

THEY'LL KILL AGAIN

A Novelette of the Dean
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CHAPTER ONE

The Jovial Embezzler

THE Dean grabbed the case from a dead man's hat—a hat that had been handed him by a serious young interne. Even then he didn't know what he had until it blew up in his face.

We were just returning home from a visit in the kitchen of the *Fah-Ts'ai* fantan hall, where the Dean had been haggling with the old cook for a special brush of human hair to apply lac on a pin tray he was making for Mrs. Duffy—when it

happened. At the Dean's insistence, we had taken a roundabout route to our apartment. We had just crossed the Cherry Street bridge and were in a block of little bungalows, each with its toy paling fence and bright flower plots. The Dean drew up by a half-open gate and hung his homburg on a picket. "What a gentle, tranquil neighborhood! How different are the lives of—"

He was cut off in mid-breath.

An ambulance rocketed around the corner, came to a screaming stop at the curb.

A white coated interne vaulted to the sidewalk, rushed up to us. He was beef-steak red with anxiety. Before the Dean could speak, he had thrust a cheap panama hat into his hand.

"It dropped to the floor and somehow we missed it," the interne spluttered. "Mr. Walker had it on him. The driver just now found it—on this run. He's a little afraid to turn it in after so much delay. I suggested that we stop here and return it to you people. They might misunderstand at the office—"

"And why," the Dean asked kindly, "why so much fuss over a two dollar—"

The interne was really keyed. "Wow! You should ask! Things inside the sweat-band. Loaded with big bills!"

The Dean bowed. "In that case you have acted sagaciously. Would you like a receipt?"

"It might be a good idea."

The chief produced pen and paper. With flourishing strokes he wrote: *I have received Mr. Walker's hat. For this I thank you. Albertus Magnus Paracelsus.* He creased the paper once, handed it to the young doctor.

The interne lingered. "This is, of course, irregular. I hope for the driver's sake there won't be any kickback."

The Dean gave him a reassuring spread of teeth. "Forget it." He shot him off with a peremptory wave of the hand. "Did you say you're on an emergency? Don't let me keep you."

A screeching and wailing and the ambulance was gone. The whole incident hadn't taken two minutes.

"It looks like fraud and grand larceny from here," I commented. "Maybe you have some other name for it."

The Dean ignored me. "As I was saying before we were interrupted," he continued placidly. "What a gentle and tranquil neighborhood. Yet in this very bungalow behind us a man was this morning bludgeoned to a brutal death. Possibly you read about it in your paper at lunch. Stenographer by the name of Russell Walker, 417 Cherry Street. Death certified as accidental. Accidental—bosh! It was vicious murder."

That, if true, put a slightly different aspect on it. I had missed the story. "Let's ramble around the corner," I leered. "And count the swag."

The Dean was nettled. "It's not swag, it's possible evidence—and this place is too public. We'll check it when we get home. Where we have proper equipment."

BUT Mr. Walker's two dollar panama had to wait.

There was a client in the reception-room when we steamed through the door.

I've been with Wardlow Rock for some time and I've never had one real day of peace and quiet. We run an investigative agency that fronts—under the *sub rosa* sponsorship of the police commissioner—as a fortune telling business. Our quarters are in an old brick rooming house down in the tenement district and we keep shop twenty-four hours a day with more trade than we can handle.

The Dean likes to pose as an affable crank with a soft brain but he carries a Magnum shouldergun that is really kennel trained. He has a hundred and one interests, from flute mending to ballistics, and can read a half-dozen Eastern languages, but his real obsession is the study of black magic and divination. He picked me up when I was down and out and gave me a job. All I know is guns and locks. They're a kind of occupational disease with me. I hate to think where I might be now if it hadn't been for him.

In a mixed profession like the Dean's, which runs all the way from card reading to stake-outs, we put up with a strange cross section of humanity passing in and out of our apartment. We meet all kinds, from all walks of life. But the gent with the buckskin vest and the ivory-headed umbrella was a new one on me. I couldn't

type him. He was a tangent to the human race. He was jolly and roly-poly and had protruding glassy eyes like a genial beetle. He gave us a frisky wink as we entered.

"My name is Carnavon. Montgomery Carnavon," he asserted. "I'm an embezzler—have been for six months. I'm getting tired of it."

The Dean took it without response. He seated himself on a chair, settled his shoulders and got out the snipe of a black Cuban cigar. "They usually do," he remarked at last.

Carnavon listened politely. "I know, I know. So I've heard. But my case is a little different." It would be, I decided. He amplified. "It's not conscience or any-

I'm holding out the remaining ten. I'm going to buy a little greenhouse in some village and get back my health."

"You're asking me to participate in conspiracy," the Dean informed him. "All of us—you, me and the opposition—we'd all be just as guilty under the law as if we'd robbed a train together. Your crime is not against the company but against the public."

Montgomery Carnavon clipped him off. "I'm fully aware of the full implications of the situation. That's why I'm offering you five thousand dollars. You're getting paid for risk. Otherwise I'd call a messenger and have it done for two bits."

"Do you think your partners will be interested?" the Dean asked. "It's a

Only the Dean could have such a case land in his lap—a dead man's panama, with a fortune stuffed in the sweatband, followed by a jolly absconder in a buckskin vest, a Beau Brummel who's cornered the zircon market, and a faro banker with lycanthropous eyebrows and a bad case of pthiozoics—all of them scrambling for the stolen Ispahans, and murder take the hindmost!

thing like that that's troubling me. It's the wear and tear of having a good time." He gave it a simple, convincing emphasis.

The Dean closed his eyes. "You're an exceptional individual, Mr. Carnavon. I want to hear your story—all of it."

The beetle eyes wrinkled in good humor. "I said I was an embezzler. Actually, I'm an absconder. As I understand the words, an embezzler pilfers, an absconder cleans up and clears out. That's what I did. Myself and two partners have, or rather had, a little company out in Indiana specializing in drugs and cure-alls for livestock. Veterinarian supplies, you know. We had a good year. I picked up eighty thousand dollars and skipped."

The Dean weighed the matter. "Just what is it you wish me to do?"

"I've spent fifty thousand. I don't seem to be able to hold up under riotous living. Nerves, insomnia and so forth. I've got to get out of it. Your fee in this deal will be five thousand. I want you to contact the other parties concerned and get them to settle for fifteen thousand.

pretty stiff horse trade. Do I go out to Indiana?"

"No need. They're here—in town—someplace. Looking for me. I want you to locate them first. One of them is Prince Ziggert—he owns the racetrack back home and dresses to catch the eye. The other is Banker Vaughn. I understand they're a little angry. Vaughn may be a bit unpleasant."

"This banker—" the Dean began.

"An oldtime faro banker."

"Oh." The Dean meditated. "They sound like characters from the Barbary Coast. You say they're businessmen?"

"Hah! And how." Mr. Carnavon got to his feet. "You find them, report to me, and we'll start negotiations. Not a word to them until you've reported to me. Understand? We may have to finagle a little. Your commission is, as I have said, five thousand. Are you interested?"

A VORACIOUS expression of incredible greed set itself on the Dean's face. Only the little bulge at the hinge of

his jaws told me that he was having himself a big laugh. "I'm your man," he agreed. "Where do I catch you?"

The jovial little embezzler wagged his head. "You don't. No one knows where I hole up. I'll drop back."

"If you ask me," I said after our customer had eased the door shut behind him, "we earn our living the hard way. First, it's robbing a dead man of his benny and now it gives criminal connivance with an absconder. I've never been accused of possessing scruples but this is—"

The Dean gave me an absent-minded pat on the shoulder. "I know how you feel—but save it for your diary. This is no time to sermonize. We've picked up cards in a pretty fast game." He went over to Mr. Walker's hat, turned out the sweatband. He blinked. "Gad! Look what we've exhumed. It's stuffed like a knapsack!"

One by one, he laid the items in neat piles on the marbled table before him. Two hundred and seventy-one dollars in notes. A common darning needle threaded with a length of hair-fine copper wire. And a folded page of onion-skin copy paper. "So." Leisuredly, the Dean put on his spectacles. "This seems to be quite a find."

He spread the document between his capable fingers and studied it intently. It went:

Made cut-in at 9 A.M.

11:47 Outgoing call. Sedgwick gripes to tailor about pleats on pants.

12:30 Outgoing call. Orders seltzer cartridges from drugstore.

1:07 Outgoing call. Calls bank.

Sedg.: Give me Mr. Henderson, please.

H.: This is Mr. Henderson.

Sedg.: This is Mr. Sedgwick. I just called to check on our arrangements. I'll need the bonded messenger this afternoon. Forty thousand in well mixed bills.

H.: He'll be there, Mr. Sedgwick.

2:37 Incoming call. Your party.

Party: Hello. Have you got the dough?

Sedg.: I've called the bank. I'll have it with me.

Party: Good. Now here's the office. You drive your coupé at nine tonight down to Marty's

parking lot and leave it. You take a walk, maybe get a beer. Your chauffeur pulls in a half hour later with your sedan, gets out, changes to the coupé and drives straight home. He's got a hot load and doesn't know it. You've got the stuff. We've made the switch. The dnrables are in the rear compartment. Now. You pick up the sedan, like we said, and meet me at eleven where we said. How does it sound?

Sedg.: Isn't there some way I can examine—

Party: No. Take it or leave it. You'd better rely on me anyway. I'm an expert. You couldn't tell flash from the genuine.

The Dean grinned. "Think of that! Do you know what this is, Ben?"

"I've got a pretty good idea," I said. "Let's hear your version."

"It's the transcript of a monitorized telephone conversation. Made probably by Walker. First taken down in shorthand and then typed. Notice that this is a carbon. The master sheet went to Walker's boss. Walker held out this copy for his own use. It appeared to him to have possibilities. This paper"—he touched the onionskin—"and this pathetic contraption"—he held up the needle-on-wire—"brought an ambitious journeyman stenographer to the portals of death."

It had all the earmarks of being close to the truth but I wasn't quite satisfied. It didn't seem possible that a man could build up so much on a death notice I hadn't even noticed.

The Dean slipped into his dressing robe, got out his newly acquired lacquer brush and tested its bristles. He was wrapped in somber thought. I stalled around for a disarming interval and then drifted casually out to the kitchen. The morning newspaper was in the trash basket and I wanted to take a look at it.

The story of Russell Walker's precipitate demise was buried on page nine back with home helps and assorted trivia. The entire item only took up about three inches. The stenographer had been found that morning by neighbors sitting on his front steps—in a coma. He was in bad shape—bruised and battered. The supposition was that he had been struck by a car and made his way home as far as

the porch. Bystanders summoned an ambulance. He was rushed to the hospital where he died without talking three hours later.

I ran through it twice. The account seemed to me tragic but otherwise unnoteworthy. I began to swing back to my earlier opinion—that we were overriding ourselves. Suddenly, without warning, the Dean's big finger came over my shoulder, touched a single line of type—a slug near the end of the item. A short statement from Walker's landlord. All the houses on the street, the landlord had explained, look alike. Mr. Walker had been out of work for two months and was mentally upset. This distraction added to being knocked down by some automobile, was what made him get mixed up and take the porch next door instead of his own.

"There you have the meat," the Dean said smugly. "Walker was murdered. Dismiss all doubts. Did the stenographer, struck by a car, walk goodness knows how many intricate blocks home and then miss out on his own gate? I think not. I think he was bludgeoned and delivered—and that his killers made the error, got the wrong house. Any other conclusion seems to me to be preternatural!"

Many's the time he's done the same thing—won his argument without giving me a chance to open my mouth. I tried to push him in a hole. "What are we going to do with the boodle, the two hundred odd bucks? Bank it as a retroactive fee on this fancy autopsy?"

"Such is our tentative plan. The hat, of course, goes to the heirs if any. Keeping the hat would be stealing."

MID-AFTERNOON came the visit from the nervous lady.

She knocked on the reception-room door—which few patrons trouble to do—and told me she would like to consult a sorcerer. What she really needed, in my hasty opinion, was a triple bromide. She was expensively gowned and as plump as a bisque doll, but cosmetics and a summer sable couldn't conceal the fact that she was as tense as a trapped catamount. I perched her on the rose brocade Chipendale and reported to the Dean.

"She wants to consult a sorcerer," I informed him.

He slipped out of his robe. "She does, eh? Well, she's about nine hundred years too late—this isn't the Middle Ages—but I'll see what I can do for her."

He entered her presence beaming. She attempted to answer his smile but couldn't quite handle it. Her gloved hand fumbled in her tapestry handbag and came out with a C-note. Instantly, she launched into an excited torrent of jumbled words. "I'm a stranger in town. I've enquired around and I understand, Mr. Rock, that you're an authority on necromancy. You have to help me. I've been down at the library reading books and I can't find the right answers. I'm all mixed up. It's a question of life or death. My life."

The Dean nodded. "Let's begin at the beginning. Just what's wrong?"

She bit her underlip, took a big breath. "Here's what I want to know: are there such things as death-stones and do they have power?"

The chief stiffened. "Now that's an interesting question in any man's reception-room. I'm not sure that I understand you. There are, of course, natal stones, or birth stones, but this death-stone business—I'm not sure I'm clear—"

"I mean diamond dust. My husband is preparing some to poison me!" Again her chubby hand dipped into her pocketbook. This time she came out with a small cardboard box. "Just look at this!"

The Dean slipped off the cover. Inside, on a pad of tissue paper, lay a pinch of sparkling white dust and several medium-sized, brilliant cut diamonds. A beam of late afternoon sunlight through the window struck the tissue paper to a smolder of tiny rainbows.

"Nice dispersion," the Dean murmured. "I'd like to hear a little more about this."

She settled down and gave it to us. As though she were making a deposition. "My husband is here on a business trip. With a friend. The three of us have taken a basement apartment over on Greenwood Avenue. The Caerleon. My husband and I have the south bedroom—with twin beds. Two nights ago, about three in the morning, I was awakened by a faint dull hammering sound. I switched on the bedside lamp. The covers on Emmet's bed were turned back. I was

frightened. I searched the apartment. Fred—he's our business friend—was snoring behind his door. The hall door was partly open. I went out into the corridor. The thumping was coming from the back end, from the furnace room. The Caerleon doesn't have a furnace man in the summer." She paused.

"Could you see into the room?" The Dean prompted her.

"Yes, I could. Through a little crack. Emmet, in his pajamas, was standing by a workbench pounding on an upturned flat iron with a hammer. I knocked on the door and stepped back. He swept off the top of the iron, emptied his cupped hand into this little box and hid it back in the corner of an old cupboard. I beat him back to bed. The next morning I got up before he did—and found this! He was grinding up diamonds to put in my food! Maybe I've already eaten some and don't know it! I've been studying at the library. There have been lots of cases where diamonds were used as poison!"

"Now just a moment!" The Dean cut her off curtly. "Don't get hysterical. You're indulging yourself in a delusion. Your husband is not attempting to kill you. Diamonds are not poisonous. That's a fancy from the old alchemic days."

SHE contradicted him. "Benvenuto Cellini said so! He said his enemies tried to poison him with diamond dust when he was in prison but the plan miscarried!"

"I know, I know." The Dean was irritated. "Cellini was an excellent goldsmith but hardly reliable as a toxicologist. There are numerous antique records of pulverized diamond being used as a lethal agent but generally—and only when effective—the dosage was accompanied with some old dependable like corrosive sublimate or white arsenic." She started to speak. He frowned at her. "You're not satisfied?"

"No." She was doggedly persistent. "I read it in a book. And why would Emmet be smashing diamonds in the middle of the night?"

The Dean selected an undamaged brilliant from the box. He produced a small white card and held it between the sunlight and the gem—so that the stone re-

flected on the card as would a mirror. Delicately he moved the jewel back and forth, turning it slowly. Until facet images appeared on the card. Double images. He grinned. "Just as I suspected," he announced. "See those *double* images? A diamond would cast back single images. These stones are not diamonds. They're zircons. The diamond's closest imitator. Beautiful but cheap. Your husband was pounding zircons. My advice would be not to ask him why."

She was thunderstruck.

"And now," the Dean said brusquely, "your name please. So I may enter your cash in my ledger." I listened popeyed. We had no ledger, and we kept no books of any kind.

She hesitated, finally complied. "Irma Ziggert. Mrs. Prince Ziggert."

The Dean's eyes sparkled as he led her to the door. "So that's the way it goes," he said after she had gone. "A landslide! Emmet is Prince Ziggert. Friend Fred, the business acquaintance, is indisputably Mr. Carnavon's Banker Vaughn. This case is practically solved before we start work on it."

"Now you're throwing your weight around!" I objected. "You're taking advantage of my good nature. This isn't a case—it's a miscellany. Which case are you talking about? Sedgwick and his forty grand? Carnavon and his Indiana horse-medicine? Walker and his wireappings? Mrs. Prince Ziggert and her screwy husband? Make up your mind. Which rabbit shall we chase?"

"It's all the same, Ben. It's all one big case. And if you think it's a rabbit we're after you're due to get a surprise. They've killed twice and they'll kill again."

"Twice?"

"That's what I said."

"Well, I don't like it," I declared. "The atmosphere is too exotic for me. Needles threaded with wire and guys smashing up costume jewelry. Such folderol. Give me the old-fashioned down-to-earth gunman with his sandpaper voice and his armed robbery."

The Dean smiled amiably. "That, my boy," he remarked, "is exactly what you've got. You just don't recognize it. Wait a little. We'll be looking down gun bores before long."

CHAPTER TWO

The Death of Brother Aubrey

JUST about the time I had put supper—we have a working man's supper, not dinner—on the table, the Dean went into a moody, troubled silence. He generally relaxes over his evening meal come mayhem or arson but tonight he was brooding and tense. "Brace up," I admonished. "Be of light heart. The bird is on the wing."

He gave me a reproachful glance. "Don't horse. Please. There's something haunting me, something wrong with the picture. I've muffed something, some important factor. What is it?"

I offered my assist. "Mayhap it's Sedgwick. That's one bullfinch that doesn't fit the nest—if you ask me."

"It's not Sedgwick," the Dean replied. "You're confusing me. Let's hold a period of silence." Where another man gets short-tempered and mean when he's worried, the Dean gets gentle and considerate. Put the Dean under pressure and you get a glimpse of his real character. "I don't mean to be curt," he explained. "Just leave me alone. I've got to find this leak."

The call from Captain Kunkle and Lieutenant Malloy snapped him out of it.

They made enough clamor to snap an ushabti out of his tomb. The captain, ordinarily cooperative enough — if he could find a political slant—was in a beligerent mind tonight. Lieutenant Malloy, an ace out of another deck and as smart a cop as you'll find on anybody's force, seemed particularly mild. Which meant that Bill Malloy was on the alert.

The Dean and the lieutenant mixed about like the grain and the grape. They gave each other headaches. Malloy was so level headed and competent that the boss was openly jealous of him. The lieutenant resented the Dean's knack for quick solutions and pretended to attribute it to the boss' tie-up with the commissioner.

Captain Kunkle came to a halt in the center of the room with a little one-two of his ankles and a click of his heels. He expanded his chest and grew red around the wattles. "Take a truck," he thundered, "an enormous moving van. It's reduced

to ashes and then it rises again—like the fabled phoenix. Appears right in front of headquarters! It's most embarrassing!"

The Dean cut his eye at the lieutenant. "Think of that! Just how am I connected with this—"

"It was what was in the truck," Captain Kunkle explained. "Not what was in it, because there wasn't anything in it, but what was supposed to be in it. Artistic stuff. Right down your—ah—alley."

The Dean gave his head a single bearish shake. "I'm not interested. In the first place, I haven't the remotest idea as to what you're talking about. And, in the second place, I'm up to my ears in work of my own. Sorry. I can't consider it."

Malloy grinned. "That's what you think! Brother, wait till you hear this. For once we went over your head. You'll play along with us on this. It's the commissioner's orders."

"In that case—very well." The Dean's face was as blank as a field-stone wall. "Give me something to work with. Skeletonize it for me."

"It's a mess." Malloy took over with relief. "It puts the department in a bad light. Here are the facts. Two months ago—out in Illinois—a rich man decided to dissolve a private museum he had on his estate. He was moving west. He held an auction for dealers and disposed of everything but a dozen small Oriental rugs and some fourteenth century armor. He kept the rugs because they were priceless—the cream of his collection—and the armor because he liked it. There were a few other odds and ends held back, too." Malloy hesitated, got organized. "Well, the junk was packed and crated and Townely, the owner, decided to move it by truck. Where he could ride on the front seat with the driver and keep an eye on things, make sure that it was handled properly. It was insured, of course, but the rugs were treasures. Outside Elko, Nevada, the engine went blooey. They got the truck towed into a barn. The driver went into town for a spare part. It was about midnight, so Townely stretched out on a couch in the rancher's parlor. He dozed. When they awakened him the barn was in raging flames."

The Dean seemed bored. "Stuff burned, eh?"

"There seemed no doubt about it. The warped chassis of the truck and scorched armor were good enough to collect from the insurance people on. Now here's the twist: the same truck, same engine number, same license plates, everything, suddenly pops up here in town—parked in front of our station! The other was a swindle—a substitution. It looks like Townely's due for judgment and sentence. What we want now is to recover those rugs."

"Of course," the Dean agreed blandly. "Well, you asked for my professional opinion. Here it is: Townely is completely innocent. He was fingered and robbed. Whoever prosecutes him will get snagged with a valid suit for false arrest. That's all now. You gentlemen will have to excuse me. If I learn anything I'll let you know."

HE ALMOST gave them the rush getting them out the door and on their way.

"That does it!" he exclaimed. "The Townely private collection. That's what's been fighting to get through my consciousness." He indicated a morocco folder on a book shelf. "Take down that portfolio. Third from the end. That's right." He lay back in his broken down Morris and closed his eyes. "Pick out the yellow leaflet and refresh my memory. What we want, I believe, is among the last three items."

I sorted through a sheaf of loose papers until I located the little eight-page booklet. On the front, it said: *Townely Museum, Catalog of Exhibits and Prospectus of Auction*. There was a parenthesized footnote: *Items marked with asterisk will not be sold but are to remain in the possession of present owner*. I read it to the Dean and flipped to the final page. "Here," I said, "are the last three mentions." I gave them to him. They were:

*207A6 Armor. English. Mixed mail and plate. Engraved. Fourteenth Century.

*311K9 Matched Rugs. Ispahan. Palmette and lotus. Sixteenth Century.

*788M3 Crosier-head. Burgundian. Carved narwhal. Volute 5 inches in diameter. Very Rare. Thirteenth Century.

"All marked with an asterisk," I added. "None for sale."

"And, by the same token, all doubtless in the stolen truck." The Dean got to his feet. "Let's go out on the street. I'd like to satisfy a little curiosity. Things are going very nicely."

In the foyer, I attempted to ease a little information from him. "Now that we seem to be in better spirits, how's for the answer to a couple of puzzlers? Did you find what you wanted in that catalog?"

The Dean drew up in astonishment. "Naturally. Didn't you spot it?"

"You mean the Oriental rugs?"

He flared up. "No. I don't mean the rugs. They had to be there! And so did the armor. Don't you use your eyes? I mean the narwhal crosier. It goes a long way to solving the entire case!"

"I suppose I should know this," I said humbly, "but I don't. What's a crosier-head?"

"The crook on a bishop's pastoral staff." He whipped around a mental corner. "We'll be in some strained situations in the next few hours. However I address you before strangers, take it. Don't revolt."

The doors and windows of the toy bungalows on Cherry Street were open to the balmy summer air. Radios blared, kids bawled and there was a sound of revelry by night—as the poet hath it. More than ever it seemed a gay homey community where violence and murder could never enter. Yet, according to the Dean, that very thing had happened. Killers had paid this neighborhood a visit within the past few hours.

The Dean broke into a quickstep. "We'd better hurry. Anything may have happened. I hope we can get this across."

Number 417 gave us difficulty from the moment we rang the bell. The boss pushed a button, a buzzer hummed from the entrails of the house—like a stimulated ganglion—and a face appeared in the tiny glass panel in the door. It wasn't a particularly pleasant face—hard searching eyes, a dwarf saddle-nose embedded between two high pinched bulbous cheeks. Not over-friendly—if you get what I mean. This was the late Mr. Walker's landlord, the lad that had given the statement to the papers.

The door opened about four inches. On a peddler's chain.

"Yes?" The voice was as sour as the face. It looked like no dice. The Dean got out his old-fashioned clip-purse. He snapped it open and shuffled through the assortment of cards he always carried with him. The boss never threw away a card of any sort, personal or professional, that passed into his hands. He had ornate cards from sideshow freaks and crested cards from nobility. The one he selected now said: *Mitchell V. Spurlick, Numismatist, Coins and Medals, Bought and Sold*. He thrust it through the crack with a growl.

"I've come for my half-dollar. The Billy-the-Kid Commemorative. Mr. Walker took it from my office two weeks ago on approval. I see in this morning's newspaper that he has suffered fatal accident. It must be here among his possessions. Little objects, especially currency, become lost easily. Mislaid, you know. No offense. I want my coin."

The landlord uttered a short grating laugh. "Walker's rent was in arrears. His door is locked. Nobody touches his stuff until I get my board and room."

"So that's the way you feel about it." The Dean grew frosty. "This is no new situation for me. I've been blackjacked by experts. I anticipated trouble tonight. You'll notice I've brought along my attorney." He turned to me. "What do you advise, Counselor? Shall I swear out a warrant?"

"No," I said cheerfully. "I don't think it'll be necessary. The gentleman has talked before me, a witness. We'll just ask him to sign a—ahem—transfer of debt and—er—acknowledgment of possession. For, how much did you say that coin was worth?"

"Eight hundred dollars, Counselor."

Wham! The chain went down and the door flew open. The sullen landlord stood bowing and simpering. "I'll cooperate," he declared. "I don't want trouble. I was just being careful. You wanna go upstairs and look for it? Russell had the front room. Key in the door. His things ain't been touched. Miss Mulcahey, that was his fiancée that holds down the switchboard at the poultry market, dropped in this afternoon and got his

burying suit. Ain't been no one else in."

The Dean's eyelids tautened. "Thanks. We'll go up. If we need you we'll call."

IT WAS a saddish sort of room to live in—not squalid or messy, just neutral and uninteresting. Everywhere were traces of a misfit life. Russell Walker must have been a victim of futile ambitions. Here, in his little room, he could imagine himself a brawny bigshot. A high school diploma, dated back fifteen years, hung in an elaborate frame from the wall beneath crossed tennis racquets. A cheap bow and arrows stood stacked in the corner; a pair of shiny boxing gloves looped from the bedpost. Everywhere sports goods, brand new, unused. The guy just liked to have it around.

"Maybe," I hazarded, "what we're after the gal got first, eh?"

"Maybe," the Dean agreed. He stood in the center of the room and gazed about him. "Actually, I'm after nothing in particular. I just felt that we should come here and look around."

"Sort of absorb the emanations and vibrations? Get ourselves into the personality, attain the psychological—"

"Malarkey!" The Dean chopped me off. "I mean just what I say. That we should look around."

"All right," I declared. "I will."

That's how I found the three big zircons—mates to those in Mrs. Ziggert's cardboard box—stuffed down in the tip of the thumb of one of the shiny boxing gloves.

"Look!" I exclaimed. "Yow! See what I got. What shall I do with them?"

The Dean hardly gave them a glance. "Keep them, if you like. They're worth about thirty-five cents a carat."

I objected. "You're trying to belittle. You're burned because you lagged. In my opinion this is the most important clue in this whole nutty case."

The Dean shook his head. "Ben, you frustrate me. This simply verifies—"

"It ties Walker up with Mrs. Ziggert!"

"No! No! It does nothing of the kind. It simply verifies what we already know." He paused. "As to the key clue in this case—it walked in with Montgomery Carnavon. It's Carnavon's buckskin vest. You remember the eccentric vest? Ask your-

self why he wears such a grotesque garment and the answer will astonish you. The reason is perfectly obvious!" He reached for the doorknob. "Let's go. This room depresses me."

A June Mulcahey lived at 117½ Fountain Court—so said the city directory. There were two Sedgwicks. One was located on the waterfront, the other lived at a place called Iris Acres out in the doggy Hill View suburb. Iris Acres sounded like forty grand and bonded messengers, so we flagged a cab and drove out.

Say you were an architect and some dough-crazy millionaire came to you and said, "Build me an old-fashioned Southern-style mansion that will cost a hundred thousand," and you said, "But it won't cost a quarter of that," and he retorted, "I don't want it to cost a penny less!" Iris Acres would be the kind of a job you'd hand over to him. New ivy. Imported sundials. Flagstone walks and antique wrought-iron garden benches.

The place reeked moneyed pretense.

Our cab swung in from the highway, skidded to a stop at the carriage porch. "Wait," the Dean advised the driver. "We should be right out."

A skinny lad, unshaven, in his undershirt and stocking feet, let us in. He had a pleasant crinkle to the corner of his eyes. He held a stein of beer in one hand and a chessman—a rook—in the other.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," the Dean apologized. "I'm Wardlow Rock. I'm a private investigator. I came to enquire about Mr. Sedgwick."

The skinny lad nodded. "I'm Mr. Sedgwick."

The Dean started. "Oh," he said after a second's waver. "I see. You're the heir. A brother? Yes. I'm speaking of the other Mr. Sedgwick—the one that was murdered."

Our host grinned. "If he was murdered they failed to mention it to me. His lawyers summoned me from my sheep ranch in Montana and gave me this house. Just a minute. I'll call Snibbers." He turned and whistled.

Back through a columned archway, you could see into the parlor. A man in butler's regalia was sitting at a chessboard with a silver tankard in his fist.

He put down the mug and joined us. "This is Snibbers," Mr. Sedgwick said genially. "He came with the house." He addressed the butler. "Gentlemen are officers. They wish to know about Brother Aubrey's murder."

The butler considered. "There's an error someplace, sir. Mr. Aubrey Sedgwick died a natural death." He went to the door, flicked on a series of toggle switches. Out in the summer night the lawn lit up in a sequence of subdued floodlights. Snibbers pointed to a cypress lawn-chair in the shadows of a bank of flowering shrubbery. "He died there."

"No," the Dean said flatly. "He didn't."

The butler amplified. "Mr. Aubrey had a weak heart. Sometimes in the night it would distress him. He would get up and walk out on the lawn and sit in his favorite chair. Sometimes until dawn. It gave him relief. Last Tuesday the milkman found him thus. We thought he was asleep—but he was dead. He had died painlessly and peacefully in his slumber."

"It's a pretty picture," the Dean remarked. "I wish I could believe it. Sedgwick was murdered. Away from here. Smothered, probably. Ah, well—" His gaze traveled absently about the interior, ceiling, walls, furniture. "Quite an outlay here," he commented. "What is this—a new style? No rugs on the parlor floor?"

The butler hastened to explain. "Mr. Aubrey was finicky about rugs. He insisted on the best. As a matter of fact he was taking care of the rugs just at the time of his death. He had ordered some fine Orientals from an importer."

"And they never came?"

"No. He must have changed his mind and canceled the order."

The sheepherding Mr. Sedgwick listened with narrowed eyes. "I think you're batting around in the dark," he decided. "I don't know what your line is and I don't think you do either. You can't be right. But if you are—if Aubrey was bumped off—I'd pay good cash to catch his killer."

The Dean smiled. "It's a deal." He indicated the chessman. "Go back to your Steinitz gambit."

THE Caerleon, on Greenwood, was a rambling apartment house of patios and wings and blighted evergreens. It was thrown up and designed to catch short-time resident-transients. It catered to a class a couple of jumps above trailer camps and a couple of steps below the swankier hostleries. It aped its ritzy brothers in shoddy detail: it had a cocktail bar, a third rate foreign chef, and a noisy six-piece orchestra. You could lease a closet and a hot plate, bring your blanket roll, and do your own cooking or you could light like a butterfly in a rosewood veneer suite and be succored, ha! in your every whim by an insolent but uniformed staff. At the Caerleon you paid your way and lived according to your income.

The Emmet Prince Ziggerts retained quarters on the less expensive level.

Mrs. Ziggert received us in shocked horror. As though we were paroled from a lepers' colony. Before she could jam the door with her sandaled toe, we eeled through. She cupped her palm before her lips. "Get out," she hissed. "You mustn't come here!"

The Dean gave her a bawdy wink, seated himself precariously on a flimsy maple bench. "Is Mr. Ziggert in?" he asked. "It's imperative that I—"

"No," Lady Irma was foaming at the gills. "Emmet's not here. He's at the bar. He mustn't find—"

A bedroom door swung open and a man stepped into the living-room. He was a hairy little man with tufts in his nostrils and ears, and black, bushy eyebrows that lay in a single bar—like a strip of fur—across the bridge of his nose. His walk was sinuous and supple and his eyes were hard and animal. "Are these bums bothering you, Irma?" he asked. His voice was low, almost casual. "Shall I give them the toss-out?"

"You're Banker Vaughn, I presume," the Dean asserted. "I'd like to talk to you a moment first. I want to speak of a little negotiation in Indiana horse-medicine. But before we begin, at the risk of becoming personal, I have to allude to your eyebrows! They're extraordinary specimens. Gad! They make my mantic heart beat with joy. Are you, by any chance,

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aware of the significance the medievalists placed upon such joined eyebrows? They're the signature of *Lupinus insaniam*, or lycanthropy. The malady, by the way, was held to be most troublesome in February, according to Burton. The werewolf, or *Cucubuth*, as Alvicenna names him, has a pretty active record. Nebuchadnezzar—"

Banker Vaughn, to my astonishment, dropped his belligerent manner and listened with close attention. Throughout the Dean's exposition, he kept up an antiphony of ejaculation. "That of that! Now that I never knew! It's an education just to hear you talk, Mr.—er—"

"Rock. Wardlow Rock."

"Mr. Rock, we'll have to get together sometime when I'm not so busy and you can go into detail. You're sort of a doctor, aren't you? I thought so. And talking about doctors, what was that crack you made a few seconds ago about horse-medicine?"

"This is going to be a waste of words, but I'll go through with it," the Dean announced. "Were you ever connected with a veterinarian drug firm in the Middle West?"

Banker Vaughn laughed. "Not me. I'm just an old-time, out-of-date gambler. Someone's ribbing you."

The Dean arose. "So I expected. Drop in and see me sometime. I have a fortune telling business over in the other end of town."

Vaughn agreed heartily. "I will, Rock, I will. That's one pitch I can't figure."

Outside, in the corridor, I took a look at the Dean. He was white around the lips. "That man's in a bad way," he said. "He needs treatment—desperately. He should consult an expert immediately. A specialist in phthiozoics."

"Is that so?" I said. "And what is phthio-so-and-so?"

The Dean flagged me with a wave of his hand. "No time for explanations." Suddenly he broke into a guffaw. "How do we get to the bar?"

THE Caerleon bar—or the Taproom, as it preferred to call itself—was got up to represent a sidewalk cafe. Lamp posts, set about the room on the floor between the tables, were supposed to give

atmosphere. The walls were painted like the one drop on the old time vaudeville stage with foreshortened curbs and buildings and fireplugs. The place was having a light rush when we entered. There was the smell of fried fish and malt mixed with the sickish perfume of cordials. The bartender, in answer to a question from the Dean, pointed a massive finger. "That's Mr. Ziggert," he said. "Setting in the corner. By hisself."

Carnavon had said that Prince Ziggert dressed to catch the eye—and he didn't miss. Where he had got such violent tweeds I don't know, unless he wove them himself. His shirt was peach colored and his tie was luminous purple. His cheeks were shaved to the follicles and his upper lip, about a quarter of an inch short, revealed a glint of gold teeth.

Prince Ziggert sat with an assortment of tools laid out around his plate: two orangewood sticks, a cut-glass vial of polish and three or four pellets of cotton. He was emory-boarding his nails.

"Won't they do that for you in the barber shop?" the Dean slurred.

It was a quick, hard shot and a mean one—and it really touched the raw. A slow, malignant surge of blood crept up the nape of Ziggert's neck. He dropped his hands beneath the tablecloth—out of sight—and slithered his reptilian eyes across our shirt fronts. "Say that again!"

"No need." The Dean put on his spectacles, bent forward and stared at the man. "For goodness sakes!" He unclipped them, replaced them in his pocket. "I've been wondering what you looked like. You are, as you no doubt know, the laughing stock of the town."

Prince Ziggert spoke hoarsely. "I've got my hand in my lap. I've got a rod in my hand. Who are you? What's all this about? I'll give you three seconds to clear yourselves."

"We're detectives," the Dean said amiably. "I understand you're cornering the zircon market." He made a *volte-face* and became gravely serious. "There's a group in town peddling zircons as diamonds. I hear you have been sniped. Could you give me a little information?"

Ziggert bared his gold teeth. "It'll be a pleasure." He faltered. "I don't like to play with the cops but this here's a

private gripe." He blazed hate. "A couple of cheap chiselers took me for a chump. It's too much for me. I can't see how they make enough cut—they wasn't no dough hardly at all involved."

The Dean prompted him. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. It was just the old Russian crown jewels racket dressed up a little and I fall for it! These two guys contact me. They say they heisted a guy coming home from a nightclub. This guy, they say, is loaded with big diamonds. He's a European refugee and he's brought his capital over with him in ice. They want to know do I want to take them off their hands dirt cheap? So I meet the two chiselers in a poolroom. They show me the stones. We have a big argument. I tell him I ain't no jeweler and I ain't buying anything that ain't been appraised. Take them along to a jeweler, they say. Lend us ten bucks to tide us over and don't pay no more until you're satisfied. Well, that seems fair enough so I put out a couple of fins. The next morning I take the stones to a jeweler. Zircons. Worth about three dollars. I been stuck."

"It strikes me as a lot of planning and risk for a mere profit of seven dollars," the Dean decided. "What became of the stones? We'll have to have them as evidence."

Ziggert flushed. "I got to thinking about it in the middle of the night. How these two guys was sitting back someplace giving me the laugh. I got mad. I couldn't sleep. I got out of bed and—ah—disposed of the stuff." He glowered. "I didn't want Irma calling me a sap."

"Listen." The Dean whispered out of the corner of his mouth, convict-style. "You don't want to buy some nice Oriental rugs, do you? High class goods."

Prince Ziggert looked at us as though we were maniacs. "Why should I?" he asked. "I don't have no home except where I hang my hat."

"In that case," the Dean observed, "I'll be getting along." On the street outside, he grinned. "I just tossed that into the hopper. I thought it would pay. It did."

"We're no better off," I said, "than we were before. The zircons turn out to be a run-of-the-mill swindle."

"No, no." The Dean objected. "They

turn out to be, as I suspected, a ruse. A bloody, fiendish subterfuge. They explain how Sedgwick was trapped." He posed in ponderous meditation. "I think," he decided, "the Mulcahey is next on our list. How's your glamor?"

"Terrible," I answered. "And so is yours. And you know it. You mean Miss June Mulcahey, of the poultry market, the late Mr. Walker's fiancée? What are you scheming to do—filch the poor man's burying suit? First it's his hat and now it's—"

"You're talking gibberish." The chief was really burned. "I want to offer the girl our protection. I feel she may need it."

CHAPTER THREE

Money for Bribery

YOU'D think that a private investigator would after a time become hardened to violence and tragedy. I never did and I'm not sure that the Dean actually did himself. The Dean was stone cold when he was dealing with an habitual or a professional but, all in all, he wasn't adverse to passing out a little Solomonic justice if the angle suggested it. He'd held many a one-man jury panel in that powerful skull. His judgments were rarely in error. He filed the Mulcahey dame in the correct cabinet—and lucky he did. If we had taken her at face value the case would have then and there made a U-turn and headed back for the stable.

Miss Mulcahey was chic, sweet and starry eyed—but no gal could be as dumb as she acted and yet hold down a switchboard. And people don't act dumb just to make a favorable impression. The other way around, maybe, but not that.

Miss June Mulcahey was a gal that played them close to her vest.

Fountain Court was a little cement areaway that spurred off from Market Alley. It was walled on three sides by a warren of tenements and on the fourth by the rear of a theatrical supply house. You entered the court by a cramped passageway. Our destination, 117½, jutted from a dark corner. "It's a funny thing," the Dean declared as he pulled an old lever-action doorbell. "I don't

believe I've ever been in this hole before. Quaint, isn't it?"

Walker's name got us in. Miss Mulcahey apologized for her quarters. "It's just one room," she deplored. "And a small one. Most girls team up and cut expenses. I'd rather live alone. In privacy. It costs more that way."

It was my flash opinion that Miss Mulcahey had tried living with other girls and that it hadn't worked out. She was just a shade too attractive, too man-conscious, to pull in a female team. She was a supple little brunette and had a way of talking to you with a show of great docility, standing almost under the point of your chin and looking up at you through a filigree of lacy lashes. The Dean had said she might need our protection. It was my impression that she could handle all the danger she would ever run into. "What's all this about Russell?" she asked. "Did you say you were relatives of his?"

"Not relatives. No." The Dean coughed glibly. "Just—er—admirers. Russel was a man of great promise. He became just a little too energetic towards the end, I'm sorry to say. But—ah, well." He squinted. "You didn't really love him, did you?"

"I'll answer that," she said. "You have no right to ask it, but I'll answer it." She paused thoughtfully. "No, I didn't love him. He loved me. There's quite a distinction. He had a sad life story. He'd been kicked around a lot. He was kind of a misfit. I got myself into it—I gave him encouragement. So I decided to stick it out. Today, I obtained his best suit from Mr. Quinn, that's his landlord. Russell has no relatives. I'm going to bury him—pay his funeral expenses. There's no one else to do it. Then Russell and I will be even. Finished."

"Why you?" the Dean asked. "Didn't Russell have any money at all?"

She flexed her hip, thrust out a shapely calf and studied the moire bow of her stubby spike-heeled pump. "He had a small bank account which he was saving for our marriage. He'd run in debt but he wouldn't touch it. Two hundred and some odd dollars. That was one of the things he called me about while I was at work yesterday afternoon."

"Oh. He called you?" The Dean's rich voice was affable, warm.

"Yes. He didn't sound exactly sane. He'd been out of a job for some time and brooding had upset him. He said he had drawn out his nest egg and was going to use it to make thousands of dollars. He said he was already 'ahead of the game.' He muttered something about converting certain objects. Converting was the word he used and he didn't say what he meant by 'objects.'" The zircons, I thought. Walker believed them to be diamonds. June Mulcahey ogled the Dean through her long lashes. "I had the feeling," she said, "I had the strangest feeling that Russell was going to use that two hundred dollars in some illegal or unethical way. If a man has some money and it's honestly his own, how can he use it in an illegal way?"

"He could use it as a bribe, for one thing," the Dean put out.

"Well, like I said, he yelled and whispered and went on in a crazy way and at last said good-bye. Before I could disconnect he was talking again. He said there was one thing more he wanted to ask me. And when he did, I could hardly believe my ears!"

She was giving it a build-up and it was worth it. "He wanted to know the polite way to eat frog legs. Should one use fingers or a fork!"

The Dean produced a checkbook. He filled out a blank payable to June Mulcahey, for the sum of two hundred and seventy-one dollars. Down in the left hand corner he wrote, *Funeral Expenses: Russell Walker*, and laid it on the bed. "We'll bury him," he said pleasantly. "Fraternal organization. Cherry Street Sportsmen's Club." He bowed. "If fortune favors us, we'll be seeing you again before very long."

BEFORE she made the contact, he had picked up his hat and we were out in the court.

"You see how the pattern fills out?" The Dean was smug. "Just like an assembly line! So Walker intercepted the rugs. That was what he was hoping to 'convert.'"

I let it pass. "What was the bribe for?"

"Another matter. A little blackmail affair. He was trying to piece his way into Sedgwick's forty grand."

I balked. "Are you giving me an intravenous—or do you know what you're talking about? Does this jumble actually make sense?"

The Dean frowned. "I don't see how you can miss it. I'll break a primary trade custom and line it up for you. Here it is in a capsule: Sedgwick, rolling in new wealth, attempts to purchase Townely's hot Ispahans for his mansion. A certain party chisels in on the deal by hiring Walker to sit at Sedgwick's tapped wire. Walker, with information obtained for his principal, gets ideas of his own. He pulls a quick one and flimflams the rugs into his possession. Moreover, having had a taste of criminal profit, of outwitting the lesser breeds without the law, he comes back on his erstwhile wire-tapping employer for a bit of blackmail squeeze. This happened twice. The first time he was paid off in zircons. The second time he was given the works."

"That's quite a capsule," I commented. "What do we do now?"

"You go home and keep open house. I'm expecting a return match with our jovial absconder. Mr. Montgomery Carnavon. Watch yourself. Don't answer provocative questions. He's a subtle customer."

"And where," I remarked, "will you be? What should I do should your presence be suddenly required?"

I didn't expect a retort. Sometimes when the pace gets the liveliest the chief will disappear for a couple of hours. He's out running his trapline of friends and beneficiaries—elevator boys, doormen, hat-check girls—collecting and sorting bits of pertinent information. When he comes back from such an itinerary he's usually loaded for bear. I never ask him who he has seen. He'd cut off his tongue before he'd betray a friend. I only asked him now to ruffle him.

To my surprise, he answered. "I'm going to try to pick up a dropped stitch. There's a flaw in our hypothesis. You didn't notice it, did you? It's this: say Sedgwick was murdered away from home, as he certainly was, and placed on his lawn chair. What actually happened? Take

that stenographic transcript we found in Walker's hatband. Sedgwick, according to directions, drives his coupé to the parking lot, he gets out, is picked up on the street by his killers, murdered and robbed. The chauffeur, according to instructions, pulls in with the sedan, changes to the coupé and drives back to Iris Acres. Now this pre-planned transfer must have gone quietly through without a hitch—because the chauffeur has not stepped forward into the spotlight. Nothing was done to arouse his suspicions. Very well." He took a deep breath.

"I get it," I remarked. "What became of the sedan? The extra car that was stranded in the parking lot?"

"Precisely! It was returned after the murder, of course. I believe I should talk to Aubrey Sedgwick's chauffeur. There's a little point he can clear up. He lives, as I remember it, above the garage."

The Dean waved farewell. "Good-bye. And be wary!"

I WAS about halfway home when the inspiration hit me. I'd been thinking, to tell the truth, not about the case but about June Mulcahey and wondering how a futile guy like Russell Walker ever hoped to corral a flashy firebrand like the switchboard operator. From the Mulcahey, my train of thought switched to a picture of Walker dabbling with crooks and telephone detectors. Abruptly, in full bloom, the gag about the frog legs and what it meant popped into my mind.

I'd never seen Walker, of course, but I'd seen his room and heard a lot about him. I was getting to know him. He had been a neutral little guy, a striver, who had gone through life trying to make the grade. His big urge was to climb up and be an average man. I'd known plenty people like him. They're all more or less bugs on propriety and the intricacies of etiquette. No matter where they are, lunch wagon or automat, they want to do the right thing the right way.

There's one place in town where they serve frogs, big Louisiana jumbos, any hour of the day any day in the year. Brother's Gumbo Parlor. Brother gets them by the barrel from his kinsmen down in the bayou country—and really knows how to lay them on the platter. The

joint is in a cellar down in the warehouse district. There's no drinking or cursing—Brother has peculiar house rules—but the place is the worst deadfall in six states.

The restaurant is laid out according to a working arrangement that the proprietor brought with him from New Orleans: a row of little cubicles, each partitioned from its neighbor and curtained from the connecting hall by a sheet of sail canvas. Many a shoestring corporation had been organized behind Brother's canvas on a mail order short-gun and a handful of wad cutters.

Brother—what his real name was no one I ever knew could tell you—sat on a high wooden stool behind a cash register in the dusty room that dummied as a front. He met each customer as he entered, led him to the dark hallway and turned him over to one of his family of waiters. The waiter placed the patron in a booth, took his order. The house survived on one ironclad law: no customer could enter the booth of another except by the permission of the proprietor. Say you were slipping behind your curtain and noticed a friend in the next cubicle and decide to join him. You follow the proper procedure: you tell the waiter, out he goes to Brother, back he comes with the O. K. If you want to keep healthy you don't try to do it any other way.

"Evening, my friend." Brother greeted me with a ministerial smile. "You wish to partake?"

"Yes," I said. "But first I'd like to ask you a question."

With his slow shuffling swampman's stride, he ushered me to the hallway. "Ask me no questions I'll tell you no lies, *hein?*" He uttered a low flutelike whistle. A figure appeared in the shadowed tunnel of the corridor. "A gentleman for a table, Thibaut."

Settled in my booth, behind a hinged table-flap, I turned my attention to Thibaut. He had to be my wedge. Swarthy, with a lean, lined jaw he didn't look any too gabby. I made my throw. "Bullfrogs, the best you've got. That reminds me. Did you see a friend of mine, a fellow named Walker—"

"Frog legs, it is, sir." The lad was

way ahead of me. "But as to that other: ask me no—"

It seemed to be the slogan of the place. "Save it," I said wearily, "I've heard it before." He grinned and left.

I'd been sitting there probably six minutes when the shot blasted out. The explosion in the confines of the hollow passage almost blew out my eardrums. A slug from the hallway ripped through the canvas curtain—about three inches from the floor—and buried itself in the plank-ing by my foot.

I got out my bulldog and whipped back the curtain.

A STRANGE tableau confronted me. A man, a thug who was a complete stranger to me, stood scarecrow-like, his arms out stiff from his shoulders. He wore a baggy green suit and a candy stripe shirt. In his paw, muzzle pointed to the ceiling, was a black .45. He stood frozen, holding his breath.

Behind him was Thibaut. The waiter's lean hand snaked out, collected the man's gun. In that little flurry of movement I understood the whole business. The waiter was in a half-crouch, leaning a little forward, touching the point of a claspknife to the stranger's back. Touching the knife-point to that special spot below the shoulderblade where, as any doctor can tell you, the heart lays least guarded.

"Good-bye," Thibaut said politely. "You must leave now."

Believe me, he did.

"What happened?" I asked. "What was the oaf shooting at? Rats? He almost got my ankle."

"No, not rodents, my friend. It was you whom he was attempting to slay." The swampman pursed his lips. "I come out of the kitchen. I see this intruder slip from booth number three. He listens at your curtain. Then he makes a mistake, he reaches for his gun. Now this gun he carries in a hip holster. The hip holster affords a good draw and a quick one, but it has its little peril. Back in the bayou country we call such a draw a sheriff's draw and have given it much thought. The pistol is carried, as I said, on the hip. The hand goes back, swings the gun forward from the scabbard. There is one instant in this draw—where the front

sight clears the hipbone—when the small bones of the wrist are askew and without good muscular grip. A blow on the upper arm and the fingers, off balance, give way. I strike our unamiable intruder. He fires into the floor. He is fortunate he did not wound himself in the groin. Ha!

"I'll take your word for it." There was a feline glow to the woodsman's eyes. I wanted to get out. "What's the bill? I seem to have lost my appetite. I've got to see a man about a man."

Concern wrrenched the waiter's lank face. "A moment, I pray. Will you do me the favor of waiting but one moment?"

He was gone—off to his boss. A minute later he was back.

"I have reported the unfortunate incident to the owner of this place," he announced. "He wishes to make amends. He informs me that you are troubled with questions. And orders me to answer any reasonable inquiry."

Just like that—suddenly the silver lining. I sat down on the edge of a bench and went to town.

The man's name was Willie Dunkel, he teamed with a hood named Hammerless. They were from out of town, had appeared a week or so ago and had chosen Brother's as a hangout. They were not particularly welcome.

Mr. Walker? Possibly Mr. Walker was the timid gentleman—yes, wearing a cheap panama hat—who had acted so strangely the previous night, or rather this morning about three o'clock. He had entered alone, obviously frightened, had stopped at the cash register and attempted to

bribe Brother. He, too, was interested in Mr. Dunkel and Mr. Hammerless. Two hundred and seventy dollars if Brother would tell him who they were, for whom they worked, where they lived. No sale. Brother wouldn't talk.

What had happened then? The gentleman had eaten a small order of frog legs, left a nickel tip, and gone out into the night.

To his death—I could have added.

"Thanks, keed," I said. "All told, you've been a big help this eventful night. Maybe I can return the obligation sometime. Could be, you know." I lingered. "Here's something I'm curious about. It's personal. If you don't want to answer it just clam up. It's this: who in the world is Brother? Does he have a name? Is he your brother?"

There was a flash of white teeth. "Everyone wonders." The swampman laughed. "I will inform you. Listen carefully. You alone of all outsiders shall know. Brother is simply Brother. As for me, I am his second double cousin twice removed."

I let it go at that. I wanted to get out on the street and breathe some clean, fresh night air.

I COULD see from the steps, as I entered the boarding house, that the guest light was burning in our reception-room. That meant that the Dean had not yet returned. With a little luck I could catch a little poise before I confronted him. He didn't encourage freelance masterminding on my part and I wasn't sure that he'd rhapsodize over my excursion. It looked as though I'd stirred



up a little unwelcome action. Now we were out in the open. I closed the foyer door behind me and stepped into the old-fashioned hall.

Mrs. Duffy's door was ajar. From behind its panels came the roistering sounds of elderly frolic; coquettish squeals and giggles which I recognized as our landlady in the throes of merriment—a deep masculine vibrato which I couldn't quite make. I was a little astounded. Mrs. Duffy had always been rigidly faithful, both in word and deed, to the memory of her late husband, Pat, a valiant patrolman who had lost his life in the line of duty. I shook my head and reached for the reception-room doorknob.

"Salutations, sir!" It was the vibrato baritone and now I placed it. Montgomery Carnavon.

He was standing at Mrs. Duffy's elbow. His beetle eyes wrinkled and blinked in jollity. His ivory-headed umbrella was clasped tightly in his armpit, the thumb and index finger of his right hand were sticky with blackberry jam, and balanced in his left palm was one of Mrs. Duffy's best bone china tea-cups.

It was our landlady's weakness to throw a tea any hour of the night or day when she felt the impulse to festivities. "This is Mr. Carnavon, Mr. Matthews," she explained. "He was waiting over there all by himself to consult Mr. Rock. He looked so lonesome. I invited him across the hall. He's very amusing—and—" Mrs. Duffy braced herself, "and so, er, gallant."

Carnavon demurred. "How gracious of you to say so!" He handed her his cup, wiped his fingers on a canary yellow handkerchief. "This, to me, has been a most pleasant—"

I broke it off. I didn't like it. The two of them going on like a couple of groggy parakeets. Mrs. Duffy was playing with gellignite. "Just step this way," I cut in. "This is our office, over here. The boss will be in any minute."

I was nearer correct than I suspected. The Dean returned before he got set to cross-examine me. He was sitting there, on the corner of the couch, with a speculative look in his eye—wondering just how to milk me—when the chief came bursting in. "Darning needles and cop-

per wire have jumped ten points!" he exulted. "Things are crystallizing into a bull market!"

Bewilderment made Carnavon cagy. "How bizarre! I don't think we quite understand you, Mr. Rock."

The Dean pretended to notice our guest for the first time. "Oh! It's you, Mr. Carnavon. How's pilfering?"

The genial absconder lost, for a second, his mask of hearty geniality. He made a quick recovery. "You like your jokes, eh? Well, so do I, Mr. Rock. I always say a little fun between friends—"

"I'm no friend of yours," the Dean declared mildly. "Just a hireling. Which reminds me—it's time you made me a small payment for services rendered. I've cut the trail of Vaughn and Ziggert."

Carnavon flicked his eyelids like a snapping turtle. He probed in a pocket of his buckskin vest and came out with a grand note. He switched to another pocket and located a second. It was a wonderful thing to watch. "Here's two thousand," he said. "Forty per cent of your stipulated fee. You collect the balance when our deal is complete. What have you learned?"

The Dean scooped up the papers. "I've talked to a second-hand furniture man who sold them some rugs."

"Rugs?" Carnavon jerked to attention. By this time he was genuinely muddled. "Did you say they were buying rugs?"

"That's right." The Dean was lying by the clock and having the time of his life doing it. "Cheap imitation Persian rugs. What they want them for, I couldn't tell you. Maybe they're for sick horses out in Indiana. Be that as it may . . . Well, I questioned the furniture man. He showed me the sales slip: Emmet Ziggert and Fred Vaughn, no address. They called for the goods. . . . Here's a description of them: Ziggert, tweeds, over-manicured hands; Vaughn, heavy black eyebrows joining—"

"That's them." Carnavon got excitedly to his feet. "Put me in touch with them—soon!"

"I hope to," the Dean remarked, "before morning."

Carnavon went bleak. "Excellent. You're a fast worker." He paused, came to a decision. "You can get in touch

with me by calling Marty's Parking Lot."

Abruptly he changed from the hound to the hare. "I'll sleep better when I pay them back. It's no fun being in some one's debt."

"Now that sentiment," the Dean dogmatized, "should be writ in letters of rubies and fine gold." A sudden thought seemed to strike him. "Your buckskin vest," he remarked. "I've never seen one like it. Does it serve a special purpose?"

Carnavon bubbled with pleasure. "Thank you for noticing it! I'm very proud of it. Its only purpose is to interest the passerby. It's a thing of beauty, isn't it?"

HE THINKS he's shrewd," the Dean observed dryly after our client had departed. "He mixes truth with falsehood and expects it to take hold. He thinks he deceived us."

"No doubt," I commented. "And mayhap he did. I'm getting to abhor that man. What's all this hokum about that buckskin vest? I gave it a good look, and, other than being ballasted with heavy kale, it left me cold."

"Of course it did," the Dean sympathized. "Did you notice the umbrella?"

"Not particularly."

"It's a childish sleight, that employed by Mons. Carnavon. An old device—as old as the first street corner legerdemainist. He attracts your attention to one thing, the vest, to divert it from another—the umbrella."

"Now it's the umbrella." I bridled. "Don't push me too far. I've had a strenuous evening."

"And it's just beginning. Now, when I say umbrella I do not mean umbrella, of course—"

"Oh, no. Of course not."

"I mean the umbrella *handle*. That ivory *handle* is the Townely crosier-head. The thirteenth century carved narwhal bishop's staff. Carnavon, a man who passionately loves art, comes into the possession of this priceless volute. He is fascinated by it, by the sight and touch of it. He is perfectly aware that it is stolen property but he is driven by an urge to have it constantly where he can admire it, to carry it with him. He in-

geniously affixes it to an umbrella shank and openly vaunts it. No one looks at the umbrella, everyone looks at the blind, the vest."

"You've made your speech," I said. "Now I'll make mine." I gave him a dramatic version of my skirmish at Brother's. He closed his eyes and dozed through the entire report. Only when I came to the very end, the part about finding Carnavon in Mrs. Duffy's on my return, did he wake up. "That's bad," he said. "Let's have a word with our landlady."

Mrs. Duffy had retired. She came to the door in curlers, beauty cream, and an ostrich-plumed negligee.

The Dean glared at her. "Seraphina," he said sternly. "I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour but I feel it incumbent upon myself to warn you. Mr. Matthews informs me that this evening you lured a client from our reception-room and entertained him with tea and cakes—"

"Not cakes. Jam."

"I fail to make the distinction. If such an episode arises again I shall promptly move my quarters from your roof." Suddenly the deep affection he felt for her got the best of him. "It's dangerous, Seraphina," he complained. "I'm in a trade that attracts riff-raff. Crooks, killers and worse pass in and out of my office. Tonight you were in deadly peril. That was a dangerous man!"

She nodded. "So I suspected." She stepped back. "Come in. I've saved exhibits for you."

We went to the kitchen. She stood tiptoe, opened a cupboard. One by one, she took down and laid out pieces of china: a saucer, cup, creamer, teapot, sandwich platter. "I was afraid the gentleman would get away without your seeing him. Then you would ask me who was in tonight Mrs. Duffy and I would have to say a man I don't know who. So I took steps." She got a smugly complacent look, a perfect imitation of the Dean himself when things are riding high for him. "I invited Mr. Carnavon in and Bertillonized him."

The Dean frowned. "Pardon? You did what?"

Mrs. Duffy nodded brightly. "I know all about these things. Pat, my dear de-

parted, lectured to me about them over and over again. I asked the pleasant Mr. Carnavon in and Bertillonized him. I fed him my stickiest jam." She turned over the crockery. "See."

The bottoms of the pieces were littered with fingerprints. Dozens of them. Carnavon's fingerprints in blackberry jam. "We'll crate these and send them to the Department of Justice in Washington," she suggested. "They'll know just who the gentleman is."

"They surely will," the Dean assented. "But no need. He's about at the end of his tether."

He gave her a fond pat on the shoulder. "I don't know why," he said slowly, "I don't know why I don't sell out to you and retire! Gad!"

THE phone was shrilling in our office. The Dean caught it on the run, whisked the receiver to his ear. I could hear and recognize the calling voice half-way across the room. Lieutenant Malloy and the officer was haywire with excitement. The Dean listened to him stoically. "Yes," he said. And again, "Yes." Finally he added, "We'll be right out." He rung up.

He seemed amused. "It's Quinn," he informed me. "The disagreeable Quinn. The late landlord of the late Mr. Walker. They've knocked him off, slit his throat. I said they'd kill again. And they're not finished yet. We'd better run over and take a look at the corpse. As some sweet singer once penned, 'It isn't the fact that he's dead that counts—but only how did he die?' This should be very interesting indeed."

It's been my experience that slow cases lag from beginning to end. But when you're on a case that's been a hornets' nest from the start, when things get tightened to the buckling point, that's the time to watch out. A fast case gathers momentum. I buttoned my vest, straightened my tie. "I'll go," I said. "But it's time and a half for overtime."

The Dean snorted. "It's all overtime in this trade." He drew his eyebrows together. "Now what do you want?"

"I don't want anything," I began. And then I saw that he wasn't speaking to me. I took a second look at the gentle-

folk that were gracing our hovel and gaped.

Mr. Sedgwick, of Montana, immaculate in a tight professorial suit of electric blue, with a savory flake of chewing tobacco at the corner of his lip, stood sizing up the room. As though he were trying to spot the gimmick at a carnival concession. To his lee, and about a point abaft his beam, fluttered Lady Irma Ziggert.

She was deathly pallid. Did you ever see a couple of glass eyes, like taxidermists use, just laid out on a blank sheet of paper? They stare at you wherever you stand. That was Mrs. Ziggert.

The Dean rallied. "I wasn't aware that you two were acquainted. When—"

"We're not," Sedgwick slipped out of his ocular inspection tour. "The lady was sitting on the front step outside crying, afraid to come in, when I came up. She has her own business with you. I have mine."

"I can give you exactly four minutes. That's two minutes apiece. All right, Mr. Sedgwick, start talking."

The ex-shepherd grinned. "The day my brother died he drew forty thousand dollars from his bank. We can't figure where it went. I want to retain you. I want to find out what happened to that money."

The Dean nodded. "It was stolen from him. I have a line on it. I'll know all about it by midnight. Now you, Mrs. Ziggert. What did you wish to say?"

She faltered. "In front of this strange man? I can't. It's all so horrible. I don't know how to put it." She clutched her glossy sables to her throat. "There's evil in the wind." She elevated her shoulders and shivered, lowered her voice. "Gruesome, unholy workings are afoot. Let me tell you—"

"Time's up!" The Dean threw the switch on her. "Sorry. I have an important appointment." He took out his Cuban cigar snipe and got it going. "Mrs. Ziggert, permit me to present Mr. Sedgwick. Irma this is—er—"

"Harve."

"Harve. In the span of a few hours—about midnight—I expect the summation of developments which will certainly be of deep interest to each of you. How

does this sound? I'll meet you both, say, at Iris Acres about twelve?"

Sedgwick started to object. The Dean overrode him. "Good. That's settled. Now. In the interim, I want you to do me a bit of a favor. There's a girl, a Miss June Mulcahey," he gave them her address, "whose betrothed died this morning. She's at this moment at home, fighting off despair. Drop in on her. Take her a little present. Candy maybe. Say you're from me. Cheer her up." He paused for emphasis. "Spend the rest of the evening with her. Both of you. *Don't let her out of your sight.*"

Sedgwick liked the idea. "O. K. Swell. We'll take her a basket of fruit! We'll stop in a drugstore and pick up a chessboard. We'll throw a party. Eh, Irma?"

Mrs. Ziggert was less enthusiastic.

In the taxi, on the way to Quinn's, I put out feelers. "What ever suggested that nutty plan? Mulcahey and Sedgwick and Irma. Such a combination! You are suspicious of one of them. You're putting them together to keep check on each other. Who is the guilty party? My favorite is Lady Irma, win, show and place."

"No, Benton. Not Mrs. Ziggert. That cozy matron is the only person in the entire affair who might be said to be completely isolated from the stream of events. She's as innocent as a new-born babe and about half as reliable."

"Innocent? Then why all the shuddering and shivering and rolling of the optics?"

The Dean chuckled. "She enjoys it. She's probably been carrying on that way all her life. And will doubtless continue to until the undertaker rings down the curtain." He wagged his head. "No wonder Ziggert goes for such stimulating clothes—sort of an escape fixation with him."

CHAPTER FOUR

Shambles at Marty's Lot

LET'S hear," I demanded, "about chauffeurs."

"Very well, my boy." He settled himself comfortably in the corner. "The word chauffeur comes from the French and means, of all things, stoker. His-

torically, a chauffeur was a member of a band of brigands by that name who roamed France in the latter half of the eighteenth century, robbing and slaying and extorting money from their victims by searing feet. It was, of course, the practicing of this torture which gave them their nomenclature—"

"You're ribbing me!" I accused. "I meant—"

He sighed. "You meant the Sedgwick chauffeur. Nevertheless what I have just told you is true. Words are pretty slippery things, aren't they? Why aren't we more familiar with language? It's an essential and purely inexpensive commodity. Take the word 'waif.' You would say a waif was an orphan or a destitute child. It is no such thing. A waif is an article of stolen goods thrown away by a thief in his flight. Traditionally such property belonged to the king. Thus the 'franchise of waif' which may be summed up briefly as—"

"As phthiozoics?"

"Ah. You remember that one? You have a retentive memory. Now what were we talking about? Oh. The Sedgwick chauffeur. I've been on quite an odyssey." He went into it with relish. "First, I rang Iris Acres from a corner drugstore. Snibbers, the butler, answered. He somehow understood me to say I was calling about the delivery of a sow and pigs that Fleming, the chauffeur, had won in a raffle. Snibbers blew his top. He really foamed. No place for any swine at Iris Acres! He didn't recognize my voice, maybe because I had my watchfob in my mouth. Ah, me. Fleming wasn't there any more. He'd been fired, canned. The new Mr. Sedgwick considered a chauffeur superfluous to a menage, wanted to drive his own cars. Where did the man live now? Snibbers wasn't positive—somewhere down around the amusement park. I located him—through sweat and ceaseless questioning—polishing off a game of Kelly pool. He was a little hostile to me but ten dollars fixed that. Fleming's version of his discharge was one of the most grotesque yarns I've ever heard. He attributed it to red thumbtacks."

"Thumbtacks?"

"Yes. The morning that Aubrey Sedgwick was found dead, before that unhappy

event, Snibbers, in dressing gown and slippers, opened the servants' door—that little door at the side under the honeysuckle trellis—to gaze upon the glories of the early summer morn. He was shocked to notice a row of red celluloid covered thumbtacks stuck in a line down the panel of the door. He knew he hadn't done it. The cook had spent the night away. That left Fleming, the chauffeur. Only a drunk man, reasoned the butler, would do such a goofy thing. He had previously suspected Fleming of tipping on duty. He questioned the chauffeur but he denied it. They chucked him a few days later, when Brother Harve pulled in and took over. Fleming swears that this incident is the actual reason for his dismissal."

I thought it over. "It doesn't make much sense, does it? Who do you think put them there?"

"It makes plenty sense. And I don't think, I *know*, who put them there. Walker. As a joke, a childish flourish of bravado. He had a few thumbtacks left over so he just decorated the door panel. It's the link we need. It's the tip-off. It explains the needle and the wire. It proves conclusively that Walker muscled in on the rugs. It tells us in a general way what he did with them."

Cherry Street was dark and silent. The radios had been turned off, the yowling kids muffled and put to bed. Again that fake air of tranquillity had settled down on the little file of shadowed bungalows. A cold, curled moon rode the black sky like an ice shaving. Thunderheads were gathering to the north. The breeze, sticky and oppressive, that fanned down the street was the threatening of the coming storm. A low watt porch bulb was flickering at 417. Three shiny police cars, parked bumper to bumper, stood at the curb.

The Dean swung open the knee-high picket gate. "The third time today," he observed. "And each time we have a different reception committee."

QUINN was laid out on his dining-room table. The table was circular and too small; his arm and legs sprawled from the sides. He looked like some huge tropic spider. A little gilt vase of arti-

ficial flowers and a pair of comic salt and pepper shakers had been pushed away to make room for him. They were clustered in a gay group by his bloody ear. The landlord's blotched and sullen face was frozen in a silent shriek of terror; his bulging eyes had watched death strike him. It wasn't a pretty picture.

Upstairs was the grim sound of exploring feet and the casual pacing of police boots. The house was being frisked—thoroughly, painstakingly, scientifically. By men who knew their business.

Bill Malloy was alone in the dining-room. Waiting for us. "Snap it up," he grated. "This is murder."

The Dean pretended to simmer. "And say it is. Why annoy *me*? Every time—"

The lieutenant sat back and leered. "You may well ask. Listen. There's a dame across the street. Her name's Murchison. She's got a hobby. It's spiritualism. Three years ago she threw a semi-professional seance. It was kind of a debut for her. A stranger in the audience spoke up and exposed her, caught her using a 'flap slate.' That man was you. She's remembered you and hated your guts to this day."

The Dean strolled over to the table, scrutinized the body. "So?"

Malloy sprang it. "Today she sees you visiting this house. Twice. Once this afternoon, once this evening. A couple hours ago she seen you and Matthews coming out. You, she identified positively. You were waving a gory chive in your hand!"

The Dean took Quinn's head delicately between the balls of his two thumbs, rolled it to one side. "What kind of a knife?" he asked. "It must have been a big one. I should say this was done with a butcher knife." He leaned forward and ran his fingertips back and forth beneath the surface of the table. Almost instantly he grinned, straightened, and came out with an object. A sticky object. A stag handled game knife. "Wedge between the pedestal and table top," he murmured. "The murder weapon. Don't let me interrupt. What were you saying about Miss Murchison?"

Malloy exploded. "I'll have that dame's scalp." He took the blade, wrapped it in a clean napkin, and laid it on the cor-

ner of the sideboard. "Bulletin! Captain Kunkel, again exercising that uncanny intelligence he so frequently displays while on a case, alone and single handed, discovers slayer's weapon et cetera, et cetera . . . Look for your name in the paper, Rock. Or mine." He grunted. "A policeman's life is not a happy—" The doorbell cut him off with a spasm of coughs and belches.

"Company?" I asked.

"So it seems." The Dean brightened. "I'll get it."

It was Banker Vaughn, the werewolf, and he was not overly astonished at our presence. His bushy black eyebrows raised themselves maybe a quarter inch.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Dr. Rock!" He turned and nodded to me. "And the faithful assistant. Well, this is going to prove very pleasant indeed. I didn't expect to find you rooming at this establishment." He wavered. "This is the right place, isn't it?"

"That depends," the Dean remarked. "Just what did you have in mind?"

"A room. I want to rent a room." Banker Vaughn produced a clipping from the evening newspaper. It was a little item from the Want Ads—Rooms to Rent. It informed the public that Thomas Quinn, 417 Cherry, had a temporary vacancy and could accommodate a gentleman lodger. Walker dies in the morning and the greedy landlord is advertising for a refill before the sun sets.

"Don't tell me," the Dean protested, "that you've severed relations with your associates, the Prince Ziggerts!"

"Not yet. But I anticipate something of that nature in the near future. They're, to be painfully candid, a crackpot pair. She's a chronic hysteric. And now he seems to be slipping. Hallucinations. He thinks a man in a buckskin vest is ceaselessly searching for him! It's not a very healthy atmosphere to live in. I don't see how I've stood it as long as I have." He noticed Bill Malloy. "And is this our estimable host, Mr. Thomas Quinn?"

"No," said the Dean. "This is the estimable Lieutenant Malloy. That"—he indicated the twisted body back in the other room—"is Mr. Quinn."

Vaughn warped at the knees. His face remained placid and expressionless but the sight really jarred him. He made the distance to the sideboard in a sort of wheeling lurch and groped for a sherry bottle.

"And now," the Dean said hurriedly, "you gentlemen must excuse us—"

"Hold on!" Malloy commanded. "You're not clean yet. What were you doing here this afternoon—and later, tonight? What—"

The Dean looked haughty. "This is no time for sociabilities. There are more pressing matters at hand. Be at Iris Acres, the Sedgwick place, out on Hill View, tonight at twelve o'clock. There'll

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Whisk Off Tough Beard Easily With Smooth-Shaving PROBAK Jr. Blades... Twenty For A Quarter!

RECEPTACLE FOR USED BLADES INSIDE!

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4-10

be a man out there to answer all your questions."

Banker Vaughn put down his empty wineglass. His color was a little better. "I'm just an old time faro dealer," he remarked. "I've seen my best day and I know it. An old-style card man like me isn't any too smart but he learns to keep his eyes open. He sees things and he doesn't forget them. I believe I understood you to say you were a detective, Dr. Rock. That puts a new aspect on the matter. I feel that I am in the position to make an important suggestion."

The Dean waved him off. "Not to me. Please. I've got more facts now than I can handle." He gave them an ambassadorial bow. "Make your suggestion to Lieutenant Malloy."

THE moon had vanished, blacked out by tumbling clouds. The air was deathly still—the storm still held off. Towards town, above the ornate tower of city hall, a spray of lightning flickered down the sky and broke, golden-green and branched—like a tarnished candelabra. "It's going to be quick and hard and mean," the Dean observed. "I know the signs. I've felt them in the tropics. Let's make cover."

"And where?"

"Marty's Parking Lot. Montgomery Carnavon owes us a final installment."

There was no cab in sight. Bucking the gathering wind made tough walking. I tried a bit of small talk. "Do you expect me to believe," I demanded, "that of all the rooming houses in town Vaughn picked Quinn's—on this night—by pure coincidence?"

"No." The Dean chuckled. "It's too much for anyone to believe. Even Malloy. Banker Vaughn, that helpless old gambler, as he so readily admits, had his nose to a scent. He came to the Cherry Street house as those other visitors, the killers of Quinn, did before him: to search for the missing rugs! He had his little newspaper clipping with him to present to anyone who questioned him."

"Did the killers get the rugs?"

"Hardly. And neither will Brer Vaughn. Russell was vixen-smart. No one will find the rugs unless he knows about the darning needle and no one knows

about the darning needle but the junto of Rock and Matthews!"

I didn't know anything about Marty—but I knew all about his parking lot. It hadn't any too sweet a reputation. The kids in the tenderloin knew it as a good place to peddle fog lights and spare tires. I had a suspicion that it handled bigger stuff, too. That it was a hot car fence.

Marty's had popped up twice in the case. It had been alluded to in Walker's stenographic transcript and had been designated by Carnavon as a rendezvous. I was getting curious about it.

It lay at the worst edge of town, the badlands, where the shanties fingered out into swampy willow jungles beneath the viaduct. I wondered what Aubrey Sedgwick must have thought—or his high-toned chauffeur, for that matter—about parking in such a dump.

When we arrived the yard was deserted. Just a sterile, poisonous plot of grassless ground littered with heaps of rusty car parts. In the center of the place, like a rotten coffin, stood the murky bulk of Marty's shabby one-room office. The Dean dismissed it. "It's not for us," he decided. "It's a front. For the innocent public. Let's prowl."

We found what we were looking for on the edge of the swamp, shrouded from the highway by a neck of dense saplings: a low, gray workshop. It was trim and efficient looking. The Dean snapped on his flash, ran it up the side of the building, held it on a cluster of porcelain insulators and high tension wires. The place was equipped to eat electric current. "This is more like it," the Dean growled. "What's inside?"

"Watch yourself," I whispered. "Don't be grabbing any doorknobs. You may catch yourself a handful of lethal voltage. This place looks dangerous!"

We circled the corner, picked our way around to the rear—and ran smack into a shaft of light from a wide open door!

Willie Dunkel, the rat who had tried to bushwhack me at Brother's, was seated at a table beneath a hanging light in the center of the room. Facing the door. He was in his shirtsleeves and his candy stripe cuffs were turned up to his forearms. His fingers were busy at work and his head was bent forward so you could see the

bald spot in the middle of his fuzzy hair. He had the frame of a thirty-eight in his hand and was sliding a strip of oily gauze back and forth through the barrel. Laid out on the table was a can of gun oil, a little pile of cartridges—and the gun's cylinder.

He looked up and gaped at us as we entered.

"Well!" he exclaimed. He smirked. "Like shooting fish in a barrel! That Hammerless is foxy."

"Where's Carnavon?" the Dean demanded. "I was supposed to meet him here."

"Don't move!" The voice behind us was malignant, deadly. "Carnavon ain't here. And who cares?"

I GAVE the speaker a cut from the corner of my eye. It was Hammerless. It had to be. He looked like something out of a sideshow. A rumpled Palm Beach suit, patent leather shoes and pearl-button doeskin gloves! He had a vicious little puckered face and a tic to his cheek. He'd stepped out from behind a forge and clutched as evil a weapon as I've ever beheld—and guns are my life work. This job was a cut-down hammerless shotgun. The blue steel breech around the ejector was about as fancy a spread of gun-inlay as was ever turned out by an engraver. Flowers and medallions in gold—and in high relief.

The Dean squinted. "That'll look nice," he declared, "in a glass case in some police museum." He smiled. "Don't be under the illusion that you have trapped us. We came in because we wanted to. Your ruse was perfectly transparent." He frowned sharply at the man with the tic. "Don't fidget!"

"You mean that wiggle in his cheek?" Willie Dunkel came in helpfully. "He can't help it. It's a noxious disorder. It can't be stopped."

"Oh, yes it can!" the Dean corrected him pleasantly. He looked about him. The place was a crooked set-up if I ever saw one. All rigged out to remake a hot car so you couldn't recognize it. A pit for paint spraying. Overhead an I-beam ran from gable to gable with a running block for engine lifting. "So," the Dean declared, "so you're the boys. You brought

the truck here from Nevada and Marty wouldn't handle it."

Hammerless held silent. Willie Dunkel took on an expression of half-witted innocence. "Well, I never! What's the guy talking about?"

"I'll tell you," the Dean said. "Just as I got it from you-know-who. You boys were out of work. This bigshot, this fence—and I don't mean Marty because he's not in on the play—came to you and made a deal. He'd already fingered a job for you. A man named Townely was moving some art stuff in a van. You were to tail it in a similar truck until you got a chance, switch, and fire the substitute. You pulled it off in a rancher's barn just outside of Elko, Nevada. You left the armor as a red herring and brought the other stuff here—where the fence was waiting for it. He paid you and took it off your hands. You tried to sell the truck to Marty but it was no go. You left it at the curb by the police station."

Outside, the storm broke loose with a crack and a torrent. The walls of the shop rattled beneath the driving rain. Willie Dunkel was chalk white. "What then?"

"Much," the Dean answered. "Then came a tapped wire, a swindle with zircons—a double cross. You changed bosses. Then came murder, murder and again murder!"

The gale out over the swamp was really going to town. To our ears came the muted roar of lashing water, bumbling of thunder, the bullwhip snaps of crackling lightning. Of all of us only the Dean was oblivious to the elemental fury. He stood there, mild and affable. The queer illusion passed through my mind that maybe, after all, he knew just a little bit too much about black magic and grimouires. He was just a bit too comfortable with that squall howling about the roof. I dragged my imagination back to earth. Willie Dunkel was talking.

"We heard about you, Rock. You're supposed to be dynamite. Well, we handled you, didn't we?" He wavered, blustered: "And don't gander at me that way. I don't scare!"

"It's the evil eye," Hammerless said. "He's a voodoo. He's getting set to put the evil eye on you."

The Dean broke into a raucous laugh.

"Not me. I wouldn't do it if I could. It'd be a waste of energy. You're both dead men this minute." He assumed a solicitous manner. "One thing more—before you go: when you took Sedgwick home and placed him on the lawn, after you had strangled him, when you put him into that chair, did you see a light in the garage?"

Willie Dunkel said automatically: "Not the garage. The light was on that little side porch, the one covered with them vines."

I began to get the gist. While Willie Dunkel and his pal were robbing Aubrey Sedgwick of his forty grand, Walker was at Iris Acres lifting the rugs from the back of the coupé. He was in the act of sticking his thumbtacks on the door panel when the killers drove in with their corpse.

Hammerless spoke in alarm. "Now you went and did it! Willie Dunkel, I ain't never saw such a man for testifying. You went and spilled—"

The hood in the striped shirt smirked. "Who cares? It'll never come into no

The Dean whipped his Magnum from its shoulder clip and went into action as a one-man team.





court." His fist came out over the table top with an army automatic. "Our orders is—"

That brought on the shambles! Dunkel cursed. The Dean went into action as a one-man team. And crossed my wires for me. Dunkel had started a slow pull on his trigger. It was too much of a start for me to handle.

I delegated him to the chief and shifted my attention to the man with the shotgun. That's the way we always did it—the Dean took over the fast ones and I wheeled in and picked up the debris.

This time he did it different. He whipped his Magnum from its shoulder clip bird-wing style, up and under with

his left hand, and blasted—not Willie Dunkel—but his pal. Below the eye. It was wholly unexpected and caught all of us off balance. Hammerless smashed back into the forge, his fancy gun with its gold inlay flew from his fingers. I watched it, the Dean watched it—Dunkel watched it.

IT'S hard to put this into words. It all happened almost before we could grasp what was going on.

The next thing I knew, I was back where I started. Willie Dunkel was raising a black automatic, focusing it on my belt buckle. Dunkel wasn't my man. He was supposed to be the Dean's. It was like having a cadaver lean out of a hearse

to take a final shot at you. It was like a dream. Well, I got out my bulldog and laid in a volley before his firing pin struck. How I did it, I don't know.

The Dean was effusive in his congratulations. "Why, you're better than I ever realized—"

There was a circlet of cold sweat around my collar. "Listen," I said, "you do that to me just once more, change target on me in the middle of a release and leave me in a hole, and you'll have to get yourself another bondboy. That was the craziest trick—"

The Dean grinned. "I didn't change target. I was backlogging you all along, holding in reserve."

I was speechless. "Are you telling me you did it on purpose? Well, blast your creepy hide! If I owned a resignation I'd hand it to you right now. The next time you want to see me make a quick draw just toss up a clay pigeon."

"It wasn't entirely amusement," the Dean explained. "Hammerless was the wheelhorse of the pair. Dunkel was just a stumble bum."

He reholstered his point three-five-seven and threw a parting glance about the shop. "Malloy will be interested in learning of this thieves' den," he declared. "How will we tell him? Send him an anonymous gift card, eh?"

The gale had about threshed itself out. From out of the swamp came the sluggish odor of leaf mold and pungent, brackish slime. The moon had again cleared itself from its tangle of clouds and was climbing high. Night birds in the dripping brush resumed their ghostly talk. "Let's pay a flying visit to Fountain Court," the Dean suggested. "Things are edging towards a tumble."

"It's Carnavon I'm worried about," I declared. "What's he doing? Giving us the runaround?"

The Dean dismissed it. "Does it make any difference? First things first, Ben, my boy. Let's drop in on the wake of Russell Walker. That Mulcahey has things on her mind and I don't mean chess and fruit."

There were two ways of getting to the place. We could go back to the city and catch a cab, as any human would do—or we could jaunt cross country, around

the rim of town and save about thirty minutes. The Dean chose the fields and it's no frolic plodding rural backroads on a rainy night. We picked our way through a network of lanes and paths, hit the railroad track and followed the ties into the outskirts. It was an eerie and uncomfortable pilgrimage and gave me plenty of time to meditate. "What's it all about?" I asked. "Some new angle?"

The Dean ignored me, came out with a *non sequitur*. "What's your impression of June Mulcahey?"

"Mighty sweet!" I declared. "But so, I hear, is chloroform."

"I'm afraid you're right." The Dean sighed. "I have a growing feeling that we've been minimizing her connection with this affair. We might well reconsider her. I don't seem to be able to tie her up with this mess—yet the thought of her gives me an uneasy reaction. She's playing us somehow as dupes. Now how could that be?"

Market Alley, with its ashcans and loading platforms, fused with the misty night. A single electric light, a green bulb on a gooseneck over the rear of a pawnshop, struggled with the diaphanous haze from the river. The entrance to the passageway was a black maw as we approached it. The Dean placed his hand on my arm, stopped dead still.

Then I caught it—his keen ears had picked it out before me—the sound of footsteps coming from the cement court.

Harve Sedgwick meandered out of the entrance into the murky light, strolled lazily towards us.

"Oh!" The Dean was puzzled. "It's you! I think I advised you to stay with the others."

SEDGWICK lifted a weary hand in greeting. "I've got me a little refuge about two blocks away. A bakery where they're making up bread for the ovens. I stand by the back door and watch them. It's educational and it's a refuge."

The Dean became irritated. "Take it slower. What's all this about?"

"They're jealous over me." Sedgwick seemed troubled but flattered. "You put me in a corner. We just sit around in Miss Mulcahey's bedroom and I talk. The gals don't say anything. They just sit

there and look daggers at each other and ogle me. Like I'm the only man left on earth! Then one of them asks me something in a sugary voice and I say yes, and the other one says no, and I agree with her and *whambo!* They got me in the middle, in a cross fire. When it gets so I can't stand the pressure I take my hat and grab me some quiet."

"How long," the Dean asked sternly, "has this weird procedure been going on?"

"All evening. I've made at least eight of these here escapes."

"Well," the Dean remarked judiciously, "who am I to interfere in the puckish ballet of romance? Go your way to your educational refuge." He paused. "Will you do me a small favor while you're gone? Send a telegram for me? It must get off and be delivered immediately. The addressee is Emmet Ziggert, Caerleon Apartments. The message is: 'Irma making play for man named Sedgwick. Will be with him at Iris Acres, Hill View, about midnight.' Sign it Wardlow Rock."

Sedgwick recoiled in shocked horror. The Dean nipped his revolt in the bud. "Strictly business. Don't fail me. Thanks." He counted out some change, clinked it into his lax palm. "I'm depending on you."

We watched him falter out of sight. "What was the idea of that?" I asked.

"He's our number one boy, our chief client!" He gave a slow, lupine grin. "Give him an exciting time, say I. We've got him walking on his heels!" The Dean paused. "That telegram is double-barreled."

It was a strange scene and just about as the ex-shepherd had pictured it.

The gals were devoting themselves to a capacity job of hating each other. The Mulcahey let us in, gave us an absent-minded nod of welcome, and went back to her unfinished business. It was a very silly spectacle: Irma, arched on a little stool, her sables in her lap and her chubby bisque-doll face grimaced in disdain; the brunette, half reclining on the bed—propped in a swirl of lacy pillows—lobbing the glare right back to her. They looked like a couple of mesmerized assistants that some ham hypnotist had put the works on and then mislaid.

"Here, here!" the Dean whipped out. "What's all the heavy brooding about? What's the percentage?"

June Mulcahey looked at him through her fragile lashes. "It's that dowdy woman over there. She's a trouble maker." The girl swung out a graceful wrist, lifted a cigarette from a taboret. "Mr. Sedgwick drops in—I like him very much, by the way—and he has this woman with him. He says you sent him. He wants to teach me chess but this woman won't let him. She—"

Irma puffed. "I will too. It's only when you try to give me the brushoff. You keep saying that it's hard for you to learn when there's a third person present. You don't fool me—"

"Girls, girls!" The Dean placated them. "You are—each of you—lovely and attractive. Let's—"

"You can't have it both ways," Irma flared. "It's either her or me!"

"It's neither—for my money!" The Dean turned to the brunette. "Miss Mulcahey, it grieves me to inform you that I have been deceiving you. I am an offi-



cer of the law. I have reason to believe you are involved in a mighty nefarious project." He raised his right hand, solemnly, as though he were administering an oath. "To all it may concern, I, Wardlow Rock, by the power vested in me, place you, June Mulcahey, under probationary arrest—"

Such rigamarole! And it had her worried. "What's my crime?" she asked.

"A very serious one—*amor nummi!*" He didn't crack a smile. The phrase was a favorite of his and means, of course, simply 'love of money.'

"If you're talking about that letter, the one addressed in Russell's handwriting that I received this morning, you're wasting your breath." She was thinking fast. "It was posted last night but it came in the mail this morning after he'd died. I burned it without opening it. I haven't the slightest idea what it said." She quirked the corner of her mouth. "That's my story. Try to prove it different!"

"In that case," the Dean said blandly, "we'll call the whole thing off." He addressed Mrs. Ziggert, winked. "I'll see you, you know what I mean, at that place like we were talking about, eh?"

Shuffling footsteps smacked the cement court outside the window. Harve Sedgwick, revitalized, was returning for another act.

WE DROPPED into a hole-in-the-wall for a cup of coffee. My cuffs and sleeves were still moist and wrinkled but the chief looked handbox fresh, as immaculate as ever. "I can't get that guy Carnavon off my mind," I complained. "I really detest that man."

The Dean put down his cup. "Don't we all!" He looked about for a phone. "Perhaps he returned to our apartment. I'll give Mrs. Duffy a ring and see." He slid from his seat, made for a booth at the back. Three minutes later he returned—bewildered.

"We've a visitor, all right," he reported. "But it's not Carnavon. Mrs. D. has just been conversing with him. From her description he must look like a Latin movie star. Flashing eyes, raven hair. He's a new one on me. I can't place him. Can you? He wants to talk to you."

"What's his name?"

The Dean looked embarrassed. "She told me—but remember she was just out of bed and doubtless a little dazed with sleep. She says his name is Mr. Tea Ball—"

I shook my head. "Finally it's got her. She's gone off her rocker on the subject. It's pretty sad, isn't it?"

The Dean flushed. "Don't joke—"

"Yow!" I laughed. "I've got it. Not Tea Ball but Thibaut. The waiter at Brother's Gumbo Parlor. I wonder what he wants."

"We'll see," the Dean exclaimed. "And now. Let's get home."

It was Thibaut, all right. He greeted me with an avalanche of horsy teeth. "It's so late, so rude of me to intrude," he apologized. "You will forgive me, my friend?" He looked as though his world would crash if he had offended me.

"It's a pleasure to look at you. Anytime. Night or day!" I said it and I meant it. "What brings you out of the cellar and how did you find me?"

"Brother recognized you. He followed closely the exploits of your mentor, the efficient Mr. Rock. We respect him. We have now the opportunity of doing him a small favor. So!" He shrugged, continued: "One thing this evening, I neglected to mention to you. Last night, after the customer, whom we now know to have been a certain Walker, attempted to bribe my employer, he retired to a table and called for pencil and paper. Now, in confidence I must confess we have a specially prepared apparatus, a tablet concealing a sheet of carbon paper among its leaves. This device is purely protective. It is good for a management to know what goes on within its walls."

The Dean gave him a gentle roweling. "Of course!"

Thibaut took out a sheet of cheap yellow scrap paper. On it, in carbon transfer, was the note:

Dear June, I have the hunch I may be over my head in this business and want you to show this letter to Wardlow Rock, the fortune teller, if anything should happen to me tonight. Russell.

This was just a single sentence scrawled at the top of the page. The rest of the sheet was taken up with three childish

drawings. A fringed rug, a baby's cradle, and something that looked like a barbed spearhead. The Dean lifted it from my fingers, gave it a quick glance and roared.

"Think of that!" he exclaimed. "It was Walker's intention that I be retained!" He dismissed our guest. "Thank you," he said simply. "You have been of great value. We are deeply indebted."

Again that gusher of big, white teeth—and the swainpman was gone.

"What is this screwy note?" I asked. "A rebus?"

"No." The Dean was thoughtful. "It's a pictorial map. To show the location of the rugs. In the what-you-may-call-it, out at Sedgwick's. We really didn't need it but it simplifies our search, makes their recovery less involved."

"Maybe I'm stupid," I remarked, "but I don't seem to catch. The rugs, I grasp. The cradle, I grasp. But how do you cook up Sedgwick's from that funny looking spearpoint?"

The Dean was amused. "That's no spearpoint. That's Walker's inept try at drawing a *fleur-de-lis*, or flower-de-luce as our English variation has it. The *fleur-de-lis* is the iris. Walker is designating Iris Acres." He wagged his head. "Such a man! Such a man! So devious!"

"Devious?" I corrected him. "You mean demented."

CHAPTER FIVE

Two Derringers

THE Dean said: "Now, Ben, I'm going to pose you a question. An hypothesis. Don't be facetious—please. Give me a frank and well considered answer. Here it is: project yourself into the character of a man who plots to steal forty thousand dollars. You employ an out-of-work stenographer to case the job by sitting at a tapped wire, taking down calls. When you get the lay you hire two professional killers—say Dunkel and his partner—to abduct the victim, knock him off and rob him. Now what is the fallacy in that thesis?"

"The cast of characters is your fallacy." I tried to organize it for him. "The hoods. Those boys were bursting with ingrained larceny. No one in his right mind would

expect Dunkel and his pal to kill a man, lift his leather containing that much money, and go trotting back to their boss like a couple of well trained spaniels. When those lads touched money it stuck to their fingers! However, if their boss happened to be feeble-minded—"

"He wasn't that!"

"Then he did it the safe way. He was along on the party. To protect his wolf's share. He took charge of the loot personally and doled out the wages and vamoosed."

The Dean listened intently. "I'm afraid you're correct. Then where's the money now? Does our party have it on him?"

I laughed. "Scarcely. With Dunkel and Hammerless as threats? He's salted it away some place—and let them know he did it. Some place where they couldn't bat it out of him. I'd say he'd deposited it—with their knowledge—in a bank."

"In a bank?" The Dean considered. "It well could be. Yes. How does this sound? Two killers and an arch criminal pick up Sedgwick at Marty's. They smother him in their auto. Our party pays off his help from the plunder. They then drive by the bank where our party gets out and caches the remainder to his account. Thus securing the money and underwriting his life."

"That sounds pretty good—but for one thing," I agreed. "This crime took place at night. How—"

The Dean anticipated me. "The deposit slot for night business. There's one, I believe, at the Waterways Commercial Trust—" He blinked. "This is getting tangled! Sedgwick banked at Waterways. Bryant Henderson is one of their vice-presidents. Remember Henderson? He was mentioned in that transcript of Walker's. He sent the bonded messenger."

He furrowed his brow. "I'm afraid this calls for a bit of prying. Henderson's not going to enjoy talking to us."

But he did.

There was a string of glossy cars before the vice-president's brownstone residence. Henderson was having a quiet party. We could see them through the portières as we ascended the steps. A half-dozen florid gentlemen in full evening dress. Squatting on their haunches or crawling on their hands and knees on the

library broadloom, pushing little wooden locomotives, working miniature 'sema-phores, manipulating toy switches. "Suppress yourself," the Dean ordered. "We are on stern business. You are permitted to observe great men at their recreation."

The financier himself answered our ring. He was nimble, goatish, with blood-shot eyes. He held a small scale engine in his blue-veined fingers. Vice-president Henderson was highly annoyed at our intrusion.

The Dean hastily presented his best credentials. "I'm from the office of the Commissioner of Police. You must pardon this interruption. I see you're engaged—"

Henderson cut him down. "Quite right. I am engaged. See me tomorrow at my office. I'm entertaining a rather important group at this moment—the Brotherhood of Midget Railroaders. I resent—"

"That locomotive," the Dean diverted him, "that you have in your hand. Isn't that a reproduction of the "Stourbridge Lion," English built, which made its first and only run in 1829? I thought so. And a very nice piece of workmanship it is. Who made it?"

Henderson blushed like a schoolgirl. "I did. Do you like it? You should see my "Best Friend," trial January 15, 1831. My fellow members marvel at—"

"No doubt, no doubt." The Dean had him melted and ready to cast. "About this other matter. The Aubrey Sedgwick heirs are not exactly satisfied about the way you people handled that forty thousand—wait! No offense. Let's get this straightened out. We, the police, have reason to believe that money was stolen from Mr. Aubrey Sedgwick. And redeposited in your bank that very night. Not all of it perhaps, but most of it."

You could almost hear him think it over. "Possibly I'm being indiscreet," he decided. "But I will say this. Thirty thousand of that money *did* return to us. It was left in the night slot, in a manila envelope with slip, sometime after closing hours. The same money—no doubt of that." He looked wary. "Mr. Sedgwick's request for so much money under such strange circumstances had certain earmarks that he was being placed under duress—so we took the—er—precaution

of noting down a few numbers. There was never any complaint, however, so we made no report to anyone."

"Very circumspect," the Dean congratulated him. "To whose account, may I ask, was this thirty thousand deposited? An old patron's, perhaps?"

"No. To the credit of a gentleman who, strangely enough, opened with us earlier that very day. New business. None of the tellers seemed to be able to recall him. What he looked like, that is. His name is a rather unusual one; Emmet Ziggert Prince. Does it mean anything to you?"

The Dean took it with a grunt. "Thank you, sir." He wound up the conversation. "We're keeping you from your—ahem—playmates. Good evening. I can see you're anxious to get your Early American Hotshot back on her steel."

WE DISMISSED our cab at the lodge-gate. Back through the privet and the formal box trees, the ground floor of the Sedgwick mansion blazed in a sparkle of lighted windows. Harve had returned with his two hours, as per arrangement, and was awaiting our entry. The velvet lawn, aromatic from the recent rain and powdered silver in the moonlight, stretched past the sunken gardens, past the rose arbors, and ended at the far rear in a row of glimmering white out-buildings.

"That third building," the Dean said, "is the stable. I noticed it this evening. At one time Aubrey Sedgwick must have fancied trotters." I had the sensation that he was laughing at me in the shadows.

"Now it's racehorses!" I passed my hand across my forehead. "I feel a mutiny coming on. Do we or do we not—answer yes or no—get paid on this farcical—"

"There's money in it," he answered cheerfully. "If we live to collect it." He pushed through the foliage. "Come along. Let's case the barn." We groped our way, keeping between the tall rough cedar fence and the flanking shrubbery. "If there's a lock," the Dean reminded me, "it's all yours. But there won't be."

He was right. The handler's door was latched with a simple hasp and a wooden peg. I slipped it from its staple. Abruptly, the Dean stepped out into the open, passed

the beam of his torch back and forth over our heads. "Look," he whispered.

A black telephone wire stretched through the leafy branches of the trees. It came from the house, cleared the eave of the barn by a scant foot, and vanished in the night beyond. "There we are," the Dean said. "The last essential link."

Inside was the smell of old leather and the choking dust of chaff. We paused and got our bearings. The chief knew exactly where he was going. He passed three neat but empty stalls, strode down a cluttered corridor and drew up by a slatted compartment at the foot of the loft stairs. He grinned like a hungry salmon. "So here it is!"

"What is it?" I asked. "It looks like a cell or wooden cage."

The Dean played his flash through its crated sides. "This is Russell Walker's hiding place. As pictured on Miss Mulcahey's note. This is the 'cradle.' He was trying to draw, not a cradle but a *crib*. He just didn't know the difference. Do you?"

I passed it up. "Then, according to your logic, this is the location of the stolen Persian rugs. Now, I somehow fail to see them."

He bent his back, pushed through the little entranceway. The crib's floor, laid with huge hand hewn timbers and slotted with inch-wide cracks between the planking, was littered with a scattering of corn husks. He scuffed a heap of the husks carefully to one side.

A row of perhaps fifteen thumbtacks studded the edge of the center plank.

Loops of thin, almost invisible copper wire reached tautly from the tacks—over the lip of the timber, disappeared down the crack. The Dean knelt, inserted his finger under one of the strands, lifted gently. Up out of the slot appeared the corner of a small carpet. Just a small triangle but about the most magnificent thing I ever saw. It was red but a sort of red that shifts and changes and defies description. One moment it was warm and pulsing like the petal of a flower—the next it was cold and glowing like embered ruby. Reluctantly the Dean removed his finger, dropped it back from sight. "We'll leave them here for the time being. They're safe. The stable is built on a hillside.

There's a dead space within the foundation." He straightened, sighed. "A beautiful thing, wasn't it? And there are nine others suspended here below us just like it. No wonder Aubrey Sedgwick, respectable millionaire, took the wrong turn."

He joined me. "Upstairs. I want to see the mow."

The mow was high raftered and cob-webbed. It was like any other barn loft except for one thing: against the wall, over by the window, a broken rocking chair was pulled up to an old-fashioned sewing table. On the table was a blank stenographer's notebook and a saucer heaped with cigarette stubs. The Dean flicked his torchlight through the window pane. The black telephone wire snaked past the glass. "Here's where they made their cut-in," he said grimly. "The house wire was tapped right here. Seated on that rocking chair, Russell Walker eaves-dropped, waited for the call which was to start the chain of murders. Including his own. You see it all now, don't you? Walker, employed by—"

The quick double cough of gunfire checked him in mid-sentence. The two explosions, a *pop* and a *bam*, were almost merged. They came from below our feet. From the empty stalls. The Dean was halfway down the stairs before I overtook him.

IT WAS like the climax curtain in an old melodrama. A dim light dangling from a joist threw the brutal scene into stark actuality. Prince Ziggert, his flashy tweed coat in a rumple about his ears, sprawled spreadeagled on the floor. There was a bullet hole in his throat and his eyes were just finishing their death glaze. A little pearl-handled ladies' gun lay where he had dropped it—beneath his contorted ankle.

Montgomery Carnavon, minus umbrella but in his buckskin vest, stood over the body. There was something indefinite in his stance that gave the impression that the man was satiated with gloating. He held a chunky derringer, a gun no longer than his thumb but with a bore that you could drop a grapefruit into. "I'm unarmed," he said hastily as we burst in. "This gun carries but one shell." He

handed the derringer over to the chief.

Then we noticed it. The film of wet blood between his fingers. "You're wounded," the Dean remarked. "How—"

Carnavon laughed it off. "He just nicked my biceps. A little antiseptic will fix it. Do you suppose the people in the house would spare me a bit of bandage?"

"I'm sure they would." The Dean was bland. "May I ask what all this is about?"

Carnavon was his old jovial self again. "It was, of course, self-defense. We'll leave his pistol where it is to prove it. And you can bear witness to my innocence." He amplified. "I swear I don't understand it. I'm sitting on a park bench catching a little breeze when a car with this man driving pulls up. Ho, he says, a leather vest, eh? Then you're the man that's trailing me with murderous intent. We'll fix you up permanent, he says, hop in this car and be very good. Well, he drives me out here, walks me into this dump and throws down on me for the knockoff. He gets the first one in but I get the second. Who in the world is he?"

"That," the Dean informed him, "is Prince Ziggert. One of the men—"

"Not him!" Carnavon rejected it. "That's not Emmet Ziggert. Ziggert is about twenty years older than this man. What made you think—"

"Let it ride," the Dean said. "First things first. Let's go inside and call on Harve Sedgwick. All of us."

Lieutenant Bill Malloy intercepted us as we crossed the porch. "That fellow Vaughn," he remarked. "He's inside too. He wanted to come along and I gave him the O. K. I suspicion him of something—I don't know what."

The Dean chuckled. "This gentleman is a certain Mr. Carnavon. Permit me to present him. He has a tale to tell sweet to the ears of Homicide." He paused, his hand on the latch. "The girls are here, of course. And Snibbers. How about the lord of the manor? Is Sedgwick here?"

"No." Malloy grinned. "Not just at present. The gals got to fanging each other over him and he took a powder. Until they cooled off. He'll be back shortly."

There's something about a fireplace that attracts people. Here it was midsummer with beetles banging the window screens

and the air so steamy you could raise Guatemalan orchids and yet the entire gathering had dragged up chairs in a semi-circle around the fireless, eight-foot hearth. Someone had started it, maybe—and the others had followed suit through timidity. Irma and Vaughn and June Mulcahey sat in silence, each with a little silver platter, an uneaten sandwich and a glass of pink lemonade. The butler, resting on his elbow, had reserved himself a leaning place on the corner of the mantel.

I WAS keyed for a blow-up that didn't take place. Carnavon stood in the archway, bowing and smiling and blinking his eyes as if the glare of the crystal chandelier blinded him. Banker Vaughn gazed at him absently—like a tired executive initialing the final letter of a busy day—and brightened at the sight of the Dean. June Mulcahey was taking in everything, all of us, at the same time.

Lady Irma heaved out her buxom chest in a gust of words. "Mr. Rock! We are glad to see you again. I have things to say and no one will—"

"I will," the Dean said. "In a minute." He turned to Malloy. "This business is all over. Finished. Or is it, Mr. Carnavon?"

Carnavon started to speak, stopped, smirked helplessly.

The Dean continued: "This man, who at the present is using the name of Carnavon, is unfamiliar to me. But this I am certain of—he is a master thief. Where he came from, what his past crimes may be, are secrets which will probably remain forever hidden. This man is one of those rare specimens in the criminal world—the true lone wolf—who works alone hiring and firing professional aid as he needs it for each new job. Doubtless, until he became involved in the Townely Persians, he had no trace of record on any police register. Now, however, for the first time in his career, he has fumbled—"

The little man in the buckskin vest rolled pleading eyes about the group. "I've been wounded. My arm hurts. What's this person talking about?"

"This," the Dean accused. "I submit that you stand in our presence fresh from merciless murder. That; in this order, you did these things: You attended the Townely auction, cased his matched Ispa-

han rugs. You contacted Aubrey Sedgwick of this town—who had just finished building his mansion and was in the market for art treasures—and clinched a crooked deal. You then went ahead with the steal. You employed two killers, Dunkel and a pal of his, who stole the rugs by a substitution of moving vans and brought the goods here, to you, to the place of negotiation. The bishop's staff, the carved narwhal crosier, fascinated you; you were unable to part with it."

Carnavon raised a limp hand, wiped a smear of blood from his fingernail. The back of my neck went hoar-frost cold. I was standing to one side of him. The way he held his arm, crooked out from his side, and the way the bright chandelier lit his coat sleeve gave me a freak glimpse into his cuff. What I saw was a leather band around his forearm, about twice as broad as a wrist watch strap.

It was wrist rig for his derringer and derringer rigs usually come in pairs—one on each arm!

"What about this murder you're speaking of?" Vaughn asked casually. "Who shot whom?"

The Dean was watchful. "It seems, according to Mr. Carnavon, to have been a case of mistaken identity." He added bluntly, "Carnavon just killed Ziggert."

That started the uproar. Irma went berserk in a shrieking squall of sobbing hysterics. Banker Vaughn set his little silver platter on the floor and scrambled to his feet.

The man in the buckskin vest made his pass for the other derringer. I nailed him through his hand. And his hand was over his heart.

Malloy purpled. "You people can't do this to me! What—"

The Dean soothed him. "You're a hero. You've got the man that stole the rugs from Townely. There's a reward for their recovery, isn't there?"

The lieutenant nodded. "Plenty. But I know you, you hog! I'll never—"

"Reward?" June Mulcahey's delicate voice chiseled into the conversation. "Are you people making me some sort of a proposition? You see I happen to be the only one that knows where they are. The man that stole them from Mr. Carnavon, Russell Walker—my fiancé—wrote me a

note before he died and confessed. He drew a picture in the note to show me where he had hidden them!"

I gulped. The Dean listened with courteous attention. "And where," Malloy asked, "are they?"

Miss Mulcahey turned to the butler. "Bring out Mr. Sedgwick's cradle!" she ordered.

Snibbers dropped his jaw. "His what?"

"Cradle." Her eyes wavered. Something seemed to be going sour. "Mr. Sedgwick had a cradle, didn't he? Don't gape, all of you." She stamped her tiny heel.

The butler shook his head. "The lady's joking. Mr. Aubrey was a bachelor."

Malloy broke it up. "What's all this tom-foolery—"

"Just a mistake, Lieutenant." The Dean bared his teeth. "Anyone can make a mistake. And nothing ventured nothing gained, eh? To get back to the affair at hand: Carnavon came to me with a silly tale about being an absconder. For reasons I need not go into now, I knew he was a fake. He employed me to locate a couple of men named Ziggert and Vaughn. He claimed he had wronged them and wished to make partial retribution. Actually, he simply wanted me to put the bee on them for him. He hated them. He carried two derringers: one for Ziggert and one for Fred Vaughn."

THERE was a stunned silence.

The Dean's lips tightened. "It was a prankish fate that slew Ziggert, who was entirely innocent, and spared Banker Vaughn, spared him for the gallows!"

Vaughn interrupted. "Dr. Rock! Do you realize what you're saying?"

"I'm just beginning." The Dean beamed happily. "I'm smashing your works. And you know it. It was your thugs, at your direction and under your pay, that throttled Aubrey Sedgwick, battered Russell Walker—jugulated Quinn, the landlord." He gave it a moment to take effect.

"Be cautious," Vaughn warned. "You are wading in base canard—"

"To the contrary. These are the facts, the progressive facts. Carnavon's killers delivered the rugs to him, as I have outlined. Look at the thing a second from their angle. They deliver the Persians,

they have been paid off, they are out of work. But they have valuable knowledge. They know Carnavon now has valuable goods and that Sedgwick is about to come out with some big cash. They look up a new boss—you—and turn snake on their former employer." He spoke suavely, casually.

"You take charge. You tap Sedgwick's wire, hire a needy stenographer to sit in the stable and make telephonic transcriptions. When the tip-off message comes through, you go into action. You and your thugs waylay Sedgwick as he leaves Marty's parking lot, choke him, rob him, deposit your share of the loot under the misleading name of Emmet Ziggert Prince at The Waterways Trust—and return his corpse to the lawn here.

"But all at once things went awry. Walker, the mild little stenographer, began to get ambitions. He was in the know. While you were slaying Aubrey Sedgwick he dashed out, removed the Ispahans from the back of the chauffeur's coupé, and hid them.

"Success made Walker feel his oats. He attempted to blackmail you and was paid off in costume jewelry. He came back for more and you killed him."

Vaughn's eyebrows lowered threateningly. "You're a smart man, Dr. Rock, and a dangerous one. You can build an ironclad case—but a false one—on a tattered imagination. You belong in confinement." He added thoughtfully, "May I comment? There's a weakness in your logic. You state definitely that Emmet Ziggert was clean—"

"Absolutely innocent. I'll take an oath on it—"

"Well, I'll tell you that Ziggert and I were together that night. Together every minute."

Lady Irma gave us a weepy nod. "It's true. I swear it. I asked him next morning where he had been and he said all evening with Fred. If he were alive he'd tell you the same thing."

"No doubt he would," the Dean agreed. "A barefaced lie to save his vanity. But he wasn't. He was out haggling with a couple of Vaughn's stooges over some zircons. This was Vaughn's cleverest play. In one stroke he gets Ziggert out of the way and shames him in a gyp deal

so that he's eager to lie about his whereabouts—"

Banker Vaughn, face writhing, went for his waistband.

"Grab the sky! I'm a road agent!" Snibber yelled his way into the picture. He was standing stocklegged, his right hand raised stiffly before him, leveling a gigantic, old-style Western six-gun straight into our midst. He pulled the trigger: *click*. An empty chamber. It was a silly spectacle, over in a split second.

But a split second was all that Bill Malloy needed. Vaughn went down against the firedogs with four police slugs in his chest.

"At last," the Dean said, "he has consulted an expert in phthiozoics. Phthiozoics, Benton, is the killing of harmful animals.

"Just odds and ends," the Dean said after a pause. "You can have them if you want them. Carnavon's motive is obvious: he got rooked by Vaughn. That's why he came to me. Quinn was killed by Dunkel and his pal in a last minute decision that Walker had taken the rugs back to his rooming house. Vaughn followed up their fruitless visit, intending to make a check of his own. . . . Now I have a question to ask. Snibbers, where in heaven's sphere did you pick up that single-action relic and where did you acquire that grotesque jargon about road agents and sky grabbing?"

The butler was his old aloof self. "I'm glad I was of small assistance, sir. I teach Mr. Harve chess—he teaches me Montana."

"And that," the Dean decided, "is more than enough for one day. I'll see Mr. Sedgwick in the morning." He turned to Irma, gave her a cheerful pat on the shoulder. "Don't cry. You'll be much happier without him. Did you know Emmet left you quite a large endowment? An insurance company's going to pay it to you. You helped them find some rugs that they mislaid."

Outside, through the open window, someone was whistling *Home on the Range*.

"Our host returns! I leave him to you, Miss Mulcahey—to dispose of as you deem proper and advantageous. Good-night."