

A-DELL BOOK

DELL

303

The MIRABILIS DIAMOND

JEROME ODLUM



WITH CRIME MAP ON BACK COVER

A DELL MYSTERY





THE MIRABILIS DIAMOND

Persons this *Mystery* is about—

JOHN STEELE,

tall, gray-eyed, black-haired Hollywood private detective, has a new client of whom his secretary Betsy heartily disapproves. Steele has just been hired to locate the missing archeologist, Royal Xavier Adams, who recently found the Mirabilis Diamond.

BETSY CARNES,

Steele's plain-faced secretary, who is almost constantly angry, doesn't always succeed in hiding her affection for her employer. She feels her pay is highly incommensurate with that of a combination Bertillon expert, secretary, errand boy, liar, and all-around punching bag.

THE PROFESSOR,

lean and sinewy, with sunken cheeks and small, deep-set cold blue eyes, decides Steele is the man to trail the missing archeologist. Steele also has a chance to make \$10,000 if he can clear the professor of a murder suspect charge.

CLARENCE,

one of the professor's bodyguards, is swarthy, sleek, and ratty-looking. He seldom talks and wields a sharp knife at the slightest provocation.

ALBERT,

wooden and pasty-faced, is the professor's other bodyguard. He dresses like Clarence and stands with his arms crossed trying to look sinister.

CLAIRE ADAMS,

who identifies herself as the archeologist's daughter, is a slender, lovely creature whose brown eyes contrast startlingly with her wheaten hair. Her manner is provocative.

GORDON LEON EUSTACE,

a lawyer who is "just a friend" to Claire, has a reputation for being too punctual for his own good.

(Continued on next page)

THE MIRABILIS DIAMOND

Persons this *Mystery* is about—cont.

STANLEY O'HARA
red-haired and freckle-faced, is a person Steele is sure he has seen somewhere before.

HENRY CORDELL,
tall, blond diamond merchant whose eyes are usually cold and sharp when he looks at Steele, upsets a well-laid plan.

CAPTAIN HEGG,
of the Hollywood police, is a corpulent man with keen little eyes in a fat, placid face. He sometimes thinks he reads the wrong sort of detective novels.

RICARDO MARTINEZ,
night watchman, is an aged Mexican who gives tender care to the only letter he ever received. He cannot read.

HOP LEE,
a bartender in Puerto Raton, is a flat-faced, expressionless Chinese of indeterminate age.

ARTURO TORREON,
pier master at Puerto Raton, is fat and untidy of person and hair. When he goes on a bender, he gets around.

HARKNESS AND ST. SAEN,
of the Hollywood police, are plain-clothes men assigned to Hegg.

GUILLERMO VARGAS,
polite Puerto Raton policeman, is a man who seems to know what he is doing.

THE MIRABILIS DIAMOND

What this *Mystery* is about—

• • • A million-dollar DIAMOND that spells death for at least four people . . . A nice white CALLING CARD tacked to the door of the home of a man who is trying to hide . . . A BODY grotesquely sprawling . . . A dish of MARGARINE deeply crisscrossed with the blade of a knife . . . A DROP OF BLOOD on white tiling . . . A LETTER in a fold of waterproof silk lying on a table, meaning that another man is probably dead . . . METAL NAILS protesting loudly as board is ripped from board . . . PLASTER CASTS of footprints and tire treads—but whose? . . . Scrawny-necked, fierce-eyed BUZZARDS ever circling in the air—afraid to light.

Wouldn't You Like to Know—

- Why a man who wishes to hide leaves a trail a mile wide behind him?
- About the Mirabilis Diamond which has a history of violence and death?
- Who or what Ifnis are?
- Why Claire is so kittenish about telling John Steele where she lives?
- Why, for once, Eustace should have been late?
- What old Ricardo could know that makes the situation so precarious for someone else?

(Continued on next page)

THE MIRABILIS DIAMOND

What this *Mystery* is about—cont.

- Why a gaunt mongrel kept the circling buzzards from lighting in the dry wash?
-

YOU will learn the answers in this story of John Steele, Hollywood "private eye" who doesn't like the man who paid him a fat retainer fee, and who doesn't like that man's bodyguards. How John Steele solves the secret of the Mirabilis Diamond makes a story filled with swift action, gunplay, puzzlement—with a payoff that will surprise.

A DETECTIVE JOHN STEELE MYSTERY

.....

THE MIRABILIS DIAMOND

By JEROME ODLUM

Author of "Night and No Moon,"
"The Morgue Is Always Open,"
"Each Dawn I Die," etc.

Author's Dedication—

To my good friends
Sanford M. Furrow,
James Cox, Mona Cox

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THE MIRABILIS DIAMOND

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The Mirabilis Diamond

Chapter One

THE CADAVER-FACED CLIENT

THE TALL, LEAN MAN with the cadaverous face and the sunken eyes paused in the hallway outside the office door while his two sleek little companions, one dark, one pasty fair, pushed inside. Betsy Carnes, the secretary, had a glimpse of the tall man while the door opened and shut. Below the raised windows, Hollywood and Vine banged and rattled and squealed to morning traffic.

The pale little man ran his eyes over the reception room, like a white rat scenting for food. His dark companion remained at the closed door.

Betsy eyed them suspiciously. "Something for you?"

The dark little man's eyes felt of her, probed her, found her unimportant, and cast her aside. He motioned the white rat toward the closed door of the private office.

Betsy jumped up. "Oh, no, you don't! Not without being announced."

The dark little man caught her and gagged her with his palm. Before she could bite him, he had forced her back into her chair and had raised his hand threateningly. Betsy, her plain, sharp face suddenly colorless with hate, found a hidden button under the desk and pressed it three times.

Inside the private office, John Steele snatched a .38 police special from the drawer of his desk, then moved,

silent and quick for all his height, to the private entrance that opened into the hallway.

The tall man with the sunken eyes waited alertly outside the door to the reception room, his back to John Steele, his attention obviously centered on whatever was occurring inside. Steele had the pistol against the waiting man's back before the private door clicked shut. The stranger sighed and raised his hands to half-mast. Steele's free hand closed over the other's collar.

Steele snapped, "Open the door."

They marched into the reception room, Steele using the stranger with the sunken eyes as a shield. Betsy looked up from her desk and smiled sardonically, then indicated the open door of the private office. The white rat scurried back into the reception room, stared at the pistol, and reluctantly raised his hands. The sunken eyes glared their fury at the white rat.

Steele said, "Get back in there."

As they entered the private office, the dark little man looked around in sudden alarm from peering into the corridor. One hand jerked unconsciously toward his shoulder.

The sunken eyes blazed. "Clarence!" The dark little man's hand dropped to his side. The tall intruder turned to the white rat. "That goes for you, too, Albert."

Steele's gun remained against the other's back. "What is this?"

The man with the sunken eyes turned in Steele's grasp and eyed Steele appraisingly. "I'm not disappointed in you, Mr. Steele." He nodded to himself, eyes approving. "You rise to any occasion. I can use you."

Steele's gray eyes flashed angrily. The muscles rippled under the blue of his heavy, closely shaved beard.

"Maybe I have something to say about who can use me."

The other tired of the neck-twisting position, and turned his face from Steele. "Before we get down to business, I suggest you put that gun away and release my collar. I'm here to employ you, not fight you." He had been speaking to the wall, but now his neck once more twisted until he could look at John Steele. "My bodyguards are here to protect me, not to threaten or intimidate you."

"Protect you from what?"

"I have enemies, Mr. Steele. I could not come into your office until my men had made certain this was no trap."

John Steele's grip remained firm on the other's collar. He blackly studied the two little bodyguards, then again addressed the lean man with the sunken eyes. "If you're here to hire me, I don't recognize the symptoms."

"If you will release my collar, Mr. Steele—"

Steele hesitated a moment, then released the other's collar. Clarence, the swarthy little bodyguard, slipped a pocketknife from his trousers, opened it, took up a stand at the door leading into the corridor, smirked nastily, and began paring his nails. The white rat, Albert, closed the reception room door, crossed his arms, and leaned against the jamb.

Steele moved to his desk and sat down and placed the pistol in the drawer. Significantly, he did not close the drawer. Below the windows, the sound of morning traffic took on an added hysteria. In the distance, look-

ing north and east beyond the roofs of Hollywood, the foothills lay fresh and green against the April sky; and, like an aged man with hoary head, Mount Baldy raised its snow-capped peak in the dimming distance. From somewhere, a newsboy barked like a sea lion.

The man with the sunken eyes straightened his collar and flashed angry eyes at Clarence and Albert.

"If this had been a trap—"

Clarence and Albert avoided his eyes. He moved to the customer's chair and sat down. He was in his late fifties or early sixties—lean and sinewy, with sunken cheeks and small cold blue eyes in their deep sockets. An odor of toilet water originated either from the white handkerchief peeping from the upper pocket of his coat or from his freshly shaved face.

He extracted a long slim panatela from the vest of his loose-fitting double-breasted gray business suit. Deliberately, he snipped off the end, dropped it into an ash tray, and snapped a silver lighter. He studied John Steele over the tip of the little flame.

"A man is missing. I want you to locate him."

Steele glanced contemptuously at the two little men guarding the entrances to the office, then turned back to their master. "Who sent you here, professor?"

The little flame glittered red against the sunken eyes. "Perhaps I read about you in the newspapers."

Steele looked scornful. The other lighted the cigar, then took off his big gray hat and placed it carefully on the desk.

Steele asked, "What's the missing man's name?"

"Royal Xavier Adams."

"Where was he last seen?"

"In Mexico."

"An American?"

"Yes."

Steele waited. The other offered nothing further. Steele's fingers tapped on the desk. "Mexico's a pretty big country."

"You'll accept the case?"

"Where in Mexico?"

The sunken eyes went thoughtful. Clarence completed his impromptu manicure, and began flipping the open knife into the air and catching it in the flat of his palm. Albert, wooden and without expression, stood at the door to the reception room, arms crossed at his chest, pale eyes alert. The little men wore similar clothing—dark double-breasted suits, pearl-gray hats, white shirts, conservative neckties, immaculately shined black oxfords.

The tall, lean man turned his deep-set eyes on John Steele. "I tell you this with reluctance and the request you treat it with strictest confidence— He was in Puerto Raton last Monday night. Since then, he has been missing."

"Puerto Raton, *Baja California*?"

The other frowned questioningly. "Eh?"

Steele eyed him appraisingly. "That's the Mexican name for Lower California."

"Oh, yes—in Lower California."

"Where had he been before that?"

"In Yucatan for the past twenty-two years."

"That's a long way from Puerto Raton. What does he do for a living?"

"He's an archeologist."

Steele studied the ceiling for a moment. "Royal Xavier Adams. Archeologist— Name's familiar."

He got to his feet and opened the door of the reception room. Betsy looked up from her open dictation book, pencil poised. Indignation flooded her face.

Steele began, "Did we read something or other about—"

She interrupted crossly. "No."

He looked at her a moment, an angry young woman with flashing gray eyes and a mouth that had thinned disapprovingly. The severe business suit and the crisp white blouse blended with her mood.

Steele thanked her curtly and closed the door.

"The perfect secretary." He sat down at his desk.

The tall client reached tolerantly for the switch of the interoffice communications system, and closed it.

His tone was mildly censorious. "I don't care to have our conversation transcribed."

Steele ignored the occurrence. "Is Adams endowed by any college or research group?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Has he any connections at all in this country?"

"I don't know. I have very little information on him."

Steele nodded thoughtfully. "He'll be hard to find if he's been out of the country twenty-two years. Have you a picture of him?"

"No."

"What does he look like?"

"I don't know."

Steele frowned. "You've never even seen him?"

"No."

"Have you checked with the newspapers and wire services?"

"Yes. They have nothing beyond a report he was leav-

ing Progreso, Yucatan, for the United States. That report proved in error. Instead of coming to this country, he went to Puerto Raton, and then disappeared only a few hours later."

"Are you certain he was actually there?"

The other smiled enigmatically and quoted a familiar line from the newspapers. "My information came from usually reliable sources."

Steele's quick anger jumped from his eyes. "You aren't giving me much to work on."

"I'm giving you what little I have."

"If you'll name your usually reliable sources, I may be able to pick up a thread from there."

The sunken eyes blinked solemnly. "My source of information would be of no value to you."

Steele's anger exploded. "Go ahead and be mysterious. The less you tell me, the longer it will take me to find Adams, and the more it will cost you."

The other sighed, but did not comment further. Steele glanced irritably at Clarence and Albert, then turned back to their master.

"Why do you want to locate Adams?"

"My reason cannot be given at the moment."

Steele got to his feet. "Look, professor—a private detective can do only so much. He has to have some cooperation. And I'm not getting any from you."

"Professor." The other smiled, pleased, glanced around at the two little bodyguards, then turned back to John Steele. "I like that."

Steele ignored the aside. "You're deliberately withholding information; yet you expect the impossible."

"I'm sure you'll have very little trouble."

"I'm in a better position to judge than you."

The professor nodded agreeably. "If I had more information, I shouldn't be here to employ you."

Exasperated, Steele lowered himself into his chair, and glared at Albert and Clarence. The knife described its arc.

Steele turned to the professor. "What's the matter with George Raft and Peter Lorre—or have all of you just been seeing too many movies lately?"

The small eyes became wistful. "Clarence does get such a comfort from his knife." He sighed and puffed at the cigar. "Charming boys, both of them."

Steele snapped, "Well, knife-throwing makes me nervous, and if charming Clarence doesn't put that thing away, he's going to pick himself up out in the hall."

The other turned and spoke mildly. "Put your knife away, Clarence. It seems to annoy Mr. Steele."

Clarence scowled blackly at Steele, but pocketed the knife. Steele caught the glint of metal in a shoulder holster. He turned back to his prospective client.

"I don't like this setup." His hand indicated Albert and Clarence. "I'm not anxious to take the case."

The professor spoke gently. "I'm willing to pay more than generously, Mr. Steele."

Several seconds passed before Steele could make up his mind. And then he spoke in a manner deliberately calculated to discourage the other. "If I'm going down to *Baja California* on a wild-geese chase like this, I'll have to be paid in advance. I probably won't find your man, and in any event it will cost you more than it could ever be worth."

"Let me be the judge of its worth, Mr. Steele." The cold little eyes glittered. "How much would you want

in advance?"

"Four hundred dollars."

The other hesitated. "Isn't that rather steep?"

Steele eyed him narrowly. "I told you it would cost more than it could ever be worth."

The sunken eyes contemplated the hills of Hollywood. "You were highly recommended to me, Mr. Steele. I paid a police officer twenty-five dollars for your name." Without looking around, he reached behind his back. "Four hundred dollars, Albert."

The pale-eyed little bodyguard unearthed a thick wallet and counted out four one-hundred-dollar bills. His master placed them on the desk.

Steele considered the money and the client, then rang for Betsy. She came to the door. Her eyes carefully avoided the three strangers.

Steele said, "Your receipt book, Betsy?"

She did not move, but her eyes blazed angrily at Steele. Then she indicated Clarence, but when she spoke she addressed John Steele.

"This little rat put his hands on me when I tried to stop them from breaking in on you. He pushed me in the face. He shoved me into my chair. He threatened to hit me."

Steele turned from Betsy to Clarence, then climbed slowly to his feet and walked around the desk. "You put your hands on her and pushed her in the face? You shoved her around and threatened to hit her?"

Clarence's lips curled back. His hands cocked at his waist.

Steele caught the lapels of Clarence's coat, sealing the gun under his armpit, and slapped him twice, first with the open palm, then with the knuckles—two

hard, ringing blows that left frightened white imprints on each cheek.

Clarence struggled for his gun. Albert jumped threateningly forward. Their master spoke sharply and with authority. "Clarence! Albert! That will do!"

Both froze.

Steele, his grip tight on Clarence's lapels, opened the private entrance and propelled Clarence into the hallway. The door closed.

The client looked up, eyes languid, but with cold amusement touching the thin lips. "Very chivalrous, Mr. Steele."

Betsy waited stonily.

Steele returned to the desk, picked up the four hundred dollars and the hat and handed them to the other.

"I don't want the case, professor. I don't like you or your two gunsels. Take them to hell out of here and don't come back." He started for his chair, then added an afterthought. "And tell that cop not to do me any more favors."

Betsy regarded Steele with approval.

The client, undisturbed, replaced his hat on the desk, and showed no signs of leaving. The sunken blue eyes considered the four hundred dollars.

"This is a large sum to refuse, Mr. Steele."

"I didn't have it when I got up this morning. I can go to bed without it tonight."

"But can you go to bed as happy financially as you might otherwise?"

For answer, Steele simply indicated the door. The client sighed, then reached again behind him.

"Another hundred dollars, Albert."

The hundred dollars was placed in the reaching

hand. He turned and placed it with the other bills, spread them on the desk, and looked up at Steele.

"Now, what do you say to that, Mr. Steele?"

The big detective considered the money, turned to Betsy, saw the fresh anger, hesitated another instant, and sat down. Betsy regarded him with scorn.

He muttered, "Keep your Clarence out of here."

Disgusted, Betsy found the receipt book, and slammed back into the reception room. Steele lighted a cigarette, then poised a pencil over the receipt book. "What's your name?"

The other considered the question. "You called me professor. That will do."

Steele snapped, "Professor what?"

The client shrugged, smiling. "Just professor."

Steele appraised him. "Maybe I'm getting into something five hundred dollars won't cover. Maybe this fee will look pretty sick when I learn the answer to the questions I asked."

The professor laughed shortly. "Nonsense, Mr. Steele! You're to do nothing but locate a missing person."

"That isn't worth five hundred dollars."

"It is to me."

Steele worked his mouth and looked undecided. "I don't suppose there's any use asking your address or how I will reach you."

The enigmatic smile returned.

Steele tore up the receipt and threw it on the floor. "How am I expected to locate you when I want to make a report?"

The professor got to his feet. "Ah, Mr. Steele—that's where I hold the advantage. I'll locate you."

Steele rose slowly, eyes suspicious. "You're being very clever, professor. Watch out you don't outsmart yourself."

The other smiled questioningly. "Your meaning is vague."

Steele studied him for a moment before replying. "You've overpaid me; and people never do that unless they expect some crooked service in return. I don't perform crooked services. And if I find myself involved in something shady, I turn the client over to the police."

The little blue eyes glittered in their sockets; the long, lean legs moved to the private entrance. Albert pulled open the door. In the hallway, Clarence's eyes blazed everlasting hatred at Steele. The white marks on the dark cheeks had now become a deep crimson. In a fury, Clarence hurled his cigarette to the tile floor and stamped on it and flung Steele another malevolent look.

The professor turned at the door. His lips twisted into a thin smile. "I think you'll enjoy this case, Mr. Steele. If you're half the detective I've heard, you'll especially enjoy the denouement."

He turned. Albert followed him into the hall. The door clicked shut.

Steele bent over the interoffice telephone and, ignoring the switch his client had previously closed, spoke into the screen. "Get all that, Betsy?"

Her voice rasped over the speaker. "Unless you can read shorthand, it won't make much difference whether I did or not."

Steele reached beneath the eave of the desk, located a hidden switch, and shut off the intercom. He pocketed the five hundred dollars and stepped into the recep-

tion room. Betsy's purse lay on her desk. She was pulling on her hat.

Steele eyed her questioningly. "What's eating you?"

She glared angrily and turned to a small mirror on the wall. "I quit."

Steele regarded her for a moment, then found some coins in his pocket and rattled them up and down in his hand.

He said, "I can't choose my clients. They just walk in."

Betsy swung contemptuously. "And you're supposed to be tough! That greasy little bandit comes in here and pushes me around and threatens me, and what do you do? You slap his face and bar him from the office." Her eyes flashed indignantly. "My schoolteachers used to handle the tough boys rougher than that."

Steele glared darkly, obviously upset. "Do you know how the bank balance stands?"

Her anger rose. Her eyes became more accusing. "You don't need to use that excuse. I've waited longer than this for my pay, and I've never complained yet."

Steele rattled the coins some more. "Did you ever hear of the landlord and the telephone company and the stationer?"

"They've waited, too." She turned back to the mirror, fingers struggling futilely with the hat. "I've seen you throw clients out bodily—clients who were gentlemen compared to those greasy little worms and that long-gearred snapping turtle. You're going soft. You're getting like all the other phonies who drift to Hollywood—can't stand up for your principles if it means losing one dirty dollar. You should have stayed in New York."

Steele looked down at the coins in his hand, then shoved them into his pocket. "Relax. We've got to eat."

Betsy's fingers abandoned their frantic struggle. She turned to him, eyes smoldering. "So for an extra hundred dollars, your clients can push your secretary around, too!"

He interrupted her by flinging an arm across her sharp shoulders and absently kissing her on the mouth.

"You'd better take a couple hours off and find a good man. You're getting neurotic."

She stiffened and jumped from him. He stood back, grinning, and jingled the coins in his pocket. Her lower lip trembled; her eyes suddenly looked down at the floor.

He tossed three one-hundred-dollar bills on the desk in front of her. "Pay yourself a week in advance. Spread the rest among the wolves."

She looked up. "I wish you hadn't taken the case, Mr. Steele."

He nodded, humoring her. "Maybe I'll wish I hadn't, too; but Royal Xavier Adams evidently has something your long-gearred snapping turtle wants pretty bad. I'd like to find out what it is."

Betsy's armor closed around her. She snapped, "And you're going to turn him over to that lanky rattlesnake and those two little spiders."

Steele hesitated, then said softly. "I'll decide about that after I've located Royal Adams."

"But you're going into this stone-blind."

He moved into the private office, and returned with the .38 police special and a shoulder holster.

"Not too blind, Betsy."

She looked at him a moment, then reluctantly low-

ered herself to her desk and pulled off the hat. Steele shucked his jacket and strapped the holstered gun under his left armpit.

"While I'm gone, check the newspapers and wire services for everything they have on Royal Xavier Adams. Phone or telegraph all the archeological societies and archeologists for a line on him. Check for his family. Try the State Department in Washington for a passport issued twenty-two years ago. I'll phone you sometime tomorrow afternoon."

Betsy looked puzzled. "Tomorrow afternoon? Where on earth are you going?"

He climbed back into his coat. "Down to Puerto Raton."

Chapter Two

THE WORLD SEEKS SENOR ADAMS

OUTSIDE THE TOWN of Puerto Raton, the reddish-brown adobe houses—low, squat, flat of roof—cling like a scabrous growth to the side of the highway. And the land is barren of trees and flowers and the green of breathing plants; and the grass pushes its shoots at the sun, lives a verdant moment, and becomes brown and dry, like the houses and the hills and the soil beneath the feet. Here, children scabble in the dirt and cry out and fight bloodless battles; and the dogs, the goats, the cows, the horses roam from yard to unfenced yard. And fat women stand, bare of foot, on their doorsteps or over mean, parched little gardens, while their men lounge in the sun. And an odor of salt flats and fish and cooking food hovers about those houses nearest the water line, thinning to a scent not unlike stale incense when the wind shifts and cleanses itself in the mesquite of the interior. And buzzards wheel overhead, dark threats against the blue. And the mountains stride south beside the restless sea.

At Puerto Raton, the haphazard pavement ends, and even the main street of the town is packed earth. From the lower end of the town a highway emerges and dips around boulders and into dry washes and becomes an aimless track that wanders the length of *Baja California* to San José del Cabo at the tip of the peninsula—a track for the most part impassable except for the most rugged of automobiles and for the traveler who

carries his own water and gasoline and oil.

John Steele piloted his little Ford coupé down the main street of Puerto Raton, his sharp eyes scanning the low, one-story buildings that make up the business section. At the end of a cross street, the largest building in the town—the three-story brick warehouse that supplied the entire area—stood between civilization and the forbidding foothills to the east. In the other direction, toward the sea, he could make out the Playa del Rey Hotel, a luxurious, rambling two-story structure maintained almost solely by vacationers from the Hollywood motion picture colony and by wealthy Europeans awaiting admission into the United States. Appropriately, the hotel stood a hundred yards back from the beach, and, quite aloof from the town, was served by its own private road.

Steele parked his car at the corner and got out. A knot of native men in faded overalls or nondescript trousers and black hats regarded him stolidly. He looked at the little cluster of buildings, then swung into a corner bar.

He found a stool and sat down at the long mahogany bar. The bartender, a flat-faced, expressionless Chinese of indeterminate age, poured whisky for a group of male patrons gathered along the rear section of the bar. An overalled native youth rested on a broom and gazed vacantly out the window at the scabby establishments across the wide dirt street.

The bar was barny and bare and dank, with an odor of stale beer and human bodies and decaying timbers. Sunlight fingered through the streaked windows, but found the effort too exerting and expired weakly on the floor. An aged dog suddenly hoisted itself erect un-

der one of the stools, cocked a hind leg, and searched out a flea. As the leg thumped against the floor, the dog's eyes blissfully closed, and the mouth lengthened in a contented smile.

Steele looked around while the Chinese bartender waited on his patrons. The building was old and dilapidated, but held an excellent stock of liquor on the back bar. Beer signs proclaimed one brand *el mejor en el mundo*—the best in the world. A few wire-legged tables and chairs had been scattered about. A pot-bellied stove stood black and cold in a far corner. Steele lighted a cigarette and shoved back his hat.

The Chinese left his customers and, squinting through thick spectacles, approached Steele expectantly.

Steele found himself suddenly at a loss and searched for the right words. "Ah—give me a *vaso de cerveza*."

The bartender regarded him archly, then spoke in the thick accent of New York's lower East Side. "Whatcha want—a beer?"

Steele's eyes twinkled. He nodded and searched a dollar bill from his pocket. The Chinese opened a cooler and wiped off a cold, dripping bottle of Mexican beer, then uncapped it and filled a glass.

Steele asked, "Native New Yorker, aren't you?"

The bartender rang up the sale and placed the change before Steele. "Ever hear of Pell Street?"

"Naturally."

"My old man runs a hand laundry just off Pell and Mott. I went to P. S. 23."

Steele drank from his glass and smiled, pleased. "Old home week in Mexico!"

"You from New York, too?"

Steele nodded. "Kew Gardens. I worked for the *Sun*."

For the first time, the Chinese permitted his expression to change. He grinned. "I used to rush the growler for the gang in the pressroom when I was a kid."

"At the Readaway Bar?"

The Chinese nodded, pleased. "You sure know that neighborhood." He wiped his hand on his apron and extended it to Steele. "My name's Hop Lee."

Steele shook hands. "I'm John Steele."

"Down here on a vacation?"

Steele unearthed a business card. "No, I've got a detective agency in Hollywood. I'm looking for a man named Royal Xavier Adams."

Hop accepted the card. He hesitated a moment, examining the card, then looked up at Steele. "That right? You're the second party who's been in here asking about him today."

"Oh?" Steele tried to seem casual. "Who was the other party?"

"Just a girl. I didn't get her name."

Steele nodded, his interest not too apparent. "What was she like?"

Hop shrugged. "Blond. Young. Pretty good-looking."

"Did she say why she wanted Adams?"

"No. First she wanted Ricardo Martinez. I guess he couldn't tell her much, because she came back asking if I knew where Adams went after he left Ricardo's."

"Did you know?"

Hop shook his head. "Naw. I sent her down to see the pier master."

"He knows?"

Hop shrugged. "Could be. He sees everybody that comes and goes by ship. And there was a ship at the pier the night Adams turned up missing."

"Did you know Adams?"

"Never heard of him till Ricardo came in here the morning after Adams disappeared." He peered through the thick lenses. "Say, what gives? Is that diamond hot?"

Steele shot him a glance. "Come again?"

"The big diamond Adams was supposed to of had."

Steele shook his head. "You're shooting them at me too fast, Hop."

"Didn't you know about that rock?"

"No."

The Chinese paused. "Ricardo said it looked like a searchlight."

"Did Ricardo say how Adams got it?"

Hop nodded. "There was supposed to of been quite a history that went with it. Indian burial mounds or something like that." He eyed Steele. "Must be worth plenty gelt."

"How big?"

Hop formed an apple with the thumbs and forefingers of both hands. Steele showed disbelief. Hop nodded earnestly. "That's what Ricardo said."

"But what would a diamond like that have been doing in an Indian burial mound? The Indians didn't have diamonds."

Hop removed his spectacles. "Don't ask me. He even had a name for it—Miraculous, or something like that."

"Miraculous is right— What did Adams look like?"

"I never saw him." Hop breathed on one of the lenses

and began polishing it with his handkerchief.

"When did he disappear?"

The Chinese looked into the past. "Let's see. About last Monday night— Yeah. Ricardo came in here about him Tuesday morning after work, so it must of been last Monday night."

"He was looking for Adams?"

Hop finished cleaning his glasses and replaced them. "Yes. He said he left Adams at the house and went to work around seven Monday night. When he come home Tuesday morning, Adams had pulled out."

"What does Ricardo do?"

"Night watchman at the warehouse."

"Where does he live?"

"Take the south road through town. He's in the first place on the right after you cross the dry wash; but if you're gonna talk with him you better take Joaquin along." He indicated the overalled Mexican youth leaning on the broom. "Ricardo don't speak no English."

Steele glanced around at the young Mexican, then turned back to Hop. "Do you know where the girl is staying?"

Hop lighted a cigarette. "Probably at the Playa del Rey—maybe at the Bolivar."

"Alone?"

Hop shrugged. "You've got me."

"Is she driving?"

The Chinese started to nod, then turned toward the window nearest the bar, and pointed for Steele to look. A long, cream-colored Packard convertible had just driven up and parked. Now, the car door opened, and a slender blonde stepped out and headed for the swing-

ing doors. Hop exchanged a significant glance with Steele, then looked toward the swinging doors.

The girl entered. For a moment she became silhouetted by the brightness of the outdoors. Her white linen dress failed to conceal the slender, lovely form. Then the doors swung closed behind her and she turned to the bar and seated herself several stools removed from Steele. Hop moved quickly to her.

She smiled, half amused, half exasperated. "Now I can't find the pier master."

Hop said, "Ain't he down at the pier?"

Wistfully, she shook her head; and the red curving lips remained in a half smile. For a moment, the brown eyes touched John Steele—brown eyes that startlingly contrasted the bright wheaten hair; then they turned back to Hop.

"Do you know where he is?"

Hop turned to the Mexican youth leaning on the broom. "Hey, Joaquin—where's the pier master?"

The youth came to sudden life. White teeth flashed. He said a single word. "*Borracho.*"

Hop turned helplessly to the girl and shrugged. "He's on a bender."

A frown marred the pretty face. "Where does he live?"

"In that shack at the sea end of the pier, but he never goes there while he's fighting booze. Afraid somebody might put him to work."

"Do you know where he usually goes?"

Hop rubbed his chin. "He mighta got a ride to Tijuana, but you can't tell. When he drinks, he gets around."

A smile ruefully entered the dark eyes. "How long

do his benders last?"

"Till he runs out of money." Hop turned back to Joaquin. "Did he have much money, Joaquin?"

The youth nodded, pleased at receiving this attention. "Si—twenty American dollars. Much money."

The girl defeatedly shook her head. "I suppose there's nothing to do but wait." Her eyes again touched upon John Steele. Then she turned away and ordered a Tom Collins. Hop left.

Steele caught the girl's eye. "You're having a big time not finding people, aren't you?"

She hesitated, as if she were uncertain whether or not she should answer. He pushed his advantage while she hesitated, and moved with his beer to the seat beside her.

"I understand," he added, "you're looking for Royal Adams."

Caution entered those contrastingly dark eyes. "Do you know where he is?"

"Not right this minute, but I have hopes."

She laughed musically and tossed her corn-colored hair. "You have plenty of self-confidence. He has disappeared without leaving a trace."

"Nobody disappears without leaving a trace. Some trails are easy to pick up; others are hard. That's all."

She studied him a moment, her eyes mildly amused, mildly cautious, as if she were extending him an invitation to intimacy, yet paradoxically holding him at arm's length. She asked, "Why do you want him?"

Steele swizzled his beer and shook his head. "That comes under the heading of confidential business."

She seemed piqued for the instant. Then the promise grew in the dark eyes, and she shifted nearer. Her voice

took on a warmer note. "Who are you?"

Steele smiled and himself shifted nearer and felt the material of his coat brush against her shoulder and her arm. He looked down at the bright face. She colored and looked away, but did not break the contact.

Steele said, "My name is John Steele."

The dark eyes reflected approval. "M-m-m, nice. My name is Claire."

Steele raised his beer to his lips and regarded her over the rim of the glass. "Doesn't anything else go with it?"

Her head cocked over toward him, and she regarded him out of the corners of her eyes.

"That comes under the heading of confidential business."

Steele smiled approvingly. "You and I are going to get along, Claire."

Her response carried a challenge and a promise. "Are we?"

The approval grew in his gray eyes. "Will you be here for a while?"

She pointed to the bar. "You mean right here in this sink of iniquity?"

"Yes."

"Until the pier master comes back." Hop slid the Tom Collins in front of her. She smiled as she picked it up. "Unless I get too many of these and disappear myself."

Steele dragged himself off the stool. The girl turned slowly and watched him.

Steele said, "I have to go out for a while. I want to see some people. Will you wait till I come back?"

She nodded. "I'll be here."

•

Steele left a bill for Hop, but addressed only the girl. "See if you can drink that up."

She did not reply, but the dark eyes looked straight into his, and she raised her glass in the traditional gesture of a toast.

Steele turned to Joaquin. "Come along, lad."

Joaquin dropped the broom and followed John Steele through the swinging doors.

The road dipped into the dry wash described by Hop Lee, then emerged near the house of Ricardo Martinez—a squat adobe hovel with a mud addition that leaned, as if for support, against the rear. A huge pepper tree shaded a patch of bare and stony yard. A gully halved the property and joined the dry wash, like the tributary of a stream. Several scrawny leghorns and a scattering of Plymouth Rocks searched dejectedly for food, their heads popping up and down like gophers. A moth-eaten mongrel, gaunt and rangy, rose stiffly from the shade of the pepper tree and approached the arriving coupé. Overhead, a buzzard wheeled against the blue.

At the rear of the house an aged Mexican studied the proposed task of beheading a chicken. This aged Mexican was Ricardo Martinez, and, despite his age, he was dressed similarly to the youthful Joaquin—faded blue work shirt and jeans, broken old shoes, with the addition of a greasy black felt hat. He held a dirty pullet by its yellow legs, and it hung head down, momentarily patient, while he contemplated a short, rusty hatchet on the chopping block. An old topless Model T Ford touring car had been parked near the entrance of the lean-to; and a tattered canvas tarpaulin had been

thrown across it as protection from the weather.

As the little coupé bumped out of the dry wash and into the yard, the old man turned wonderingly and watched. The car stopped under the pepper tree. Steele and Joaquin got out. The dog met the car, sniffed tentatively, lost interest, and returned to its rest.

Steele extracted two one-dollar bills from his wallet and placed them in Joaquin's expectant hand.

Steele said, "Ask him if he knows where Royal Adams went."

The old man waited patiently, the chicken hanging from his gnarled hand, no interest quickening the eyes or altering the expression of the aged face. Now, as the money changed hands, he cradled the bird in his arms and, lowering himself with dignity, squatted back on his heels. The chicken, its equilibrium suddenly restored to normal, wriggled and squawked and sought to beat its wings. The old man tightened the cradle and stilled the frantic wings. The chicken calmed and cocked a red eye at the visitors.

Joaquin released a rapid flood of Spanish. Ricardo's lips pursed and his eyes remained on the distant mountains. Finally, he spoke.

Joaquin's face fell. He appealed helplessly to Steele, who nodded fatalistically and reached once more into his wallet. "I know." He handed Ricardo two dollars.

Joaquin again addressed Ricardo. He pocketed the two dollars, then gazed up at the cloudless sky. One hand absently stroked the head of the chicken.

In Spanish the old man said, "The world seeks Senor Adams, but I do not know where he has gone."

Joaquin repeated the words in English and waited hopefully. Steele frowned, puzzled.

"Ask him who else has been here looking for Adams."

The old man replied through Joaquin. "The so pretty young lady and the unpleasant, arrogant man—a tall American with hair of a flaxen color. Both spoke Spanish—of a sort."

"*Man?* Who was he?"

"I do not know—perhaps a thief; perhaps a policeman."

"What did he want?"

"Who but Senor Adams?"

"Could you tell him where Senor Adams had gone?"

"No."

"The man and the girl came here together?"

"No—they arrived separately."

Steele looked thoughtfully into the distance. Ricardo contemplated the chicken, which immediately renewed its struggle for freedom. Ricardo climbed stiffly erect, hesitated a moment, then released the bird. It hit the ground running, its wings beating frantically, and joined its mates. For a second or two, it squawked lustily and indignantly, then promptly forgot the whole procedure and began assaulting the discouraged soil.

Steele addressed Joaquin. "Ask him when he last saw Senor Adams."

The old man listened, then gravely shook his head. "I have not seen him since last Monday night when I went to my work."

"What brought Senor Adams to you?"

Ricardo shrugged. "He was a very old friend of twenty years' duration. I had not seen him since 1939, when I guided him through the back country in search

of quail. What was more natural than for him to seek out his old friend and tell him of the good fortune?"

Steele gravely nodded. "Tell me about it."

The gnarled fingers unearthed a brown cigarette paper and a small sack of tobacco. Deftly, Ricardo formed a cigarette and lighted it. One of the chickens darted for the discarded match.

Ricardo spoke. "He arrived Monday afternoon and came directly here, where he would be safe from thieves and assassins. He said his daughter was to meet him here, and he would stay with me until she arrived. While we sat in the house drinking and talking, he showed me a diamond of huge size and said he had found it among the bones of the Indians in Yucatan. And he explained that scoundrels had sought to murder him for the diamond in Progreso, and for this reason he must remain in hiding until he could sell it."

Steele's eyes sharpened. "The girl who came here to-day is his daughter?"

"But naturally." Ricardo inhaled from his cigarette, then continued. "Monday evening I went to my position at the warehouse. When I returned here in the morning, Senor Adams was gone."

"No idea what became of him?"

Ricardo shrugged. "There was only the note."

A gleam came into Steele's eyes. "You haven't thrown it away?"

Ricardo looked thunderstruck. "The note of my good friend?" He extracted a fold of waterproof silk from his hip and began tenderly unwrapping it. "One does not throw away one's correspondence, especially if it is the only letter one has ever received." He lifted a folded sheet from the oiled silk. "Even if one cannot read."

He handed the note to Steele, who opened it.

Steele asked, "Then how do you know what it says?"

"I showed it to the Chinese at the saloon. He is an American-Chinese. He reads the English as well as the Spanish." Admiringly, he shook his head. "An educated man."

Steele looked at the note.

Dear Ricardo:

My enemies have trailed me here. I must leave at once, but will return when danger is past. Many thanks.

Royal X. Adams

Steele returned the note. Ricardo reverently replaced it in the oiled silk and stowed it in his hip. Steele asked, "You found no trace of Adams?"

"None, senor."

"What does he look like?"

"A tall American of approximately sixty years— It was a real diamond?"

"I don't know, but it's possible. Was he alone?"

"Yes. Has someone slit his throat for that diamond?"

"Such things have happened. What did his daughter want?"

"What but to find her father?"

"She knew about the diamond?"

"Yes, she inquired for it and seemed concerned for his welfare after I told her of the attempted attack in Progreso." He wagged his head soberly. "An evil town, senor, with many evil persons who would slit a throat for much less than so valuable a diamond."

"And the arrogant man—did he inquire for the diamond?"

"Yes."

"And you told them both the same story you have told me?"

"Yes."

"Was the girl alone?"

"Yes."

"In a car?"

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"A white roadster, very expensive, very pretty." Ricardo glanced unhappily at the old Ford.

"What kind of car was the man driving?"

"A large blue sedan."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes."

"Do you know his name or anything about him?"

"No."

Steele separated ten dollars from the rest of the bills in his wallet. "If either of these people comes back to you, or if anyone else comes here for information about Senor Adams, will you forget ever having seen me?"

Solemnly, the old man raised his right hand. "May God slit my throat and tear my heart out."

Steele gave him the money. Joaquin regarded Steele gravely. The detective sighed and parted with another ten dollars. Old Ricardo, his wealth spread before him in his hands, turned toward the door of the house.

Steele and Joaquin returned to the coupé and started back toward Puerto Raton.

Chapter Three

STEELE ASKS QUESTIONS

THE PLAYA DEL REY HOTEL stretched its low, swank length behind a screen of subtropical vegetation that shielded the guests from the eyes of Puerto Raton. Cabbage palms thrust ragged heads level with the red tile roof. A thicket of banana trees and date palms and citrus completed the camouflage.

The building faced the sea. A wide and leisurely stairway of large maroon tiles led from the beach to the terraces and the big doors opening into the immense lobby. Bright umbrellas shaded guests gathered at colorful metal tables that had been permanently anchored on the terraces. Servants moved about obsequiously. A few hardy bathers lounged on the sand or braved the cold water. A breeze ran in steadily from the sea. Waves pounded loudly on the hard-packed sand.

A private road connected the hotel with the Transpeninsular Highway, which bisected Puerto Raton. This private road entered the hotel property from the rear and acted as a further buffer between the building and the town. The entrance for the arriving guests was at the rear of the hotel, where the management, belatedly recognizing the lack of dignity caused by the rear entrance, had erected a lavish canopy and laid out a garden of carefully tended flowers and low-lying shrubs. The private road ended in a parking lot.

From the Transpeninsular Highway, the Playa del Rey Hotel was a green oasis that hinted only remotely

at the establishment behind that wall of vegetation.

John Steele dropped Joaquin at the Transpeninsular Highway, then turned into the private road and followed it to the canopied entrance at the rear of the hotel. A brown-skinned bellboy, white teeth flashing, sleek in tight-fitting green-and-gold uniform, jumped from the lobby and took Steele's Gladstone. Another attendant materialized and drove Steele's car into the parking lot, where a dozen or so expensive makes had already been parked. Most of them bore California license plates.

Steele registered for a single room, then looked appraisingly into the smiling face of the young room clerk. The bellboy carried Steele's Gladstone to the sweeping stairway. Steele glanced into the great sunken lobby overlooking the beach and the sea. A wood fire burned in the enormous fireplace and cast bright fingers of light over the faces of the several lounging guests. Steele turned back to the room clerk. They were quite alone.

Steele extended a folded ten-dollar bill to the clerk. "This is yours."

The clerk accepted it dubiously. "For what?"

"For keeping your eyes open and your mouth shut about me, and for answering a few questions."

The clerk's expression became troubled. "The hotel doesn't like to be involved—" His words, slightly accented, broke off. The folded bill twisted in his fingers.

"You won't be involved in anything at all."

The other's face became relieved. The ten-dollar bill disappeared into his lapel pocket. He nodded, and his smile returned.

"Bueno."

Steele said, "If anyone at all questions you about me, you're to give no information whatsoever without first getting my permission."

The clerk nodded. "So it shall be."

"Now—is a girl named Adams registered here?"

Again the clerk nodded. "Claire Adams. In 238."

"When did she register?"

"Last night."

"Where is she from?"

The clerk consulted a card index. "Los Angeles, but there is no street address given."

"Is she here alone?"

"Yes."

"Has she had any visitors?"

"Not to my knowlege."

"How about long-distance calls, telegrams, mail, or luggage?"

The clerk shook his head. "Nothing. She brought her luggage with her—two small bags and a wardrobe suitcase."

Steele nodded. "Sometime last Monday or before, did a Royal Xavier Adams register here or stop in—American about sixty years old?"

The clerk looked into the distance. His head slowly wagged. "I am quite positive, no."

"Is a tall blond man registered here—an American who drives a big blue sedan?"

"That would be Mr. Henry Cordell."

"When did he get here?"

"Yesterday morning. He is in room 225."

Steele frowned. "Yesterday morning? You're sure he didn't come with Miss Adams?"

The clerk's face fell. "I have not seen them together."

"Have you seen either of them with anyone else at all?"

"No."

"Where is Cordell from?"

"Los Angeles. We know him well. He comes here often to vacation."

"What's his business?"

"He is a diamond merchant."

Steele's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "I see." He turned abruptly from the desk.

The bellboy showed him up the stairs to his room on the second floor and opened the windows. Outside lay the terrace and the sloping expanse of sand beach. The odor of stale incense became more pronounced. The bellboy left.

Steele glanced about the room. Mission style dresser and bed. Mission style chiffonier. Deep, restful carpeting. An appropriate print or two, bright of color, on the walls. Two chairs—one straight-back, one upholstered. A baggage rack. And, outside the open windows, the murmur of guests conversing on the terrace, the booming of the surf, and the mountains rising blue along the coast.

Steele bathed and shaved and donned fresh linen, then left the hotel and climbed back into his car.

Puerto Raton had been founded without thought of the necessity of a deep-water harbor. The sandy, gently-sloping beach precluded the docking of large ships, but a wooden pier had been built a hundred yards into the surf, and, at high tide, could accommodate vessels of small and medium draft. The town was not on the regular schedule of any large freight and passenger ocean lines, but was served by a few coastal vessels that

ranged up and down the Pacific from as far away as San Pedro in California and Acapulco in the Mexican state of Guerrero.

Steele drove to the pier, a dangerously unstable structure that had been buffeted by years of wind and sea. He parked beneath its shore terminus and gazed up at the flooring overhead, then climbed the flight of stairs.

On the pier, several overalled and drowsy natives had draped themselves over fishing lines. He made his way to the pier master's office and sleeping quarters at the seaward end of the pier. It was unoccupied. He returned to one of the fishermen and asked for the pier master.

The Mexican, lean and dark and ageless, with high cheek bones that betrayed Indian blood, spit over the side of the pier, and shook his head.

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

The native looked down at his line. "Who knows?"

"When will he return?"

The fisherman shrugged. "Perhaps today. Perhaps next week."

Steele smothered his impatience. "How long has he been gone?"

The fisherman, muttering aloud, slowly counted the days on his fingers. "Four days."

Steele calculated mentally. "Monday night?"

"Si."

"Were you here Monday night?"

"Nights are for sleeping."

"What ship sailed Monday night?"

"I not know."

"Any idea where it was going?"

The native shrugged and looked once more at his line. "The ships come and go."

Steele's eyes narrowed irritably. "Who would know where it was going?"

"Only Arturo, the pier master."

"Was a young, pretty, blond American girl here looking for him within the last hour?"

The Mexican reached into his pocket and unearthed a shiny American quarter, which he extended in his open palm for Steele to see. "She was here."

Steele handed the man a dollar bill. "I can do better than that. Could you tell her anything about Royal Adams?"

Stolidly, the native accepted the bill. "No more than I have told you."

"Anybody else been down here looking for Adams?"

"Only the untidy *Americano* with the red hair."

Steele regarded the fisherman sharply. "Who was he?"

The Mexican shrugged characteristically. "Who knows?"

"What did he look like?"

The native looked into the distance and reflected for a moment. Then, "A thick man with a heavy body of a medium height. Shoulders like this." He pantomimed wide shoulders, the fishing line following the description, then dropping back into the water. "Eyes of a paleness with lashes like stale milk. How you say—*muy feo*?"

"Very homely. What was he wearing?"

Again the fisherman contemplated the distant sky. "A gray coat, a brown hat of some age. On his face were what you call—freckles?"

Steele nodded concernedly. "Yes, freckles. Do you know where he's staying?"

The Mexican shook his head and peered down at his line. "No. He came; he asked questions; he left." Disappointment entered the leathery face. "He gave me no money."

Steele thanked the fisherman and started back the length of the pier toward the beach. At the halfway point a fat Mexican, untidy of person and hair, emerged from the stairs and passed Steele. In a moment a shout went up. "Senor! Senor!"

Steele turned. The fat Mexican moved heavily back toward the stairs, one arm flopping a signal. The fishermen lost interest in their lines.

The fat Mexican reached Steele. "Geronimo say you want me."

Steele's glance appraised the man—identified the bloodshot eyes, the nervous hands, the pasty complexion, caught the sour, alcoholic breath. "Are you the pier master?"

A faint stirring of pride and importance rippled the pier master's unhappy countenance. "*Si*. Arturo Torreon."

"I'm checking on a ship that sailed from here last Monday night."

Unsteadily, jerkily, the pier master's hand passed over his unshaved chin. Little drops of perspiration gathered on his upper lip. He nodded.

"*Si*, the *Camberra*."

"Did it take on a passenger—a tall American about sixty years old, named Royal Xavier Adams?"

Arturo Torreon's lips jerked into a smile. "How could I forget him?"

Steele regarded the pier master unbelievably. "He was on the ship?"

"But yes!"

"What makes you so sure?"

"He tipped me twenty American dollars, and he was the only passenger."

"Why did he tip you?"

Arturo shrugged and made a face. "Who knows why rich Americans tip?"

"Did he have baggage?"

"Yes."

"Where was the *Camberra* going?"

"To San Pedro."

"Any stops in between?"

Arturo shrugged again. "Wherever it suited the captain."

"Was Adams going to San Pedro?"

"One could ascertain from the captain."

"Was Adams alone?"

"Yes."

"Has a pretty, blond American girl questioned you about him?"

The pier master's hand went to his head. "I have seen no one." He looked wistfully at Steele. "I have just this instant returned from a four-day absence." He paused, then added hopefully, "I am very sick, very much without money."

"What became of the twenty-dollar tip?"

Arturo unhappily shook his head. "That was the cause of my sickness."

Steele nodded understandingly.

Eagerness touched the pier master's voice. "If someone were to buy me at most two drinks—" He waited,

his hope renewed.

Steele looked thoughtfully out over the water. Waves boomed against the piles and along the shore.

Then, "Arturo, how would you like to make not twenty, but fifty American dollars?"

The pain left the pier master's eyes. "*Pero si!*"

"Some people will be down here to question you about Royal Adams. One will be the pretty girl, the others a redheaded man and a tall man with light hair—all Americans. And there may even be others." Steele fixed Arturo with a glance. "They must not know where Royal Adams has gone until I have had time to warn him. Not even the fishermen can be told."

Arturo became puzzled. "Warn him, senor?"

Steele nodded gravely. "Yes. They are evil people. They plan to steal from him a diamond of great value. Believe nothing they tell you—nothing at all. And if they try to bribe you into disclosing what you have told me, do not accept their money. They are not only thieves and assassins; they are also counterfeiters."

Arturo's eyes bugged. "*Madre de Dios!*"

Steele thumbed five ten-dollar bills from his wallet. "They must not know the *Camberra* sailed for San Pedro."

Arturo eyed the money and licked his lips. "For fifty dollars I will tell them it left for the South Pole."

Steele shook his head. "They are intelligent. Don't overdo it and rouse their suspicions. Tell them Royal Adams boarded the ship. Tell them it left Monday night. But do not tell them its true destination. Instead, say the ship was going south to Mazatlán, but many stops were scheduled along the peninsula. And since you do not know where Royal Adams was going, he

could have left the ship at any point between here and Mazatlán." Steele paused and studied the pier master a moment. "You understand?"

Arturo's head eagerly bobbed up and down. "Sí. I understand." Like a recording, he repeated the instructions.

Steele handed him the money. Dazedly, he stumbled back toward his office and sleeping quarters at the seaward end of the pier, the bills outspread between his two hands. The fishermen climbed slowly to their feet and trailed after him.

Steele started down the stairs. A big blue Buick sedan drew alongside his parked Ford and stopped. The driver climbed stiffly out and gazed questioningly up at the pier. He was tall, with a fringe of flaxen hair showing beneath his gray felt hat. His eyes, gray and sharp, picked up Steele's descending figure. He studied the detective coldly, then waited for him at the foot of the stairs.

"I understand you're looking for Royal Xavier Adams."

Steele surveyed the gray-eyed man. "That so?"

The other's thin lips tightened. "What do you want with him?"

"Did you ever hear of the fellow who made a million dollars minding his own business?"

The gray eyes flashed. "If you're looking for Royal Adams, your business is mine."

Steele located cigarettes and matches and struck a light. Over the tip of the flame he regarded the other man narrowly.

"You talk like a diamond dealer, Mr. Cordell."

The gray-eyed man's expression remained frozen.

"Does that make us colleagues, Mr. Steele?"

"Not at all, but it might explain Royal Adams's sudden disappearance." Steele lighted the cigarette and flipped the match toward the eddying surf.

Cordell's words razored from disapproving lips. "It's quite obvious neither of us is involved in his disappearance or we shouldn't be here looking for him."

"Unless," nodded Steele, "he had a motive for disappearing voluntarily."

"Your insinuation is vague."

"Diamonds sometimes spell death. Perhaps Royal Adams felt others would be looking for him, and he didn't want to die."

"Perhaps Royal Adams is already dead."

"And perhaps you'd know more about that than I."

Cordell studied Steele exasperatedly. "May I ask your business, Mr. Steele?"

"You may."

A moment passed. Rage undermined the diamond dealer's composure. His lips twitched; his eyes blazed like bits of very cold ice. "I suggest you discard any hopes you may have of acquiring the Mirabilis. My plans are quite complete."

Steele's own quick anger broke surface. "And I suggest you take a flying kiss at Santa Claus, Mr. Cordell."

The gray-eyed man turned abruptly and started up the stairs of the pier. Steele got into his coupé and drove back toward Hop Lee's bar.

Claire was waiting on the same stool when Steele pushed through the swinging doors. A restraint and a coolness had come over her. The contrastingly dark eyes were no longer provocative or inviting.

Steele went directly to her side, then glanced about the barroom. Hop Lee grinned at him and removed the thick-lensed spectacles and began polishing them on the hem of his white bar jacket. Joaquin, once more making vague motions with the broom, brightened and smiled and bobbed his dark head up and down. The previous customers had drifted away, and Claire was the only patron at the bar.

Steele glanced from Joaquin to Hop to the girl. "Was a tall blond American named Henry Cordell in here while I was gone—unpleasant fellow about forty or forty-five?"

Hop looked at the others, then shook his head, puzzled. "Ain't nobody come in at all except Joaquin."

Steele addressed the native youth. "Did you talk to him after I let you out of the car?"

Joaquin shook his head. "I talked to no one."

Steele turned to Claire. "Did you see anything of him?"

"Why?"

Steele sat down next to the girl. "Somebody talked out of turn. People are starting to know about me—people who shouldn't."

Claire said, "I haven't even seen the man, and I don't know what you're talking about." She seemed in a contrary mood, as if she were piqued over something.

Steele ordered a beer, then once more addressed the girl. "These people are down here looking for Royal Xavier Adams."

Her interest sharpened. "What people?"

"A redheaded fellow and this man Cordell. Any idea who the redhead is?"

She shook her head; and the corn-colored hair

danced about her shoulders. "What do they want?"

Steele surveyed her, eyes insolent. "What do you think?"

She turned to her drink, deeply thoughtful. Steele sipped at his beer. Hop had moved back to his drain-board and begun washing glassware.

The girl looked back at Steele. Her reserve had eased. "Why didn't you tell me you are a detective?"

He flashed her a sharp glance. "Why didn't you tell me you are Royal Adams's daughter?"

She smiled secretively. Her head cocked to one side, and the brown eyes regarded him teasingly, as if she were playing a game with him. "What makes you so sure I am?"

He scratched his chin. "I have my moments."

She raised her drink and appraised him over the rim of the glass, then sipped and laughed quite merrily.

"I suppose you do, at that."

He frowned. "Why did your father send for you, then disappear without any mention of where he was going?"

She replied cautiously. "Perhaps all you people down here frightened him away."

"According to the note he left, you certainly have something there. Only don't include me in 'all you people.' I only got here today."

She warmed. The dark eyes once more extended their paradoxical invitation. She leaned close to him and looked into his face. Her shoulder pressed against his.

She asked in a low, exciting voice, "Have you learned where my father is?"

"If I haven't, I'll know by this time tomorrow."

The bright hair fingered his shoulder. "You'll tell me?"

He looked into the eyes so close to him, and found them filled with mockery and promise, warmth and reproof. "Maybe."

Her hand linked through his arm and pulled it against her side. Her voice reflected an assurance he was hers.

"Tell me why you're looking for my father."

Steele's fingers turned the glass of beer around and around on the surface of the bar, making a series of little wet rings. He considered the question for several moments, while the girl pressed against him and sought to look into his eyes. Then he countered with another question. "How do I know he's your father?"

Her hand came away. She stiffened. "Why would I be here talking with you if he wasn't my father?"

Steele regarded her sharply. "Maybe you're interested in diamonds."

She reached coldly for her purse. "You're being insulting."

He nodded. "The line has a familiar ring."

She stood down from the bar stool. The dark eyes flashed indignantly, and there was no longer any promise or invitation.

She snapped, "You overrate yourself, Mr. Steele. There is nothing you've unearthed about my father that I can't discover myself."

She started for the swinging doors, heels clicking smartly on the flooring. Steele looked after her.

"Give my regards to the pier master."

She faltered an instant, displayed annoyance, then pushed out the doors and walked past the windows.

Hop, whose attention had been divided between washing the glassware and observing the minor drama, looked at Steele and grinned. Steele stepped down from his stool and sauntered casually to the windows. The girl drove past in the cream-colored Packard convertible. Steele jotted the license number down on the back of an old envelope.

He moved to the swinging doors and looked around at Hop. "If anybody takes the trouble to ask where I'm staying"—his head indicated the direction taken by the cream-colored car—"I'll be at the Playa del Rey."

Hop smiled and shook his head. "You were doing all right at first, but it don't look like anybody will be asking now."

Steele nodded and stepped into the outer sunlight.

Chapter Four

THE JOKE IS ON MR. STEELE

STEELE STRODE UP to the desk of the Playa del Rey Hotel. The smiling young room clerk looked up and had the key ready for him. Steele extracted his wallet from his pocket.

"Got two fives?"

"Of course." The clerk handed Steele two five-dollar bills from the cash drawer.

Steele shoved them into the wallet and replaced it in his pocket. Steele shot the clerk a disapproving glance.

"That's for not keeping your mouth shut about me."

The clerk's smile became forced. "I don't understand."

Steele turned from the desk. "Ask Henry Cordell. He's as bad as you when it comes to repeating things."

As he reached the second floor, a man approached from a quarter of the length of the wide, well-carpeted hall. He moved quickly and somewhat furtively, as if he suspected someone were following him. A cigar was clamped between his teeth.

He had reached the stairway before Steele recognized him as the man described by the fisherman—dusty red hair, pathetically homely freckled face with pale eyes and milky lashes, wide shoulders, a thick and heavy body of medium build, a cheap light gray sport coat, and a shapeless old brown hat. The hurrying feet faltered an instant as the man looked into Steele's sharp gaze.

Steele's hand shot out. "Just a minute, friend. Don't I know you from some place?"

The redheaded man obviously held himself from fleeing down the stairs. Steele caught the vile odor of the cigar.

"What's that?" The man's voice was forced.

"Haven't we met before?"

The pale eyes blinked confusedly and avoided Steele's glance. "Why—I don't know. I don't think so."

Steele searched the plain, disturbed face. "From Hollywood, aren't you?"

"I—get up there sometimes."

Steele nodded. "Jewelry business?"

The other glanced at him quickly. Sweat had beaded out on the upper lip and in the fine light hairs above the bridge of the nose. "No, you've got me mixed up with somebody else."

Steele's gaze remained sharp. "This fellow that looks like you is supposed to be down here now."

The redheaded man edged past Steele and reached the first step of the stairway. "Afraid it's not me."

Steele moved to the rail. "I understand he's looking for a man named Royal Xavier Adams."

The redheaded man cast one searching look up at Steele, then started down the stairs.

Steele added bitingly, "Something about the Mirabilis Diamond."

The redheaded man increased his speed but did not look up again.

Steele called a parting message. "If you see that other fellow, tell him the pier master probably can help him."

The redheaded man fled out the rear entrance. Grin-

ning wryly, Steele stepped to the hall window and looked down. The redheaded man emerged from beneath the canopy and hurried into a battered old tan Plymouth coach and shot out the private road, a cloud of blue smoke flowing from the exhaust. Steele wagged his head and started down the hall.

In his room, he caught the same vile odor of cigar smoke. He hesitated, quickly scanning the room, then closed the door and strode to his open Gladstone. The clothing seemed undisturbed, but the flap of the compartment for documents and flat wear had not been snapped shut.

Steele scowled angrily and stepped to the telephone. "Send up the bellboy who showed me this room."

While Steele waited, he sat at one of the windows and cherished his anger. Outside, the sun became big and round and bloody as it dipped toward a bank of fog lying far out to sea. On the terrace beneath the windows, several wealthy refugees discussed conditions in Europe with a famous American motion picture director. The shadows of the palms lengthened across the sand. Birds murmured in the eaves. A dog yapped shrilly from near by. Wood smoke mingled with the odor of stale incense.

The bellboy tapped on the door and entered, white teeth flashing. Steele got impatiently to his feet.

"Did you see that redheaded man just leave the hotel?"

"Si, senor."

"Is he staying here?"

The boy's smile faded. "No, senor."

"Do you know who he is?"

"No, senor. I have never seen him before."

"He just got through prowling my room." Steele indicated the door. "I'm wondering how he got through that Yale lock."

The boy hesitated an instant, then stepped quickly to the door. "One moment, senor."

He left the room. Steele rummaged through his Gladstone and ascertained nothing was missing. In a few minutes the boy returned.

"It was the maid. He told her he was you, Senor Steele, and had left his key in here. She opened the door with her passkey."

Steele gave the boy a tip and dismissed him, then placed a long-distance call to Betsy Carnes at his office in Hollywood. After an interminable wait he reached her.

"Hello, Betsy?"

She wasted no words on amenities. "Did you find Adams?"

"Not yet. What did you dig up?"

"The AP had two reports. First, that he'd excavated the Mirabilis Diamond, a big stone that had been missing for centuries. Second, that he was leaving Progreso, Yucatan, for New Orleans two weeks ago. He hasn't cleared through the new Orleans customs."

"Any trace of a family or his background before he left the States?"

"None of the archeologists I talked with know any more about him than was in the papers. And you can realize how much chance I had of digging up his background after twenty-two years."

Steele lighted a cigarette. "Look, Betsy—Royal Adams sailed from here last Monday night. He was on the *Camberra*, and it was headed for San Pedro."

"Spell the name of that ship."

Steele spelled the name. "Three other people are down here looking for him—a beautiful blonde who claims to be his daughter, a diamond merchant from Los Angeles, and a redheaded fellow I've seen somewhere before but can't place right now. It's possible Adams learned they were after him and wanted to cover his trail. He may have got off the ship at San Diego. At any rate, the customs office in Dago or San Pedro should have a record of that stone."

"Maybe he dropped off the *Camberra* somewhere below Tijuana and smuggled the diamond over the border."

"Maybe, but I don't think so. He seems to be on the legit and wouldn't try anything crooked—especially after the newspaper publicity. The customs people and the diamond dealers would be looking for him and for the stone; besides, the stone is so famous historically he couldn't sell it for a tenth its real value unless he had papers proving it came into the country legally."

"I'll check with San Pedro and San Diego."

"Try National City, too, just in case he did leave the ships below Tijuana and crossed the line on foot."

"Will noon tomorrow be soon enough?"

"No. I've got to have that information tonight. These people down here seem to be a bunch of pretty sharp operators. I can't waste time why they're flushing Adams out and scaring him even deeper into hiding."

Betsy muttered something unintelligible. Then, "I'll do the best I can."

Steele placed his cigarette on an ash tray and extracted from his pocket the envelope on which he had noted the license number of Claire's car. He repeated

the number to Betsy. "Check with the registration bureau and get the owner's name and address."

"Where will I reach you?"

"At the Playa del Rey."

He heard her sniff disapprovingly. "I might have known! How long do you think your fee will last in that clip joint?"

"Settle down," growled Steele. "If you do your part, I'll be starting back tonight or tomorrow morning."

"Where did you pick up the line on Adams?"

Steele brought the case up to date.

Betsy remained silent a moment. Then, "It sounds fishy. Are you sure this old Ricardo what's-his-name didn't kill Adams for the diamond?"

"The story checks. Adams sailed on the *Camberra*."

"Well, if that girl is really his daughter, she should be falling all over herself for your help. What's she like?"

Steele grinned and picked up the cigarette. "A knockout."

Betsy hesitated. "Do you know what I think of her?"

"I can imagine."

"I think she's a phony."

Steele snorted caustically. "Stupendous! Remind me to raise your pay when you call back."

Betsy slammed down the receiver.

An hour later, Steele was preparing to go downstairs for his dinner when someone tapped lightly on his door. He opened it on the blond girl of the afternoon.

She smiled brightly, the brown eyes warm and promising. "Hello."

He regarded her a moment, then stepped aside and motioned her in. "I've been expecting you."

She entered. A look of genuine surprise quickened her face. "You've been expecting me?"

He shut the door and flung her a casually amused glance. "Why not?" He indicated the upholstered chair near the windows. "Sit down."

She ignored the offer and the brusqueness of his tone. "Why were you expecting me?"

He grinned and took her arm and started with her toward the chair. "How did you come out with the pier master?"

Now, she returned to her game of the afternoon. The allure and the provocativeness enlivened the dark eyes. She smiled up at him, her head once more tilting characteristically and throwing the corn-colored hair against his shoulder. Her arm pressed his hand against her side.

She said, her eyes laughing up obliquely, "Very good. He told me some interesting things."

Steele chuckled. "That isn't the way I heard it."

She pulled from him and walked to the chair, her manner petulant, the dark eyes figuratively pouting. "You're mean, John Steele. You knew all along how little he could help me."

Steele nodded. "At times, I'm a very obnoxious guy."

She leaned over the chair, her back to Steele, and raised one knee to the cushion, and looked away into the gathering dusk and the blue mountains marching down the coast beside the sea. She had exchanged the white dress of the afternoon for a dark dinner gown that clung to her like a silhouette, and had caught the bright hair back in a slender black ribbon. Little metal

sequins on the dress mirrored a thousand red eyes from the glow in the west. Steele considered the girl approvingly.

She addressed the mountains and the sea and the bloody, fog-dimmed sun. "All these mysterious people down here looking for my father." She turned slowly and straightened and faced John Steele. "Have you learned what they want?"

"Not yet." He got out cigarettes. She accepted one. He struck a light for her, then touched the match to his own. "The redheaded man prowled my room this afternoon."

The girl's face became puzzled. "You're sure?"

Steele nodded and rested one arm on the chiffonier. "Positive. And I think I know who he is."

Claire frowned and moved to his side and looked up questioningly.

Steele inhaled from his cigarette. "I've seen him around Hollywood. His name will come to me."

She deposited a few flakes of ash in the tray on the chiffonier. Her arm, smooth and white and shapely, brushed his. He caught the subtle odor of perfume—an odor both delicate and vague.

"But why would he prowl your room?"

Steele shook his head. "When a person is involved with the Mirabilis Diamond, he's apt to draw all sorts of callers."

For a moment, Claire went thoughtful; and during that moment there was no sound except the muttering of the sea and the voices of the guests on the terrace below. The sun had now become a smear of red in the west, and a chill had entered from the open window.

The girl looked up. "You said you would know to-

"That's right."

A piquancy entered those contrastingly dark eyes—a challenge to John Steele to resist them. One hand, firm and cool, rested on his arm. "Why do you want him?"

Steele studied her with lazy eyes, then smiled and inhaled again from his cigarette, but did not reply. Her manner became teasing. She moved provocatively closer.

"But you can at least tell me if somebody hired you to find him. After all, he's my father, and if someone is after that diamond and he's in danger—" She broke off, the eyes wide and appealing.

"How did you know about the diamond?"

She looked puzzled. "From his letter, of course."

"When did he write you?"

"From Veracruz. I was to meet him here at Ricardo Martinez's place. When I got here, he was gone."

"Did he mention any plans in his letter?"

"No—just that he would meet me here. But now, with him gone, and these other men looking for him, and you—" She looked up into his face. The hand moved possessively up to his lapel. The dark eyes searched his. "Can't you see? I don't know whether you're a friend or an enemy, and I'm alone and need a friend."

Steele remained unresponsive, one hand in the pocket of his coat, the other hovering over the ash tray.

He said, "That's a thought, isn't it?"

Her eyes became big and pleading. She put out her cigarette. The other hand rose to his shoulder. "You're being terribly cruel."

He glanced at her hands on his shoulders, then looked into the dark eyes. "In the first place, this isn't necessary unless you just feel this way. If I'm going to help you, I'll do it without this. In the second, you're being pretty obvious."

Her gaze did not falter. The brown eyes renewed their challenge. "Am I?"

Steele remained unmoving for a moment, then dropped the cigarette into the ash tray and pulled her roughly against him. Her eyes closed. She sighed faintly and crushed her mouth back and forth, back and forth, against his.

He stepped back, his eyes smiling mockingly. "Still want me to help?"

She looked up at him, the dark eyes aflame, the trim shoulders rising and falling, and caught him against her. "Oh, Johnny, you're dynamite!"

She strained up on her toes and closed her eyes and held him tight—one hand to his cheek, the other around his neck—while the red mouth once more crushed against his own.

The telephone rang.

He sighed and stepped away. The girl, frustrated and suddenly moody, flung herself into the upholstered chair. Steele picked up the instrument and heard Betsy's voice.

"I've found him, Mr. Steele."

He shot Claire a glance, then spoke into the telephone. "Good."

"He left the *Camberra* some place below the border and came through the customs on foot. Now he's living at 5866 Gardenia Place in Hollywood."

"You're sure?"

Betsy sniffed indignantly. "Well, he paid duty on the diamond and signed for gas, power, and telephone services under his own name, but if you insist I suppose I can get a birth certificate from him."

Steele's face remained expressionless. Claire looked up questioningly from the chair. Steele said only, "Go on."

Betsy said, "The Packard is registered to Gordon Leon Eustace, 5814 Carmelita Way. He's a lawyer."

"Okay."

"Shall I repeat those names and addresses?"

"No."

"Won't you forget them?"

"No."

Betsy hesitated. "What's the matter with you? Is somebody with you?"

"Yes."

Again Betsy paused. "That blonde?"

Steele smiled reassuringly at Claire, then turned back to the telephone. "Then he must have left the ship at Rosario."

Betsy hesitated a third time, then irritably cried, "What are you talking about?"

"He probably cut inland from Rosario."

Another sniff. "So it is the blonde."

"I'll get to him sometime tomorrow."

"Oh, nuts!"

Betsy banged up. Steele cradled the instrument and turned smilingly to Claire. She got excitedly to her feet.

"You've found him!"

He replied noncommittally. "Ever hear of Santa Catarina?"

She shook her head. "In California?"

"No—down the Transpeninsular Highway about two hundred and fifty miles from here. You go south to Rosario, then turn inland."

She looked troubled. "Is it a big place?"

"Just a hamlet."

She crossed to his side and reached for both his hands and looked up into his eyes. "Is he in hiding?"

Steele shrugged. "He's known to the neighbors."

"Can we get to Santa Catarina by car?"

He laughed shortly. "If you don't care what happens to your car."

She frowned prettily. "Is the road that bad?"

"Worse. You lose it entirely in the dry washes."

She studied him from the corners of her eyes, and the provocation was back. "But we can get through?"

He nodded. "Oh, yes. It can be done. I was down that way hunting quail last fall."

She drew nearer and looked up, her face only inches from his, her hands on his arms, the subtle perfume intoxicating. "Shall we leave in the morning?"

"Any time you say."

Her eyes melted. "Darling." The hands moved up his arms and went tight around his neck. Her cheek, cool and fresh, pressed against his. "There was never anyone as wonderful as you."

He pushed her from him, his hands strong on her firm white arms, and held her at arm's length and searched the pretty face. She faced him for the moment, but then her face twisted and she looked down and caught her lower lip between her teeth.

Then she writhed from his grasp and threw herself against him once more. She whispered, her breath hot

against his face, "Come for me early in the morning when everyone else is asleep." Her arms pulled him down, and the red mouth again sought his own. She clung to him another moment, then tore herself away and fled to the door. Here she paused. "Very early." The door opened and softly closed.

Steele remained motionless in the center of the room and looked down at his glistening palms, standing thus for several seconds. Finally, with great reluctance, he packed his Gladstone and snapped out the overhead light and opened his door a crack and stood, listening and waiting.

In a few minutes, a door opened and quietly closed down the hall. Steele shut his door without sound. Muffled footsteps hurried past. He re-opened the door and looked cautiously out. Claire was struggling down the stairs with two small overnight bags and a wardrobe suitcase.

Steele picked up his Gladstone and moved to the head of the stairs. Below him, Claire was paying her bill. Steele waited until a bellboy picked up her luggage and followed her out the rear entrance. Then Steele sped down the stairs and checked out.

Steele addressed the indignant room clerk. "How would you like to earn back that ten dollars?"

The clerk nodded coldly. "I told Senor Cordell only that you were looking for Senor Adams. Nothing more." And he added, as if in justification of the act, "After all, Senor Cordell is an old and honored guest here."

Steele showed the clerk a ten-dollar bill. "Did Claire Adams telephone anyone before she checked out?"

The clerk studied Steele a moment. then turned to

a box of telephone memorandums. Outside, a motor pulsed.

The clerk selected one of the slips from the box and turned back to Steele.

"She called Gordon Leon Eustace at the Bolivar Hotel."

"Where is that?"

The clerk pointed toward the rear door. "Where our private road meets the highway."

"Any other calls?"

"None since she has been here."

Steele tossed him the ten dollars and hurried outside, and jumped into his Ford coupé.

The Packard convertible had become twin red tail-lights in the darkness ahead by the time Steele had turned his car around and started after it. At the highway, the Packard paused under a feeble street light, and an indistinguishable figure stepped in. The Packard swung south, toward Santa Catarina.

Steele reached the highway. His headlights picked up the big road sign. Arrows pointed south toward Rosario and Santa Catarina, and north toward San Diego and Los Angeles. The mileages were printed in *kilométricas*.

Steele smiled bitterly at the fading red taillights, and turned north, toward Los Angeles.

In the morning, Steele found 5866 Gardenia Place in the hills of Hollywood above Franklin Avenue. He had driven most of the night, and had slept only a few hours in his small apartment on Wilcox and Yucca. Now, he parked the little Ford on the hillside and climbed stiffly out.

The house duplicated many of the other little bungalows that dotted the district—dazzling white walls, red tile roofs, banana trees growing within a low-walled patio, flag walk, and stone steps leading up from the street. A pepper tree and a giant avocado almost joined hands above the flat roof. Shrubbery and plants flowered brightly around the house. The lawn, sharply terraced and green with the winter rains, had been closely mowed and trimmed along the stone steps. Fog shut off the sun and the view of Hollywood lying in the flatland below. The air was chill and brisk.

Steele mounted the stone steps, his eyes calculating, his face without expression. On the mailbox, inside the patio, he sighted a small white calling card. He looked close: *Royal Xavier Adams*, in fine old English script. He considered the card several seconds, then pushed the bell-button. Chimes whispered softly within the house. Footsteps thudded. The knob rattled and the door opened.

For perhaps two seconds, Steele simply stared. Then his face darkened angrily. "Well, Clarence, is this the professor's idea of a joke, or have you killed Royal Adams for the diamond?"

The swarthy little man grinned wolfishly and rumbled in his throat. The professor pushed Clarence aside and smiled enigmatically. "The joke, Mr. Steele, seems to be on you. I am Royal Adams."

Chapter Five

A GEM AND A CURSE

THE LIVING-ROOM reached long and low and intimate across the front of the professor's house. A huge pear-shaped window looked out on the lawn. The walls and ceiling had been decorated a soft cream with just a hint of pale blue-green in the coloring. An ivory mantel jutted above the wood-burning fireplace. Furniture appropriate to the atmosphere stood informally about—two davenports and several comfortable-appearing chairs, conveniently placed end tables and lamps, subdued drapes, deep carpeting, three or four water colors on the walls. A fire smoldered on the hearth, and the room had an air of warmth and wood smoke and fresh coffee and living humanity; but it lacked the little personalities—camera portraits, books lying open, carelessly dropped mail, vases of flowers, and the numberless other little personal possessions that transform a furnished house into a home. An arch separated the living-room from the dining-room, and a long hallway opened from the living-room into some inner recess of the house. Breakfast dishes for three had not yet been cleared from the dining-room table. A selection from a Rodgers and Hart musical comedy whispered softly from a cabinet radio near the pear-shaped window. An electric clock on top the radio pointed to nine-fifteen.

Steele followed the professor into the room. Clarence eyed Steele contemptuously and, with deliberate exag-

geration, located his pocketknife and began paring his nails. Albert glanced in from the dining-room. His pale eyes glittered.

The professor lowered himself into the davenport facing the fireplace, and waved Steele to an overstuffed chair. Albert entered with several small dry logs and placed them on the live coals. Sparks flurried and shot up the chimney. Smoke curled. Then the bark caught, and red and orange and white flames brightened the room.

Steele lighted a cigarette and settled back in his chair. "I admit it was a clever way to toss off five hundred dollars, professor. You probably had fun. But what was the idea?"

The professor remained thoughtful a moment, then nodded gravely. "You have a right to know." He glanced at Albert. "Get the *Mirabilis*."

Albert disappeared into the hallway, and returned with a small brass-bound hardwood box that had been stained mahogany red, and was about three inches square. A tiny but strong padlock held it securely shut.

Albert handed the box reverently to the professor, then stood alertly back. His master inserted a key into the lock, removed it from the staple, and raised the hasp. Steele waited expectantly, but the professor did not open the lid. Instead, he turned searchingly to the detective. "You know the history of the *Mirabilis Diamond*?"

Steele considered the question. "The name is familiar."

The professor's voice dropped confidentially—became the rustling of silk in a great empty vault.

"It is the most fabulous of all diamonds."

Steele dropped ashes into a tray. "What about it?"

The other leaned forward, his fingers caressing the box. "It is mentioned in the Bible. It has been possessed by kings and queens, merchants and princes, thieves and murderers. It has the oldest known history of any gem—a history of violence and death." He slowly turned the box around and around in his hands. "In Sidi el Bjac, the eye of an ancient idol is empty. The Mirabilis Diamond came from that socket, and the high priest of the Saracens placed a curse on any outsider possessing the stone. That curse was pronounced nearly two thousand years ago, when Marc Antony stole the stone and gave it to Cleopatra; and the curse followed the Mirabilis for the next sixteen hundred years, when it disappeared."

Steele listened impassively. The professor glanced down at the box, then went on. "After Marc Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide, Octavius Caesar claimed the stone and carried it to Rome. In Sidi el Bjac, a society of fanatics formed and swore to recover the Mirabilis and restore it to the eye of the idol. Ill fortune had come to the Saracens with the loss of the stone. The society, composed of descendants of the founders, is still in existence." He paused, as if marshaling his thoughts. The wood crackled in the fireplace.

The professor studied the little box. "This society is known as the Ifnis. They succeeded in recovering the Mirabilis in 50 A. D., but Nero sent out an army and got it back. The Romans kept it for the next four hundred years. Then Genseric, the Vandal, sacked Rome and carried the stone to Spain. It became one of the crown jewels. The Ifnis recovered and lost it several times. Many of the Ifnis killed and were killed in these

attacks. Finally, the Moors—the descendants of the Saracens—invaded Spain and again recovered the stone, only to lose it to others who invaded Morocco.” Eyes glittering, he glanced at Steele. “Do I bore you?”

“Not at all. Go on.”

Clarence, his face arrogant, began tossing the open knife into the air and catching it in his palm. Albert’s pale eyes remained unwaveringly on Steele.

The professor went on. “The *Mirabilis* passed through many hands and through dangerous days of history—the fall of the Roman empire, the conquest of England by William of Normandy, the six Crusades into the Holy Land, the reign of Genghis Khan, the Spanish Inquisition, the burning of Joan of Arc. Finally the Spanish again recovered it and presented it to Queen Isabella. In 1492, one of the Ifnis murdered the keeper of the royal jewels and escaped with the *Mirabilis*. Pursuit was hot and capture almost certain if he tried to return to Sidi el Bjac. So, in desperation, he stowed away on the *Santa Maria* and sailed with Christopher Columbus for the New World.” He paused once more.

Steele waited patiently. Albert, inscrutable, shifted his weight. Clarence tired of obviously attempting to irritate Steele, and put away the knife. The logs snapped again and thrust another flurry of sparks up the chimney. Outside, the sun began to win its battle with the fog.

The professor bent over a humidor on the coffee table and selected a panatela. Albert jumped forward with a lighter, then resumed his wooden pose.

The client’s eyes turned hypnotically back to John Steele. “On Columbus’s first voyage to the West Indies,

he established a settlement on the north coast of Haiti; and when he sailed back to Spain, he left forty men to guard the settlement and explore the country. The Ifni was among these men, and probably hoped to remain out of sight until the furor had died in Spain, and he could safely return the Mirabilis to the eye of the idol. After sixteen hundred years of waiting and planning, time meant little to the Ifnis. But when Columbus returned to Haiti late in 1493, the forty men and the settlement had disappeared without a trace." He drew thoughtfully on his cigar. The sharp eyes looked once more at Steele. "What I have told you is known history. The rest must be left to the imagination." He considered the cigar, then went on. "For the next four hundred and fifty years, the Mirabilis dropped from sight. I have reconstructed its history during that time: Natives of Haiti killed the Ifni and stole the stone. By barter or emigration, it reached Yucatan. When its native possessor died, the Mirabilis was buried with him."

Steele smiled thinly. "And you dug it up."

He gravely nodded. "I dug it up."

With a sense of the dramatic, he hesitated several seconds, then lifted the lid of the little box and handed it to Steele. "This is the Mirabilis Diamond."

Steele accepted the box, gazed down at the stone a moment, and finally took it in his fingers and held it to the light. It surpassed Hop Lee's description—a heavy, perfectly cut stone nearly two inches in diameter. The facets picked up the flames of the blazing hearth and threw points of color about the walls and ceiling.

Steele replaced the stone in its box, and returned it

to his client. "A very interesting story and an exceptional stone, professor, but what have they got to do with your paying me five hundred dollars simply to pick up your trail and follow you here?"

The professor carefully locked the little box and handed it to Albert. "A fair question, Mr. Steele, and deserving of a fair answer." He waved Albert into the long hallway, and sat back on the davenport, cigar fuming. "Human nature hasn't changed much during the past two thousand years. Great wealth always attracts the very worst in human form—thieves, rascals and murderers who will stop at nothing. The *Mirabilis* had not been in my possession ten days before the scum of the criminal world began arriving in Progreso, Yucatan. That is why Clarence and Albert accompany me wherever humanly possible, and it should explain why I sent them unannounced into your office before I entered." His voice dropped; his gravity deepened. "The *Mirabilis*, Mr. Steele, has far more than mere monetary value. To the Moors, the Saracens, it is the symbol of life itself."

Steele, unimpressed, nodded. "What about the *Ifnis*?"

"They are another hazard, another reason I employed you. When I first unearthed the stone, I let my enthusiasm get the better part of me. A newspaper in Mérida picked up the story and cabled it to the United States. Dealers and collectors read of the discovery. All of them are not honest. Some have no scruples whatsoever. And there were the *Ifnis*, whose search once more came to life." He nodded as if to himself. "I would have lost my life in Progreso if Clarence and Albert had not been alert. They have been with me six

years. Their task is to anticipate or forestall trouble and warn me. In a Mérida saloon, they learned I was to be killed when I boarded ship at Progreso for New Orleans. Instead, Clarence and Albert sailed without me, and I took another ship to Veracruz. From there, I flew to Acapulco, and then up to Puerto Raton, where I had an old friend, Ricardo Martinez, whom you no doubt encountered."

Steele eyed him sharply. "What made you disappear like that?"

The other smiled coldly. "It was a ruse. I left a note for Ricardo, saying my enemies had trailed me there. In reality, Puerto Raton simply seemed a good place to lose my identity. I hoped that by sailing unannounced and leaving the ship below Tijuana, then crossing the border on foot, I would leave no trail."

Steele's features did not change. He tossed the cigarette into the fire. "If you wanted to disappear, why didn't you at least change your name?"

The professor soberly shook his head. "A mere change of name would not have sufficed. I couldn't have got back through the customs; and if I had smuggled the stone into the country, I couldn't have sold it for anything near its worth with a clouded title. I needed a customs receipt if I intended dealing with the honest collectors and diamond dealers; for only from them can I expect to receive the true worth of the stone."

"Then you paid me five hundred dollars simply to see if you left a trail?"

The client nodded. "It is worth that sum to know I have failed. Now, I must try again."

Steele got to his feet. His lips twisted ironically.

"You left a trail a mile wide. All the crooks and Ifnis in the world can follow it right to your door, where your calling card will tell them they've come to the right place." He regarded the other puzzledly. "Mind telling me why you registered the utilities in your own name if you're trying to hide?"

The professor frowned. "That was the fault of Clarence and Albert. They had this place ready for me when I arrived. I'll take down the card and attend to the changes at once."

"Want me to help you really disappear?"

The professor got to his feet, and smiled regretfully. "No, Mr. Steele. That would never do."

"Why not? Nobody would know, and you'd be safe."

"I wouldn't be safe, and someone would know."

Steele frowned. "Who?"

"You, Mr. Steele."

The detective turned angrily to the door, then looked back at his client. "I ran into people down there. Would you like to know about them, or isn't it safe to discuss even that with me?"

The little blue eyes became alarmed. "People looking for me?"

Steele's face tightened warily. "That was your reason for trying to disappear, wasn't it?"

Albert had returned from hiding the Mirabilis. The professor exchanged cautious glances with him and with Clarence. "Who were they?"

Steele regarded his client appraisingly. "For one, a beautiful blonde who claims to be your daughter Claire."

The little blue eyes became guarded. "How do you

know she's my daughter?"

"I don't."

"Where is she now?"

"I sent her down into *Baja California* on a wild-goose chase."

"Does she have any inkling I'm here?"

Steele shook his head. Amusement touched his eyes and the corners of his mouth. "She thinks you're in Santa Catarina."

"And the others?"

"Two others. A diamond merchant named Henry Cordell, and a redheaded man I haven't been able to identify."

The professor exchanged another glance with his bodyguards. "If you've led them here—"

Steele snorted. "Relax. They're probably trailing your daughter down to Santa Catarina right now." He opened the door, then looked back. "By the way, you do have a daughter, don't you?"

The client stiffened. "My marital status concerns no one but me, Mr. Steele."

"I have no interest in your marital status. I'm asking if you have a daughter."

"And I have no intention of answering."

Steele's ready anger boiled over. "Maybe you don't know the answer."

He slammed out the door and got into his car.

Chapter Six

A SPRAWLING BODY

BETSY CARNES SLIPPED disapprovingly into Steele's private office and closed the door on a familiar figure in the reception room. The figure was clothed in white and blue and carried a tan polo coat over the arm.

Betsy, silent, stood above John Steele and eyed him scornfully. He looked up from an open file on his desk, his manner detached.

Betsy sniffed characteristically. "Leave it to you!"

He became vaguely annoyed as part of his attention clung to the open file. "Leave what to me?"

She ignored the question. "Every time you have the slightest dealing with a pretty woman, she finds some excuse to come up here."

He closed the file and regarded her coldly. The fingers of one hand tapped significantly on the desk.

Betsy snapped, "Double Indemnity is out there."

The tapping fingers stilled. The gray eyes studied Betsy. Steele showed definite annoyance. He growled, "Am I supposed to guess just what you mean by Double Indemnity?"

Her disapproval increased. "You'll know soon enough. She says she's sure you'll see her."

His eyes grew bitter with sarcasm. "Then we can't disappoint her, can we, Betsy? Send her in."

Betsy glared, then wordlessly opened the door.

"He says he'll see you."

Claire nodded brightly and entered the private of-

fice. She wore a dark blue skirt and a white pull-over sweater, and had draped the polo coat over her shoulders since Betsy had entered the private office. As Steele looked up, the coat fell back on her shoulders, exposing the white sweater. Steele glanced up at Betsy.

"I think I see what you mean."

Betsy made a slight strangling sound and banged from the private office.

Claire had stopped just inside the threshold, eyes apprehensive, as she looked down at John Steele. He neither smiled nor got to his feet. She advanced a step; and when she spoke, a tear splashed from her voice. "Johnny, darling."

He considered her without emotion. "Not bad—but, everything considered, not good either."

She looked out the window at the green hills of Hollywood. "I don't care what you think. I just had to see you again."

Steele eyed her as one hand reached beneath the eave of the desk and closed the hidden key of the inter-office communications system. In the reception room, Betsy slammed a drawer.

Steele asked, "How did you find the climate in Santa Catarina—or didn't you get that far?"

She moved reprovingly around the side of the desk and rested a gloved hand on Steele's shoulder. The dark eyes regarded him with infinite sadness. "Johnny, how could you deliberately do such a thing to me?"

He glanced at the gloved hand. "I wasn't aware I'd done anything to you; and don't call me Johnny."

The eyes became quickly accusing. "You sent me down to Santa Catarina. It has taken me a week to get back."

Steele chuckled coldly. "I didn't send you. You just took it upon yourself to go."

She stiffened. The gloved hand came away from his shoulder. "Why, John Steele, how can you say such a thing? You lied to me. You told me my father was in Santa Catarina so you'd be rid of me long enough to find him yourself."

Steele smiled coldly and shook his head. "I simply asked if you'd ever heard of Santa Catarina. You outsmarted yourself by concluding he was there. And I was to come for you early in the morning when everyone else was asleep." He paused, his eyes accusing, then added in a mocking voice. "Very early."

She reddened and bit her lip and turned momentarily to the windows. "Just the same, it was a terrible thing to do to me."

Steele leaned back in his chair and cupped his hands behind his head. "Sit down," he invited tolerantly. "Tell me about it."

Instead of seating herself, she walked to the window, her back to Steele. He looked at her appreciatively. She said, "I filled up with gas and oil and water on the edge of Puerto Raton, but it ran out before I reached Santa Catarina, and I couldn't buy any." She turned accusingly. "Why didn't you tell me there aren't any gas stations below Puerto Raton?"

"Why didn't you ask me?"

She turned back to the window. "I finally got into Santa Catarina by wagon. Then I had to hire a native to drive by wagon a hundred miles for gas and oil while I waited in Santa Catarina. It was horrible."

Steele smiled at the trim back. "You didn't find your father?"

She tossed her head. "The first night out, I lost the road entirely and ended up in a dry wash. After day-break, I finally located the road, but it was so bad I was never sure whether I was actually on it or not. Just two cart tracks that disappeared behind every boulder. When I finally reached Santa Catarina, nobody had even heard of my father, and I was the first outsider they had seen in weeks. And the return trip, once I got started, was even worse. It rained." She turned once more and pleaded with poignantly hurt brown eyes. "Why did you do it, Johnny?"

His face worked at the name. He got to his feet and paced once the length of the office, then halted beside the desk. "You asked for it."

The hurt grew. "I see—nothing sacred."

He stared unbelievably. "Nothing sacred?"

She stirred uneasily and looked away. Color deepened in the smooth cheeks. "Well, in your room that night—all the things we said and—" She broke off.

Steele became very reserved. "If you're referring to that run-around you tried to give me, I'll tell you why it failed. I wasn't at all sure of you to begin with, and when you went into the love scene I was even less sure. You had previously turned down my help, and I'm a very suspicious guy."

The blond head came up. "I can be suspicious, too. Maybe I was even more suspicious of you than you were of me. Maybe I saw you were just going to let me wait for you in my room, so I tried to get a head start on you."

Steele's head wagged back and forth. His eyes became very knowing. "You tried to pump me and double-cross me, but your little scheme backfired. I've been

worked on by experts, Claire, but I gave you the benefit of the doubt—tried to, anyway. I didn't leave the hotel till I'd seen you check out and start for Santa Catarina. If you hadn't done that, I'd have called you and taken you with me to find your father."

Again, the white little teeth caught nervously at her lower lip. Finally she inhaled deeply and walked across the room to him. The gloved hands rested on his lapels. She looked up into his eyes.

"All right, Johnny. I did try to double-cross you, but you turned the tables on me, and I got what I deserved. But I didn't know you any better than you knew me. And with those other men down there looking for my father, too—" She hesitated an instant. The dark eyes became big and appealing. "He was carrying that diamond. I didn't know whether you were a friend or an enemy. I didn't know what to do." Her breath caught, and she looked miserably down.

Steele studied the bright hair. "You knew what to do, all right, Claire; you just didn't know how to do it."

Her eyes quickly protested. "I wasn't just trying to pump you that night. I really meant everything I said. And it was hard to run away and leave you like that, but I meant to come to you later, just like now, and explain everything and—" Promise awoke in the eyes. The lips twisted as if from actual hurt. Steele remained unresponsive. She looked defeatedly down. "I simply had to see my father before anyone else talked with him." Once more she looked up. "And I still don't know why you want him."

He caught her arms and swung her around and steered her into the customer's chair. "Better make

that past tense."

She regarded him frustratedly. Her words were the tiny rush of her breathing. "You've found him."

"Yes." He returned to the desk and sat down and reached beneath the eave and pressed a button that sounded a buzzer once, warningly, in the reception room. Then he opened the key hidden under the desk. Again, Betsy strenuously slammed a drawer.

Claire had been studying him calculatingly. As he turned back to her, the smooth face cleared and the eyes became concerned. She asked, "How—is he?"

Steele hesitated deliberately. "Well, if he wasn't your father, I'd say he's a very nice, obnoxious sort of a guy."

Her eyes narrowed; otherwise she ignored the thrust. "Did you tell him about me?"

"Naturally."

There was a moment of silence. Then, "Did he explain why he left Puerto Raton without waiting for me?"

Steele nodded. "He wasn't too convinced you're actually his daughter. The guy seems to have enemies."

She frowned unbelievably. "Not his daughter? Why, that's ridiculous!"

Steele impassively studied the girl. "I don't know. Twenty-two years can make a lot of difference in a person; and he's not taking any chances on losing that diamond."

"But I'll be seeing him, won't I?"

"From the general impression I gathered, you won't."

She stirred uneasily and stripped the gloves from her hand. A diamond winked from the engagement finger.

"But why would he send for me, then not want to see me?"

Steele shrugged. "Maybe you'd better tell me something about him."

She hesitated. "I can't tell you very much." She paused again, then rushed on. "Mother always said he was rather eccentric, but after twenty-two years I can hardly remember him."

"He must have written and sent pictures."

Reluctantly, she shook her head. "He couldn't get along with my mother. I was only three at the time, but Mother said he was cold and overbearing. Finally, he just disappeared. I didn't hear from him until the newspapers carried the story about his finding that diamond. So I wrote. He answered, telling me he wanted to provide for me. Mother had died six years before, without ever knowing what became of him."

"Divorce?"

"No." Her hands stirred in her lap. She looked down at the diamond. It winked. She glanced back at Steele. "Is he in Los Angeles?"

"I don't know where he is now." Steele indicated the diamond ring. "Engaged?"

She flushed and covered the ring with one hand. "Of course not— When did you see him?"

"The morning after I left you in Puerto Raton— Funny place to wear a diamond ring if you aren't engaged."

She quickly shifted the ring to her other hand. "Did he tell you where he was going?"

"No— How come you're wearing a ring like that if you aren't engaged?"

She displayed a trace of annoyance. "Because it was

my mother's, silly. Do you think you can find my father again?"

"Possibly, though I don't imagine he'd be overjoyed with it— Sure you aren't engaged to one of those mysterious gents who spring from dark roadsides at night and jump into white Packards?"

She regarded him cautiously. "Mysterious gents?"

He cupped his hands behind his head and leaned back and patiently studied the ceiling. "Maybe you aren't very smart; maybe I ought to draw you a picture."

She displayed indignation. "I can't imagine what you're talking about."

He straightened and placed his hands on the desk. "Would the name Gordon Leon Eustace help you any? Or did it just happen you knew he was staying at the Bolivar and wanted a ride to Santa Catarina?" And he added significantly, "While I was supposed to wait until very early the next morning."

She looked away, and a moment passed before she spoke. "I wasn't trying to hide that. I didn't even think about him."

"How does he come into this?"

"Just as a friend. He drove me to Puerto Raton so I'd have protection. When I decided to go to Santa Catarina, I phoned him, and he met me on the corner. He's unimportant and has nothing to do with this."

Steele looked at the girl an instant, then leaned forward, elbows on the desk. "To me, anyone is important if he is involved in locating a man carrying a diamond worth a fortune—especially if that other man is a lawyer. Besides, how do I know Royal Adams is really your father? How do I know you and Eustace aren't

out to kill Adams and steal the Mirabilis?"

She stared. "Well! You certainly didn't exaggerate when you said you were a very suspicious guy!"

He nodded noncommittally. "Even the man you claim is your father seems to think you're an impostor."

She opened her purse and extracted a letter. The dark eyes had become suddenly amused. She looked at him tolerantly, then placed the letter on his desk.

"Maybe this will quiet your suspicions and convince my father."

Steele opened the message and, for Betsy's records, read aloud the complete address and the contents. The letter was addressed to Claire Adams at 661 East Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis, Minn., and verified Claire's story.

Steele returned the letter. "Seems clear enough."

She returned it to her purse. For a moment, she surveyed him triumphantly; then the dark eyes became quite grave. "Johnny, I want you to find my father for me."

Steele studied the girl expressionlessly. "I can think of more pleasant assignments than running down your obnoxious father again; but if he runs true to form I can't imagine anything much easier."

She brightened hopefully. "You'll find him?"

Steele weighed the decision. "I'll try. Where can I reach you?"

She shook her head. "I'll telephone or drop in from time to time. Will it cost much?"

"We'll worry about that when I see what's involved. Why don't you want me to telephone you?"

"Because I'm staying with a friend and she hasn't a phone, silly. Are you sure my father isn't in Los

Angeles?"

"I'm not sure of anything, and I've never said he was any place in particular at all. Doesn't your friend have an address either?"

A trace of annoyance touched Claire's face. "Of course she has an address, but I don't want anyone coming there for me because she's sort of peculiar about having callers. Where was my father living when you saw him?"

Steele smiled knowingly. "In North America. Give me your girl friend's address so I can reach you in an emergency."

The annoyance grew. She hesitated several seconds before replying. "Fifty-eight hundred Hollywood Boulevard. I do wish you'd take me into your confidence. After all, he's my father."

"I couldn't involve a former client without first getting his permission. Fifty-eight hundred. That would be on the southwest corner of Van Ness and Hollywood Boulevard."

She frowned prettily. "Don't come there. I'll either phone or drop in. Do you think my father will see me if you tell him first that I'm coming?"

"All I can do is find him again and ask." He regarded her sharply. "Sort of peculiar! I'd say your girl friend is very peculiar indeed."

Apprehension sharpened the dark eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I pass fifty-eight hundred Hollywood Boulevard every time I go downtown. It's a vacant lot. Or is that why your girl friend is peculiar about having callers?"

Claire's face reddened. She studied him for several moments, then got to her feet. "You'll have to believe

me, Johnny. There's a good reason." She bent suddenly and thrust her cool cheek against his. One arm went around his neck. The other rested on his shoulder. She kissed him desperately, a repetition of the kisses in Puerto Raton. Then the dark eyes were looking into his. "Don't let me down, Johnny. I need you terribly."

She opened the door and swept past Betsy, who straightened disapprovingly from her notebook. Claire vanished into the hall. Betsy slammed paper into her typewriter and began furiously transcribing her notes.

Steele got to his feet and lazed against the door jamb. "Well, Betsy, how were things on the intercom?"

She glared up, her angry fingers continuing to pound at the keys. "Is she going back to the dairy where she belongs?"

Steele surveyed her mildly, then looked into the mirror, got out his handkerchief, and removed the lipstick from his mouth.

Betsy's fingers poised in mid-air. Icily, she quoted Claire. "'Johnny, darling. I don't care what you think. I just had to see you again.'"

Steele grinned. "Call Captain Hegg at the Hollywood station. See what he knows about Gordon Leon Eustace's private life. Try to get a description of Eustace from his application for a driver's license."

He moved back to his desk, strapped on his holstered pistol, pulled on his hat, and walked into the reception room.

Betsy studied him anxiously. "Why get involved? She hasn't paid you anything."

Soberly he nodded. "It's not the girl. I think I've been used in some elaborate plot connected with the Mirabilis Diamond. And I don't like it." He glanced

at the office clock. Ten-fifteen. "Back around noon."
"Eustace?"

"No, Betsy—the professor. If we aren't careful, we'll get rich off that fellow."

The small white calling card had not been removed from the mailbox when Steele returned to the house on Gardenia Place. He puzzled over this for an instant or two, then finally punched the button and heard the whispering of chimes. The door jumped open. Clarence's button eyes looked angrily out.

Steele glanced impassively at the little man. "Tell the professor I'm here."

Clarence's lips curled back viciously. He stepped aside, and his master appeared. He wore the same loose-fitting, double-breasted gray business suit of his visit to Steele's office.

"What is it?"

"I'm not back here because I want to be or because I even thought I'd find you here." Steele indicated the white calling card.

The other's chin went up. His attitude reflected displeasure and annoyance. "Your deductions are of no interest to me, Mr. Steele. What do you want?"

Steele considered the huge bulk blocking the door. "Of course, I could have simply given her this address, collected my fee, and forgotten the whole matter."

The professor stiffened warily. He chose his words carefully. "You are referring to some specific person, I presume?"

Steele nodded malevolently. "Your daughter—that part of the marital status you didn't care to discuss."

"What about her?"

"She's in town and wants to see you."

The lean man's face darkened angrily. He pulled Steele inside and shut the door. Albert immediately stepped to the far end of the living-room and peered alertly out the window. Clarence took a position by the big radio and watched the front of the house.

The professor faced Steele. "You fool! How do you know she's my daughter? How do you know she isn't a clever blind for some of the thieves and assassins who are after the Mirabilis?"

Steele's quick anger matched that of the professor. "Because she had the letter you wrote her from Veracruz." Steele's eyes flashed. "You seemed anxious enough to see her then."

For several moments, the other did not speak. Then, "You underestimate my enemies. Her possession of a letter doesn't identify her as my daughter. She could have obtained it in several ways."

"Get above the primary class," snapped Steele. "That's why I came here alone."

The thin lips quivered. "Why didn't you tell me she knew where to reach you here?"

"Why didn't you tell me you had a daughter, so I could judge which of you was lying?"

The lean man glowered.

At the far end of the living-room, Albert snapped his fingers and looked concernedly over his shoulders. Steele and the professor moved to Albert's side and looked out the window. A battered old tan Plymouth coach puffed up the hill, turned at the top, and slowly coasted past Steele's coupé parked in front of the house. The driver of the Plymouth surreptitiously scanned the coupé and the house as he passed. Sun-

light silhouetted the familiar, homely face and the dusty red hair. The Plymouth continued down the hill and disappeared in the foliage.

The older man turned on Steele. "They've located me. You led them here."

Steele snorted his disgust. "Be yourself. He probably trailed you here, the same as I. God knows you've done everything possible to make it easy for him—that card on the mailbox, the utilities in your own name."

The professor swung on Albert. "Get the Mirabilis and the car while Clarence and I pack. I want to be out of here in ten minutes."

Albert's pale eyes flashed. He hurried from the room.

The professor exchanged a significant glance with Clarence, then turned to Steele. "We'll just make certain you remain here for some time after we leave. Your proclivities for ferreting me out are no longer desirable."

Steele's pistol was clearing the holster when Clarence's automatic caught him, butt first, in the temple. Steele slid to the floor and fluttered glazing eyes. One hand twitched paralytically for the pistol that had fallen at his side. Clarence's teeth bared in a snarl. Deliberately and with obvious pleasure, he drew back his foot and kicked. His toe caught Steele on the point of the jaw. Steele's eyes closed.

When he regained consciousness, Claire was kneeling over him and wiping his face with a cold wet towel. He shook his head and sat up dazedly. The electric clock on the radio had jumped ahead forty minutes while he slept.

For a time, he simply sat motionless, staring down.

Claire, grave-eyed, watched him. From time to time, he would shake his head in an attempt to regain his wits.

When at last he addressed the girl, his eyes remained down. "How did you get here?"

Softness governed her voice. "In a cab."

His eyes looked up quickly and expressed disbelief. "You followed me?"

With just a hint of humor, she shook her head, and dropped the wet towel and helped him to his feet. The sudden effort brought his palms to his temples and a grimace to his features and a sense of unbalance to his equilibrium. She moved close and caught him in her arms and held him against her and looked up anxiously into his face. After a few seconds, the grimace went away and the palms came down and he stood on his own feet. She kissed him tenderly, the big dark eyes soft, the bright hair like a mist across his cheek. She whispered, "Poor darling."

He retrieved his train of thought from the dark pit into which the pain and dizziness had dropped it. "How did you find this address?"

The hint of humor returned to the cool lips and the contrasting eyes. "By asking Information at the telephone company."

Steele shot her a keen glance. They stood, thus, for two ticks of a clock; then her eyes deepened with concern. She turned her attention to a position on the floor behind him. Her hand gestured vaguely. "Did you do that?"

He turned and saw the body for the first time—a man's body, grotesquely sprawled face down on the floor.

Chapter Seven

HEADING FOR MORE TROUBLE

STEELE MOVED SOMEWHAT unsteadily to the body and dropped to one knee. Two shots had been fired into the dead man's back—shots from a weapon held close to the gray sport coat. Powder burns dotted the material. The right hand extended straight out, as if the dead man had been shot in the act of reaching for the telephone, on a small table directly above him.

Steele studied the wide shoulders, the gray sport coat, the thick torso, the dusty red hair. He turned the head and revealed the profile of the familiar, pathetically homely, freckled face. Claire turned away and walked to the window, her features suddenly gray.

Steele said, "The redheaded fellow I told you about in Puerto Raton."

In the right hip pocket, he located a worn black leather billfold. It contained seven one-dollar bills and a miscellany of identification cards and a special officer's badge and a police permit issued to Stanley O'Hara, a private detective with offices in the Republic Building on Cherokee and Hollywood Boulevard.

Steele soberly nodded. "No wonder I thought I recognized him. I've seen him around Hollywood station."

Claire turned quickly and paraphrased her unanswered question. Her voice had become forced. "Did you kill him?"

The .38 police special on the floor caught Steele's

eye. His hand raised swiftly to his own shoulder holster and found it empty. Carefully preserving any possible fingerprints, he wrapped the weapon in his handkerchief and opened the cylinder. Two of the cartridges had been fired. He dropped the gun into his coat pocket and turned to Claire.

"No," he belatedly replied, "but somebody shot him with my gun."

Her eyes became very large. "And tried to make it look as though you did it?"

Steele nodded. "That's the general idea."

The girl hesitated. "My father?"

"Possibly."

She moved nearer. "What happened?"

Steele replaced the billfold, then picked his hat from the floor and gingerly set it on his head. "I was in here talking with your father about seeing you when O'Hara drove up the hill, turned around at the top, and drove back down. Going up and coming back, he kept his eye on this house. Your father started getting tough because he thought I'd led O'Hara here. When I went for my gun, one of your father's bodyguards hit me on the head, then kicked me in the jaw." He paused, watching the girl. "You can pick it up from there."

Claire's eyes had become frightened. "I called Information on a hunch and got this address, then took a cab to the bottom of the hill and walked up so my father wouldn't see me before I knew just what to do. I saw your car and the other car in front. I was scared, but finally I rang the front doorbell. When nobody answered, I peeked in and saw you and O'Hara lying on the floor. I started to run for the police, then realized

they might make trouble for my father. So I went around to the back door and found it wide open. O'Hara was dead, and you were unconscious."

Steele nodded approvingly. "Good work. Did you see anybody leave the house or drive away while you were coming up the hill?"

She seemed pleased with his two words of praise. One hand felt for her hair and unconsciously reassured several vagrant tresses that had stirred from their proper setting. She shook her head.

"No one at all." Then the reaction to his praise went away, and realization of what he had implied struck home. Miserably, she twisted her hands. The dark eyes pleaded with him eloquently. "But my father couldn't have done it. I know—"

Steele interrupted ungently. "All we know is that somebody killed O'Hara. The police will naturally suspect your father when they find he's run away."

Her disappointment became very acute. "Then you think he did it, too." Her words were a statement, not a question.

He shook his head. "Not necessarily."

She looked up hopefully. "Why not?"

He frowned. "It doesn't add up that easily. Why would your father kill O'Hara and risk a murder charge, then leave me alive to send him to the gas chamber for trying to hang the killing on me?"

The hope grew. "Then you'll find my father and clear this up?"

"Naturally—" he smiled coldly "—unless I want the police to start suspecting me."

Her hope faded. Trouble gathered in the pretty brow and in the pale features. "But if no one but my

father and his bodyguards was here, wouldn't that be proof that he—" She broke off, the eyes very concerned.

"Somebody else could have come here after I was knocked out—some enemy of your father's who wants him framed for murder. It's possible you scared this other party out the back door when you rang the bell."

"But why would anyone want to frame my father?"

"Because he has the Mirabilis Diamond; and since he got away, I can't think of a better way of locating him than having all the police of the country after him for murder. Once he is in custody, the diamond could be squeezed out of him comparatively easily."

Steele went hurriedly through the house. In the bath, he draped the wet towel over the tub and wiped Claire's fingerprints from the hot water tap. He could find no personal effects left behind by the professor or his men.

He returned to the living-room and scanned the street from the little window in the front door. The battered Plymouth coach stood at the curb, directly behind Steele's Ford coupé. Both cars had been parked so that they faced downhill.

He turned to Claire. "Where's your cab?"

"I paid him off at the bottom of the hill."

Steele regarded her sharply. "Did you pick him up on the street?"

"No, I called the cab company." His question again raised anxiety within her. "Do you think the police will trace—" She let the question hang unfinished.

"Probably not, since you didn't come to the house. Have you touched anything else around here—any doorknobs or glasses or tables?"

The gay hair shimmered as she shook her head.

"I wore gloves until I turned on the water faucet."

He opened the front door and eliminated his own fingerprints. "Let's go."

They threaded their way down the stone steps and got into the coupé. Across the street, a mousy little woman, her hair caught back in a bandana, stepped from the front door and began vigorously shaking a small throw rug. Steele released the hand brake and let the car begin coasting noiselessly down the hill. As it reached the curve in the street, he glanced back. The woman was vanishing into her house.

Claire said, "I don't think she noticed us."

Steele nodded gloomily. "You think they don't, but they always seem to."

Her ready alarm had sprung back to life. "If she saw us and describes us to the police— We'd better separate."

"I'll take you home," nodded Steele.

"No, it will be better if we aren't seen coming there together."

Gardenia Place turned lazily until it bisected Franklin Avenue instead of paralleling it. At the end of the turn, Steele let in the clutch, and the motor took hold.

His irritation showed plainly. "This is no time to be kittenish over where you live. I've got to know how to reach you."

The dark eyes regretfully searched his face; the clean, sharp white teeth caught unhappily at the red lip. "I can't tell you, Johnny. Honest—there's a good reason."

His jaw muscles rippled and his eyes snapped. He growled, "Johnny!"

She placed one hand on his arm. "John."

They reached Franklin and Gardenia. Steele got out. "I'd better report the body to the police." He stalked into a corner drugstore.

From a pay booth, he called Betsy and quickly outlined the case. "I want to search O'Hara's office before the police find the body and get the same idea themselves. And I don't want the police tipped off by a man's voice."

Betsy cut in indignantly. "So you want me to wait half an hour, then go over to the Owl Drug and phone the tip anonymously from a pay booth."

He growled, "Remarkable! Then go to the library on Ivar and get everything you can on the Mirabilis Diamond and a Moorish society called the Ifnis—I-f-n-i-s."

"I-f-n-i-s."

"Wire the Fred Neilsen Agency in Minneapolis for everything they have on Royal Xavier Adams and Claire Adams. You have her address there in your book. That letter, you know. Give Neilsen the details. He can go back twenty-two years in the vital statistics; and there may be something in the newspaper columns. There also will probably be a birth record of Claire Adams twenty-five years ago."

She asked airily. "Anything else?"

He snapped, "Yes—after you've typed up your report on the Mirabilis and the Ifnis, take five bucks out of the cash drawer and buy yourself five Zombies. They might improve your disposition."

She emitted a sharp laugh. "Five bucks out of *what* cash drawer?"

He hung up and stormed back to his car. Claire had disappeared.

For some time, he cruised up and down the streets of the neighborhood, then returned to the drugstore and telephoned a man named Ray at the Yellow Cab, the only regular taxi company serving Los Angeles.

"Ray? This is John Steele. A girl had a cab take her to the fifty-eight hundred block on Gardenia Place within the last hour. I'd like to know where the cab picked her up."

Ray hesitated. "Well—the switchboard girls may be able to locate the driver when he calls in. I'll see what I can do."

"Will you call me at the office? If I'm out, Betsy will take the message. There's a ten in it for you, and another for the girl who finds the driver."

Steele returned to his car, swung south to Hollywood Boulevard, and fought the traffic west to Cherokee, where he got out and glanced appraisingly at the ratty, two-story Republic Building. Stanley O'Hara's name appeared on two of the windows overlooking the boulevard.

The lobby of the building was simply a landing place just in from the sidewalk, with a tenant panel nailed aslant in the wall. The panel listed O'Hara's office on the second floor. Steele started up the dark, narrow, smelly stairs.

Beyond the head of the stairs a door closed and feet sounded and voices blurred in some foreign tongue. Two swarthy, hawk-nosed men of medium height reached the stairway and started down. Their talk ceased as they saw John Steele. He looked at them idly. They now betrayed a studied innocence; and, as they passed him on the stairs, their feet moved faster. He turned sharply and looked down just as the pair

reached the bottom of the stairs and glanced up. He stopped, wondering. They darted into the crush of pedestrian traffic passing outside the door. Suspicious, Steele reached the top of the stairs and moved down the hall.

The frosted window in the door of Stanley O'Hara's office bore the dead detective's name and occupation, but listed no home address or telephone number where he could be reached after business hours. Steele tried the door, found it locked, and searched a set of skeleton keys from his pocket. The cheap, old-fashioned lock responded to his first attempt. He swung open the door and looked in cautiously, and saw at once why no home address or telephone number had been listed on the frosted window. Stanley O'Hara, whose life had not been a financial success, had lived and worked and slept in the two rooms that made up his home and office.

Steele entered cautiously and closed the door. Both rooms showed unmistakably that they had been searched. The drawers of two battered desks had been pulled out and their contents dumped on the floor. The wooden filing case had been emptied. Even the wastebasket lay on its side.

The second room contained a cot, a cheap, unfinished table, two straight-back chairs, a broken old overstuffed chair, a floor lamp, and a battered clothespress. A few cooking utensils either lay dirty in the small sink or stood among a miscellany of dishes on a shelf above a two-burner plate. The little electric refrigerator stood open, its contents either on the floor or in the sink. A dish of margarine had been scooped out and crisscrossed with the blade of a knife so that nothing

hidden in it had gone unfound. The contents of a jar of jam lay in the sink, victim of a similar indignity. Clothing from the clothespress lay strewn about the room. The bedding, the mattress, the pillows, even the overstuffed chair had been ripped apart and investigated. Nothing had escaped the searchers' attention.

Steele filtered the debris, found nothing to hold his interest, and returned to the other room. Here he began stirring up the litter on the floor. Almost at once he found the dead detective's daybook. Each page listed the day's activities, the receipts, and the expenditures. But the pages for the preceding nine days had been torn out.

A thorough search failed to reveal the missing pages; but he did find O'Hara's checkbook. The last deposit had been made nine days previously for two hundred and fifty dollars. There was no explanation of the item. The account was carried in the Cherokee branch of the State Bank of California.

Steele slipped the checkbook into his pocket and glanced at his watch. Twelve-twenty. Quickly he wiped his fingerprints from the doorknob and left the office.

He made a U-turn at Las Palmas and drove back east on Hollywood Boulevard. As he passed Cherokee, a police car stopped in front of the Republic Building, and several plain-clothes men and a uniformed officer got out. The uniformed officer took up a stand at the doorway. The plain-clothes men filed up the stairs.

Steele parked his car next to the Broadway-Hollywood, in the parking lot, and telephoned Betsy from the Owl Drug. His call was not answered.

He ate lunch in the Brown Derby, which was

packed with out-of-town visitors looking for non-present motion picture personalities. Service was slow.

The one o'clock newscast came over the radio as he was finishing his meal. He listened patiently. Toward the end of the broadcast, O'Hara's murder was announced. Royal Adams and his two bodyguards were the prime suspects, but police questioning of the neighborhood revealed that an unidentified man and woman were seen to leave the house in a small coupé about half an hour before an anonymous telephone call sent police to discover the body. The call was believed to have been made by the woman in the case. Police promised the usual early arrests. No mention was made of Adams's background or of the Mirabilis Diamond.

Steele paid his check and walked to his office. Betsy Carnes looked up from the telephone as he entered. The same news announcer to whom Steele had just listened was recapitulating the day's headlines on Betsy's small white radio. Betsy said, "Hold the line a minute," and covered the mouthpiece.

Steele halted. "For me?"

Her sharp eyes examined his bruised chin, found it unworthy of serious consideration, and dismissed the subject—in the space of one second. "Sounds like the fugitive." She indicated the radio.

Steele went into his office and picked up the receiver. "Put him on."

The professor's voice responded. "Mr. Steele, are you still a man who is interested in earning money?"

"Not to the extent of getting my head caved in again."

"That was unfortunate but necessary. Do you know where Barney's Beanery is?"

"Yes."

"I suggest you meet me there in half an hour. After hearing the radio, I don't suppose I need caution you to come alone."

Steele snapped, "I told you I'd turn you over to the police if I found myself involved in anything shady."

"Ah—but that would cost you ten thousand dollars, Mr. Steele. And the police might take a stubborn view of O'Hara's death."

Steele thought that over. "I'll be there." He hung up.

Betsy's report lay neatly typed on his desk. The information covering the Mirabilis Diamond approximated that previously outlined by the professor, but there was no data on the Ifnis. Betsy's report stated simply that scores of secret societies existed among the Moors, and there had been little information on any of them.

Steele removed O'Hara's checkbook and the .38 from his coat. He had wrapped the pistol in a handkerchief. Now he slipped a fresh .38 into his holster, and carried the checkbook and handkerchief into the reception room.

Betsy eyed him knowingly. "I knew you were headed for trouble the moment you herded that lanky vulture into this office. He'll have all of us in jail before he's finished."

Steele ignored her. "Dust this gun for fingerprints; then call O'Hara's bank and tell them you're his secretary. This is his checkbook. Explain that you've found this two hundred and fifty dollar deposit, but have no record of it. Find out who issued the check."

"And if the bank already heard the announcement over the radio?"

Steele bristled. "His secretary has a right to straighten out his affairs, hasn't she?"

Betsy's plain face became very smug. "And if they decide to telephone back with the information?"

Steele's irritation mounted. "Use a pay phone at the Owl Drug. Give the bank that number. Wait there for the call."

Her smugness collapsed. "You're all wound up, aren't you?"

He snorted. "Wound up? Why should I be wound up? After all, I'm only suspected of murder, and it was merely my gun that killed a competitor, and I'm simply wasting valueless time explaining the obvious while a decidedly elusive client is waiting to pay me ten thousand dollars—if I can reach him before the police do."

Betsy sniffed and tossed her head.

Steele added, "Did Ray call from the Yellow Cab?"

"Not unless it was while I was at the library."

"If he calls, or if a wire comes from Neilsen in Minneapolis, telephone me at Barney's Beanery. It's out on Croft and Santa Monica."

She poked at the pistol on the handkerchief and muttered something about receiving pay highly incommensurate with that of a Bertillon expert, a secretary, an errand boy, a liar, and an all-around punching bag.

Steele patted her head, and she looked up, suddenly soft. He said, "Stick with me, Betsy, and you'll be wearing silk instead of old flour sacks."

He pushed out the door as Betsy, frustrated and helpless, burst into tears.

Chapter Eight

MURDER NUMBER TWO

BARNEY'S BEANERY is a small restaurant and bar noted mainly for its French onion soup and its unaffected proprietor. It fronts on Santa Monica Boulevard in a semi-commercial neighborhood just below La Cienega Boulevard, and caters to a mixed trade—truck drivers and local workers in the afternoon, movie stars, directors, and writers at night. Its unprepossessing exterior makes it the last place on earth where a visitor to California would look for the movie greats.

The Beanery consists of four or five booths and a counter with perhaps ten stools. The bar is tacked onto one end of the little building. Here Barney Anthony, the proprietor, mixes the drinks and has a personal word for every patron, while several ageless glamour girls attend to the duties in the dining-room. The bar is dark even on the brightest day, and is lighted only by candles stuck into bottles. Eight or nine stools range along the length of the bar; a few tables and chairs fill out the remaining space at the rear of the barroom. Barney Anthony is unique among Hollywood restaurateurs, most of whom grovel before the movie greats. Barney, however, looks with equal favor upon the truck driver and the best-known producers, the girl from the gas station and the greatest star. He works in his shirt sleeves and seldom wears a necktie. His patrons love him for his lack of pretense.

John Steele pushed into the bar. The professor and

Albert looked up from one of the tables in the rear. Barney waved an offhand greeting while he served a drink. "Hi, John."

"Hi, Barney. I'll have a beer." Steele moved to the occupied table. The professor's sunken eyes burned low in the light of a single candle. Two bowls contained the dregs of Barney's French onion soup. Albert, without an expression of recognition for Steele, got to his feet and stepped to the front of the bar, where he took up a stand. Steele sat down.

The sunken eyes surveyed him. "You should try this onion soup, Mr. Steele. You'll find it excellent."

Steele angered. "Start talking about ten thousand dollars."

The other calmly selected a panatela, bit off the end, and touched it to the candle. "I prefer first to offer regrets and to hope your injuries proved neither painful nor serious."

Steele's hand gingerly touched his head and his chin. "Were you ever worked over like that, professor?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry you attempted to draw your gun; but, of course, that was no excuse for Clarence's striking you. We intended merely to tie you loosely until we could get away— And there were further extenuating circumstances—the suspicion that you had led my enemies to the door, and Clarence's resentment over your slapping him and ejecting him from your office. I apologize for suspecting you. The radio indicates you are as deeply involved in the murder as I—though they don't yet know your identity. And Clarence has been dealt with for attacking you. Beyond that, I can explain and apologize no further."

Steele's anger did not fade. "Skip the excuses. I'm

here because you mentioned ten thousand dollars."

"We will come to that. But first I'll ask for the exact circumstances surrounding O'Hara's death and the identity of the girl seen leaving the house with you."

Steele paused to light a cigarette. Barney, shirt-sleeved and wearing a long white apron, brought Steele's bottle of beer to the table. "How they going, John?"

"Pretty good, Barney." He looked at the professor. "Drink?"

Stiffly, the other shook his head. "Alcohol numbs the brain. I make a practice of avoiding it."

Steele's mouth twisted. "The hell you say!"

Barney threw the professor a look of disfavor, then picked up the empty soup bowls. Steele paid Barney. He retired to the bar. Albert looked on with cold eyes.

The professor's voice prompted John Steele. "The circumstances of the murder?"

"The ten thousand?"

The other sighed. "I will pay you ten thousand when you clear me of this murder charge."

Steele's sarcasm emerged. "That should be simple!"

"You have earned my confidence. I was not in the house when O'Hara was killed. My men were with me. You can prove that, I am sure."

Steele hesitated thoughtfully, then made his decision. "When I came to, your daughter was wiping my face with a wet towel. She had got your address from Information at the telephone company and had taken a cab to the corner below your place." He shot the other a keen glance. "Why did you make no effort to conceal your identity if you were in hiding?"

The professor made a great show of patience. "I

wish to sell a stone of immense value. I have been out of this country for twenty-two years. I wanted to establish my identity here after I had buried my trail in Mexico. When I discovered through you that my trail was not buried, I simply took a chance."

"What about this girl—Claire? You sent for her. She wants to see you."

The other's lips thinned. "Prove that she is actually my daughter and not an impostor."

"She has your letter."

"That proves nothing. I refuse to expose myself to her at this time."

"Because of the Ifnis?"

"The Ifnis and others. I believe I explained to you the criminal types who wish to steal the Mirabilis. They will go to any extreme—and an impersonation is the least of which they are capable."

Steele puffed on his cigarette and sipped at his beer. Finally he went on with his account of the morning. "The girl said no one answered her ring, but my car and O'Hara's car were parked in front. She looked in the window and saw us lying on the floor, then ran around to the back and found the rear door open. O'Hara was dead—shot twice in the back at close range—and I was unconscious. She brought me to. From O'Hara's position below the telephone, I would judge he was killed as he started to make a call—possibly to the police."

The professor considered this account. "And why did you vanish instead of waiting for the police?"

Steele snorted and drank some more of his beer. "Did you pay O'Hara a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar retainer nine days ago?"

The other's sunken eyes became knowing. "It's quite obvious O'Hara was shot with your gun. Otherwise you would have no reason for leaving."

Steele became annoyed. "The two hundred and fifty dollars?"

"I had never seen O'Hara before he drove past the house this morning." He paused. "We saw him again in his parked car at the corner of Gardenia and Franklin as we drove away. He was evidently waiting for someone."

Steele nodded. "He could have telephoned his client from the corner drugstore. Did he see you?"

"I believe so; though he made no move to follow us."

"That proves he was waiting for someone and couldn't leave."

The professor's little eyes glittered in the light of the candle. "I was puzzled before, but now I can reconstruct the killing. O'Hara telephoned his client. They entered the house and found you on the floor. O'Hara started to call the police. The client could not explain why the police should not be called, so he simply picked up your gun and shot O'Hara. The girl who claims to be my daughter rang the bell. The client left by the back door, leaving it open in his haste."

Steele permitted the hint of a smile to touch his lips. He said scornfully, "Unless you and your men killed him, and have called me in now to set up another smoke screen. If that's the case, I want to warn you I won't hesitate to collect my fee, then turn you over to the police." The professor sat eying him steadily. Steele grudgingly added, "Though common sense tells me you'd hardly kill O'Hara, then leave me alive to testify against you and send you to the gas chamber."

The other nodded stiffly. "I am an archeologist, Mr. Steele. Murder and violence have no place in my pattern of living."

Steele drained his glass of beer. "Let's start talking about ten thousand dollars."

The professor sucked at his cigar. "I will pay ten thousand dollars if you clear my name. I wish to sell the Mirabilis, but cannot approach legitimate buyers if I am a fugitive. They not only would refuse to deal with me, but would notify the police as well. And to sell it through questionable channels would mean realizing only a fraction of its true worth."

"What is its true worth?"

The other paused. "You will not accuse me of exaggerating?"

"Try me."

"At least a million dollars, Mr. Steele."

"You have ten thousand with you?"

The professor eyed him. "I have, but the money will not be paid you until you have either turned the real slayer of O'Hara over to the police or have proved to them O'Hara was killed by someone other than me or my men."

Steele angered. "Why should I go into a speculative thing like this?"

The other permitted a smile to touch the thin mouth. "For several reasons, Mr. Steele. In the first place, you are as deeply involved in this as I am; and the police may at any time identify the man and woman seen leaving my house. It is to your advantage to clear your own name as well as mine. In the second place, you are capable enough as a detective to run down this murderer and collect the money for your

trouble."

Steele hesitated a moment, then nodded his head. "Fair enough. But there will be expenses involved."

"For what purpose?"

"Another trip down to Mexico may be necessary if I hit a stone wall here."

"I cannot see the value of another trip to Mexico."

"O'Hara was there. His trip to Mexico resulted in his death. I'll want to check on any companions he had there; and I'll want to know if he made that wild-goose chase down to Santa Catarina. There's old Ricardo Martinez—he talked with just about everybody involved in this case."

"When would you plan on going there?"

"Maybe tomorrow, maybe not at all. It depends upon developments."

"How much expense money would be involved?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"A great deal, Mr. Steele."

"Then how about hiring somebody else?"

The other hesitated, then turned to Albert at the front of the bar. The sunken eyes flashed the little bodyguard a signal. Albert moved quickly to the side of the table. "Five hundred dollars, Albert."

The pale-eyed little man unstrapped his wallet and thumbed five one-hundred-dollar bills from a wedge of one-hundred and one-thousand-dollar bills, then, expressionless, returned to the front of the bar. Barney addressed him in friendly fashion, but received only a noncommittal stare. Barney shrugged and turned back to his customers at the bar.

The professor placed the bills before John Steele. "No delays, Mr. Steele."

"I've been on it already." Steele pocketed the money. "I went to O'Hara's office before the police were notified. Two men passed me just as I reached the second floor. O'Hara's office had been torn apart. I'm pretty sure the two men had just finished going through the place."

The professor's eyes glittered red in the guttering candle. "What did they look like?"

"Dark. Thin, hooked noses. Beady eyes. Prominent cheek bones."

"Mexicans?"

"Wouldn't Ifnis be more likely?"

The professor stiffened, and did not reply at once. His cigar had gone out. He touched it to the candle. "Possibly, though I doubt the Ifnis would employ O'Hara, an outsider."

"What makes you think they hired him? Why couldn't they have been in O'Hara's office for a clue to the Mirabilis?"

The other stubbornly shook his head. "Because the murder is now so clear. O'Hara was in the employ of those two men, and had been in Mexico tracing the stone for them. When he finally located my house, he called them, then became alarmed when he found you unconscious and wanted to phone the police. They could not have police intervention, so they killed O'Hara, then went immediately to his office and made a search because they suspected him of double-crossing them."

Steele remained thoughtful a moment, then went on with his comment. "I found O'Hara's daybook on the floor, but the pages covering the last nine days had been torn out."

The other nodded. "Naturally. The entries would have connected O'Hara with the murderers."

"I picked up a clue from O'Hara's checkbook. Someone gave him a check for two hundred and fifty dollars nine days ago. When I learn who gave him that check, we may have a direct lead to the murderer."

The professor caressed his cigar. The little eyes peered from their deep sockets; shadows fell across the hollows of the cadaverous cheeks.

He asked, "Must you look beyond the two men for the writer of that check?"

Steele flared. "Do you want to handle this, or shall I?"

The other made a deprecating motion. "No offense meant."

Steele waited a moment for his anger to subside. "I'll know who wrote the check within the hour."

"You can give me the report when I telephone."

"Things may happen fast. How can I get hold of you—or is your whereabouts to be a secret?"

"I'll telephone this evening."

"I don't like this in the least."

"It is better this way."

Steele's anger returned. "It's your funeral."

The professor got to his feet and looked knowingly down on Steele. "Is it?" He turned and left the bar with Albert.

Steele got up and moved to the bar. Barney, puzzled, eyed him. "Who were those creeps, John?"

Steele shook his head. "Ever see them in here before, Barney?"

"No—thank God."

Steele nodded, satisfied, and walked from the bar.

At a filling station, Steele telephoned Betsy at the office. "Any word from Ray at the Yellow Cab yet?"

She sniffed. "Your little lovebird called the cab from 5814 Carmelita Way—if that means anything to you."

"Should it?"

"That all depends. It's the Palms Hotel, and Gordon Leon Eustace lives there, too."

"Too?"

"She's registered. So is he. And Captain Hegg says he's a good lawyer, but not above a trick or two."

"What about fingerprints on my gun?"

"Only your own."

Steele paused irritably, then snapped, "You're just too damned smug for any good use. Spill it."

"The check was issued by your girl friend's boy friend—Gordon Leon Eustace."

Steele's eyes narrowed. "Maybe you'll be able to throw away those flour sacks sooner than you think."

He hung up and drove to the Palms Hotel. The house detective investigated and learned that Claire had occupied a sitting-room and bedroom since the previous day. Eustace was a permanent guest who had lived there for the past five years, and who had offices in the Cahuenga Building. Claire's suite was 1117; Eustace occupied a suite farther down the hall on the same floor—1132. To the best of the house detective's knowledge, Eustace was a successful lawyer and was believed to be engaged to the girl in 1117.

Steele took the elevator to the eleventh floor and rapped at suite 1117. Claire gasped when she opened the door and recognized her visitor.

He walked angrily in and took off his hat. "Come along, innocence. You and I are going to have a little

talk with Gordon Leon Eustace."

She showed bewilderment. "I don't know what you mean."

Steele eyed her narrowly. "Maybe I'd better remind you. Eustace is the fellow you said was unimportant to this case and had nothing to do with it."

Her eyes protested his attack. "But, Johnny, he only rode with me for protection. Besides, it was his car."

"You're lying to protect him," snapped Steele. "And I want to warn you I'll throw you to the police just as quick as I'll throw anyone else." He indicated the door. "Come on."

Her face blanched. One hand raised to her breast. "To the police?"

"To Eustace's room, and, if he isn't there, to his office."

"But won't you tell me why, Johnny?"

Steele snorted his anger. "Because he hired O'Hara to find your father. And you're covering up for him."

She stared. "Gordon hired O'Hara?"

"Your hearing is all right, isn't it?"

She sagged into a straight-back chair, the strength all gone from her. "I can't believe it, Johnny."

"Eustace gave O'Hara a check for two hundred and fifty dollars the day O'Hara went on the case. Maybe you can explain that."

For a time Claire sat quietly in the chair, her eyes hurt, her face concerned. Finally she looked up.

"It's hard for a girl to admit that the man who claimed to love her was simply using her."

Steele frowned questioningly. "If you're referring to me—" He paused, regarding her narrowly.

She shook her head and smiled sadly and flashed

him a look with those dark contrasting eyes. "I'm referring to Gordon. You were right when you guessed we're engaged." And she hastened to add, "It's not that I'm in love with him or ever was. I guess I just felt sorry for him. When I met you, I knew there could never really be anything between Gordon and me. I was trying to get up courage to tell him, but didn't know just how to go about it. He's terribly jealous." She hesitated, looking ashamedly down. "I suppose you think I'm pretty awful, but that's really the reason I wouldn't give you my address. If you had come here and Gordon had seen us together, it would have been very difficult."

Steele snapped, "He's going to see us now. And I'm going to find out what's behind that check he gave O'Hara."

She got to her feet. "I'll go with you, Johnny. I want an explanation, too; though it's pretty obvious what he's done. He used me to locate my father and try to steal that diamond. He hired O'Hara to go to Puerto Raton and locate my father. Then when my father slipped away, O'Hara traced him to that Gardenia Place address, and telephoned Gordon to meet him there. They probably got there while you were still unconscious, but after my father had left. For some reason, Gordon must have become alarmed over O'Hara and shot him with your gun."

Steele thought that over. "Is he in his room now?"

"I doubt it. He said something about trying a case today."

Steele picked up the telephone and called Eustace's room. The call remained unanswered. Steele broke the connection and handed the instrument to the girl.

"Call him at his office. Talk natural. If he can see you, make an appointment to meet him in half an hour. Don't let him know I'll be with you." He eyed her warningly. "And don't try anything."

She threw him an indignant glance, then called Eustace's office. Steele placed his cheek against hers and listened in. A girl answered the call.

"Is Mr. Eustace there, Eloise?"

"Oh—hello, Miss Adams. He's trying a case down in Long Beach."

Steele whispered, "Ask when he can be reached. Make an appointment to meet him."

She asked. The girl replied, "He expected to come back to the office around eight tonight. Some paper work he has to clean up."

Claire made an appointment and hung up. Steele glanced impatiently at his watch. "How long have you known him?"

"About seven years."

"Engaged all that time?"

She lowered her eyes. "No—only since my last visit here."

Steele was not impressed. "Meet me across the street from his office at eight o'clock."

She turned back to him, eyes contrite. "Johnny?"

"Yes?"

"I'm wondering about something." He waited. She twisted, face flaming miserably, then went on. "My engagement to Gordon—does that make you think I didn't mean the things I've said to you?"

"I don't think anything."

The dark eyes looked up. She moved nearer to him. "Honestly, I just felt sorry for him, then didn't know

how to break it off." She hesitated a moment, looking up, then impulsively pulled the engagement ring from her finger. "See? I'll stop wearing it. I'll break off with him right in front of you tonight."

"That," announced John Steele, "will be just dandy."

Her arms flew around his neck. She drew him close to her, the bright hair pungent in his nostrils.

The soft lips clung to his mouth. He sighed and pushed her from him and strode from the room.

Fog had swooped down when Steele's little coupé halted across the street from the Cahuenga Building at eight o'clock that night. He got out and looked at the building. Two or three lights dotted its scabby front. Overhead, the night hung gray and eerie.

Claire hurried from the corner and joined him almost at once, her polo coat drawn close against the fog and chill, the bright hair caught in a bandana. Steele pulled her into a darkened entryway. She stood against him, the dark eyes big and warm and somewhat frightened, the curving red lips wistfully inviting. Pedestrians lurched past in the fog; smears of light cut round paths for automobiles to follow.

Steele glanced at the Cahuenga Building. "Which is his office?"

"The lighted windows on the second floor."

He studied two yellow oblongs of light. Partly closed Venetian blinds shut out all view from the street. She looked up at him. He threw her a glance. "Scared?"

"A little."

He took her arm. "Let's go."

They crossed the street and hurried up the stairs. At the end of the hallway two frosted glass windows

glowed bright. Gordon Leon Eustace's name was one of several on the door.

Steele turned the knob, then almost immediately halted in the open doorway. His face went stony, his eyes angry. He raised his hands. Claire, alarmed, looked past him and stifled a little scream. The two swarthy, hawk-nosed men of that afternoon covered them with a .45 automatic and a sleek Luger. Without speaking, they motioned Steele and the girl inside.

Steele looked at the emptied drawers of the desks in the reception room, at the open files, then turned to the intruders. "You boys don't pick the right places to look for diamonds."

The shorter of the two hit him across the face with the Luger. Blood spurted from his nose and welled from a gash under his left eye. He went groggy for a moment, then recovered. The blood ran down his chin and stained his collar. The girl's eyes widened with terror.

The shorter man flashed his partner a glance and said something in Portuguese. The second man used great care in moving behind John Steele and slipping his gun from its holster and throwing it across the office.

The leader addressed Steele in heavily accented English. "Take off your necktie."

Steele removed his necktie. The second man bound Steele's hands behind his back, then kicked his legs from under him. Steele fell heavily to the floor. The blood spurted from his nose again. The girl, terror-stricken, closed her eyes and turned away. The second man removed Steele's belt and bound his feet, then gagged him with the detective's handkerchief. The

girl started tottering and clutched at the wall. The leader slapped her hard, once on each side of the face. The smooth cheeks went dead white, then outlined the leader's hand in flame. She recovered.

The taller of the two began his search of Steele, emptying each pocket, examining each item, carefully scanning each card, each scrap of paper, then throwing them on the floor. He helped himself to a twenty-dollar bill in Steele's wallet, ripped the seams open, and cast it aside. He removed Steele's shoes, felt over every inch of the coat and the trousers. Finally he straightened and looked at the leader, eyes questioning.

The leader's lips curled. He planted a sudden kick in Steele's side. No sound escaped John Steele.

The taller of the two grabbed the girl's purse and dumped its contents on a desk. He ignored a book of traveler's checks, but pried open her compact, and even ran a hairpin into her lipstick. Once more he turned questioningly to the other and asked a question in Portuguese.

The leader addressed Claire. "Take off your stockings."

She began to tremble. Panic awakened in the dark eyes. Hysterically she shook her head. "No—you can't search me! You can't put your hands on—"

He slapped her again. She sat down suddenly, stunned, then began vaguely to pull off her stockings. The taller man snatched them from her and knelt to bind her ankles.

"Please!" Her voice was almost a scream. "I swear I have never even seen the diamond!"

This time the subordinate of the two raised his hand to strike her. Steele lunged with his bound feet and

caught him in the mouth. There was the sound of the impact. He toppled over, eyes going glassy. Blood poured from his mouth.

The leader started to spring on Steele, gun upraised, but caught himself, suddenly panicked, as the sound of footsteps emanated from the hallway. He swung to cover the door. His partner struggled unsteadily to his feet and drew his .45 automatic. The footsteps halted outside the door. The leader grasped his companion and rushed him into the dark private office. The front door opened. Two plain-clothes men and a uniformed patrolman entered. For a moment or two they stared at Steele and the girl. The door opening from the private office into the corridor clicked shut. Footsteps pounded along the hallway and down the front stairs. Steele struggled madly. His eyes tried to flash a message to Claire.

She cried, "They're running away!"

The two plain-clothes men hesitated another instant, then hurried back into the corridor. The patrolman looked in amazement at Steele and the girl, then turned to the front door and peered into the hall. The plain-clothes men thundered down the stairs.

Claire weaved to her knees and crawled to John Steele and, choking back hysteric tears, tore at the gag. Finally it dropped from his mouth. The girl sank back, exhausted. The patrolman glanced at them.

Steele glared at him. "All right, stupid. Come here and untie me."

The patrolman unlimbered his gun and turned back to the open door.

Claire pulled herself once more to her knees and began working and pulling at the knotted necktie.

Steele finally had her cut the tie with his penknife, then sat on the floor a few minutes rubbing his numbed wrists and flexing his fingers. The girl got to her feet and moved unsteadily to the water cooler and wet the handkerchief. While Steele put on his shoes and belt, she wiped the blood from his mouth and chin and neck. He stood up, located his gun on the floor, and returned it to its holster. The patrolman glanced around at this instant, looking stupidly down at his own pistol, and reluctantly followed Steele's example.

Steele eyed him scornfully. "They'll be pinning badges on Seeing Eye dogs next." The patrolman stared, flustered. Steele turned to the girl and took the wet handkerchief from her. "You all right?"

Her eyes ached for him. "Your poor face, Johnny."

He scowled. "Never mind my poor face." He glanced back at the patrolman. "How did you happen to get here just now?"

The patrolman looked puzzled. "I don't know. I'm just the driver."

Steele's lips curled. "I wouldn't let you drive me to a dog fight." He patted the wet handkerchief against his nose.

Claire's fingers, cold and shaken, touched his cut cheek. "I'd better get you to a doctor."

Steele looked at her as if she had suddenly lost her senses, then glanced at his watch. "Eight-thirty, and still no Eustace." He shot the girl a glance. "Is he usually this late?"

She shook her head, white and frightened. "He's usually ahead of time."

Steele stood thoughtfully a moment, then moved to the private office and switched on the lights. He

turned to the girl, his face grave. "He was ahead of time again, and this is once he should have come late."

Claire, reluctant, her fright mounting, glanced once at the body behind the desk, emitted a little cry, and threw herself against John Steele. The patrolman, puzzled, left the door and peered into the private office. He went immediately white, and, shaken, moved back into the reception room and sagged into a chair. Footsteps sounded on the stairs and in the hall. The two plain-clothes men returned empty-handed.

Chapter Nine

DON'T PUSH HIM TOO FAR

OUTSIDE THE POLICE STATION, rain beat against the windows and streaked the masonry and blurred the faces of the prisoners who tried to peer through the bars into the night, but inside there was warmth and dryness and light; and from the rear of the building a drunk in the overnight tank rattled his cell door and paradoxically demanded out into the chill wet. The smell of disinfectant and tobacco and confined human beings fingered from the cells into the corridors, and then into the offices at the front of the station house. A trusty, nondescript in prisoner's denims, absently pulled a damp mop back and forth across the corridor in front of Captain Hegg's office, only to have the clean surface immediately soiled again by wet and muddy feet stepping inside from the street.

Inside Captain Hegg's office the plain-clothes man stopped speaking and removed his wet hat and mopped his forehead and replaced his hat. The other plain-clothes man shook the wet from his topcoat. The patrolman, his face showing traces of recent pallor, stood at the open doorway and tried to look like a patrolman. The girl with the dark eyes and the contrastingly bright hair slipped the wet bandana back from her head, and looked uncomfortably toward John Steele. He grinned reassuringly and offered her a cigarette. Her chilled fingers trembled against his own as he extended a lighted match.

Captain Hegg turned his immense bulk in the swivel chair and watched the raindrops slant down the outside of the window. His fat, placid face remained untroubled as he absently contemplated the work of the elements. Harkness, the first plain-clothes man, stirred uncomfortably and flashed a helpless glance at his partner. St. Saen, the partner, dropped a surreptitious wink. Larson, the patrolman, opened his glistening wet slicker, and tried to shake water from his cap. Next door to the police station an ambulance wailed from the emergency hospital and sped north toward Hollywood Boulevard. The radio dispatchers maintained a steady stream of instructions and information from the loud-speaker at the desk down the corridor.

Captain Hegg glanced at his big, old-fashioned gold watch, stuffed it back in his vest, and turned amiably to John Steele. "Have you anything to add to the officers' statements, Mr. Steele?"

"The leader of the two men had a Portuguese accent. The other one didn't speak in English."

"You don't know who they were?"

Steele shook his head. "No."

"And you have no idea why they were there?"

Steele flashed Captain Hegg a cautious glance. "Robbery, I suppose. They stole twenty dollars from me."

Captain Hegg looked mildly amused, but did not immediately pursue the subject. He turned to the girl.

"Do you know why those men were rifling your fiancé's office, Miss Adams?"

She glanced quickly at Steele, then shook her head. "Unless it was robbery, I haven't the faintest idea."

"Did Mr. Eustace have any enemies?"

"Not that I know of."

"Have you ever seen those men before?"

"Never."

"Why were you and Mr. Steele at your fiancé's office tonight?"

"We had an appointment to meet him at eight o'clock. His secretary arranged it this afternoon while Mr. Eustace was in Long Beach trying a case."

The captain flashed St. Saen a glance. The plain-clothes man left the office.

The captain asked, "Any particular reason for the eight o'clock appointment with Mr. Eustace?"

She hesitated, uncomfortable, and looked down at the floor. Her voice became very low. "I was going to break off my engagement with him. Mr. Steele offered to go with me."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

"And you didn't see him at all?"

"Not until the officers had come and Mr. Steele had found him in the private office."

"Might I ask why you intended breaking your engagement?"

Steele interrupted. "The girl simply found she'd made a mistake in him; though I can't see what bearing her intentions have on his being murdered."

Captain Hegg turned mildly to John Steele, the fat face calm, the little eyes untroubled. For some time the captain remained silent, and there was no sound except the pelting of the rain and the voices of the radio dispatchers and the occasional shouts and rattlings of the drunk who wanted out.

The captain's voice, unhurried, broke the quiet of the little office. "You know, Mr. Steele, I'm quite a

mystery fan. The stories I read never seem to develop the way I've experienced them in real police life, but I like them anyway." He paused, then searched a pipe and tobacco from his coat pocket, and started loading the bowl. "One of the things I criticize in most murder mysteries is the way the private detective or the lawyer seems to go out of his way to have trouble with the police and almost always becomes the chief suspect in the case before he finally reaches a last-minute solution. Meanwhile, of course, the police have been breathing right down his neck, but have never even been close to a solution." He struck a match and touched it to the bowl of the pipe, then threw the match into the wastebasket. He eyed Steele tolerantly. "The answer, of course, is that the private detective or the lawyer in real life would immediately call in the police and work with them toward the solution."

Steele's eyes betrayed renewed caution. "Your men arrived on the scene before I could call them. Would you mind telling me why they came to Eustace's office tonight?"

Captain Hegg chuckled and fondled his pipe with his lips. "They were there because I sent them."

"Why did you send them?"

The captain smiled mysteriously and exchanged a look with Harkness, the plain-clothes man. "You see, Mr. Steele—those mystery writers take too many liberties. Right now the police are ahead of the private detective."

Steele frowned and looked at Claire. Her eyes were big and frightened. He turned back to Captain Hegg. "This isn't getting us anywhere. It's after nine, and I have things to do."

Captain Hegg remained unruffled. For a time he simply sat looking calculatingly at Steele. Then he indicated the open door leading into the corridor. "Just listen to that drunk back there in the overnight tank! There he is, warm and dry in his cell, and he wants to go out into the cold and wet." Captain Hegg slowly shook his head and smiled mysteriously. Steele eyed the captain with growing irritation. Captain Hegg sighed. "And why would a man prefer the cold and wet? Because, drunk or sober, he knows that as long as he remains with us, the possibility of trouble lies ahead—even a jail sentence for violating the law."

Claire betrayed herself with a sharp intake of breath. John Steele bristled. He stamped the cigarette out underfoot.

"Skip the innuendoes, Captain Hegg. We haven't violated any laws tonight."

The captain's blandness vanished. "I think you're concealing evidence, Mr. Steele; and at the risk of straining a point I want to point out my irritation at the private detective of fiction who is forever concealing evidence."

"I'm concealing nothing that isn't detrimental to the interests of a client I'm sworn to protect; and I refuse to disclose any evidence that might tend to incriminate myself. When the time comes that I'm convinced my client is in the wrong, I won't hesitate to turn him over to you."

The blandness returned. "Might I ask the name of this client?"

"Royal Xavier Adams."

Captain Hegg nodded, undisturbed. "You know where he is?"

Steele shook his head. "I'm not that much in his confidence."

Captain Hegg puffed at his pipe. The acrid smoke eddied in the air currents screening through the ventilator in the window. "I think the time has come for me to put you right on a point or two, Mr. Steele, but first I'd like to make a few observations." He looked up at the ceiling, then took the pipe from his mouth, and turned back to Steele and the girl. "Robbery was not the motive that brought the two Portuguese to Mr. Eustace's office tonight. They may have stolen twenty dollars from your wallet, but they passed up Miss Adams's diamond ring and her traveler's checks. They also neglected to take nine hundred and eighty-five dollars from Mr. Eustace." He pointed his pipe at Steele. "All of which may give you an idea how I feel toward the private detective or lawyer of murder fiction who deliberately drops a red herring, such as your robbery motive, for the police to follow while he goes on to solve the case."

Steele's expression did not change. "The point or two you mentioned?"

The captain's keen little eyes flashed appraisingly at Steele. "You carry this very well, Mr. Steele." He opened the middle drawer of his desk and removed several sheets of paper, whose notations he silently scanned. St. Saen returned from his mission. Captain Hegg looked up. St. Saen nodded, disappointed. Captain Hegg turned to John Steele. "The two Portuguese were looking for the Mirabilis Diamond or a clue to its whereabouts. The stone was found in Yucatan and brought to this country by Miss Adams's father." He paused. "Would you care to go on from there?"

Steele remained cold. "You're doing all right."

Captain Hegg eyed him a moment, then sighed again. "Mr. Steele, you and Miss Adams called on Mr. Eustace tonight to question him about a check he gave Stanley O'Hara for two hundred and fifty dollars. Stanley O'Hara was murdered this morning in Royal Adams's house. The two Portuguese killed Mr. Eustace before you could question him." The blandness again receded; the little eyes became hard. "I want to know how you learned about the check Mr. Eustace gave to Mr. O'Hara and what your interest is in this case."

Claire looked at Steele, her face paling. He threw her a comforting glance, then turned back to Captain Hegg. "You win, Captain. Royal Adams telephoned me and told me he was suspected of murdering O'Hara, but explained that O'Hara was waiting on the corner of Franklin and Gardenia the last time he saw him."

"Why did Mr. Adams run away?"

"Because O'Hara had been casing Adams's house, and Adams thought his enemies or the Ifnis had trailed him up here from Mexico."

Captain Hegg frowned. "Ifnis?"

Steele nodded, grinning. "A society of fanatical Moors sworn to recover the diamond for the eye of an idol in Sidi el Bjac."

The captain leaned forward, his interest captivated. "You mean that those Portuguese were really these Ifnis, or whatever you called them?"

Steele shrugged. "Could be. They fit in with the story Adams told me of the diamond."

Thoughtfully, Captain Hegg settled back in his chair. The two plain-clothes men watched, hypnotized,

as Steele went on with his tale. Larson, the patrolman, merely looked puzzled.

Steele said, "Adams retained me to clear him of the murder charge. I managed to get a contact into O'Hara's bank and learned of the two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar check. I traced this to Eustace, then called at his office, but learned he was out. Then I went to the Palms hotel where he lived. The house detective couldn't give me much on Eustace, but he said that Miss Adams was Eustace's fiancée. I told her of the murder and the charge against her father and of the check Eustace had given O'Hara. She reasoned Eustace had been using her to locate her father and steal the stone. She called Eustace's secretary and learned he would be in around eight tonight. We went there to question him, but the two Portuguese were already there, and Eustace was dead in the other office."

The captain shook his head, bewildered. "Ifnis! Well, I'll be damned! And here I'd been thinking it was you who had rifled O'Hara's office before our men even got there this morning!"

The telephone rang. Captain Hegg listened in it a moment, then replaced the receiver. He turned back to John Steele.

"Some of the prints in Eustace's office match those we found at O'Hara's place this morning. That definitely ties those Ifnis in with both murders."

Steele regarded him knowingly. "Why did you send St. Saen out a while ago?"

Captain Hegg grinned. "Your explanation of making an eight o'clock appointment through Mr. Eustace's secretary didn't sound as good as it worked out."

Steele nodded and lighted a fresh cigarette. "Any

idea of the caliber bullet that killed Eustace?"

Captain Hegg looked up at Harkness. The plain-clothes man hesitated, obviously averse to giving information to a private detective. Captain Hegg gave no outward sign of approval or of disapproval. Harkness salved his conscience by addressing his reply to his superior. "We won't know exactly until the medical examiner removes it at the autopsy in the morning."

Steele inhaled from his cigarette. "What course did the bullet take?"

Harkness showed annoyance. "It entered at the base of the skull and ranged upward toward the forehead."

"Were there any powder burns around the wound?"

The plain-clothes man hesitated again, his irritation now quite evident. He appealed to the captain. "Do I have to answer this guy's questions?"

Captain Hegg shrugged. "No harm in answering, Harkness. He's a taxpayer."

Harkness glowered. "There were a few powder burns."

Steele permitted the ghost of a smile to touch his eyes and his lips. "Now, about you boys showing up at the psychological moment. How did that happen?"

Captain Hegg laughed and interrupted before Harkness could reply. "I don't blame you, Harkness." The captain wagged his head, looking the while at Harkness but referring to John Steele. "He's quite a fellow. Keeps asking the questions when he's supposed to answer them." Amused, he turned twinkling eyes back to the private detective.

Steele looked puzzled. "What's the idea? I came clean with you."

The amusement passed from Captain Hegg's face. "That's what you would like us to believe, Mr. Steele, but such isn't the case. You're still covering up, and I believe you're concealing evidence."

"I told you I would turn my client in when I was convinced he was guilty."

Captain Hegg nodded. "But you didn't tell me why your secretary wanted information on Mr. Eustace this morning—at ten-thirty, to be exact, which was about half an hour before Stanley O'Hara's murder, and a good two hours before Royal Adams could possibly have retained you to investigate the case."

Claire looked sharply at Steele, her eyes betraying renewed alarm. He hesitated for only an instant, then feigned brazening out an indiscretion.

"Okay—so I'd met Miss Adams before and wanted to know what sort of competition I had."

Claire's face brightened like the lighting of a lamp, but the lines tightened around Captain Hegg's mouth.

He said, "And then decided to eliminate that competition so you could have Miss Adams for yourself?"

Steele snorted angrily. "I was in my office all afternoon until seven-forty-five tonight. My secretary and various clients will verify that. I left the office and had a sandwich and coffee at the Owl Drug on Hollywood and Vine at seven-forty-five. The waitress will vouch for that. Then I drove to the Cahuenga Building and met Miss Adams a minute or two after eight."

Claire cried breathlessly, "He did, Captain Hegg! And those Ifnis were there and Gordon was dead when we got to the office."

Hegg looked from Steele to the girl, then turned back to Steele. "How did you meet Miss Adams?"

"She came to me as a client and asked me to find her father."

Hegg addressed Claire. "And you haven't yet seen him?"

"No."

"When did you see him last?"

"When I was three years old."

"What do you know about him since that time?"

"Nothing."

Hegg turned back to Steele. "Why have you tried to cover up your previous acquaintanceship with Miss Adams?"

Steele shot him a glance. "That would speak for itself. Besides, I have no desire to spend time in jail as a material witness while the police hang a murder on an innocent client of mine."

"In our eyes, Royal Adams is not an innocent man. It might be to your advantage to stop covering up for him."

Steele got to his feet. "Whatever information I have is either incriminating to myself or privileged between my client and me. I don't intend to divulge it."

Captain Hegg's blandness reappeared again. He nodded mildly. "You know—maybe I read the wrong sort of books, but I recall one about a private detective who covered up for his client. I wish you'd read that book." He paused and puffed at his pipe and found it had gone out, then felt in his pocket for a match. "I don't remember much about the plot, but I know that in the end the private detective was involved in murder just as deeply as the client." He struck the match and eyed Steele over the flame. "Both of them were hanged." He puffed at his pipe.

Claire stared. Steele looked at the police captain for a moment or two, expression unchanged.

Steele asked, "Are we free to go?"

Captain Hegg nodded. "You're free to go." He struggled to his feet as Steele offered his hand to Claire. "But here's something to keep in mind, Mr. Steele. I'm a pretty patient fellow. I could throw you both in jail right now and keep you there for a while, but I'm not doing it." He walked around the side of the desk and ceremoniously shook hands first with the girl, then with Steele. "But don't push me too far. We're only human, and it annoys us if people from New York come out here and use our hospitality, then start pulling fast ones on us."

Steele nodded. "Fair enough. As an ex-New Yorker, I can take that broad a hint." He paused a moment, then eyed the captain. "But I'd still like to know what brought your men to Eustace's office just when we needed them most."

Captain Hegg exchanged an amused glance with Harkness and St. Saen. Larson, the patrolman, stared from one to the other uncertainly, then took his cue from the captain, and daringly emitted one short, sharp laugh. He immediately went silent and shifted his weight self-consciously.

Captain Hegg turned to Steele. "It wasn't a case of clairvoyance, Mr. Steele. Like you, we had learned of the two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar check through Mr. O'Hara's bank. We wanted to question Mr. Eustace about it, but when we dropped in at his office this afternoon, we were told he wouldn't be in until eight." He flashed Steele a knowing look. "Unfortunately for your cheek, your nose, and Mr. Eustace, my men were

a little late."

Steele grinned. "Are you a native Californian, Captain?"

The other grinned in turn, and shook his head. "No, I'm from New York, too."

Steele reached for Claire's arm and steered her from the police station.

Chapter Ten

THE DIAMOND DEALER

THE WINDSHIELD WIPER hissed above the low throb of the motor. Rain blurred across the glass, then cleared momentarily as the blade performed its cycle. The car turned from Wilcox Avenue into Hollywood Boulevard and proceeded cautiously toward Cahuenga. On the sidewalk, a few pedestrians scampered from store front to store front, taking what shelter they could from the dripping night. Even the newsboys had deserted their stands and now huddled in entryways of corner stores.

The girl spoke the first word either had uttered since leaving the police station.

"I'm parked around the corner on Cahuenga."

Steele glanced at her with some surprise. "Why didn't you drive over to the police station?"

She looked at him. "And let them know I have Gordon's car?"

Steele swung into Cahuenga and drew up beside the white Packard. "What are you going to do with it?"

She shook her head, troubled. "I don't know—buy it from the executors if they'll sell."

Steele looked around toward the corner of Hollywood and Cahuenga. For the moment, nothing moved on the rain-swept intersection. The buildings stood dark. No light glowed from the parked cars.

He said, turning back, "Guess the cops finished up in Eustace's office." He sobered. "You must be pretty

broken up. I'm sorry things turned out like this."

Humbly she nodded. "It's hard to believe. When I told you I didn't care for him, I told the truth. But now it sounds—so—well—" She broke off. For a time she looked down. A car swooshed past, its wheels spraying dirty water over the side window and the windshield. The motor rolled. The windshield wiper clicked and hissed in its orbit. Then the girl looked up. There was a determination to be cheerful. "Well—at least we're out in that cold and wet the captain mentioned." The light of the dash haloed the bright hair. She smiled at Steele and looked into his face. "For a while, I thought we'd be spending the next few days or weeks or years in one of those warm, dry cells."

Steele shook his head and grinned. One of her hands crept into his. "Hegg's pretty unpredictable. I still can't decide whether he's a fool or a genius." The grin faded. "But don't make the mistake of thinking we're permanently in the clear. Tomorrow, he'll discover we left your father's house right after O'Hara was killed."

The dark eyes became frightened. "How, Johnny?"

"I made two mistakes, and there's nothing I can do about them. Betsy called Hegg to check on Eustace this morning. That ties her into the case. Tomorrow, Hegg will check my story of how I knew about O'Hara's two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar deposit. The bank will tell him a woman called and said she was O'Hara's secretary. Hegg knows O'Hara couldn't afford a secretary, and he will discover Betsy told the bank she had found the two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar entry in O'Hara's checkbook. After that, he'll decide you and I or Betsy and I must have been the man and woman seen leaving your father's house. Then watch

the fur fly."

Her hand tightened on his. "What will you do?"

He glanced down at the girl, and for the first time that night his eyes became tender. "Solve this thing before Hegg gets me."

"Can you do it?"

"I think so."

She sat rigid for a moment, then threw herself against him. "Oh, Johnny, darling—I'm so afraid for you! If anything happens—" She broke off, her face anguished, and stared up at him.

"Nothing will happen."

The dark eyes closed; the red lips, cold and frightened, trembled against his own; the bright hair misted across his eyes. Outside the car, the rain flushed down on the street, and water ran deep in the gutters.

The girl snuggled against Steele's shoulder. "Will the police come after me?"

"They may. I'll do my best to keep you out of it."

"Who do you think is behind all this—my father?"

Steele shook his head. "I don't know. There's one more man to be checked—one our mystery-loving police captain doesn't know about." He paused, frowning suddenly. "At least, I hope he doesn't know about him!"

Claire sat up, puzzled. "Another man?"

"Cordell."

"Cordell?" She looked at him. "You mean that man you told me about in Mexico?"

He nodded. "Henry Cordell—the diamond dealer. I'm going up to my office and get his address and go see him."

She looked hopeful. "Will you take me with you?"

He shook his head, grinning. "You better go home. Hegg might want to see you."

She flared, feigning anger. "You're mean, John Steele. You're just as cold as ice, and you have no heart. I'll die of curiosity, and you know it."

He glanced at her. "I could make a very pertinent crack about cats right now."

She ignored the remark, but the feigned anger dissolved into a sulky pout. "I'm hungry. The least you could do is take me to supper."

Again he grinned and shook his head. "No time. I don't want to roust Cordell out of bed."

She glanced at him coyly. "I'll eat at Lucey's. And there are lots of good-looking movie actors there."

"Pick out an extra one for my secretary. She's getting neurotic."

She tossed her head. "You're impossible!"

Steele opened the door for her. She jumped into the rain, pulled open the door of the Packard, and snapped on the dash light. And when she looked across the intervening rain-blown distance, her feigned anger and her coyness had vanished, and a pleased smile was upon her lips. She blew him a kiss and waved the tips of her fingers.

"Call me, darling. I'll be in my apartment as soon as I eat."

He flipped one hand, closed his door, and wheeled into the slanting rain.

From the corner of Hollywood and Vine, John Steele could look up at his office and see lights burning. He parked and sat watching, but no silhouette showed at the windows. Puzzled, he looked about for police

cars, then hurried to a pay booth in the Owl Drug and dialed his own number. Betsy's voice answered.

He growled, "What's the idea? Haven't you got a home?"

She snapped, "Haven't you?"

"Meaning what?"

Her voice rasped over the wires. "I've been calling you all over the city."

"Did you try the Hollywood jail?"

She sniffed. "I might have known."

"It's after nine. Why haven't you gone home?"

She answered airily, "Because a client is waiting here for you. What happened on your call in the Cahuenga Building?"

"Eustace had been murdered when we got there. Who is the client?"

"Mr. Cordell. Do you know who killed Eustace?"

"Maybe. What does Cordell want?"

"I don't know. Why were you at the station?"

"Because Miss Adams and I happened to be on the scene when the police came in and found Eustace dead. Tell Cordell I'll be right up."

"Mr. Steele! Wait! You haven't told me—"

He hung up and walked from the drugstore.

Henry Cordell, gray and aloof, got to his feet and surveyed Steele with cold, sharp eyes when the detective reached his office. Betsy, anxious and curious, looked up from her desk. Steele, unruffled, returned the diamond dealer's gaze. "You must be psychic."

Cordell's expression remained unchanged. "You have some specific reason in mind for that remark, I presume?"

Steele's upper lip curled. He indicated the open door

of the private office, and turned on the light. "I'll be with you in a minute."

Cordell, unbending, offered one objection. "I have been waiting for you a long time, Mr. Steele. My minutes are all allocated."

"The hell you say!" Steele looked the diamond dealer up and down. "Well, Mr. Cordell—my minutes have a little value, too; and when somebody comes here to see me without an appointment, he has to take his chances."

Cordell entered the private office and seated himself in the customer's chair. Steele closed the door and moved back to Betsy's desk.

"Didn't he give you any idea what he wanted?"

She shook her head. "Just said it was important, and he'd wait." She paused, then, "What on earth happened to your face?"

He told her, briefly, the events of the night. She became concerned; and the anxiety in her eyes belied her attempted lightness. "That diamond is going to end you up on a slab."

He grinned wickedly. "No answer from Neilsen yet?"

She shook her head. "Give him time."

He glanced at his watch. "You'd better get home. It's been a long day." He started to reach into his pocket for money, before realizing he had none. "Guess I'll have to hit the cash box."

She threw him a look. "What would you do without the professor?"

Steele helped himself to three of the five one-hundred dollar bills given him by the professor that morning.

"You'd better take a cab home." He grinned again. "Compliments of the firm."

She eyed him suspiciously. "You're feeling entirely too good for a man who's just had the daylights beaten out of him. What are you up to?"

He smiled and indicated the door. "Good night."

She nodded knowingly. "I get it. You think you know who killed O'Hara and Eustace."

"If you want to call first, the Yellow Cab number is Madison 1234."

"Who killed them—those two Portuguese?"

"And be back at nine in the morning."

Betsy's plain face brightened suddenly. "Of course! Those two fellows aren't Portuguese at all! They're Ifnis!"

Steele surveyed Betsy calmly. "You know, Betsy, there are times when you show traces of having a questionable background."

He turned and walked into the private office. Betsy slammed out into the hall. Steele removed his wet hat and topcoat, then sat down at his desk and looked expectantly at Cordell. Outside, the rain pounded at the windows, and an auto horn honked in the street.

Cordell sat straight, the cold, aloof manner still very obvious.

Steele said, "You don't like me, Mr. Cordell."

The other's expression did not change. "Frankly, I don't."

Steele nodded. "Then we know how we stand, for I don't like you, either, and I'm going to pin a murder rap on you if I can."

Cordell momentarily lost his poise. "Pin a murder on me?"

Steele eyed him steadily. "Two of them if possible."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You will. Why did you come here?"

Cordell hesitated. "What did you mean by that remark about my being psychic?"

"I came up here to get your address. I was on my way to your house."

Cordell became quite amazed. "Really?"

Steele's voice lay heavy with sarcasm. "I don't like you, and I was going to see you. You don't like me, and here you are. What's it all about?"

"After our encounter in Mexico, I vowed I'd never seek your help if I ever needed assistance from one in your business; but now I find we can help one another."

Steele shook out a cigarette, neglected to offer one to Cordell, and struck a light. He looked at the diamond dealer through the first haze of smoke. "How did you find the roads leading down to Santa Catarina—pretty rough?"

Cordell frowned. "Really, Mr. Steele—can't you be a little more specific with your intimations and innuendoes?"

"I understood you had gone down there to find Royal Adams."

"If I had gone there to find Royal Adams, I wouldn't be here now."

Steele looked at him and puffed on the cigarette and slowly nodded his head. "I see."

Cordell asked, "Do you know where the Mirabilis Diamond is?"

Steele drummed on the desk. "If I don't know, I could probably locate it in a day or two. Why?"

Cordell hesitated. Then, "I have been commissioned to buy the stone for a museum in the East. If you can effect a meeting between me and Adams, and if I can buy the stone for six hundred thousand dollars or less, I will pay you a flat sum of one thousand dollars."

Steele snorted his amusement. "Not bad—considering the stone is worth a million."

"Who told you that?"

"Adams. What do you do—collect a million from the museum and keep the difference?"

Cordell ignored the question. "The man must be insane. A million dollars! He has been out of touch too long. He hasn't the faintest idea of values. No one would dream of paying such a price."

"Save it, Mr. Cordell. I've looked up the stone. It's listed in the encyclopedia. You know what it's worth. So do I. And, most important, so does Royal Adams."

Cordell dropped his attitude. He leaned forward, confidentially, like a co-conspirator. "All right, Mr. Steele. Let's face facts. Adams is a fugitive on a murder warrant. As long as this charge hangs over him, the *Mirabilis* is of no value to him because he doesn't dare come into the open market and sell it. If he breaks it up and sells it bit by bit, he won't realize anything near its real value. But I'm willing to help him. I'll deal with him quietly and pay cash. That should be worth some concession."

Steele looked coldly at Cordell. "A four-hundred-thousand-dollar concession?"

Cordell straightened, his indignation reappearing. "A fugitive needs money. I can supply it, and Adams can get out of the country again."

"What about the murder charge?"

"That is no affair of mine. I'm interested only in buying his stone."

Steele smoked his cigarette. Cordell fumed in the customer's chair.

Steele said, "You'd be stealing it at six hundred thousand, Mr. Cordell—and only because my client is under suspicion for the moment."

Cordell looked questioning. "For the moment?"

Steele nodded. "I expect to clear him of suspicion in the O'Hara murder tomorrow."

Cordell hesitated and moistened his lips. "You know who committed the murder?"

"I have a number of people in mind—including you."

Cordell's eyes widened. "Me?"

"You or your agents."

"You're joking, Mr. Steele."

"Am I?" Steele exhaled a blur of tobacco smoke. For an instant, he studied the diamond dealer. "Where were you at eight o'clock tonight?"

Cordell drew himself stiffly erect. His eyes glittered like cut glass. "Your question is stupid. My whereabouts tonight could have no bearing on a murder committed this morning."

Steele regarded him another moment. "O'Hara's killer committed another murder at eight tonight."

Interest and curiosity displaced Cordell's indignation. "Another murder? May I ask who was killed?"

Steele waited. "Don't you know?"

The gray eyes flashed. "I most certainly do not!"

Steele nodded, eyes lazy. "Gordon Leon Eustace, a lawyer in the Cahuenga Building."

The name made no apparent impression on Cordell.

"Why was he killed?"

Steele chuckled. "He seemed to have an interest in the Mirabilis Diamond." And he added, significantly, "Like you."

Cordell stared. "Good heavens, man—how many people are after that stone?"

"So far, I've run across six, not including myself."

"Six!"

Steele nodded. "Two of them are dead—O'Hara and Eustace. And I might add that unless you, yourself, are the murderer, you stand a good chance of ending up in the morgue. Somebody wants that stone pretty bad."

Cordell looked alarmed. "I'm not the murderer. My chauffeur brought me here from my office at ten minutes of eight. Your secretary can establish that I have been here since that time; and as for this morning's murder—my employes will establish that I did not leave my office between ten o'clock and noon."

"How did you know Adams was going to be in Puerto Raton?"

Cordell looked amazed. "Because he wrote me."

Steele was not convinced. "Why should an archeologist who hadn't been in this country for twenty-two years suddenly write you?"

Cordell became very superior. "I am an authority in my field, Mr. Steele. I have handled the sales of some of the world's most famous gems. Mr. Adams no doubt knew of me when he asked me to come to Puerto Raton and meet him and bid on the Mirabilis."

Steele chewed his lip. "That's your story."

Cordell rose to his feet. "I am not accustomed to having my word doubted."

"Well, start getting used to it. I doubt it plenty."

"Your rudeness is appalling."

Steele grunted. "Yes— But you can be thankful Captain Hegg isn't doing the questioning. He may not be rude, but you'd be a lot unhappier at the finish."

Cordell looked coldly down. "You act your part very well, Mr. Steele. But now might I be the inquisitor and ask what you were doing in Puerto Raton, and your whereabouts at eight o'clock tonight and eleven this morning?"

"You might."

Cordell stiffened. "You find the questions embarrassing. Perhaps your Captain Hegg should be told to put those same questions to you."

"Perhaps." Steele turned irritably from Cordell and pulled open the center drawer of the desk and glanced over the typed page Betsy had prepared after her visit to the library that afternoon. He sat thoughtfully for a time, then returned the page to the drawer and turned back to the diamond dealer. "Have you ever heard of an organization called the Ifnis?"

Cordell contemplated Steele for several seconds, his attitude implying a continued superiority over the detective, a knowing smirk on his lips. He shook an extra-length cigarette from a package and flicked a silver lighter. He spoke with telling intimation.

"You find my reference to Captain Hegg upsetting, Mr. Steele?"

"Yes—terribly." Steele's sarcasm bit into the diamond dealer, undermining his assurance. "What about the Ifnis?"

Cordell tried a stab in the dark. "Perhaps Captain Hegg doesn't even know you were in Puerto Raton

looking for the Mirabilis."

Steele's irritation overflowed. "For God's sake, call him up and tell him!" The detective angrily jabbed out his cigarette. "I'm trying to find out something that has a bearing on this case, and may decide whether you face a murder rap. What do you know about the Ifnis?"

Cordell's superiority increased. He looked down on Steele with undisguised contempt. For some time the diamond dealer simply studied Steele. Then, with great condescension, he asked, "And what, might I ask, are the Ifnis?"

"A secret Moorish society sworn to recover the Mirabilis."

Cordell studied Steele for another second or two, then turned and paced the length of the office and finally resumed his seat in the customer's chair. "I have never heard of them."

"You know the history of the Mirabilis?"

Cordell's attitude indicated great pity for Steele's ignorance. "My dear man."

Steele overlooked the other's patronage and remained silent. Cordell sat, superior, in the chair, eyes remote. Then a stiffening and a suspicion became apparent. He glanced sharply at Steele. "Of course, there are dozens of fanatical societies I haven't heard of."

Steele lightly drummed his finger tips on the desk, but said nothing. Cordell leaned forward, his superiority and condescension momentarily submerged.

"Are you suggesting these Ifnis may have committed the murders?"

Steele considered him levelly. "Yes—unless somebody like you deliberately tossed two Portuguese stick-

up artists into this shuffle as a smoke screen."

Cordell's gray anger returned. He jumped quickly to his feet and threw his cigarette into the corner. "I've had enough of your insults, Mr. Steele. I came here to make you a proposition. If you'll show me the courtesy of an answer, I'll leave."

Steele remained calm. "I'll consider it after I've seen the letter you claim you got from Royal Adams."

Cordell's anger held him stiffly for several moments, and he seemed on the verge of storming from the office; but finally he held himself in check and drew a sheaf of letters from an inner pocket and tossed one on the desk in front of Steele. It had been posted air mail to Cordell from Veracruz, Mexico.

Steele picked it up and threw Cordell an appropriate word. "Some people can take a lot of insults when four hundred thousand dollars in profit is at stake, can't they, Mr. Cordell?"

The gray eyes snapped; the lean shoulders squared, and the granite jaw closed like a trap. But the diamond dealer said nothing.

Steele read the letter, then pushed it back into the envelope, and regarded Cordell with renewed suspicion.

The diamond dealer demanded angrily, "Well?"

Steele tapped the envelope on the desk. "I can hardly qualify as an expert on the handwriting of Royal Adams."

Cordell waited a moment for his anger to subside, then spoke from a great height. "You're perfectly at liberty to submit the letter to Mr. Adams for his recognition."

Steele shoved the letter into his pocket.

Cordell paused, then asked, "And my proposition to

buy the Mirabilis?"

Steele shot him a glance. "Five thousand, Mr. Cordell."

The diamond dealer looked horrified. "Why—that's outrageous! I shan't have a cent profit for all my trouble."

Steele nodded. "Only three hundred and ninety-five thousand." He lighted a fresh cigarette. "Take it or leave it."

Cordell wavered. "Payable only if I am able to buy Adams's stone for six hundred thousand or less?"

"That's right."

"When can I see him?"

"Bring the money here at noon day after tomorrow. Cash."

"You'll have the stone here?"

Steele shrugged. "If I don't, it won't cost you anything."

Cordell hesitated another instant, then turned without speaking and strode from the office. Steele got to his feet and moved to the corner, where he stepped on the cigarette that was burning a hole in the floor.

The telephone rang. Steele answered cautiously. The professor ignored the formalities. "Did you discover who gave O'Hara the check?"

"Yes." Steele told him the events of the night. "I'll have you cleared by noon the day after tomorrow. I'm pretty certain of that. If you are here at that time with ten thousand in cash, I'll say the word."

"I can depend on that?"

"You can depend on it. And here's another thing. I'll not only clear you. I'll have a cash buyer here for the Mirabilis, so bring it along."

"Who is this buyer?"

Steele laughed shortly. "What does that matter? His opening offer was six hundred thousand dollars."

"The man must be mad. The stone is worth every cent of a million."

Steele's eyes took on a sly expression. "Then maybe I'd better tell him not to bother with coming here."

The professor became indignant. "Mr. Steele, I will greatly appreciate your permitting me to make my own decisions. No harm can come from my at least being there and hearing the offer."

Steele grinned, hung up, crawled back into his wet topcoat, and put on his hat.

Chapter Eleven

AN AWFUL NUISANCE

FOR A TIME, the rain fell away to a drizzle. And then great black clouds pushed over the hills from the San Fernando Valley, and the water fell again in a down-pour that drummed like the sizzling of fat in a giant skillet. Thunder rolled, and lightning, almost a phenomenon in Southern California, deposited its tons of nitrate in the hungry earth. The storm drains filled, and the muddy water mounted, mounted, until curbsings disappeared from view, and mighty currents swept the lowlands, and boulders loosened from their footings in the hills and crashed down on the homes and highways. And the Los Angeles River choked up like an over-filled stomach and spewed its contents upon the lands that fronted it.

John Steele coaxed his small coupé through the tumbling water and the sheeting rain, and parked near the Palms Hotel. A sharp-eyed doorman, dry and warm in sou'wester and ankle-length black rubber raincoat and rubber boots, saw Steele open the door of the car and hesitate before plunging into the wet. The doorman opened an umbrella and hurried to the car and piloted Steele beneath the umbrella to the covered terrace.

The doorman grinned. "Sure is coming down to-night."

Steele grinned also. "Yes—unusual, isn't it?"

Steele gave him a fifty-cent piece. "Has Miss Adams

come in yet?"

The doorman accepted the coin and thanked him, then hesitated for only an instant. "Miss Adams? The cream-colored Packard?"

"That's right."

The head under the sou'wester bobbed; and water rained on the terrace. "She came in about twenty minutes ago. I parked her car."

Steele entered the lobby and called the girl on the house telephone. She did not answer. Puzzled, he moved to the desk.

"Did Miss Adams go up to her room when she came in?"

The clerk looked automatically into her box, then turned back. "Yes—she got her key."

Steele indicated the house telephone. "She doesn't answer."

"Perhaps she's in the coffee shop or the cocktail lounge. Would you like her paged?"

"Yes."

The clerk hit the bell. An anxious Filipino in neat blue and gold jumped to the desk. The clerk told him to page Miss Adams, then turned politely back to Steele. "It will be only a minute or two." Steele nodded and thanked him. The clerk added, looking toward the front windows, "Wet night, isn't it?"

Steele agreed it was a wet night.

For a time, he could hear the boy making his way about the main floor and the mezzanine, calling the girl by name. After a time, he returned. Steele intercepted him before he reached the desk.

The grinning little brown man shook his head. "Not in."

Steele drew him into an alcove out of sight of the desk. "Look, Manila—I'm afraid something may have happened to her, but I can't tell the house detective or the desk. There's ten dollars in it for you if you open her door with a passkey and let me look in."

The Filipino became alarmed. The dark head shook an emphatic refusal. "No, no—cannot do."

Steele displayed his badge. "I'm a detective, Manila. I won't disturb a thing or get you in trouble. All I want is a look."

Manila eyed the badge, obviously impressed, but still unwilling. "Must ask desk or house detective."

Steele went into a lengthy explanation of why the desk and the house detective could not be called into the case—Miss Adams's aversion to publicity or notoriety.

The Filipino's big black eyes looked pleadingly up at Steele. "I lose job. I get in plenty trouble."

Steele flashed a ten-dollar bill. The bellboy eyed it, tempted, then overcame his greed and determinedly shook his head. Steele added another ten. The boy hesitated, obviously wavering. Before he could again summon his moral sense, Steele intervened. "Twenty-five. And I'll take all blame if there's any trouble."

The Filipino succumbed. "Wait here. I get key."

He was back in a moment with the key, hand extended for the money. At this instant, the clerk at the desk rang the bell. Manila said, "Give me money. I come back after call."

Steele shook his head. "This can't wait. Give me the key, and I'll give you the money."

The boy was reluctant to part with the key, but the bell rang again, impatiently this time, and Steele re-

moved the key from the boy's hand. The boy looked at Steele and at the key and at the twenty-five dollars Steele had shoved into his hand.

He poised, like a little brown animal about to take flight. "You wait. I go with you."

Steele shook his head. "I can't wait. I'll bring the key back to you."

The bell rang several times—short, angry rings. The boy looked unhappily at Steele, hesitated only another instant, then shoved the money into his pocket and sped for the desk. Steele marched to the elevators.

On the eleventh floor, he moved silent down the carpeted hall. Claire's door opened minutely, then quickly and quietly closed again. Steele's footsteps lagged. He looked sharply ahead at the door, then approached cautiously.

Outside the girl's apartment, he listened tensely. No sound came from within. He glanced down at the floor but could detect no crack of light. He looked up and down the hall, then noiselessly slipped the key into the lock and turned. He waited another instant, then quickly jumped inside, dropping to his knees at the instant a shot roared and a thread of flame lashed out at the position he had just vacated. The door slammed shut with the momentum of his jump, and he rolled quickly away from it. Four shots rang out, and four more threads of flame sprayed the floor adjoining the entrance. Steele got out his gun and threw three quick shots at the blackness from which the red threads had sprung, then vacated his position fast.

He reached a wall that he knew divided the living-room from the dressing-room, and followed it to the dressing-room door. No sound arose from the source of

the red threads, and quiet held behind him in the dressing-room and in the bedroom beyond.

He crouched on his knees, pistol ready, and tried to see into the blackness of the room. Outside, the rain pounded at the windows. Thunder rolled in the distance, but no lightning brightened the room.

He waited, motionless, his gaze on the front door. Suddenly something crashed near the windows, like a lamp or a vase being knocked to the floor. He spun, tense. At this instant, the front door snapped open and closed as a silhouette, hunched low to lessen the target area, darted out. Steele threw two quick shots toward the door, then plunged across the room and pulled at the knob. The door gave slightly, then held. He tussled with the knob, but something had been wedged between the outside knob and the door jamb. He felt along the wall and finally located the switch and turned on the overhead lights. A table lamp lay shattered near the windows. The drawers of the writing desk had been dumped on the floor, their contents strewn about. The cushions of the sofa and the overstuffed chairs had been removed.

Steele sprang back to the door and leveled his pistol at the area between the knob and the upright jamb, but voices began asking questions in the hallway outside. He put his pistol away and found the passkey on the floor where he had dropped it. Something clicked metallically against the outside doorknob. He heard the voice of Donoghue, the house detective, calling. Steele turned the knob. The door opened, and Donoghue stood there holding the .38 automatic that had been wedged between the knob and the woodwork. A knot of people in various stages of dress and

undress looked on.

Donoghue stared at Steele. "What in God's name, Steele?"

"Prowler. Did you see him run out?"

Donoghue shook his head. Steele looked at the curious guests huddled in the background. They gained courage and inched closer. Several shook their heads. The others immediately buzzed with gossip. The little Filipino bellboy, eyes big and worried, hurried along the hall and stopped at the door.

Donoghue entered and looked at the rifled desk. Steele turned his back on the Filipino and surreptitiously extended the passkey to him. The key disappeared into the bellboy's pocket. A look of great relief came over the brown face.

Donoghue turned to Steele. "Did you get a look at him?"

Steele shook his head, and indicated the broken lamp. "I fell for an old one. He tossed the lamp across the room, then got out while I was covering the noise of the lamp breaking. I couldn't even tell if there were one or two men."

Donoghue stepped to the telephone and called the desk. "Did anyone hurry out in the last ten minutes?" He listened a moment, then hung up. "No way of telling." He turned to Steele. "Where's Miss Adams?"

"She went out. I came up here to wait for her."

Donoghue looked suspicious. "How did you get in?"

"She left the door open for me."

The house detective sighed. "And she'll probably blame us for being robbed." He started into the dressing-room.

Steele said quickly, "You ought to trot down to 1132.

There's a good chance Eustace's room has been torn apart, too."

Donoghue hesitated a moment then wheeled abruptly and hurried to the door. Here he stopped and turned, his face betraying the new thought that had combed through his mind. "Good grief, Steele—you don't think this is connected with Eustace's murder!"

Steele nodded. "I wouldn't be surprised."

Donoghue emitted a low whistle. "The manager will just about blow a fuse."

He left the room. Steele quickly herded the guests and the bellboy into the hall and closed the door, then moved alertly through the dressing-room and into the bedroom. The drawers of both rooms had been emptied about the floor. Steele snapped on the bedroom light and opened the closet door. Claire, helplessly bound and gagged, looked up from the floor. He dropped to his knees and removed the gag and cut away the strips of bedding that bound her. She sat up, dazed, and touched the back of her head. Steele held her against his knees and felt for the hurt—a purple lump behind her left ear.

His arm steadied her. "Quick—before the house dick comes back. What happened?"

She shook her head, still dazed, and tried to work her lips. After a moment, she could speak. "I don't know. I came in the apartment, but something hit me before I could turn on the lights."

"You don't know who did it?"

"The Ifnis, I suppose."

He helped her to her feet and guided her into the living-room, where he examined the bruise. "That's going to be some lump, baby. We'd better have the

house doctor look at it."

She nodded. He supported her with one hand, and tossed the cushions back on the sofa, and let her down. She looked puzzled.

"What were they after here?"

He shot her a glance. "Where is the letter you got from your father?"

She indicated the rifled desk. "It was in one of the pigeonholes."

He frowned. "I came here to check the handwriting in that letter, but I'll bet even money it's gone."

He sorted hurriedly through the stationery and other papers on the floor, then gave up.

The girl asked, "But what would they want with that?"

He shook his head. "That all depends on who stole it." He showed her the letter Royal Adams had written Henry Cordell. "Does this look like the same handwriting?"

She studied it. "I don't know."

He stuffed the letter back into his pocket. "I'll have to go back to Mexico right away."

She looked alarmed. "Why, Johnny?"

He tapped the letter in his pocket. "I've got to check this handwriting with the note your father left Ricardo. If it doesn't check, a forgery has been committed, and Cordell could conceivably have had somebody mail him a phony letter from Veracruz, to cover his presence in Puerto Raton."

"But would he do a thing like that?"

"He'd even countenance murder—at least, letting somebody get away with murder—if there was something in it for him."

The doorknob rattled. Steele threw the girl a cautioning glance and opened the door. Donoghue entered, then looked puzzled. He turned from Claire to Steele. "I thought you said she was out."

"I thought she was, but I found her tied up in the clothes closet." He indicated the hallway. "Did you find anything in Eustace's room?"

Donoghue shook his head. "Everything seemed to be in order."

"Did you call the police?"

For answer, two uniformed patrolmen, their slickers wet, their caps covered with cellophane, entered the room. They were radio officers who had responded to the dispatcher's call. They listened gravely to Steele's and Claire's story, then moved to the telephone. One of them said, "We'll have to get the dicks over on this. Don't touch anything till they come." He telephoned for the burglary squad.

Steele looked at his watch, then turned to Donoghue. "Miss Adams's head should be attended to. I've got to get along, so I'll depend on you to call the house doctor."

Donoghue looked puzzled. "Sure, but aren't you going to wait for the city fellows?"

"They know where to find me."

One of the patrolmen moved belligerently toward Steele. "Hey, you can't leave here until the dicks talk to you."

Steele shot him an annoyed glance. "That so? Who's going to keep me here?"

The patrolman blustered. "We are."

Steele's look became challenging. "Got a warrant?"

The other hesitated and exchanged an uncertain

glance with his partner. "Well, no—but you can't—"

"I wouldn't advise you to try holding me then."

The girl had sat on the sofa and listened to the exchange of words. Now, as Steele started buttoning his wet topcoat, she got to her feet and moved to his side and clutched his arms and looked up into his eyes.

"Take me with you, Johnny."

He shook his head. "No can do."

"Please! I've got to be with you!"

"Too dangerous. Besides, the cops will want to talk with one of us, and—" he grinned knowingly "—it's your apartment."

Her eyes became panicky. Her hands ran up his arms and caught the lapels of his coat. "You've got to take me, Johnny! It couldn't be more dangerous than here, and besides I can't tell the police any more than I have."

Steele disengaged her hands. "Move to another hotel. Call me the day after tomorrow."

Donoghue snapped disapprovingly. "She don't need to move to no other hotel. If she hadn't left her door unlocked, this wouldn't of happened. As it is now, I'll stand guard outside this door for the rest of the night."

Steele smiled at Claire—a brittle, knowing smile. "See there? Donoghue's settled everything for you."

She frowned, unhappy.

The belligerent patrolman glowered at Steele. "The dicks ain't gonna like this."

Steele included the patrolman in the smile. "I'm not actually enjoying it myself."

He swung from the apartment and hurried to the elevators, but did not push the button. Instead he searched the carpeting closely, then moved to the door

opening into the stairway. Here he found what he sought—a drop of blood on the white tiling.

He started quickly down the stairs and picked up another blood spot on the next landing. The trail led to the ground floor, where it vanished at a door opening into an alley.

Steele let the door close behind him and plunged up the black, stormy alley. At the street, he paused and looked up and down. The belligerent policemen and two strange detectives had stepped from the lobby onto the terrace and were peering into the storm. After a moment or two, one of them shook his head, and the four turned back into the hotel. Steele hurried through the wet to his car.

At his apartment, he put on dry clothing and packed his Gladstone for a short trip and reloaded his pistol. He donned a raincoat and hat, then sat down at his writing desk and began making notations on a pad. He read over the notations, added another, then picked up the telephone and dialed a number. Betsy Carnes answered. He said, "Betsy, the heat's on, and I've got to go back to Mexico."

She thought that over a moment, then snapped, "Well, what do you want me to do about it—start sleeping at the office?"

"I'm not at the office. I'm home."

She sniffed, but there was an anxiety in her voice that belied her words. "I thought that blond phony had gone back to the dairy where she belongs."

He ignored the remark. "Listen close, Betsy. Captain Hegg is likely to be dropping around here any minute, and I don't want to see him tonight." He told her of the events that had taken place in Eustace's office and

of his interview with Cordell. "You know what's going to happen when Captain Hegg starts checking my story tomorrow and discovers I knew about O'Hara's two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar deposit before I had you call the bank."

Her voice hinted at sarcasm. "I can imagine."

"He'll pay you a call. For your own good, play dumb. You made no call, you don't know where I am, and you haven't the faintest idea what any of this is about."

"From the way things are going, with bullets flying around and people turning up dead, maybe it would be a good idea if Captain Hegg locked you up for safety's sake, if for nothing else."

Again, he ignored her comment. "Have you a pad and pencil handy?"

"Go ahead."

"When Neilsen's wire comes from Minneapolis, I want you to follow these instructions to the letter—telegraph me the dope on Adams and Claire. Send your wire to me at the Playa del Rey in Puerto Raton. Specify sealed, personal delivery."

Betsy repeated these instructions.

Steele said, "Another thing. Find out the caliber of the bullet that killed Eustace not later than noon tomorrow and wire it to me in a second separate message, sealed delivery."

Her reply was in character. "Sure, I'll just ask Captain Hegg. He'll be dying to tell me."

"Call the ballistics department and say you're somebody's secretary—or you're a reporter. I don't care. But get that information to me before I start back to Los Angeles."

Betsy hesitated. "Is that blonde going with you?"

He laughed shortly. "No such luck. She's safely in the hands of the burglary squad."

Betsy sniffed again, her indignation and resentment apparent even over the wire. "If they have any sense, they'll hang onto her."

Steele grimaced and shook his head. "What a sweet disposition! Are you all alone?"

"Certainly, I'm alone."

"Too bad."

He hung up, grabbed the Gladstone, and pushed out into the rain. A car passed in a spray of dirty water that flew up against Steele's parked car. One pedestrian scurried down the street, his collar turned up ineffectively against the wet. At the corner the street light hung overhead like a ball of luminescence. The water poured from the sky in a noisy tattoo, like the rolling of distant drums. Steele plunged for his car.

He could see the girl before he opened the door—could make out the bright hair and the polo coat through the blur of raindrops on the windows. He looked inside.

"What are you doing here?"

She regarded him with large, frightened eyes. "I had to come, Johnny. I was scared."

He stood there in the rain, the Gladstone in his hand. "Scared of what? Donoghue was going to watch out for you."

"Come in out of the rain." She moved her legs. "I didn't know what that Captain Hegg might think if the burglary squad told him my apartment had been searched."

He stared at the face brightening the inner darkness

of the car. "What did they have to say?"

The hint of a smile touched the red lips. "I don't know. I left when they went downstairs with the patrolmen to look for you." She drew her legs up out of the way and sat back on the seat. "Come on in, Johnny. You're getting soaked."

He tossed his bag up onto the ledge behind the seat. Water soaked through the material of his hat and began dripping from the brim. He studied the girl a moment, then removed a key from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Use my apartment. Stay in hiding there till I get back, and you'll be safe."

Disappointment saddened the bright face haloed by the corner street light. "But, Johnny!"

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, indicating the apartment building he had just left. "Out."

She hesitated another few seconds, then climbed reluctantly from the car. She looked up at him hopefully, saw his angry determination, and hurried through the rain to the protection of the entrance of the building.

He got into the car and closed the door and stepped on the starter. It whirred endlessly. He jiggled the key in the lock, then tried again. The girl left the entrance of the building and returned to the car. The starter continued fruitlessly to whirl.

She opened the door. "It must be wet."

He glared at her. "Do tell!"

She waited patiently in the chilling wet while he once more smashed his toe against the starter button. Finally she said, "The Packard is parked right down the street."

He snarled, "Go on in the house before you catch pneumonia!"

She eyed him wistfully. Drops of rain glistened on her cheeks and on her nose. The tan polo coat darkened with moisture, and the bandana over her hair became sodden. She added, "It's full of gas and oil." He threw her an exasperated glance, then tried the starter once more. "And the starter works."

He turned and stared at her, then flung out a hand. "Well, give me the key!"

She smiled and shook her head. "It isn't my property, Johnny. I might get in trouble if I let somebody else drive it alone."

He sat for a moment in helpless rage, then reached behind him and pulled down the Gladstone and slammed out of the little coupé. Claire ran ahead of him to the Packard and got behind the wheel, leaving the door open for Steele. He dropped the Gladstone behind the seat and climbed in beside her, and sat glowering into the storm. She switched on the lights and started the motor and swung from the curb.

They were driving through Santa Ana on U.S. 101 when she dropped one hand from the wheel and reached for his own. She smiled shyly in the glow of the dashboard. "Mad?"

He looked at her. "You're getting to be an awful nuisance." His anger relented. "Besides, a nice girl wouldn't want to go ramming all over the country with someone who is practically a stranger."

Her hand caressed his. "If being nice means staying away from you, I'd rather risk my reputation."

He studied the face that looked straight ahead at the glistening road—noticed the wet curls plastered

against the straight, high forehead, the classic nose, the firm chin, the rich lips. She turned briefly, and smiled, and again guided the big convertible south on 101.

Steele extracted his hand and found cigarettes and held a light for both. The twin windshield wipers struggled against the rain and the rushing air. The motor sang low and steady. The tires hummed, and water splashed out on each side of the highway, like the sea falling aside from the prow of a swift destroyer.

At Oceanside, Steele turned once more to the girl and held out his hand and eyed her steadily.

She glanced questioningly away from the wheel.

He said, "All right—give it to me before you lose it."

She affected great surprise. "Give you what, darling?"

"The rotary out of my timer."

She glanced again from the wheel. Her foot left the accelerator, and the car slowed. "The rotary out of your timer?" Her bewilderment apparently grew.

His attitude did not change. "Quit stalling. My car wouldn't start because you took the rotary."

She became indignant. "Why, John Steele, if you're so hopelessly conceited you think I'd take your rotary just so I could go to Mexico with you—" Her bewilderment changed to indignation.

Steele regarded her levelly, hand outstretched. She glanced once from the wheel, feigned rising anger, and turned back to the road, head high, muscles tense, dark eyes flashing.

Steele said, "You're wasting this acting on me. It's too late for us to turn back." The outstretched hand waited patiently, palm up. "I'll have to take you with

me all the way."

The simulated anger and indignation ebbed. She glanced at him from the corners of her eyes, smiled in uneasy confusion, then fumbled in the pocket of her coat and handed him the little rotary from the timer of his motor.

Chapter Twelve

KIDNAPED OR DEAD?

THE DARK, WET MILES dropped away behind the car; and the man and the girl were in San Diego and then National City and then over the international boundary into Tijuana, Mexico. A smear of phosphorus brightened the east and spread across the mountains and into the coastal valleys and over the waters of the Pacific to the far horizon; and the darkness faded, reluctantly, like an aged man cherishing his anger; and ahead of the car stretched the gray, empty miles.

The rain pounded down, and the sea whipped itself white. The wind sighed over the barren hills. Clouds raced, low and dark, across the sky. Water stood muddy and wind-whipped in roadside pools and overflowed from holes in the pavement. And in all that vast expanse of land and sea and sky, no thing stirred except the car speeding south on the bleak, wet highway.

And then a thing of wonder occurred. The clouds parted above the mountains; and the sun looked down, bright and warm, on the steaming lowlands; and the fresh, spring blades of grass raised their heads from the pounded soil; and a bevy of blue mountain quail marched in single file from their shelter beneath a low-lying bush, and watched the car, its surface gleaming from a thousand diamond raindrops, whip past.

John Steele watched the pitted road with eyes long tired of their task. A dark scab had formed on his

cheek, and the left eye was discolored. His nose had become slightly enlarged. His beard showed black and coarse through the dark skin. He had been driving since Oceanside.

His vigilance relaxed momentarily, and the front wheels hit a pit in the surfaced road. Steele switched off the lights and glanced at the girl curled up beside him on the front seat. She stirred in tiny discomfort, then settled back in sleep, the tan polo coat hugged close to her, the bandana removed from her head.

Steele glanced at her again. The purple lump behind her left ear was perceptible only to the expectant eye. She lay against the cushion, with her feet curled in Steele's lap, her head almost touching the door. Her purse swung back and forth from the knob of the glove compartment. One arm and her two hands folded prayer-fashion, served as her pillow. The bright hair cascaded down over the collar of the tan coat and the seat of the car. Her eyes remained closed. Her lips were faintly parted.

The sun beamed in, warming the car. Steele lowered one window slightly, then realized he had not shut off the windshield wipers, and turned the button. He steered with one hand, trying to avoid the jagged holes in the pavement, and searched a cigarette from his pocket, but the little book of matches lay empty on the floor. He tried the cigar lighter in the dash, found it did not operate, then looked hesitantly at the sleeping girl. Finally, he removed her purse from the knob of the glove compartment and looked through it for a match. There was none. He tried the glove compartment, but found it locked. The keys in the ignition would not unlock it. He sighed and returned the purse

and shook the girl.

She stirred, hung for a moment between sleep and wakefulness, then sat suddenly up, trying to do something with the blond hair. She threw him a self-conscious smile. "I must have slept hours."

He nodded. "I wouldn't have wakened you, but we're almost there." He held up the unlighted cigarette. "And I need a light."

She started hurriedly reaching for her purse, but Steele stopped her.

"I've already looked there."

"I guess I'm still not awake."

She felt through her pockets and located a book of matches and held a light for him and lighted a cigarette for herself.

She turned the rear-view mirror and began working once more on her hair. "How much farther?"

"About twenty miles."

"Shall I take the wheel?"

He grinned and glanced at her not unappreciatively. "I'm doing all right. You know, you ought to get out in the sun oftener. It does things for you."

She looked very pleased. "Really, Johnny? Why, you're the last man in the world I'd expect to say nice things in the morning!" She worked furiously at her hair, then got out a compact and began repairing the ravages of the night. Her fingers touched the bruise behind her left ear, and she turned to him. "Look bad?"

He shook his head. "Can't even see it."

She snapped shut the compact and looked out the windshield at the brilliant sunshine, then turned and cranked down the side window and inhaled deeply of

the fresh, crisp air.

"My! Isn't it lovely on a spring morning? Makes me ashamed I've wasted so much of my life sleeping on days like this."

Steele nodded absently.

Her interest quickened as she looked ahead. "What are those cute little birds with the top-notch, Johnny?"

"Mountain quail."

She looked at him and smiled. "I shouldn't have asked. I'm famished."

He inhaled from his cigarette and held the car to its course.

Puerto Raton had not yet fully awakened when they left the surfaced highway and followed the dirt road into the little town. The sun beat down on the flat roofs. An occasional pedestrian plodded to his work. A fat woman came to an open door and screamed something unintelligible. A lean, brown man looked up from repairing a fish net, studied the long wooden pier, and turned back to his work without comment. The woman screamed something more, and moved back into the house. The odor of stale incense crept through the windows of the car. To the east, the mountains drowsed blue in the haze above the roof tops.

Steele slowed as the car moved down the main street. For the most part, the shades of the town remained drawn, the shops as yet unopened. Steele glanced at the girl. "Eight o'clock. Shall we go out to Ricardo's house or stop at the hotel and have breakfast and clean up first?"

She looked helpless. "I'm such a mess, Johnny, and I came away without anything."

He nodded. "You can pick up the things you need

from the shops at the hotel. Ricardo will keep for a while."

As the car reached the cross street leading to the warehouse, he picked out a topless old model T Ford touring car parked in front of the building. "That's Ricardo's car."

She nodded absently. "Probably hasn't gone home yet."

He stopped the Packard, and looked back. "But he should have gone home by now. He certainly doesn't work thirteen hours a night."

Her interest sharpened. They exchanged a look. She said, "Maybe we'd better stop over there."

Steele turned the car around and drove to the front entrance of the warehouse. The door leading into the office stood open. Three male civilians were talking in the office with a man in khaki uniform. Steele glanced out of the car and look concerned. His face went grim. "I was afraid of that."

"A soldier?"

He shook his head. "A Mexican policeman."

They left the car and walked up the steps into the office. Talk ceased as the four men turned to regard them questioningly. Two of them wore overalls and were obviously laborers in the warehouse. The third man had on a white shirt and a necktie, and his jacket matched his trousers. Even the policeman showed him a deference.

Steele and Claire entered the little office. It consisted only of a few tables and chairs and a huge green safe and a rolltop desk. A calendar hung from the wall. A pretty little native stenographer sat in the background at her typewriter. There was an air of spice and fresh

fruit about the place, and overhead the movement of heavily laden hand trucks caused the flooring to creak.

Steele addressed the man in the white shirt and necktie. "*Habla inglés?*"

He looked puzzled, but the policeman smiled and nodded. "He does not, but I do." His pronunciation was execrable.

Steele included the girl. "We're looking for Ricardo Martinez. We saw his car outside."

The policeman hesitated. The well-dressed man threw a quick question in Spanish. The policeman answered, then turned back to Claire and Steele.

"We, too, are looking for him."

Steele paused. "Has he disappeared?"

The policeman nodded. "He has been missing since two o'clock this morning. No one has seen him."

"Missing from here?"

"Yes."

"Anything of value gone?"

The policeman shook his head. "Nothing."

"Any signs of violence? Any bloodstains?"

The policeman appeared startled. "Why do you ask such a thing, *senor?*"

The well-dressed man interposed a question in Spanish. The policeman explained. The civilian took alarm and started from the policeman to John Steele.

The civilian said, "*Por qué, por qué?*"

Steele looked at Claire. The girl's cheeks had gone pale once more. The dark eyes reflected that same alarm appearing in the eyes of the civilian. The two laborers stood back and simply stared. The pretty stenographer abandoned all pretense of work and openly listened, fascination freezing the nimble fingers.

Steele said, "No reason I can explain. I just wondered."

The policeman did not seem satisfied with Steele's answer. "You are here as a friend of Ricardo?"

Steele nodded. "As a friend, and as a private detective." He flashed his special officer's badge. A new respect appeared in the officer's eyes. "This is Claire Adams. I am John Steele."

The policeman bowed to Claire, white teeth flashing, and shook hands with Steele. "I am Guillermo Vargas. This is Senor Atilla, the manager of this warehouse." He turned to Atilla and introduced Claire and Steele. "Senorita Adams y Senor Steele." The manager's alarm and suspicion faded. He, too, flashed white teeth and bowed. The two laborers remained unidentified and ignored.

Steele asked, "What are the circumstances?"

The policeman, Vargas, shrugged, puzzled. "Ricardo punched in as usual at seven last night." He handed Steele a timecard. "He pulled his clocks until two this morning. After that no clocks were pulled, and he failed to punch out at seven this morning. When Senor Atilla came to work, the back door was unlocked, and Ricardo had disappeared."

"Have you searched the warehouse?"

The policeman nodded. "From top to bottom. He cannot be in here." He hesitated an instant, then added gravely, "Dead or alive."

"Have you been to his house?"

"Yes."

"Has he any friends?"

The policeman again nodded. "A few. We have questioned each of them. No one has seen him since

yesterday evening."

"How about enemies?"

The policeman shook his head.

Steele studied the timecard an instant, then returned it to the policeman. "Could he simply have walked away?"

"He is a very old man. His feet hurt him, and he cannot walk more than a very short distance. Besides, he loves his old Ford and goes everywhere in it. We find this very mystifying, Senor Steele."

"Do you mind if we look around?"

The policeman turned to Atilla, the manager, and asked a question in Spanish. The manager's eyes became round. He nodded his head up and down with vigor, then smiled on Steele and Claire.

The policeman turned back to Steele. "We are pleased to have the assistance of the American police."

Steele shot him a glance. "Private police. Will you take us to the last clock Ricardo pulled?"

They left the office through a rear door and entered the warehouse proper. The odor of spice and fresh fruit strengthened. Cases of canned goods stood in huge piles. Through an open double-door, laborers wheeled a consignment into a waiting truck. Bananas hung in big bunches from the ceiling—green bananas, ripening as they awaited shipment. A pile of American cigarettes reached almost to the ceiling. Steele eyed them and moved on. The two laborers, determined to make the most of this day of recognition, tagged along at the rear of the little procession. The stenographer had risen from her desk and watched wistfully through the glass top of the door, her curiosity not quite sufficient to send her trailing after the others.

The policeman led Steele and Claire to a metal box set in the wall. This box had an opening for a key.

Vargas, the policeman, indicated the box. "This was pulled at five minutes of two."

Steele looked around. A door stood open near by, framing the fields beyond the warehouse. Steele searched the floor, then moved toward the door.

"It rained here last night?"

"Very hard, senor."

"What time did the rain stop?"

The policeman turned to the manager and asked a question. The manager looked puzzled and turned to the laborers. One of them brightened and jumped forward and made a lengthy statement. The manager turned to the policeman. The policeman turned to Steele. "Carlos says the rain stopped sometime after midnight."

Steele looked at Claire. "That's more than the people can say fifty miles north of here." They exchanged martyred glances.

Steele stepped from the open door and looked down at the ground. The door opened on a driveway of sorts. This driveway, unpaved, cut from the front of the warehouse around the back, then along the other side to the front again, so that trucks could load and simply circle the warehouse without troubling to turn around. In the moist soil of the driveway, tire marks stood out clearly. Several footprints indicated that people had moved back and forth between the car and the warehouse.

Steele turned to the policeman. "Has anyone parked out here and used this door this morning?"

The policeman ascertained from the manager and

the laborers that the truck being loaded was the first of the day.

Steele said, "We'll need some plaster of Paris."

The policeman relayed the information to the manager. He issued an order to the two laborers. They scurried away. Claire moved to Steele's side.

"Do you think he was killed?"

"I don't know." He indicated the tracks. "But it certainly looks as though somebody hauled him away."

The policeman became troubled. "But why would anyone trouble to do that to so harmless an old man?"

Steele shook his head. The laborers returned with plaster of Paris. Steele ripped open the container, mixed the contents with water, and placed a cast over each tire mark and each footprint. Vargas watched admiringly. Steele asked, "Will you be around here for a while?"

Vargas looked puzzled. "You wish me to stay here, senor?"

Steele wearily pushed back his hat. "We've been up all night. We ought to go to the hotel and clean up and have something to eat; but I'd like to know somebody was keeping an eye on these casts while we're gone."

Vargas bowed. "By all means. And will you mind if I, too, make casts of the tracks—for my records?"

Steele could not stifle a smile. "Not at all. It's Senor Atilla's plaster, and this is your jurisdiction."

The last word puzzled the policeman. "I do not understand."

Steele, smiling again, shook his head. "It doesn't matter. But tell me—did Ricardo go armed while he was on duty?"

The policeman turned to Atilla, the manager, who

shook his head and explained in Spanish the need did not exist in this quiet little community. Thievery was almost unknown. There was not even a jail.

The policeman interpreted for Steele, who nodded. Then the policeman made a shrewd observation. "You do not seem unduly amazed at Ricardo's disappearance, Senor Steele."

Steele's eyes went cautious. "Up in Los Angeles, such things happen often."

Vargas was not satisfied with this explanation. "Your reason for seeking Ricardo, Senor Steele—I do not recall having heard it."

Steele smiled disarmingly and threw Claire a quick glance. "We thought he might take us quail hunting."

"He has taken you quail hunting before?"

"Well—not us. But he has guided Miss Adams's father."

The policeman's smile broke through again. He turned to Claire. "Ah—then you are the daughter of the Senor Adams who disappeared so mysteriously."

She nodded, smiling upon him. "Yes."

"And you found him?"

Steele answered for her. "Oh—yes. He had simply gone to Hollywood."

The policeman's smile faded. His eyes became troubled. "I am wondering if these two disappearances—" He paused, then shook his head. "But of course there can be no connection. Senor Adams was found."

"I'll know more about that after I've had something to eat."

Steele and the girl walked around the driveway to the front of the warehouse and got into the Packard. Steele started the motor. The girl's face looked very

concerned. She turned to him. "He's dead, isn't he?"

He nodded. "Dead or kidnaped."

"Why would they kill him?"

He wheeled the car from the curbing. "Because he knows something."

"Do you know?"

"Not for certain. But I'm going to find out."

"Do you know who killed him?"

He shook his head. "That's another thing I'm going to find out."

"Is there a chance he isn't dead?"

"Very little. When a million dollars is at stake, unscrupulous people don't leave others around alive to convict them."

"But what could an old man like Ricardo know that would make him important enough to be murdered?"

Steele glanced momentarily from the wheel. "For one thing, your father."

She looked puzzled. "I don't see how his knowing my father would make him a target for murder."

Steele frowned. "It's pretty involved right now, but when the whole thing unravels we'll probably find Ricardo's part obvious enough."

She nodded, troubled. "I suppose." Then the bright face looked up into his. "But what are we going to do now?"

"Go to the hotel and get you fed and cleaned up."

Her brightness faded. "You think I'm an awful nuisance, don't you?"

He glanced at her. "Well, aren't you?"

She looked down. "I guess I am, at that. I shouldn't have forced myself off on you last night."

He shook his head. "To tell you the truth, I'm glad

you did. Otherwise, I'd be even worse mixed up than I am."

She looked up, hopeful. For the moment, her concern and anxiety faded. The dark eyes became pleased. "Honest, Johnny?"

"Yes."

She smiled and moved against him and hugged his arm. "I can't believe it." Then the obvious implication wore away, and she recognized the underlying meaning of his words. She moved back from him, once more puzzled. "Worse mixed up?"

He nodded, very sober. "I'm sure of at least one thing. You didn't kill Ricardo, because we were on the road together at the time he disappeared."

She became amazed. For several seconds, she could only stare at him. And then, "You mean that if I hadn't been with you, you might think I had something to do with his disappearance?"

He flashed her a look. "I certainly would have had to consider that possibility."

She stared. "Why, John Steele! What earthly reason would I have for killing that old man?"

He thought for several seconds before replying. "In the beginning, there were your father and his two bodyguards, Cordell, Eustace, O'Hara, the Portuguese, Ricardo, you, and me. Those were the suspects involved in the Mirabilis Diamond. O'Hara and Eustace are dead, and Ricardo is missing—probably dead. Somebody among that original group is trying to eliminate everyone who can give any possible clue to the murderer of O'Hara."

She continued to stare. "Then until Ricardo disappeared, you suspected me of killing O'Hara and even

Gordon Eustace?"

"You had as good a chance as any of the rest of us."

"But I thought it was settled that the Ifnis committed the murders."

Steele nodded. "Could be, but they're pretty convenient."

She sagged back in the seat. "And I've been stupid enough to think you were in love with me!"

He glanced at her. "What has that to do with these murders?"

Chapter Thirteen

BUZZARDS OVER A MOUND

AT THE PLAYA DEL REY HOTEL, Steele and the girl registered separately, then visited the expensive little shops opening from the lobby and selected the toilet articles and items of clothing Claire felt she would need. Steele helped her to her room with the packages, then intimated he intended going to his own room, to shave and bathe and get into fresh linen before breakfast.

She caught his arm and looked up into his face, terribly concerned. "Johnny, darling—how could you have had such terrible thoughts about me?"

He returned her gaze. "I simply said I would have had to consider the possibility of your being involved if you hadn't been with me last night."

"I'll never, never forgive you."

His attitude indicated no change. She moved against him, the hands reaching up for his shoulders, the pretty face pleading. "Say you're sorry, Johnny."

He smiled and disengaged her hands and moved toward the door. "See you in the dining-room."

She stood in the middle of the room, indignant, staring after him. He stepped out. She hurried across the room and slammed the door before he could close it. He hesitated an instant, then strode past the door of his own room and down the stairs.

At the rear of the hotel, the uniformed attendant asked if he wanted the cream-colored Packard. Steele decided against it, and had the attendant summon a

decrepit taxicab waiting in the private roadway.

At the pier, Steele learned that Arturo Torreon, the pier master, was somewhere in the town. The taxi drove to Hop Lee's bar, where Steele dismissed the driver. By now, the usual knots of natives had gathered on the street corners, and the shutters were down from most of the shops. The sun slanted warmly down from beyond the mountains, crusting the mud in the street, and drying the puddles.

Hop Lee was serving a lone patron when Steele entered the bar. Joaquin leaned on his broom and gazed out the streaked windows. The dog dozed under one of the chairs.

The Chinese bartender and the patron looked up as Steele entered. The swinging doors hinged shut behind him. Hop and the patron and Joaquin smiled recognition. Steele saw that the patron was Arturo Torreon, the pier master.

Arturo hurried to Steele's side, bowing and shaking hands effusively. There was the familiar air of stale liquor on the pier master's breath. Joaquin grinned and nodded hopefully. Steele sat down with Arturo.

The Chinese peered through the thick lenses. "What you been through—a meat grinder?"

Steele grinned wryly and touched his injured cheek. "I feel like it."

"What gives?"

"A beer. Have either of you seen Ricardo Martinez this morning?"

Arturo tossed off his drink and looked puzzled.

Hop turned from opening a bottle of beer. "Ain't he home?"

Steele took off his hat and ran his hands through

his thick, dark hair. Hop poured beer into a glass. Steele placed his hat on the next stool.

"He disappeared this morning at two o'clock. I was hoping one of you might have seen him."

Arturo and Hop exchanged puzzled glances. Hop asked, "You mean he walked right off the job?"

Steele sipped his beer. "Walked or was carried."

The pair became concerned. Arturo said, "Kidnaped, senior?"

Steele explained the circumstances of Ricardo's disappearance as he knew them. Joaquin, in the background, gradually edged closer to the bar, his young eyes big with curiosity.

Joaquin said, "He is an old, old man. Perhaps he became sick and someone drove him home."

Steele shook his head. "Vargas, the policeman, was out to Ricardo's house. He wasn't there."

Hop removed his spectacles and began polishing one of the lenses with a clean handkerchief. He regarded Steele thoughtfully. "This don't look good for Ricardo. He ain't the kind of a guy who would walk off the job. He was so regular you could set your watch by him."

Arturo added, "And he took great pride in his responsibility."

Joaquin, the dark eyes even larger, asked breathlessly, "You think someone has killed him, senior?"

Steele did not answer for a moment. And then he said only, "He has disappeared. That's all I'm sure of."

Steele paid Hop, who rang up the sale, then turned back to Steele. "You know—I been wondering. First, that fellow Adams disappeared, now Ricardo. They were friends. Maybe Ricardo knew something about that diamond."

Steele shot Hop a glance, but made no comment.

Hop remained thoughtful a moment, then added, "Did you ever find Adams?"

Steele nodded. "The day after I left here."

"Alive?"

"Very much so."

Hop looked mildly disappointed. "Did you see that rock?"

"Yes."

"Was it as big as Ricardo said?"

Steele drank some more beer. "Bigger, if anything."

"How much dough you figure it's worth—ten thousand?"

Steele permitted himself to smile slightly. "A million."

Hop stared. Arturo tried to drain the last drop from the empty liquor glass.

Hop whistled silently and shook his head. "Plenty people been murdered for a lot less than that."

Steele nodded. "From the looks of things, plenty people have already been murdered for this."

Arturo turned to Steele. "If you look for a murderer, I give you this advice for not even the price of a drink, senor. Find the arrogant American who came to my pier—the Senor Cordell."

Steele looked at Arturo. "What makes you say that?"

Arturo nodded mysteriously to himself. "I can read character, senor. One with the eyes of Senor Cordell would commit murder for much less than a million dollars. And I give you that character reading free."

Steele glanced at Hop. "Give him a drink." Hop poured a drink of whisky. Arturo beamed and thanked

Steele. The detective asked, "Did Cordell question you after I left the pier?"

Arturo nodded. "I told him exactly what you instructed me to say—that the *Camberra* had sailed south for Mazatlán, that Adams was on it, and that the ship would make many stops along this peninsula."

"Did he act as though he believed you?"

"But, certainly, señor! Why should anyone doubt the word of Arturo Torreon?"

"What did he do then?"

"He became very angry and drove back to Los Angeles."

Steele looked sharp. "Back to Los Angeles? How do you know where he drove?"

Arturo tossed off his drink, savored its flavor for a moment, then regarded Steele with immense self-esteem. "Because I drove with him as far as Tijuana, señor."

Steele's attitude became doubtful. "Why?"

Once more, Arturo sought the moisture at the bottom of the glass. Steele made a motion, and Hop refilled the jigger.

Arturo, nodding thanks, replied, "It seems that while I was talking with him, Geronimo, the fisherman, removed two wires from the spark plugs of the *Americano's* car. Then when the car would not start, I fixed it with Geronimo's help, and Senor Cordell gave us transportation to Tijuana—as insurance against further motor trouble." Arturo grinned smugly.

Steele remained suspicious. "Why did you and Geronimo want to go to Tijuana? You had just come from there."

Arturo stared as if Steele had suddenly become childish. "But, senor—you had just given me fifty *Americano* dollars! When I returned from Tijuana, I had no money. But with fifty *Americano* dollars!" His attitude implied that anyone but a rank idiot would naturally hurry to Tijuana the instant he laid hands on fifty dollars.

Steele smiled. "How long did it last?"

Arturo looked unhappy and shook his head. "The roulette, senor. We rode back in the rear of a cattle truck next day." He tried to drown the unpleasant recollection in the fresh drink Hop had poured.

Steele asked, "Who else questioned you before you left for Tijuana?"

Arturo placed the empty jigger on the bar. "We did not leave until dark, after Senor Cordell had eaten his supper. Only the redheaded man questioned me."

Steele frowned. "Not the pretty girl I warned you about?"

Arturo became disappointed. "No. And I found it very disappointing. One does not see many pretty girls in Puerto Raton."

Steele became very concerned. For a time, he looked thoughtfully into his beer. Then he asked, "What did you tell the redheaded man?"

"The same as Senor Cordell."

"Did any of you ever see the girl or Cordell or the redhead together, or get an idea they might be meeting secretly?"

Hop, Arturo, and Joaquin shook their heads. Hop volunteered, "She was back through here two or three days ago, and she gave me a long song and dance about you double-crossing her and sending her way to

hell and gone some place down in the peninsula while you went back to the States and found her old man."

Steele finished his beer and paid Hop for Arturo's drinks. "See anything of the redheaded man while the girl was gone?"

The trio shook their heads.

"I never did see the guy," said Hop.

Steele asked, "Have you noticed two medium-sized, dark-skinned men around who talk like Portuguese? Hook noses. Wicked black eyes."

The three exchanged questioning glances. Arturo said, "There have been no such strangers in town, senior—only *Americano* tourists and vacationers from the Hollywood cinema."

"Well, then—have you seen anything of Adams or his two bodyguards? Adams is a big man, about sixty, as Arturo knows. The bodyguards look like the gangsters you see in American movies. They're short. One is light, the other dark. Never have anything to say. One is named Clarence, the other Albert. Clarence is the dark one. He plays around a lot with a pocket-knife. Albert stands with his arms crossed and tries to look sinister."

Hop and Joaquin shook their heads. Arturo said, "I have not seen Senor Adams since the night he took the *Camberra*. And I have never seen those two you describe."

Steele looked puzzled. He shook his head.

Hop asked, "Do you make anything of it?"

Steele got down from the stool. "You think you have all the answers, and then something like this comes up."

"What about the girl—can't she give you a lead?"

Steele was about to answer when the cream-colored Packard drove up outside the windows, and the girl looked in. Steele threw Hop a glance, and moved through the swinging doors.

Claire regarded Steele chasteningly. "I didn't know we were to drink our breakfast."

He got into the car and slammed the door. "I thought I might pick up a lead on Ricardo."

Within the bar, Hop, Arturo, and Joaquin looked out from the window. Claire glanced at them. All immediately grinned and bobbed their heads. She waved cheerily and started from the curb.

She looked at him and sniffed and wrinkled up her pretty nose. "Beer! At this hour!"

He paid no heed. "Look, lovely. I've got a little hunch. Drive me out to Ricardo's place."

"I thought we were going to eat."

He nodded. "After."

"What on earth could we find at Ricardo's?"

He shook cigarettes from a package and held a match for her while she steered. After his own cigarette was lighted he said, "I won't make any stupid guesses out loud."

She turned momentarily from the wheel, her gaze questioning. "I don't suppose there's any use asking what you're talking about."

He grunted, "You're learning." Then he settled down in the seat.

She followed the road through the town and into the dry wash and out the other side to the property of Ricardo Martinez. Steele had her park the car under the pepper tree, then got out and looked expectantly

around.

She followed him to the ground. "What are you looking for?"

"I was wondering about Ricardo's dog."

They started for the house. "What about it?"

"It's an old dog. And an old dog wouldn't be wandering away—especially if it's hungry. And Ricardo's dog should be hungry by this time."

She looked alarmed. Her footsteps lagged. "Do you think we ought to go in the house?"

He glanced at her. "We'll never find what I'm after out here."

Reluctantly, she resumed her pace.

Claire was not kept long in suspense. Steele led the way into the living-room and went immediately to the fold of waterproof silk lying on the battered table. "Here it is."

He opened it and exposed the note Ricardo had received from Royal Adams, then compared the handwriting with that in the letter Cordell had given him the previous night.

Claire said, "Why, they aren't at all alike!"

"That's pretty obvious."

"What does it mean?"

"Probably that Ricardo is dead."

"How can you know?"

He pocketed the two letters. "Ricardo's letter was his badge of importance. He was illiterate, but it marked him as a responsible man who had dealings with educated people who could read and write. It is the only letter Ricardo received in all his life. He treasured it. He would never have left it here like this. Somebody killed him and put it on this table where it would

surely be found."

"But why, Johnny?"

He was thoughtful for a time. Then, "Ricardo's kidnaper and probable murderer left the letter here to establish something."

The girl stared up at him, then said, "We know Ricardo's letter is authentic and was actually written by my father. Ricardo said it was. So maybe that letter was left here to prove Cordell's letter a fake."

Steele looked troubled. "I suppose that's one way of looking at it."

She became excited. "That has to be it! Cordell is behind everything!"

Steele shot her a glance. He asked quietly, "What about the Ifnis?"

Her enthusiasm died. The fright returned. "Johnny, let's get out of here."

He took her arm and led her to the car. She got behind the wheel and started to turn the car around. Something caught Steele's attention. He placed a hand on her arm. "Hold it."

She stopped the car, and followed his gaze. Beyond the crest of the dry wash, several large black feathered forms were slowly circling above the ground, dipping from sight, then soaring into the air again.

Steele said, "Buzzards."

Her puzzlement deepened for a moment; then she went very pale.

Steele said, "Drive down there."

She started to shift once more into low, then took her hand from the lever. She moistened the lips that had turned suddenly gray. Her voice had become strained. "Ricardo?"

"Probably."

She hesitated, weak. He stepped from the car and walked around and got into the driver's seat. She looked down at the floor and shook her head. "It's horrible."

Steele eased the car into the dry wash and followed its curving length until the large black forms became thick bodies and scrawny, naked necks and fierce eyes and huge beating wings. Ricardo's gaunt old mongrel dog stood angry guard over a mound in the bed of the dry wash. A length of blue denim, faded from many washings, protruded from this mound. And in a circle around the dog and the blue denim, the buzzards waited, rising and settling back as the dog charged among them.

Steele patted the girl's hand. "It's all right. The dog has kept them off."

He got out of the car. The buzzards flapped aloft, circling vigilantly. Steele moved toward the body. The dog set itself, eyes fierce, and snarled. Steele talked gently to the dog. Its teeth bared in another snarl. Steele looked over the situation, then turned back to the car. The dog, exhausted, lay down.

The girl had gained courage and now looked out at him with large eyes. Some of the color had returned to the red lips and the smooth cheeks.

Steele said, "They buried Ricardo, and the dog dug him up. The buzzards spotted the body, but the dog fought them away. Now, we'll have to find a way to remove the body without hurting the dog."

"Can't we just tell the policeman?"

He regarded her sharply, and indicated the black forms overhead. "And leave Ricardo while those

things are still up there?"

She looked uneasy. "I thought the dog—" She left the sentence unfinished.

Steele said, "The dog is all in. Probably been fighting those birds since dawn. I couldn't leave." His censure dissolved. He looked at her with her eyes suddenly less severe. "Think you can drive in alone?"

She hesitated. "I don't know. I guess so."

"Then I'll wait here for you. Tell Vargas to bring a big fish net so we won't hurt the dog."

She started to turn the key in the ignition, then suddenly hurried from the car and threw herself against Steele and clung to him in terror.

"Johnny, I'm so scared! When I came here to meet my father I didn't think I'd get into anything like this, with killings and beatings and—"

She broke off and pressed her face against Steele's shoulder. He stood motionless, one hand on the bright head, the other at her waist. Quietly he said, "Take it easy."

She looked up with the large frightened eyes. "But it's so horrible, Johnny! The old man buried there, and the dog, and those terrible birds—" She caught her breath and clung to him. Alarmed, the old dog wove alertly to its feet.

For a time, she sobbed. And then there was only the quiet of the countryside.

The throb of an automobile motor became audible and grew in strength as the car approached. Claire caught the sound, and stiffened in alarm, and raised her head. Steele tried to see the road but the slopes of the dry wash shut off the view.

The motor suddenly ceased running. A car door

slammed shut. Almost immediately, the sound was repeated, as if two people had simultaneously left a car on opposite sides.

The girl clung to Steele's hand as he pushed warily up the slope of the dry wash and peered through the mesquite. A Dodge sedan bearing California license plates stood under the pepper tree. Two men were entering Ricardo's house.

Claire looked and again went white and held onto John Steele's arm for support.

Her voice was only a whisper. "The Ifnis!"

Chapter Fourteen

AN UNFORTUNATE ARRIVAL

OVERHEAD, THE GREAT DARK FORMS circled around and around, the fierce eyes probing the mound in the dry wash, the naked necks craning, the great wings catching the rising currents of air. The quail and the timid rabbits remained motionless in their sanctuaries as the hawklike shadows sailed back and forth, back and forth, waiting for the two human beings and the big white car to depart. The gaunt dog stood stanchly above the mound of earth, its old legs shaken with weariness. And the dog, too, awaited the departure of the two human beings so that it might lie beside its master and gain what rest it could before the onslaught of the great birds resumed. And a breath of wind sifted sand across the blue denim cloth.

On the brim of the dry wash, John Steele peered grimly through the mesquite and weighed the situation. The girl clung to his arm.

Steele said, "We can take them if you feel up to it."

The stark eyes looked up into his and asked the question she could not voice.

Steele surveyed the terrain again. "I'll go to one of the windows and throw my gun down on them. While they're covered, you go inside and disarm them and tie their hands. Avoid getting between them and my gun. As soon as they're tied, I'll come through the window and take over."

Hysterically she shook her head. "I can't, Johnny!

I—" She hid her head.

He patted her arm. "It will be simple. Just keep out of my line of fire, and I'll see nothing happens to you."

She clutched at him. "They'll kill us, Johnny! The buzzards will get us!" She looked up with pleading eyes. "We can go cross-country in the car and find help."

He regarded her appraisingly, then started down the slope into the dry wash. "I'll take them alone."

She stumbled down the slope after him, hands clinging to him. "Please, Johnny! They're killers. They killed Ricardo, and they'll kill you and me."

Steele disengaged the girl's hands and unholstered his .38 police special. "What do you think this is—a water pistol?"

He plunged down the middle of the dry wash toward the road. The girl took a few steps after him, then became helpless in her own fear and sat down in the sandy bed. The old dog wove above the patch of blue denim and growled low in its throat. Overhead, the buzzards wheeled their patient cycle.

Steele followed the dry wash until he was abreast of the house. Here, he moved up the slope and looked cautiously through the mesquite. The door of the house stood open. No sound reached him.

He gauged his distance, then, keeping the parked Dodge between himself and the house, raced to the pepper tree, where he poised, tense, until an even flow of Portuguese reached him from the house. He gauged his distance again, and quickly spurted across the yard. Pistol in hand, he crouched down behind the chopping block. Inside, the two Portuguese continued their conversation.

The minutes passed. Furniture crashed and pottery broke inside the house as a search went on. Cloth ripped. Metal nails protested loudly as board was ripped from board. Finally footsteps moved toward the door, and the Portuguese voices snarled in anger.

The subordinate of the two was the first man through the door. Steele jumped out and struck him behind the ear with the pistol, then covered the leader while the other was collapsing unconscious. The leader's mouth dropped open. Steele said, "I told you boys you didn't pick the right places to look for diamonds."

The leader began the motion of going for his pistol. Steele laughed and joyfully hit him in the face with the .38 police special. The leader fell back against the wall, blood spurting from his nose, and from beneath his left eye.

Steele touched the scab under his own left eye. "Great fun, isn't it?"

The leader groggily raised his hands.

Steele said, "Face the wall."

The leader turned to the wall. Steele expertly went over him and removed a Luger pistol from the other's shoulder holster, and dropped it into his own coat pocket. Then he backed to the unconscious man, quickly located a .45 automatic, and dropped it into the other pocket. Steele turned to the leader. "Take off your belt."

The leader hesitated, then removed his belt.

"Lie flat on your face, and cross your hands behind you."

The leader started to turn in protest. Steele kicked the other's feet from under him, and he fell heavily. Steele trained the .38 on the man's forehead. He hesi-

tated an instant, then rolled over on his face and placed his hands as Steele had directed. Steele sat quickly on the other's neck and shoulders, holstered the .38, and bound the crossed hands with his belt.

For a moment Steele contemplated the buzzards wheeling overhead, then turned to the unconscious man and removed his belt and trussed his hands. The leader rolled over on his back and managed to sit up. His black eyes glared malevolently.

Steele began a minute search of the unconscious man, but found only the usual odds and ends. The man's name, he learned from a tailor's label, was Paulo Sao Vicente. There was nothing else of value.

Steele turned back to the leader and made a similar search. In the inside pocket of the man's jacket, he found the missing pages from O'Hara's daybook. The pages stated that O'Hara had been retained by Gordon Leon Eustace to help contact Royal Xavier Adams in Puerto Raton, that Adams's trail had vanished at the home of Ricardo Martinez, and that after spending a week in Mexico, O'Hara had returned to Hollywood. There were no details covering that week.

Steele shoved the pages into his own pocket, and continued his search. It revealed the leader's name on an identification card in a billfold: Ignatio Manáos. There was nothing of further enlightenment.

The unconscious man, Paulo Sao Vicente, groaned and stirred and opened his eyes. Steele waited patiently. After a time, Paulo sat up and looked bewilderedly from Steele to Ignatio Manáos.

Steele gave Paulo time to collect his thoughts, then asked, "All right, you two—are you working for Henry Cordell or Royal Adams or yourselves?"

Paulo's face remained blank. Ignatio's lips curled back. He glared his hate. Steele considered him a moment, then kicked him heavily in the side. Ignatio fell over, groaning. Steele gingerly rubbed his own side and surveyed Ignatio in cold anger.

"That pays us off, but I still owe you both a booting for the handling you gave Miss Adams." He looked at his watch, then once more addressed Ignatio. "I asked you a question. You have five minutes before I make you talk."

Ignatio pulled himself to a sitting position once more. His teeth bared in a snarl. The left eye had by now swollen nearly shut. Blood had streaked down his cheek and his chin, and stained his collar.

Steele seated himself on the chopping block, watch in hand. At the end of five minutes, he got to his feet and entered the back kitchen of the house and returned with a length of rope and several short pieces of wood like tent staves. Paulo regarded him wonderingly. Ignatio looked up sullenly. Steele picked up the old hatchet from the chopping block, then turned to the two men. "Stand up."

Paulo turned to the leader, eyes questioning. Steele motioned them up with one hand.

"*Erecto!*" The word was the best Steele could improvise, but Paulo grasped the meaning and struggled to his feet. Ignatio did not stir. Steele walked to his side and poised one foot. Ignatio stood up.

Steele pointed to the dry wash. "Start walking. You'll know when to stop."

The little procession set out, with Ignatio in the lead, Paulo stumbling along in second place, and Steele following in the rear. They moved down the slope, made

the several turns in the course of the dry wash, and then the cream-colored Packard and the gaunt old dog and the mound of earth came into view ahead. The girl was nowhere in sight.

The prisoners halted beside the car, as if they expected to enter it. Steele said, "Move on."

They traveled forward until the dog's teeth bared in a snarl. Paulo halted and, frightened, turned to Ignatio and said something in Portuguese. Alarmed, both stared down at the patch of blue denim protruding from the mound of earth. Steele said, "That's right. It's a dead man—old Ricardo Martinez."

Paulo repeated the name and looked again at Ignatio. The leader's swarthy complexion began to gray.

Claire, clutching her purse, crept from the mesquite at the brim of the wash and stared down with disbelieving eyes. Slowly, she made her way down the slope.

Steele addressed Ignatio. "Ricardo died because he knew too much." He paused for just a moment, then added, "Maybe you and Paulo know too much, too."

Ignatio moistened his lips and turned to Paulo and exchanged concerned words. Fright entered Paulo's eyes. Claire looked uncomprehendingly at Steele.

He asked, "Where were you?"

Her voice shook. "I thought they had you. I hid in the mesquite."

He indicated the bumper of the car. "Sit down."

She sat down and continued to regard him uncomprehendingly. He moved to the glove compartment of the dashboard and removed the Luger and the .45 from his pockets. "Have you got the key to this thing?"

"It's open." She hesitated an instant. "I got some

cigarettes out of it."

He pulled open the compartment and put away the guns. "I'd better lock them up."

She found a little key in her coat pocket. He locked the compartment and retained the key, then moved back to the prisoners. "Sit down."

He indicated the ground. Paulo hesitated, and sat down. Ignatio remained stubborn. Steele again kicked the leader's feet from under him. He fell more heavily than the previous time. Blood started running down his chin once more. Claire shuddered and looked away.

Steele cut the rope into several short lengths, then bound the feet of the prisoners, and picked up the stakes and the hatchet. Real alarm now entered the eyes of Paulo and Ignatio. The leader spoke for the first time in English. "What you do with us?"

Steele smiled grimly and looked aloft at the black forms making their endless circle. Ignatio and Paulo followed his glance. Horror came into their eyes.

Claire jumped up, her face suddenly colorless. "Johnny! You can't!"

He knelt and started pounding stakes. "Can't I?"

She started to tremble and seated herself again.

Paulo began shouting at Ignatio as Steele roped the prisoners to the stakes. Ignatio, very gray, perspired freely. Steele completed his task and stood up.

Ignatio said, "You kill this old man, and now you kill us?"

Steele lighted a cigarette. "What does it look like?"

"But you cannot! We have done nothing to deserve this!" The black eyes watched the forms wheeling in the sky overhead.

Paulo strained at the stakes and turned his shoutings

to Steele. Ignatio snapped back at Paulo, but the other continued addressing Steele in Portuguese.

Steele spoke to Ignatio. "I don't know what Paulo is saying, but I have a good idea he is confessing. I'll give you one minute to tell me what he's trying to say."

Ignatio lay back, panting, while Paulo's voice raged and pleaded with Steele. Claire, white-faced, rose once more. She walked away from the car and looked in the opposite direction.

Steele took out his watch and held it in his hand. "When the minute is up, we drive away and leave you here." He looked again at the buzzards.

Paulo renewed his rantings. The sweat poured from Ignatio.

When the minute ended, Steele pocketed his watch, guided the girl into the car, and started the motor. Paulo stared up, momentarily unable to grasp the significance of Steele's move, then began hysterically screaming and straining at his bonds. Ignatio's black eyes turned desperately from the car to the great birds swinging above the dry wash. The old dog growled once more, and wobbled on its feet. Steele backed the car against the farther slope, turned around, and headed down the wash toward the road. Claire stared straight ahead, her face frozen with horror.

At the third turn in the bed of the dry wash, Steele shut off the motor and found fresh cigarettes. The girl ignored his offer. The dark eyes turned accusingly to him. "You're going to leave them to those—those—" Her eyes flicked upward; then she shuddered and looked at the floor boards.

He lighted his cigarette. "Relax! Buzzards won't touch a live man. If those would-be gunmen had ever

lived in the country, they'd know that."

The wan face turned up; the eyes became hopeful. "You're sure?"

He studied the trembling lips. "Look, lovely—this is just a lesson in elementary psychology. The effect of those buzzards will make Ignatio tell me the things I want to know."

She collapsed against him, weeping. He threw an arm around her and let her cry. After a time, she straightened and wiped her eyes. The pretty brow furrowed.

"Johnny, you gave them the impression we killed Ricardo."

He nodded. "That's right."

"Why?"

"More psychology. If they think we killed Ricardo, they will also think we'll kill them unless they talk."

She became more puzzled. Color started returning to the pretty face. "But didn't they kill him?"

He shook his head. "They were in Hollywood at eight o'clock last night. They couldn't have got down here by two o'clock."

Her amazement grew. "But they killed O'Hara and Gordon. And they prowled my room last night and knocked me unconscious."

"They didn't prowl your room. I shot whoever was there. He left a trail of blood down the stairs and into the alley. Neither of these Portuguese has been wounded."

She stared. "Then there must be two separate killers. These Ifnis murdered O'Hara and Gordon; somebody else killed old Ricardo."

Steele turned in his seat and looked into the sky be-

hind them. Now, the black forms had dropped lower in their circling, and one or two of the bolder creatures even dipped from sight below the rim of the slope before zooming into sight again.

A shout carried across the distance; the black birds fluttered up in alarm. "Senhor Steele! Senhor Steele!"

The detective grinned mirthlessly at the girl. "Elementary psychology."

He spun the car around and started back.

At the mound of sand in the bed of the dry wash, Paulo continued to plead in Portuguese. Steele and Claire got out of the car and walked to the side of the leader. The gaunt old dog growled. Ignatio watched the great dark forms circling overhead, then looked up at Steele. "You untie us, I talk."

Steele undid the ropes from his arms and removed the belt from his hands, but left the legs pinned to the earth. Claire released Paulo's hands. Both men sat up, rubbing their arms and flexing their fingers and casting apprehensive eyes at the buzzards over the wash.

Steele and the girl stood back from the men. Steele addressed the leader. "We're giving you this one chance. If you lie about anything or try to cover up, we'll drive away, and this time we won't come back."

Ignatio nodded. "We admit everything. We wish to tell it all."

"Are you working for Adams or Cordell or yourselves?"

Ignatio looked puzzled, and opened his mouth to reply. At this moment, for the second time that day, the throb of an automobile motor became audible. Ignatio tensed, listening. Steele looked impatient and prodded him. "Talk fast, Ignatio. What's your connec-

tion with the Mirabilis Diamond?"

The throb of the motor increased. Tires crunched from the road into the dry wash. Ignacio's lips curled scornfully. Steele hesitated an instant longer, then unholstered his pistol and crouched behind the slope of the first turn in the wash. A brown sedan moved cautiously around the turn. The tan faces of Guillermo Vargas, the Puerto Raton policeman, and Senor Atilla, the manager of the warehouse, looked out.

Vargas showed surprise. "Senor Steele!"

Steele holstered his pistol and walked to the car. The two Mexicans got out. Somberly, Vargas looked from the girl and the two men and the dog into the sky.

"We saw the buzzards."

Steele nodded, and indicated the mound of sand. "It's Ricardo, all right."

Senor Atilla looked down and muttered something in Spanish and made the sign of the cross.

Vargas shook his head. "In this country, one has but to follow the buzzards."

They walked to the group around the mound. Vargas noticed the ropes and the stakes that pinned Ignacio and Paulo to the ground. He turned, amazed, to John Steele. "These are the murderers?"

Steele shook his head. "No, they aren't."

"Then why are they staked out like bait for the buzzards?"

Steele explained in detail each move of the morning that involved the two men.

Vargas exclaimed excitedly, "But if they came here to rob Ricardo's house, they must be his murderers!"

Steele sighed. "I'd like to agree with you, but they couldn't have killed Ricardo. I had an encounter with

them at eight o'clock last night in Hollywood. They are wanted there for burglary and on suspicion of two murders."

Vargas protested. "But, Senor Steele, you have sought to force a confession from these men on Mexican soil. We do not permit such things in this country."

Ignatio looked up at Steele and smiled wickedly, then issued a quick order in Portuguese to Paulo. The latter's terror faded. He fell contentedly back on the sand and closed his eyes.

Steele's anger burned in his eyes, but he kept it from his voice. "Senor Vargas, two murders are unsolved in Hollywood. I think these men can help solve them. One was about to start talking when you unfortunately arrived. He knows now he is safe from being left to the buzzards. I regret having violated the hospitality of your country, but the end seemed to justify the means."

Vargas bowed with formality. "Accepted."

Steele turned coldly, touched Claire's elbow, and started for the car. "Let's go."

Vargas became confused. "But, Senor Steele—what am I to do with these prisoners?"

Steele's anger was now an icy flame. He reached the car and handed the girl in before turning and surveying the Mexican policeman. "Senor Vargas, I would like to tell you what you can do with those prisoners, but a good-neighbor policy exists between your country and mine, and I must show proper respect." He paused as Vargas stiffened. "I'll add, however, that the Los Angeles police want those men, and you will avoid embarrassment if you hold them until extradition papers reach you from our President."

He got stiffly into the car, turned the key in the ignition, and slipped the gears into low. Claire, her fright entirely gone, regarded him impishly. She said in a low, merry voice, "Elementary psychology."

He threw her a glance, then looked out the window. "Another thing, Senor Vargas. When your men come to remove Ricardo, have them look around for another grave. I think a second murder victim is buried here, but he didn't have a dog to dig him up so the buzzards could guide you to the body."

Vargas stared. Claire's impishness faded. Steele let out the clutch and turned the car around and headed for the road.

Chapter Fifteen

A KNOCKOUT DOES THE TRICK

A BROWN RABBIT scurried up the slope of the dry wash and disappeared into the mesquite. Other small creatures became emboldened to stir from their places of sanctuary—the blue quail, the mice, the little snakes, the gophers. They entered into the open and looked aloft and found the heavens rid of the great forms that had cast hawk-like shadows upon the earth. Life had hung suspended; but now, with the withdrawal of the dealers in death, life resumed as befitted the dignity of a spring morning.

The big cream-colored convertible bumped out of the dry wash and turned north on the dirt road toward Puerto Raton. Puzzlement marred the pretty face of the girl sitting beside the annoyed driver. She said, "Did you mean that about another murder, Johnny?"

His sharp gray eyes did not turn from the road, but his voice snapped angrily, like the breaking of a bundle of sticks. "After Vargas barged in there and then started quoting international scripture, do you think I felt like kidding?" He piloted the car around a large boulder in the middle of the road, then momentarily glanced away from the road. "And I told you not to call me Johnny."

His anger and sarcasm blew out the open windows and was lost. She said, "But why do you think there's another body buried back there?"

"Call it a hunch."

She eyed him, upset. "Who was killed?"

He growled, "I'm out on a limb far enough without trying to name the victim, too."

"Then you aren't certain?"

His annoyance increased. "Am I certain the sun will rise tomorrow?"

She looked at the set face, and her eyes softened, and she placed a gentle hand on the sleeve of his coat. "Johnny, darling, I'm not fighting you. I love you. It's only natural for me to be curious."

His jaws set stubbornly. He started searching through his pockets for a cigarette. She took the package from his hand, and placed a cigarette between his lips, and struck a light. He puffed furiously.

She asked, "Did the Ifnis kill him?"

He sighed, exasperated. "Does a person have to hit you over the head before you catch on? If I wanted you to know, I'd tell you."

She regarded him fatalistically. "Then it was the Ifnis. They killed O'Hara and Gordon; and they committed this other murder."

He watched the road, refraining from comment. The car bumped into the main street of the little town. Claire remained quiet and thoughtful. Steele drove to the warehouse, where he got out and carefully stowed away the plaster casts he had poured earlier.

She asked, "Aren't you going to check them against the Ifnis's tires and shoes?"

He climbed back into the car. "No use wasting time. Ignatio and Paulo couldn't have been here when the tracks were made."

He started the motor and turned back to the main street, then swung into the private road leading to the

hotel. Claire's eyes became questioning again.

"Are we going back to Hollywood now?"

"Why not? The case is all settled, isn't it?"

She hesitated, very sober. "Is it?"

"You seemed to think it was."

She stirred uncomfortably. "What about Ricardo and the other body you think is buried back there?"

He gestured impatiently. "Vargas's jurisdiction. He messed up my plans and forced me to do things the hard way. Let him worry about Ricardo and the other victim."

She looked away, dissatisfied, then prepared to leave the car as he pulled to a stop under the canopy at the rear of the hotel.

No telegrams had arrived when he inquired at the desk. They ate hurriedly in the dining-room, asked again for telegrams, then went to their respective rooms, where Steele shaved, bathed, and packed while the girl picked up the articles she had bought that morning.

They returned to the desk, where Steele checked them out. A Mexican boy jumped off his bicycle and hurried into the lobby with two sealed telegrams. Steele signed for them and pushed them into his pocket without opening them. The girl, puzzled, waited expectantly. Steele picked up his Gladstone and steered her toward the door.

"Let's go."

She asked, "Aren't you going to read your wires?"

"They're just from Betsy. I'll read them in the car."

He bought gas and oil at a filling station and headed north toward Los Angeles. An hour passed before he took the telegrams from his pocket and glanced at

them fleetingly while he steered the car. Expressionless, he returned them to his pocket. The girl waited. He made no comment.

She asked, "Bad news?"

He shrugged and glanced at her and permitted himself to smile. "Oh—no worse than I expected."

She waited again, then added, "Serious?"

He looked annoyed.

She laughed. "No, you don't need to hit me over the head!"

He grinned.

The miles slipped past. The sun swung across the sky and became a smear of crimson upon the water. Darkness reached over the tops of the mountains and slid down into the sea, engulfing all the vast panorama around them. Steele switched on the headlights. The moon peered over the edge of the water, saw nothing alarming, and climbed bravely into the sky.

Claire looked out at the night scene and sighed, and turned partly from Steele, then settled back against him, her hands folded over her purse in her lap, her legs curled under her. He flung one arm across her shoulder and steered with one hand. She twisted in his arm and looked up. The light of the moon and the dashboard revealed her contentment. She asked, "Happy?"

His expression indicated neither great joy nor extreme sorrow. "So-so."

"I am."

"Any special reason?"

"Well—I have you, and we're here together, and there's all that beautiful sea, and—" She hesitated. "Any girl would be happy."

He smiled down at her. She closed her eyes and twisted up farther, and the warm mouth reached for his. The car weaved for an instant, and then he brought it back into line. The girl settled back against him, the bright head resting on his shoulder, the center of her back against his side, his right arm around her.

For a time she was dreamily silent. Then she said, "Will you tell me something, Johnny?"

"Maybe."

"Why would another body be buried at Ricardo's? If there really is another one, why wouldn't it be buried some place else?"

Steele gathered his thoughts, then spoke quietly. "It's really the other way around. Ricardo was buried there because the other body was there already. I suppose you could call it simple deduction on my part—or just plain guessing. Ricardo was kidnaped from the warehouse, but after he was murdered his body could have been buried any place between Puerto Raton and the border, and there would have been less chance of its being found. Instead, the murderer or murderers hauled him out to his house—a dangerous thing in his own town—while they planted that note. And since they took that risk and went to that trouble, I figured they must previously have buried a body there and gone undiscovered."

She half turned, puzzled. "You mean somebody who isn't even involved in this case?"

"No. It's entirely conceivable that another murder was committed in connection with the Mirabilis Diamond."

She turned the rest of the way. He took down his

arm. The pretty brow furrowed. "But who, Johnny? No one is missing. Cordell was in Hollywood last night. The Ifnis are safely in Vargas's hands. Arturo and Hop were in the saloon this morning, and Vargas would have known if anyone else from Puerto Raton was missing."

He grinned at her. "That's right."

"Is there somebody else connected with the case—somebody I haven't even heard of?"

He glanced two or three times from the wheel and smiled appreciatively. "You're the first brown-eyed blonde I've ever known."

She regarded him steadily, untouched by his words. She nodded. "Then it is somebody else."

His smile held; his attitude had become one of teasing. "I didn't say it was."

She started to smile; then a fresh thought froze her face. Alarm set into the dark eyes. "It's my father!"

He continued to smile; but now he was watching the road and not looking at the girl or catching the concern she suddenly displayed.

He said, "I didn't say it was your father, either."

Her apprehension grew. "But it is! He's the only one it could possibly be! You haven't seen him since yesterday afternoon. He could have come down here since then, and—" She broke off, staring. "Cordell had someone murder him for the diamond!"

He drew in a deep breath. His smile became lazily contemptuous. "Why don't you stop smoking opium?"

She gazed into his eyes. "Then take me to him. Show me he is alive."

His attitude remained the same. He watched the road ahead, looked out on the silver of the sea, then

glanced back at the girl. His gray eyes crinkled quizzically. He laughed a little. "I'm going to let you in on a trade secret. Cordell is buying the Mirabilis Diamond in my office at noon tomorrow."

Her face registered the whole scale of emotions, gradually changing from deepest apprehension to utmost delight. The brown eyes sparkled; the red lips parted in a smile, and the white teeth flashed against the backdrop of the night. "Can I see my father then?"

Steele shrugged. "There's nothing I can do about it if you show up at noon."

She exhaled with great exaggeration, then swung half from him again, placed the corn-colored head back on his shoulder, reached for his hand, and drew it around her, as she lay against him and once more curled her feet under her. "Johnny, darling, life will never be dull as long as I know you."

More miles fell behind the car. The highway worsened, and an occasional automobile passed in the opposite direction. The lights of Tijuana came into view far ahead. Claire snuggled down close and pulled Steele's hand to her cheek.

She said, "When we started out last night, I thought I would never see my father and we would be murdered any moment. Now, the Ifnis are captured and O'Hara's and Gordon's murders solved, and I'll be with my father tomorrow." Her cheek caressed his hand. "You're wonderful, darling, but something is still bothering me."

"What's that?"

She twisted impishly and the dark eyes studied him for an instant. "You won't tell me who is buried at Ricardo's."

He gauged the distance of the lights ahead. They were no longer a blur, but had become individual dashes of brilliance against the dark night sky. The bull-fighting arena stood up like a great black block of stone.

Steele said, "Don't let it bother you, lovely. That murder was committed before you ever saw Puerto Raton and before I was even called into the case."

She held herself in that twisted position—half turned around as she looked up at him. "Were your telegrams about that murder?"

He shook his head. "One of them was about a dead girl. She died of pneumonia three years ago."

For a time, she sat without moving. Then she settled back and caught his free hand in both of hers and pressed it against her cheek. The bright hair cascaded over his shoulder. He could feel the increased tempo of her breathing. Her hands became hot and moist. Outside the car, the lighted business establishments of Tijuana slid by, and the international boundary lay just ahead.

She said in a strained, low voice, "Did the other wire say anything about the Ifnis killing O'Hara and Gordon Eustace?"

He once more gauged the distance between the car and the international boundary. Then he said quietly, "They didn't kill O'Hara and Eustace."

She stiffened. Her breathing momentarily stopped. Then she said, "But they were right there when we came into Gordon's office. They had guns."

He watched her from the corners of his eyes. "The second telegram said Eustace was killed by a .25 caliber bullet. Paulo was carrying a .45 automatic. Ignatio had

a big Luger."

She moistened her lips and swallowed. He could feel the center of her back pressing warm against his side. She asked, "Then who did it?"

He pinned one of her hands. "You did."

Her breathing stopped again and for a moment she sat stiff and tense. Then her free hand darted into the purse in her lap.

He slammed the brake pedal to the floor. The tires screamed; the radiator nosed down. The girl shot from the seat, her moist hand slipping from Steele's grip. Her head cracked sharply against the dashboard, and she dropped motionlessly to the floor of the car. Steele picked up the purse and glanced in at the wicked little white-handled .25 automatic, then drove on.

He passed the Mexican border officials with a nod, crossed the international boundary, and stopped in front of the United States Custom House. The American immigration officers looked at the car and the license plates and the driver, then glanced uneasily over their shoulders into the Custom House.

Inside, Captain Hegg of the Los Angeles police acknowledged these glances by struggling heavily to his feet and moving to the side of the Packard. In the background, St. Saen and Harkness materialized and lounged to the open doorway and looked on in mild amusement. Steele lighted a cigarette and watched Hegg and waited for him to speak. Hegg studied Steele for a moment.

Then Hegg drawled, "About that private detective I was mentioning last night—the one that got hanged with his client. Your gun killed Stanley O'Hara, so maybe we'll have to hang you, too."

Steele handed the girl's purse through the window of the car, then opened the door and indicated the unconscious form on the floor boards. "If you've made up your mind to hang somebody, hang her."

For once, Hegg was nonplused. He looked at the girl; then he looked into the purse; then he looked back at the girl. St. Saen and Harkness lost their amused looks. With the immigration officers, they crowded around the car. Hegg turned to John Steele. "Miss Adams?"

Steele smiled bitterly and shook his head. "An impostor. Miss Adams died of pneumonia three years ago in Minneapolis."

Hegg stood thoughtfully for a time. Then he wagged his head and looked regretful. "Cold country—Minneapolis."

Chapter Sixteen

AN ASTONISHING REVELATION

THE PACKAGE HAD BEEN festooned with yards of ribbons, and bore the imprint of a famous Hollywood shop for women. A great ball of the same ribbon had been gathered like a chrysanthemum just beneath the imprint. A bright card, with some writing inked across it, had been attached to the chrysanthemum. The package was an excellent example of gift wrapping.

Steele shifted the package to his left arm, and tried the door of his office. The door was locked. Puzzled and angry, he started searching for his keys. He had not reached his apartment until the early hours of the morning; and, after the previous sleepless night on the road, he had tumbled into his bed and slept the sleep of utter exhaustion, until the janitor had repeatedly thundered on his door to inquire if Steele's apartment needed the services of the exterminator that day. Steele had somewhat testily suggested the exterminator begin on the janitor, then had noted the time, had jumped into his clothes, had raced to the famous Hollywood shop for women, and finally had arrived at his office.

Now, at eleven-thirty in the morning, he found his keys and opened the door. The morning mail lay where the mailman had pushed it through the letter slot. Betsy's typewriter desk stood unopened, gathering dust. Outside, the morning sun beamed bright through the closed windows.

Steele picked up the mail, tasted the stuffy air, opened the windows, then stalked into his private office, and dumped the package on the desk. He hung up his coat, shoved back his hat, sat down at the telephone, and dialed Betsy's number. The call went unanswered.

He lighted a cigarette and started idling through the mail. The telephone rang. Angry, he snatched at it.

"Hello."

"Mr. Steele, what have you done with Albert and Clarence?"

Steele hesitated, bristling. "The hell with Albert and Clarence. What have you done with my secretary?"

"Your secretary?"

"She isn't here. If you and your smart boys have been up to some more tricks—"

"This is no time to try diverting my attention, Mr. Steele. My men went on an errand two days ago. They did not come back."

Steele glared; his voice growled with sarcasm. "Maybe they eloped with my secretary."

"I assure you I know nothing of your secretary. I have been trying to call you since last evening. My men—"

"Phooey on your men. Are you ready to talk business?"

"I insist, Mr. Steele. Where are Clarence and Albert?"

"Look, professor—I haven't seen your men. I don't know where they are, but I hope they're at the bottom of Santa Monica bay. I cut short a lot of good sleep just so I could keep my noon appointment with you, and I don't like wasting that kind of time talking about

Clarence and Albert."

The professor hesitated. "Your mission was successful?"

"Have you still got that ten thousand dollars—or did the money and the Mirabilis Diamond disappear with Clarence and Albert?"

The other's tone stiffened. "I do not use unreliable employees, Mr. Steele. The money and the stone are in my pocket."

"Then trot ten thousand in cash over here and I'll clear you of the charge of murdering O'Hara."

"Who is with you?"

"I'm alone, but a certain diamond dealer who has an exalted opinion of the value of his time is going to be pretty put out if you aren't here when he arrives at noon."

"Your proof of my innocence is indisputable?"

"The chief of the homicide squad himself will clear you if you like."

"The murderer is already in custody?"

"We've done enough talking. Let's see the color of your money."

The professor hung up. Steele looked at the mail again, then threw it into the wastebasket. He tried dialing Betsy's home telephone number, but again his call went unanswered.

In three or four minutes, the professor looked cautiously into the reception room, then advanced into the private office.

Steele asked, "Where are you hiding out now—down the hall?"

The professor glanced around the office, then seated himself with dignity in the customer's chair. "I called

from the drugstore across the street." He extracted a panatela and bit off the end.

Steele growled, "That place is getting an awful play from here. Maybe I ought to ask for a cut."

The other eyed Steele censoriously. "The evidence of my innocence?"

Steele regarded the older man levelly. "I haven't seen the color of your money."

The professor stiffened. "You wish me to pay for a pig in a poke?"

Steele shrugged. "You buy it that way or not at all."

"I am at a great disadvantage, Mr. Steele. My bodyguards are missing. I dislike being forced."

"You don't need bodyguards around here. You get what you pay for." He paused, eyes dangerous. "And I get paid for what I do."

The sunken little blue eyes considered Steele for some time. Finally the professor unearthed a shiny leather wallet and thumbed ten one-thousand-dollar bills from it and placed them on the desk between himself and the detective.

Steele looked at the now empty wallet. "This cleans you?"

The professor smiled knowingly, and patted one of the spacious pockets of his topcoat. His fingers thumped against something hard and hollow, like the wooden box that had housed the diamond.

Steele smiled and reached for the money. The professor shook his head and covered the money with his hand. "Talk first, Mr. Steele."

Steele surveyed the other, then sat back and unholstered the .38 police special and placed it on the desk. The professor smiled coldly; the little blue eyes

glistened. He removed his hand from the money—stiffly, as if he were suffering a twinge of rheumatism—then struck a light to the panatela and regarded Steele expectantly.

Steele paused thoughtfully a moment, then spoke. "Your hunch about the girl was right. Your daughter died in Minneapolis three years ago." Steele tossed him one of the telegrams that had been forwarded to Puerto Raton the previous day. The professor picked up the message as Steele continued. "The other girl had been your daughter's pal for years and knew most of the family history. She read about your finding the Mirabilis and wrote you, assuming your daughter's identity. It started out as a simple plot to steal the diamond, but it got away from her when she killed O'Hara. Then she had to kill Eustace to cover the first murder."

The professor placed the telegram on the desk. "You have proof of this?"

Steele grabbed the ten thousand dollars. "She's in jail charged with the murders."

The professor settled back in the customer's chair and unhappily wagged his head. "So my daughter is dead." He looked down at the floor.

Steele tucked the money into his pocket and holstered the pistol.

The other looked up. "Why did she kill O'Hara?"

"You reconstructed it pretty well at Barney's Beanery. O'Hara traced you to the house on Gardenia, then phoned his client—the girl. They found me unconscious. O'Hara got panicky and started to call the police. But the police would have investigated and found the girl not only had no reason for being there, but also was an impostor. So she picked my gun off the

floor and shot O'Hara in the back. She wore gloves, so only my fingerprints were on the gun."

"Why not her own gun?"

Steele shrugged and lighted a fresh cigarette. "The D.A. can play around with a couple of reasons there. She probably knew I would track you down for trying to frame me. If I hung a murder on you, she would inherit the Mirabilis. If the charge didn't stick, she would get another chance to move in as your daughter and steal the stone. Or she could simply have cold-bloodedly killed O'Hara on the spur of the moment when she knew police intervention would end her attempt to get the diamond."

"And the murder of Eustace?"

"He was probably in the plot, at least to a minor extent. Captain Hegg had said Eustace wasn't above a trick or two. And some lawyers can be mighty tricky when a million dollars is at stake. The girl and I had an appointment to meet Eustace at his office at eight that night. She had previously phoned his secretary, and we were to ask him about the check he had given O'Hara. But the girl knew Eustace usually was early for his appointments. So she came early, too, and shot him in the back of the head with her cute little .25 automatic. Then she went down to her parked car and locked the gun in the glove compartment before meeting me on the corner and going up to his office, as though she had just arrived." Steele shook his head. "What a gal! She almost got away with both murders simply by knowing that a criminal is safest if he remains at the scene of the crime and raises the first cry for help—such as she did after killing O'Hara." Steele inhaled from his cigarette. "And her fiancé, Gordon

Eustace, died before he could explain he had hired O'Hara for the girl, knew nothing of the murder, and wasn't even in town when it was committed."

"How did she find my address?"

"She said she called the telephone company, but O'Hara probably did that and then told her."

"Did she try to kill you, too?"

Steele nodded, eyes sparkling, face going softly reminiscent. "She pulled a clever little ruse so she could go to Puerto Raton with me just after I talked with you on the phone night before last. I suppose she wanted to keep an eye on the progress I was making, so she could knock me off if I started getting too close. The glove compartment was locked on the way down. We found your friend, Ricardo Martinez, murdered and buried in the dry wash." The professor started, looked amazed, then saddened and shook his head and turned his gaze to the floor. Steele went on. "Right then, the two Portuguese walked into the house. The girl, who could kill without batting an eyelash if her victims weren't looking, went into an awful panic. I had to take the Portuguese alone. While I was gone, she evidently was scared into unlocking the glove compartment and putting the gun in her purse for protection—in case the Portuguese turned the tables and took me instead. The gun cinched the case against the girl. It killed Eustace, and will send her to the gas chamber."

The professor looked up from the floor. "Did she or the Portuguese kill Ricardo?"

Steele grunted, upset. "None of them did it; but I mentioned the cleverness of that girl. Regardless of what she had done, she tried to solve Ricardo's murder. And she came through with an idea that Cordell killed

Ricardo. The Mexican pier master had the same idea; and Captain Hegg means to do a little investigating along that line, himself. After Cordell gets here and buys the diamond, we'll see what we have on him."

The professor beamed and rubbed his hands. "By all means, Mr. Steele, let us consummate the sale first. The preliminaries to reaching this point have entirely exhausted my finances."

Steele nodded and glanced at his watch. "They ought to be along pretty quick. It's almost noon."

The professor quickly withdrew the cigar from his mouth. "They?"

Steele flashed him a look. "Cordell and Hegg. You don't think I'm going to do all the work for the police department, do you?"

"You mean this Captain Hegg is going to arrest Cordell right here, as soon as the sale is made?"

"If the evidence warrants it." He frowned. "I wish I knew what has become of my secretary."

"Capital!" The professor puffed again at the cigar. "You have earned your fee, Mr. Steele. But tell me this. What directed your suspicions toward the girl?"

Steele glanced up at the ceiling. "Let's see— Well, O'Hara searched my room in Puerto Raton. Only two people could have told him I was there—two people interested in locating you. And they were Cordell and the girl. Then the girl gave the impression she had talked with the pier master about you. I learned the pier master had talked only to Cordell and O'Hara, and had given both the false information I had planted with him. But when the girl saw me that night, she had this information, though she had not talked with the pier master. I then sent the girl down to Santa

Catarina on that wild-geese chase. Cordell did not go with her, so that ruled him out of her scheme and tied her definitely with O'Hara. When I discovered this yesterday, the whole case broke wide open."

The professor looked puzzled. "Why did the girl and Eustace hire O'Hara before they even knew I had left Puerto Raton?"

"That gave me a little trouble. I think I have the answer, but I'll let the D.A. work that out. I never actually saw Eustace in Puerto Raton. There's a possibility O'Hara was there under Eustace's name, as a blind. At any rate, O'Hara disappeared during the week the girl was in Santa Catarina. It's possible O'Hara was with her as Eustace."

"You don't think Eustace could have been an innocent victim?"

"I suppose it's possible, but highly improbable. They were engaged, but she had been at the Palms Hotel only one day. And she was registered as Claire Adams. She said she had known him for seven years. Regardless of that, he must have known her real name. And knowing that, he must have been involved at least in attempting the fraud."

The professor's little blue eyes glittered. He rolled the panatela around in his lips. Steele shoved his hat farther back on his head, then picked the telegram from the desk and dropped it face down in a correspondence box.

The door opened into the reception room. Captain Hegg, Harkness, and St. Saen filed in. Hegg indicated that the two plain-clothes men were to remain in the reception room, then entered Steele's private office. Steele introduced the professor to Hegg and the plain-

clothes men in the doorway.

Hegg shook hands. "Glad we aren't meeting under other circumstances, Mr. Adams."

The two plain-clothes men grinned from the reception room. The professor sank back into the customer's chair. Steele waved the captain to the swivel chair, and perched on the edge of the desk.

Hegg sank gratefully into the chair. He sighed, then addressed the professor. "I'll have to admit I'm here to see that stone as much as for anything else." He smiled mildly. "It has given us quite a busy few days."

The door opened into the reception room again. Cordell, accompanied by a uniformed chauffeur, walked in. A pistol swung from the chauffeur's hip. Cordell carried a black money bag. The chauffeur tensed, suspicious.

St. Saen said, "Take it easy, buddy. We're the police."

The chauffeur looked at his employer. Cordell coldly surveyed the two plain-clothes men, then walked into the private office and placed the bag on the desk. In the reception room, St. Saen examined the chauffeur's gun permit, then handed it back to the man.

Cordell glared disapprovingly at Steele. "I had no idea you intended making a Roman carnival of a simple business transaction."

Steele made the introductions. Cordell nodded coldly to Captain Hegg, ignored the plain-clothes men, and turned to the professor.

"Do these policemen indicate you are in custody, or are they here for your protection?"

The little blue eyes flashed angrily. The professor's attitude equaled Cordell's. "They indicate, sir, that I am no longer a fugitive who must fall prey to oppor-

tunists seeking to capitalize on another's misfortune."

Cordell eyed him, his reserve mounting. "The Mirabilis Diamond?"

The professor drew the small wooden box from his pocket, opened it with the tiny key, and placed it on the desk. Steele immediately clapped his hand over the open box.

He looked at Cordell. "Just to keep the records straight, I want an acknowledgement of our terms. If you can buy this stone for six hundred thousand dollars or less, I am immediately to receive five thousand dollars in cash for arranging this meeting?"

Before Cordell could frame an answer, the professor snorted angrily. "Six hundred thousand! A million is the price, sir—a cool million in cash."

The two plain-clothes men and the chauffeur looked in from the open doorway. Cordell looked with distaste upon the professor, then turned to John Steele.

"Those were our terms."

Steele removed his hand from the box and seated himself on the edge of the desk. The two plain-clothes men and the chauffeur pushed into the room and joined Captain Hegg and Cordell in peering at the stone. Cordell lifted it from the box and held it to the light. The two plain-clothes men exchanged impressed glances. St. Saen's lips pursed in a silent whistle. The chauffeur managed to look bored and returned to the reception room and picked up an old magazine and started glancing through the ads. The professor beamed and puffed at his cigar.

Cordell looked from the stone to the professor, then moved to the window and screwed a jeweler's glass into his eye. For a time, he studied the stone, moving it

around and around. The facets picked up the sunlight and threw brilliant small rainbows across the ceiling and the walls. The others watched soundlessly.

Finally, Cordell removed the eyepiece and glanced at the professor.

"I will give you a thousand dollars for it."

The professor stood very still. The lean face became puzzled. The little blue eyes turned to John Steele, then back to Cordell. Finally, the professor snapped, "Your humor, Mr. Cordell, is badly timed."

Cordell dropped the eyepiece into his pocket and returned the stone to the box on Steele's desk.

"This is a synthetic diamond. I wouldn't pay over a thousand dollars for it."

The professor's anger rose. "That is the *Mirabilis Diamond*, sir! It has been buried in a Yucatan Indian grave for more than four centuries. And I assure you the art of making synthetic diamonds was unknown at that time."

Cordell smiled with icy superiority. "This is a composition of synthetic carbons. It is not more than a year old. Further, it is entirely flawless; and a flawless genuine diamond does not exist." He selected a long cigarette from his package and snapped his silver lighter. "Your hoax never had a chance of succeeding, Mr. Adams. Synthetic diamonds have been made that defy detection, but this stone is not in that category. Fortunately for us jewelers, a good synthetic costs far more to manufacture than the maker can realize from its sale. In your attempts to lower manufacturing costs, you have given it the unmistakable stamp of a synthetic."

The two plain-clothes men looked on in awe. Steele

and Captain Hegg exchanged amazed glances. The chauffeur set aside the magazine and became very superior, much in the mannerism of his employer.

The professor looked from Cordell to the stone, then picked it up and held it to the light and stared into its brilliant heart. Finally, he turned to John Steele. "Is this some trickery of yours, Mr. Steele—some ruse you have devised with this mountebank?"

Steele earnestly shook his head. "It's your stone, professor. You ought to know whether it's phony or not."

The professor, stunned, seated himself in the customer's chair, and, stone in hand, shook his head, as though he were trying to clear away a fog from his brain.

Cordell said, "My thousand-dollar offer, Mr. Adams?"

The professor simply looked at the stone.

Steele turned to Cordell. "There's no doubt it's a synthetic?"

"None whatsoever."

Steele addressed the professor. "Better take him up on that, professor. You're going to need the money for a lawyer."

The professor stared up, puzzled. Hegg looked on questioningly.

Steele added, "You're going back to Mexico to face a murder charge."

The cadaverous face went cautiously blank. "Might I ask who I am accused of having murdered?"

Steele's face became savage. "You killed Royal Xavier Adams. Clarence and Albert killed Ricardo Martinez."

The professor gazed about at the faces, then turned back to Steele.

"You are joking, Mr. Steele. Clarence and Albert are missing. You know I am Royal Adams."

Captain Hegg fumbled a cigar from his vest and bit off the end. "If Clarence and Albert are those two little vipers we picked up at the border yesterday, they aren't missing."

Both Steele and the professor looked amazed.

Steele said, "Say, you do get around, don't you? Why didn't you tell me last night you had them?"

Hegg shot Steele a sharp glance, and lighted the cigar. He indicated the professor. "Why didn't you tell us you had him?"

Steele grinned. Hegg puffed at his cigar. The professor's face began to gray.

Hegg slipped a telegram from his pocket, opened it, and looked at the professor. "I have a telegram from a policeman named Guillermo Vargas in Puerto Raton. It seems Steele found the body of one Ricardo Martinez yesterday, then tipped Vargas as to where he might find another body." Hegg returned the message to his pocket. "Vargas found the other body, but it's unidentified and causing him some worry."

The professor said, "I can assure you it is not the body of Royal Adams."

Steele looked at Hegg. "It might be interesting to know what caliber bullets killed those two people."

Hegg nodded. "This man Vargas seems to be quite a policeman. Anticipates everything." He got the wire out and looked at it again. "The unidentified man was shot with a .38, and Ricardo Martinez was shot three times with a .32. I hate to admit it, Mr. Steele, but you were ahead of the police for a while. Those little fellows we picked up at the border were both carrying

.32's, and their shoes and tire treads just fit those plaster casts you gave us last night." Again he placed the telegram in his pocket. "Looks like our friend here—" he indicated the professor "—will have company when he faces that Mexican firing squad."

The professor stood up. "If Clarence and Albert have committed a crime, it is entirely without my knowledge. I have done nothing for which I can be arrested."

Hegg looked mildly at the tall cadaverous man. "That so? Maybe I'm just a suspicious man, but we have a .38 down at headquarters that was used to jamb shut the door when a prowler was escaping from Mr. Steele in the Palms Hotel the other night; and I have a hunch those are your fingerprints on that gun." He eyed the professor knowingly, then added, "And I have another hunch ballistics will prove that gun was the .38 that killed the unidentified man who is bothering Guillermo Vargas down in Puerto Raton."

Steele got up and suddenly squeezed the professor's arm. The professor responded as though pained. Steele grinned and seated himself again and looked at Captain Hegg. "I winged the prowler that night in the girl's apartment. And the professor seems to be wearing a bandage."

Hegg nodded to St. Saen and Harkness. "Take him down and see how those fingerprints check up, boys."

Harkness ran expert hands over him for a pistol. There was no weapon.

The professor turned accusingly to John Steele. "You guaranteed I was cleared of murder. You took my money and had me come here practically under a flag of truce. Now you have violated that truce and are framing me for a murder."

Steele nodded, undisturbed. "I accepted your money for clearing you of the O'Hara murder charge. And I warned you when you first came to me that if you ever involved me in anything shady, I would turn you over to the police. And two murders come mighty close to being downright shady, professor."

The professor's deep-set eyes glared at Steele, then turned to Cordell. "I'll accept your offer of a thousand for the stone."

Cordell started to reach for the money bag, but Hegg interrupted by picking the stone from Steele's desk.

"The stone isn't yours to sell. It goes to the descendants of Royal Adams."

Cordell hesitated. The professor looked angry for a moment, then shrugged fatalistically. Steele said, "You're drawing a mighty fine line there, Captain Hegg. I don't know of any descendants, and since the stone isn't real anyway—"

Hegg looked knowingly at Steele. "I'm way ahead of you, Mr. Steele. If Mr. Cordell buys the stone for six hundred thousand or less, you get five thousand dollars." He shook his head. "But I can't permit the sale of evidence. Besides, you've made enough for one day."

Steele scowled. Cordell looked alarmed, grabbed his money bag and, with his armed chauffeur, ducked from the office. The professor regarded Hegg questioningly.

Hegg said, "That's all, boys. Take him away."

They left the office. The door clicked shut. Steele eyed Hegg, and Hegg eyed Steele. Outside, the traffic pounded past Hollywood and Vine.

Hegg leaned back in the swivel chair. "You know, this is a nice racket, Mr. Steele. Makes me wonder if I haven't made a mistake staying on the force so long."

Steele grinned, then lowered himself into the customer's chair and stretched out his long legs. His face suddenly clouded. "That Betsy!" He glanced at his watch. "She has never done a thing like this before."

Hegg looked amused. "Any idea where she is?"

Steele shrugged. "I made a couple suggestions before I went away. One was that she find herself a good man; the other was that she take five dollars out of the cash drawer and buy five Zombies."

Hegg grunted. "Maybe she took you up on both suggestions." He leaned back once more in the swivel chair and contemplated the ceiling. Smoke rose from his cigar. After a time, he shook his head and placed the cigar in the ash tray and looked at Steele. "Ifnis!"

"What about them?"

"You know, I really believed you." He shook his head again. "Ifnis!"

Steele laughed suddenly, "I feel almost sorry for those two Portuguese. They innocently wandered smack into a murder when they were simply looking for a clue to the diamond they wanted to steal."

Hegg sobered. "Oh—those two. Know who they are?"

Steele regarded the officer questioningly.

Hegg added, "We wired the FBI a description of their prints. They're wanted for breaking jail on an armed robbery charge in Riverhead, Long Island. But those Ifnis! Were they your idea—another red herring for the police to follow while you were clearing up the case?"

Steele grinned and shook his head. "No—the professor served them up to me on a platter. He had evidently read the history of the *Mirabilis* from an encyclopedia, but felt something was missing and added the *Ifnis* for good measure. The name sounded phony, but I believed it myself until I had Betsy do a little checking, and until the professor himself brushed off my suggestion the Portuguese might be *Ifnis*."

Hegg asked, "No such thing?"

Again, Steele shook his head. "No such animal."

Hegg looked disappointed. For some time, he sat smoking his cigar. And his attitude indicated something was turning over in his mind. Finally he approached it.

"I told you the other night that those mystery writers take too many liberties. Maybe I spoke a little too hastily."

Steele regarded him appraisingly. "Maybe."

Hegg dawdled some more. Then, "You might even say I spoke hastily when I said the police, at that moment, were ahead of the private detective."

Steele's gray eyes smiled.

Hegg considered Steele. "But you'll have to admit those two sets of killers made the issue a little confusing."

Steele nodded. "A little."

Hegg sighed. "You force me to ask when the case started to crack."

Steele grinned, but refrained from pushing his advantage. "It cracked a little at a time." And to ease the captain's embarrassment, Steele added, "I just wasn't smart enough to recognize those cracks. For instance—the professor didn't drink, and didn't speak enough

Spanish to know what *Baja California* meant. Yet Ricardo Martinez had told me he and Adams had spent several hours drinking and talking. And Ricardo didn't speak English. Then there was that little hoodlum, Albert. Pale as a white rat. The professor had told me Albert just returned from six years in the jungles with him. Nobody's skin stays white in the jungle. Those were a few of the cracks I didn't recognize until the whole story jumped up and hit me in the face. But, of course, as you say, the two sets of killers threw me off considerably. When I thought I had the goods on one, the other did something that exonerated the first one."

Hegg nodded understandingly. "I'd better have the details so I can send them to Guillermo Vargas down in Puerto Raton."

Steele exhaled and gathered his thoughts. "Royal Adams was a heel and a no-good to begin with or he would never have run off and deserted his family twenty-two years ago. Somehow he got hold of that synthetic stone, or made it, and sent out word he had found the Mirabilis Diamond. The professor read the story in the newspapers and set out to steal it. I told you the girl's part last night, so we can skip her now. Anyway, Adams slipped through the professor's hands in Yucatan, but the professor picked up the trail and followed him to Puerto Raton by plane. Meanwhile, Albert and Clarence had come on to Hollywood and rented the house and established the professor's new identity by putting the lights, gas, telephone, car, and everything else in Adams's name—even to a calling card on the mailbox.

"In Puerto Raton, the professor killed Adams after

old Ricardo had gone to work, buried the body in the dry wash, left a note that would establish the handwriting, then carefully left a trail that would look as though he had tried not to leave a trail. He came to me and paid me five hundred dollars to test that trail—so he would have the security of knowing others could check back when he went to sell the diamond. The trail led to the professor as Royal Adams. So he settled down to establish the identity before selling the diamond.

“Unfortunately for the professor, he didn’t know that Adams had written two letters from Veracruz—one to the girl, the other to Cordell. Because of the girl, the professor found himself suddenly wanted for murder.” Steele paused and looked questioningly at Hegg. “You’re not bored?”

Hegg shot him a glance. “I’m not bored.”

Steele grinned. “Good. It gets better. When the professor retained me to clear him of O’Hara’s murder, I let drop that I might return to Mexico, to talk with Ricardo, and to pick up O’Hara’s trail from there. The professor also knew the girl had a letter from Adams. So he sent Albert and Clarence to Puerto Raton, to kill Ricardo, because Ricardo was the only man who could positively identify Royal Adams, and to have them leave the original note from the professor in plain sight, thus establishing that handwriting as Adams’s. While Clarence and Albert were in Mexico, the professor raided the girl’s room and got her letter. He discovered the girl’s address the same way I did—from the cab company; for I had told him the girl came to the house in a cab. I took a shot at the professor as he left the girl’s room. He went home and waited for his

boys to come back." Steele flipped his hands. "That's about all."

Hegg grunted and got to his feet. "Remember what I said about the private detective who deliberately conceals evidence?"

Steele nodded, smiling.

Hegg added, "You could have saved yourself a lot of trouble by simply phoning me when you found O'Hara's body."

Steele eyed him knowingly. "And end up in jail as a suspect? Remember, Captain Hegg, my gun killed O'Hara."

Hegg turned toward the reception room. Steele got to his feet and followed him. Hegg said, "If I had wanted you in jail, you would have gone there the night Eustace was killed. You're just like those fiction detectives. You've got to stir up trouble with the police."

"Well, that was one instance when a phone call to you would have cost me money." He patted the ten bills in his pocket. "Lots of money."

The door opened, and Betsy, grim-faced and angry, entered. She glared from Hegg to Steele, then pulled off her hat and sat down. Hegg hurried to the door. Betsy looked up. "Thanks for nothing."

Hegg went out without speaking.

Steele looked puzzled. "Say—what's the matter with you? Where have you been?"

She snapped, "In jail—thanks to you and your friend Captain Hegg."

"In jail? What for?"

"For following your orders and lying to Hegg about the checkbook you stole from O'Hara's office. For act-

ing dumb when Hegg knew the answers all the time. For having in my desk the gun that killed O'Hara."

Steele stared down at the girl a moment, then started to laugh. She looked very hurt. "I'm glad you are so sensitive, Mr. Steele. It makes me glad I went to jail for you and didn't say a word to hurt you."

He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the forehead, then dropped the ten one-thousand-dollar bills on her desk. "Pay yourself six months' salary as a bonus. If you hadn't done the things you did, I would have been in jail instead of you—and then where would all this money have been?"

She showed signs of softening. "What happened to the blonde?"

He sobered. "I guess she goes back to the dairy—for keeps this time."

Betsy nodded. "Would you mind telling me what this has been all about—the professor and the Mirabilis Diamond and all the rest?"

Steele grinned. "All phonies, Betsy—the diamond, the girl, the professor, Adams himself, even the Ifnis."

She stuffed the money into the office bankbook. "Want to go to lunch now?"

He shook his head. "You go, Betsy. Take the rest of the day off. But first there's something I want to give you."

She looked puzzled while he stepped into his office, then brought her the gift package he had left on his desk. She accepted it and looked up in surprise. "For me?"

He nodded, grinning.

She looked at the package suspiciously, then broke open the wrappings and stared down at the mound of

soft lace and silk inside. For a moment, she could only feel of the items.

Then she looked up, melting. "Oh, Mr. Steele!"

He ruffled her permanent. "I told you you'd be able to throw away those flour sacks if you stuck with me."



- 1- STEELE'S OFFICE
- 2- POLICE STATION
- 3- LIBRARY
- 4- BARNEY'S
- 5- EUSTACE'S OFF.
- 6- O'HARA'S AGCY

MAPS SHOWING CITIES & COUNTRIES CONNECTED WITH THE MURDERS IN "THE MIRABILIS DIAMOND"

