

The Dead Book

By

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IT was a strange series of events that brought us together in that Godforsaken hole. Men drift around through the tropics like lost souls in hell. It isn't considered good ethics to question them closely, either. A lot of them went out there to escape justice; some joined the army, and when their enlistments were out decided to remain; others had been disappointed in love and professed to be woman-haters. But, as a general rule, they were good fellows. Now and then we would run across a scoundrel. It did not take us long to find it out. A few nights at the club, a stretch of work, some tense moment; then, if the poor dog failed, it ended the affair. A few days later a tramp schooner would melt into the distance carrying a dejected being to another port. It was not always so easy to rid the place of their presences. There was Braxton, for instance; but that's another story.

Kennedy has always possessed a flair for the mysterious, the unseen. In addition, he was a good talker. When you dwell on the fact that we had been marooned in Mindanao over six months, with no possible hope of returning, and had been hard put to find something which might amuse us, you will realize what Kennedy stood for. Not that he was such a jovial fellow; no one was less so. The

charm of his personality lay rather in his comfortableness, his manner of repose. We watched each other closely, we four, and I am sure if one of us had proven a coward it would have been instantly discovered.

It wasn't an easy matter to try and sleep when a thousand Moros or so beat their fiendish drums in religious ecstasy through the long, hot hours of darkness. Nor was it a simple matter to greet a column from the interior bearing the remains of some American slashed and shot to pieces. When these and a few other trifling matters are taken into consideration it will be seen how comparatively easy it might have been for us to drift into a laxity of spirit and will.

Kennedy kept us interested from the very first day. As it happened, he was the head of an engineering party that had built some sort of a plant the year before. He was waiting for orders from Manila. He expected to have another proposition on his hands by the end of that summer. We didn't know much about his past life. From his conversation I gathered that he had been educated decently, no more, and was a reader of wide range, with a tremendous store of experiences. He had delved into Eastern thought and European

philosophy, holding to his original opinions in spite of argument and despising dogmatic conceptions of any kind. It is a bit dangerous to be an original thinker when you are banished to a distant part of the world. I have seen them crumple like burned paper in the silence, those thinkers. But Kennedy had a level head.

“You’ve got to watch yourself,” he would say. “Out here it’s blamed easy to concentrate on what you’ve lost. I tried it for a while. The chief looked me over, and said that if I didn’t let the booze alone and stop getting off into a corner by myself he’d send me home as a failure. That set my thoughts in motion. I didn’t repeat. A man’s philosophy out here has got to be objective, not subjective. What he needs is plenty to do and little to think about. Don’t you remember Carson? He came here when I did. There wasn’t a finer fellow in the world. He once told me that he expected to make a fortune and return to the States. He didn’t say anything more, but we learned later that he was engaged. I found her picture in his room afterward. Then we had to wait for some machinery. That came all O.K., but it proved the usual dead stuff. We had to order again. By that time Carson began to worry. We didn’t like to say anything. We kept a close watch. Months passed. We realized that unless something happened the game was up. It did. Fred Birney found him sitting in front of his mirror with a kind of silly smile on his face, dead! The poor fellow had shot himself. We buried him quietly, but it made us all do too much thinking.

“There are three things you have to do in the Islands: forget that women ever lived, leave drink alone, and never worry.”

Kennedy lit a comfortable cigar and tipped his chair back against the railing, putting one leg over the arm and the other on a chair. He loved to sprawl. It was a particularly hot night. We could hear the continuous racket of the drums far off along the bay and now and then the odd yell of a native engaged in some peculiar work. There wasn’t another white man in the district. We were too busy listening to Kennedy to think much of this, however.

“I often wonder,” he continued, “why fear doesn’t get the best of us in the end. I haven’t met many fellows out here who experienced the emotion and got away alive. That was what was the matter with Carson. He was afraid. You couldn’t have put your hand on the exact cause of it all, yet

he killed himself because of fear. The fact is, a white man never was intended for such a beastly life. It isn’t human. The slightest thing will set your nerves on edge if you are not careful. Now take the case of Carson, for instance. I’ll bet that none of you ever imagined that he shot himself because of something that happened in Manila months before he came here. You remember how we used to wonder at his dread of the tarantula. I poked fun at him until I learned the reason; then I kept still. But in a civilized community I am sure he would never have allowed the thing to prey upon him. It was in the night that he suffered most. He had his bed surrounded by three thicknesses of netting, and when he retired he would tuck the whole business carefully under a mattress so that there wasn’t a chance for a mosquito, as he claimed, to enter. I knew better. He lived in terror of the tarantula. He had heard of how they crawled into houses sometimes and walked over one in the darkness. I’ll admit it is enough to make one’s flesh creep. Well, it made him tremble. Near the end he hardly dared to sleep at all. I could have killed Birney when he put that dead one in his bed as a practical joke. Birney was sorry enough later on, but it didn’t do Carson any good.

“It was funny how I happened to be the one who learned the truth from Carson’s own lips before he died. One night—it must have been around twelve or one—I heard someone rap on my door. I was reading, and when I answered it there stood Carson, in the yellow light streaming over my shoulders, looking for all the world like a ghost. He was wearing a peculiar sort of kimono that he affected, and I was struck by the fact that he had only one slipper on. I begged him to come in. He took a cigarette, but it was some time before he spoke. ‘I suppose you think I’m a fool,’ he remarked after a while. I hastened to disagree with him. ‘Oh, don’t do that; my nerves are on edge and I can’t sleep.’ And before he left me I had listened to one of the strangest stories I have ever heard. I didn’t say anything to you fellows. He didn’t ask to have the thing kept secret, but I thought it best. Fellows like Birney never understand.

“It seems that when he first came to the Islands he was stationed for a time in Manila. He had taken rather a fancy to the old city and loved to ramble around the Luneta and through the Tondo. The sight of the natives in their ridiculous costumes amused him. It wasn’t long, however, before he

began to grow a little tired of the life. It was this that led him into strange portions of the city and on long walks through the country when he ought to have been at work. He was a curiously imaginative chap, building dreams out of a mere desire. I guess that was why he thought he could get rich by coming down here. He did manage to keep away from the women, and he didn't carouse much. Finally he got keenly interested in an old monastery that faced on the Calle Palacio in the Intramuros. You know where it is. The place is about three hundred years old and the walls look as though they were built to withstand a ten-month siege. Carson said that he heard of a book they kept there, an old hand-painted Bible which had been brought over by Magellan. It was kept chained to a table. It was already centuries old when it first came over, so the story went. The room where they kept the thing was locked all the time. Carson said that a strange tale had grown up around it. Anyone who dared to spend a night studying it never came out alive. Many students had died in this way, and it was deemed best by the prior to lock the doors and make it impossible for anyone else to run the risk.

"Carson, once his interest was fully aroused, refused to listen to any objections. In the end he convinced the authorities that they could let him examine the book without danger. The prior decided not to let him go alone, and when Carson called as per agreement he gave the keys to a trusty monk and ordered him to stay in the room during the time Carson was there. On the way down through the musty corridors they ran over the history of the book. The peculiar part about it all was that when someone read the faded print for a few hours alone they were found dead, their eyes popped out as though in abject fear, the mouth open and the hands gripping the table like vises. About fifty years previous to Carson's visit some stranger had obtained permission to spend a night in the room, and had astounded the monks by walking out of the place the next morning as quiet and contained as when he entered it. He showed them the book lying wide open on the stand with a soft, furred thing that he had crushed. He said that while he was reading, a thin thread, alive, had curled around over the cover clasps, followed by two eyes that peeped over the great back of the book. At first he could not stir, but watched it, fascinated. His very heart seemed to stop beating. When the blurred eyes neared his own he had sprung to his

feet from a sudden overflowing of courage and had closed the heavy volume with a slam. A colorless liquid had forced its way out through the leaves, and for a few moments his excited senses realized that a single tendon waved tremulously forward and backward and then stopped. An odor as of almonds hung upon the suffocating atmosphere, and he rushed for the little door in order to let in some fresh air. When the morning dawned he smilingly told the monks that there was no more danger. After eating a hearty breakfast he left them. He had not been seen again.

"The monk who accompanied Carson told the story for perhaps the thousandth time as they opened doors and tramped through seemingly endless corridors on their way to the cell where the book was kept. Carson distinctly remembered the monk telling him that he didn't believe there was the least bit of danger. In fact, he confessed that he based his conclusions on the death of the animal or specter that had haunted those ominous pages. He smiled in a superior sort of way when Carson warned him not to place any faith in that ancient tale. 'If people died then,' he said, as they neared the top of a narrow staircase that led into the very bowels of the earth, 'they can die now.' Carson laughed as he drove this warning home. Somehow the echo of his laugh seemed to collect more echoes as it sung back of him down an empty, dark corridor. He turned his head over his shoulder after hesitating, then cursed himself for giving in to his vivid imagination. It was at this moment that the monk pulled a large key from his pocket and inserted it within a small doorway that faced directly upon the base of the spiral staircase down which they had come. After some trouble it yielded to his efforts, and he entered, followed by Carson. One match spluttered and went out in the darkness. It had been years since the place was opened, and for some time it was difficult to coax a candle into lighting. The shadows formed weird arabesques on the wall, and, as the monk moved across the floor, his shape loomed high above them and seemed to bend strangely at the juncture of the wall and ceiling. Huge cobwebs dangled in their eyes. Carson felt a thin piece of gossamer float before him, and jumped as a tiny spider ran hurriedly over his lips. He brushed it off.

"It was deathly still. For the first time he saw through the half light an oaken table and on it the heavy book chained, as was the custom in older

days. The links had rusted, and he snapped one of them between his nimble fingers. He looked closely at the yellow pages, marveling at the wondrous artwork of the master who had illuminated them. Great capital letters stretched down the margins in faded greens, yellows, and reds. It was well-nigh impossible to read the sentences. He had brought a huge magnifying glass with him. He applied it, and was surprised to see how the words leaped at him as though greedy to be deciphered after a half century of retirement. In spite of the age Carson saw that the strong lines plainly held their shape. With the aid of his glass he might easily read what he desired. Raising his head, he spoke to the monk. His eye happened to catch sight of an ancient cupboard in one end of the cell. Leaving the monk to examine the Bible, he stepped over the musty floor and turned the knob. He found nothing within except a very strange odor. It might have been that of almonds. He wasn't sure. Just then he heard a cry which he admitted to me had clung to him ever since. It wasn't so much a cry as a sort of long-drawn-out sob that filled every crook and cranny of the tiny room. He swung about on his heels, and saw the monk falling to the floor, dragging the table over on his head. The candle went out as it followed the book in the downward crash. Carson was left in absolute, impenetrable darkness.

"As he said, it took him about a minute to collect his senses. That, as you know, is a mighty long time under such circumstances. He didn't hear another sound, but his nostrils began to fill with that nasty odor. It seemed to madden him. He wasted twenty matches trying to light one of them. When he had found the candle and raised it above his head so as to obtain a better view of the cell he saw that the monk lay perfectly still. A corner of the table had crashed through his skull. A moving thread curled back into the leaves of the book lying at his feet. Carson saw this with startled eyes. Letting out a silly shriek, he rushed out of the door and up the winding stairs, down the long corridors, and out into the sunlight. There is something about the sun which is friendly and warm, and in a little while he was feeling better. The prior came running out into the garden, followed by the other monks. They heard the story with absolute silence. Carson spoke, as he described it to me, through chattering lips. His voice sounded far off. He waved his hands foolishly, and then collapsed.

"That was all there was to the adventure. He

kept still about it because the good old prior begged him to. It would have been disbelieved anyhow. The story was given out that a heavy table killed the monk. Indeed, Carson was sure that this was what really had killed him. He was taken into a quiet room and nursed back to reason in a very short while. He really possessed a fairly level head. It isn't surprising that he attributed the whole thing later on to some queer delusion. His fear of the tarantula, however, grew out of this. He couldn't have sworn that that was the thing which had haunted the book. It was too large, anyhow. It was very much like one. This much he knew absolutely."

Kennedy lit another cigar and made himself a bit more comfortable. I was conscious of not having moved during the whole recital of the story. My cramped muscles ached, and I moved a sleeping leg with some difficulty. The noise of the ceaseless drums beat on my ears more aggravatingly than ever. We waited silently. He went on:

"Well, there isn't much more to tell. Birney came to me the following morning with white lips and begged me to go to Carson's room. I had parted from him the night before feeling that I had effectually quieted his aroused nerves. Birney's frightened countenance left me cold. I opened Carson's door, and found him sitting before the mirror, clasping in one hand a large revolver. I saw what happened in a moment. While Birney ran for the servants I looked down at the smile which had frozen itself into the tight lips of the dead man. I have always been a close observer. At this time I was especially so. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why Carson had killed himself so suddenly. Then, as I heard the steps of the servants down the hallway, my eye caught the end of a red tie protruding from a book lying on the table. I glanced back at Carson's body, and then in the mirror for some unknown reason. I saw the book clearly. The glass was cheap and the red tie seemed to waver and fade in the distance. After they took him away I sat down in the chair myself. Turning my head slightly to the left, I could catch just a glimpse of the tie. I was startled by it. To my muddled mind it seemed to be a monstrous spider. In a flash the whole thing came over my mind. Poor Carson had returned to his room thinking that he would get a good night's sleep. He lit the light; this was still burning, by the way, and sat down

before his dresser for a second. Perhaps he was looking for something in one of the drawers. He found it, I have no doubt. When the cold steel touched his sensitive fingers he must have started back and gained his first glimpse of the tie resting in the book. I tried the same trick. I knew which drawer the revolver was kept in, as I had often seen him take it out before we went beyond the compound on a business trip. That was when the order first went into effect that no white man could go out without a revolver or rifle.

“Still sitting in the chair, I lifted my hand, as

though I were holding the weapon, and pointed it over my shoulder. The reflection in the glass was so indistinct and blurred that it was difficult to aim at the book. It was clear enough to me then. He had meant to shoot what he thought was a tarantula and had by mistake killed himself. In fact the bullet had passed through the back part of his head. I have never said anything about this before because of Birney. He was sorry enough afterward, as it was, without my adding the true story of how Carson died. I have never felt that I had a right to until I learned of Birney’s death the other day.”