

THE MANDARIN

by OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

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CHAPTER VI—Continued

"Talking that for granted, we can understand that even a chap like Vernon could go crazy. The worm having his inevitable turn. We do know positively that shortly after their campus quarrel Vernon went to the fraternity house where he and Thayer both lived and made no secret of the fact that he was bitterly angry with Thayer. A little later Vernon left the place in his car and was later, Thayer's body was discovered. He had been stabbed in the throat."

"And even without knowing what you know about the money situation, they spotted Vernon as the man, eh?"

"Yes. If they heard about this... I'm worried about the kid, Hanvey. Maybe he killed Thayer, and maybe he didn't. If he did I'm sure it was the result of a quarrel and a fight. The boy needs help. We have the loss of what must have appeared to him as an inexhaustible fortune; his desperation over finances; the five thousand dollar note covering a debt of honor—there and we have a staggeringly strong reason why he must have become seized up in the robbery of this bank. I'm afraid Vernon did one or the other, and frankly, Hanvey, I'd rather see him tied up with the robbery than the murder."

"The detective lighted another cigar. There was a silence for a few minutes and then the door opened. Miss Seward placed a card on Randolph Fluke's desk. Fluke glanced at it and passed it across to Hanvey."

"Who is John Reagan?" asked Jim.

"Chief of the Marland detective force—if you'd rather not have him come in—"

"Goody! He's the one man I'd like to talk to."

"Two minutes later Reagan snapped into the room; trim and efficient. He said hello. "All my life I've wanted to meet a real detective."

Hanvey grinned like a kid. "What's doing Reagan—taking me for a buggy ride?"

"Mean it." The local chief turned on Fluke. "Do you know who this fellow is, Mr. Fluke? He's the coo of the bank."

"Say, wait a minute, Reagan. I guess I've missed more easy ones than any man in the country. Not even I have. But my people don't advertise the failures so awful prominently."

"Hokey," said Reagan with hearty admiration. "And the minute I heard you were in town I followed you here. I want you to do me a favor—a big one."

"Take charge of two cases here: the robbery of this bank and the murder over at the college."

"Man! I never felt around with killings. They're too doggedged."

"You're handling this bank thing, ain't you?"

"Then you'll have to take on the other."

"Why?"

"Because," announced Reagan crisp, "they're tied up tight together. I don't know how they were done, but I've got the baby who did 'em both—or knows who did. This fellow killed Thayer and then came here and copped the mill pay roll."

"Vernon, Maxwell Vernon?"

Randolph Fluke looked pleadingly at Hanvey, and the Gargantuan detective slowly extended his hand to Hanvey.

"Done with you," said Jim. "If you really want me, I'll take charge."

"But if I do, things are to be handled my way."

"Oh, boy!" Reagan was enthusiastic. "Take my word for it, Hanvey—you're the boss. I won't do anything but hang around and listen."

"Wrong," grinned Jim. "You're gonna talk and you'll start right now."

"Well, that beats the case. I'll say that I wouldn't like to be in this kid's shoes. I guess you want to know all the dope I've got on Vernon, don't you?"

A big fleshy paw was raised in admonition.

"I'd rather hear this direct from Reagan, if you don't mind."

The banker nodded and Reagan proceeded.

"First, the robber was using Max Vernon's car and it's a ten-to-one bet that Vernon was driving it. Second, after the robbery occurred Vernon drove right through Birmingham and on to Steel City. I've just come back from there."

"Eighty miles from Birmingham. A hundred miles from here. He carried his car to a dealer and dickered for a new one on a trade-in basis. Next morning they closed the deal and Vernon turned in his old car on a new one, and paid the difference—twelve hundred snappers—in cash. Now the funny part, Hanvey, is that from all I can gather Vernon has been broke for about a month."

"What makes you think that?"

"He tried to borrow money sev-

eral places—and didn't get it. Now if you think if a man is broke one week, how does it happen that the next week he buys a new expensive car and pays twelve hundred in cash on the deal?"

Hanvey nodded. "Sounds queer, Reagan. And then what?"

"Plenty." Reagan's face was beaming with pardonable pride. "I discovered that when Vernon traded in his car, there was something missing, the floor rug!"

"Floor rug, eh? What does that mean?"

"It means this: I'm sure Mr. Fluke, here, has told you all about the robbery and how Mr. Burke and the stick-up guy got shot and killed. The fellow must have been blood on the floor of the bank and a trail of blood between the front door and the curb. Now, there it's natural to suppose, ain't it, that this palooka was bleeding pretty free and easy when he piled into the back of Vernon's car."

"If it was the boy's car."

"Well, take that for granted. Anyway, he was bleeding. That blood would have gone on the floor and the rug, because we got to remember that a man who has just robbed a bank wouldn't be fool enough to sit on the back seat of any car. Chances were he was curled up on the floor. Now, then, I just naturally believe it would have been some guy for a girl to go anywhere near a fraternity house without a chapman."

"But that ain't all, either, Jim: because it seems that this Miss Peyton rolled up on the porch and asks where Pat Thayer is. They say he's up in his room and offer to call him. She says not to bother, she'll go right up. That knocks 'em for a goal, and they sit back gasping like a couple fish while she calmly starts a big scandal by telling you some more about that bundle he had. Don't forget it."

"I won't," promised Hanvey.

"Fifteen minutes later Furman and Gleason find out they're still not quarter past one. Well, another guy comes down the hill to the fraternity house and inquires for Pat Thayer."

"Ooah!" murmured Jim, "they must have thought he was a popular guy. Who was this new fellow?"

"A professor! And a whole of a fine fellow, too. He only graduated last June and before that he was the best athlete this college ever had. His name is Welch—Larry Welch—and, while I hate to land it on him, he's got a pretty rotten tie-up with Thayer."

"How?"

"In the first place, this Miss Peyton who had just been to Thayer's room is supposed to be Welch's girl. Everybody at the college says they're nuts about each other. In the second place, Welch is the brother of the girl that Pat Thayer and Max Vernon are supposed to have quarreled about."

"Larry Welch remained upstairs only a few minutes," continued Reagan. "The boys say he looked kind of worked up and queer when he came out and he hustled back up the hill to college. Five or ten minutes later Larry Welch left, the two boys on the porch heard all 'I just bust loose inside. Yelling and screaming and all, and they hear a fellow coming down the steps so fast that he's almost falling. Out on the porch comes the janitor—a named Carmichael. He's a dear pear creaker, but they finally get out of him that he saw Thayer's door partly open and could see Thayer's legs. Thought Thayer was probably drunk—or maybe sick. Went in to straighten him out—and discovered that he was dead."

"And you think that Max Vernon killed him?"

"I almost think he did."

"But a minute ago you said—"

"That's the rotten part of the case, Hanvey. I've got too much dope against too many folks. I could convict Vernon in a minute if it wasn't for two other people."

"Who are they?"

"Miss Peyton and Larry Welch—Thayer's other visitors."

"I see." Hanvey was absorbing the outlook. "Where are they, John?"

Reagan looked up brightly.

"They're under arrest, too," he announced.

The huge detective nodded approval. "I'll hand you one thing, John—you sure have made a complete job of it."

Reagan mopped his forehead with a lavender-bordered handkerchief. "I had to, Jim. I've got those three, and I know I'm right on one of 'em."

"Which one?"

"That's what puzzles me. One time I think it was Vernon; then I come to believe it was Miss Peyton. And just when I'm sure of that I get a hunch that it must have been Welch. Of the three, I'd rather it be Vernon."

"Why?" inquired Fluke sharply.

"Would you pick Max Vernon as a murderer?"

"Out of this bunch—yes. That is, maybe. I'm darned if I know."

Hanvey was slumping in his chair, absently regarding the huge hands. He spoke without bothering to look up.

"What does Miss Peyton say, Reagan? I'll tell you what I can find out. Nothing. She admits visiting Pat Thayer, but that is all."

"Of course she denies killing him, doesn't she?"

"Sure. She says they had a talk and she came away, leaving him perfectly happy and healthy. But that ain't the point, Jim: There's something queer between her and Thayer. I asked her about it and she got right white—but she wouldn't say boo. I accused her of holding something back, but she allowed she didn't care to discuss the case any further."

"And this chap, Welch?"

"I don't look a bit healthy for him. First of all, Thayer was running around with Larry Welch—that's Larry's kid sister; pretty little chick, she's been her and Thayer. I asked her about it and she got right white—but she wouldn't say boo. I accused her of holding something back, but she allowed she didn't care to discuss the case any further."

"What else you got against him?"

"Welch was the last person known to have been in Thayer's room before Mike Carmichael, the janitor, discovered the body. He seemed all right when he went to see Thayer, and he left in a hurry. Then the body was found. But even if all that wasn't enough, there's something else."

"You mean about Miss Peyton, being Welch's girl?"

"Exactly. And she had been to Thayer's room before that. Welch is cuckoo about Miss Peyton. Somebody tells Larry she has just paid a visit to Pat Thayer in his room, so what does Welch do but hotfoot it down to find out what the h—l. Ain't it reasonable that he'd be boiling over under those circumstances?"

"Uh-huh. I've seen lots of fellows get fightin' mad at less."

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