, however, that his debts just about wiped out all his other possessions.

"As you know, a deal in the stock market practically ruined him," she went on. "The only way out he could see was the chest that both of us felt was hidden in the lagoon. He never took the monster legend seriously, but always before he had been willing to wait until he could procure some safe appliance to rescue the chest. At that time both of us knew almost exactly where it was. And when the crash came, the sudden need for money and his desperation sent him out in the darkness to procure it. He too was caught in the undersea channel.

"Of course Major Dell was never even menaced by the sink-hole. Likely he had some knowledge of

it. He vanished the third night, because first, he realized that Noyes' testimony would sooner or later convict him of his brother's murder, and second, because the disappearance of Florey and Nealman had set a good example for him. Some secret business took him into my uncle's room first, as you guessed. I have no doubt that he was hiding in the dense thickets on the other side of the lagoon all the time—waiting for his chance to procure the treasure and make his escape.

“I don't know that you'll believe it, but by this time I had guessed the secret of the lagoon. I didn't know just how it worked, but I felt there was some kind of an underground outlet that would sweep away any one who tried to wade in the proximity of the treasure. Of course I didn't suspect Dell—I thought he had merely gone as Uncle Grover had gone, through the sink-hole to his death. When I made my attempt, I went prepared.”

“But how dared you attempt it?” I demanded.

She laughed at my anger. “I wanted to know the truth!” she exclaimed. “I owed it to Uncle Grover—to find out what became of him. I needed the treasure chest, too—for his securities won't quite balance, he told me, the demands that will be made upon the estate. And finally—

maybe there was another reason, too. Perhaps you know what it was."

The narration could not go on at once. It was one of those moments that a man always remembers, and holds dear when most earthly treasures are as dust. She hadn't forgotten my own dreams—the plans I had made but which seemed so impossible of fulfillment.

"But how did you dare take the risk?" I demanded.

"There wasn't any risk—at least, I didn't think there was. I felt sure that a sink-hole in the bed of the lagoon was the explanation. The plank I dragged out there was plenty big enough to hold me up. You know a floating cake of soap doesn't go down the sluice as long as the bathtub is any way near full of water. The plank would have held me easily if Dell hadn't interfered and torn it from my hands.

"Why did he interfere? Of course we can only guess at that. I think he was waiting for a chance to take the treasure himself—and he saw my intention. I suppose he had dreamed about his grandfather's gold until it was a veritable passion with him—a mania—and he was willing to risk death in the sink-hole sooner than let it go? Likely he meant to tear my hands from the plank but hang on to it himself. Of

course it got away from us both. That's the whole story. Your own wonderful endurance and mastery of swimming saved me. Doesn't that seem to clear up everything?"

"Almost everything. Yet I don't see why Dell waited—why he hadn't got the treasure out some time night before last—or yesterday——"

"Of course he couldn't work in daylight. Most of the night after his disappearance the lagoon was guarded. Yet it isn't easy to see why he didn't make the attempt the night of his disappearance——"

"I suppose he was waiting for a favorable time. He had to have certain equipment, I suppose—to keep from being carried down. Perhaps there are certain periods when the flow through the channel is less, and there isn't so much suction——"

A sudden light in the girl's face arrested me and held me. Her eyes were sparkling like blue seas in the sunlight. " 'At F. T.,' " she quoted. "Ned, Ned, what stupids we are! Don't you see——"

"I can't say that I do. I saw 'At F. T.,' at the bottom of the script, but I don't know what it meant——"

" 'At flood tide'—that's what it meant! Just as a sailor would say it. He told on his own

directions the way to safety. When the tide flows the water movement is probably in the other direction through the underground channel, and the lagoon is as safe as a lake; and it's only in the ebb-tide that the suction exists. And of course the ignorant treasure-seeker would make his search in the ebb-tide, when the surface of the lagoon is still."

Exultant over this, a discovery that, if the treasure was a reality, assured its procurance, neither of us noticed the dignified, courteous approach of Pescini from the hallway. He was distinguished as ever, his dinner-jacket unruffled, his linen gleaming white in the dying light.

"Have you seen Sheriff Slatterly anywhere?" he asked me. "I'm in a sort of quandary—I've got a letter on my hands and don't know what to do with it."

"A letter?" I repeated. The skin was twitching on my back.

"Yes. I hardly know whether to send it on—or whether he will want it for the investigations. It's one that Major Dell gave me a few days ago to mail, but which I dropped in my pocket and forgot."