"I appreciate your position," Rankin said sympathetically. "And if they were really indicted events, I'd drop them in a moment. But actually, the two crimes are connected; and it is Mr. Patterson who supplies the link between. I've got to learn the truth about the murder, so I can't afford to disregard the lesser offense. If Patterson isn't Jordan's murderer himself, then he is surely implicated in his death as well as the thefts!"

"But that's ridiculous!" Stanton cried. "Surely, sir, you aren't serious!"

Rankin shook his head. "It isn't so hard to believe as it seems. A small amount of cocaine, the poison which killed Jordan, was kept in the chemistry laboratory at school, for special research. Mr. Patterson knew this fact; and on Tuesday itself, he stole more than a fatal amount of it. He left finger-prints in the laboratory. Yesterday, I found some of it hidden in his bedroom, the rest missing."

"But why?" Stanton protested. "Why should Ned want him out of the way? They never even met before rushing season; then, as his sponsor, they were on the best of terms."

Barely ten minutes before, this problem of motive was as mystifying to Rankin as when he first started to suspect Patterson. On the surface at least, his crime lacked incentive. Now, however, Ben Crawford's information had suggested an answer.

"It is my conviction," he addressed both students, "that his motive developed only last Monday night. Just when your watch was taken, Mr. Crawford. You say that happened between two-thirty in the morning and seven-thirty, though probably some time before daylight. When you retired, Jordan had not yet returned to the house for his clothes. But he did get back somewhere around three o'clock. I've ascertained from other sources he drove in from Gladwyne at half-past two. Suppose he arrived while Patterson burglarized you, entering so carefully you didn't hear him. Suppose he went up-stairs. What more likely than that he either caught Ned in your room or saw him softly sneak out of it? Especially as it is almost at the head of the stairs."

"Then why didn't he mention the incident to us on Tuesday?" Ben Crawford queried. "If he could clear up the mystery, he'd scarcely be quiet about it. Unless," he added as an afterthought, he tried to shield Ned because they were friends."

"He because he failed to realize at the moment the significance of what he had witnessed," Rankin suggested. "Remember, as Mr. Stanton stated, the incident was ignored at the further to see the mere sight of Patterson in another boy's room, even so late, would hardly arouse Jordan's suspicions. But if he became a fraternity brother, he would be entitled to all the rituals and secrets; naturally, he would hear of the thefts. Then, when he put two and two together, he would realize his opportunity."

With great reluctance, Stanton concealed a smile. Of all the deductions at a moment, the detective himself raised their single possible flaw.

"My only misgiving," he admitted, "is with regard to your use of the blackball box. Could Patterson have prevented Stuart's initiation through that—or any other normal measure? If so, he wouldn't need to resort to murdering him to remove what he dreaded—the danger of exposure."

The president answered truthfully, though the facts were detrimental to the suspect.

"No, he couldn't have stopped him from going through at the last moment, even by the blackball box. The final vote on the pledgees took place at a special meeting called on Monday afternoon. Tuesday was too late; once hell night is over, their membership is assured. Anyhow, it takes three blackballs to remove a pledge pin. So Ned's charge of from would not have helped him but only looked very strange."

Rankin's tone held no pleasure. "You see, that section is, Mr. Stanton," he said. "It all fits in to complete his motive. I've sent for him; I want to give him every chance to clear himself. Only unless he can do that, I shall have to charge him with murder, unpleasant as that may be."

He guessed the banter on Captain Thomas' desk, summoning Simpson. Patterson had just come in, the officer informed him; and he ordered that the student be ushered into the office.

Deliberately, he set the watch in full view on the desk-top, to note the sponsor's reaction when he saw it. In the door, Patterson hesitated; he glanced from the detective to his schoolmates, a perplexed anxious frown on his earnest features. Suddenly his eyes on the timepiece, he stiffened; telltale recognition drained the blood from his hollow cheeks. He clenched his fingers and swallowed hard. Then, as if robbed of all power to disincriminate, he dropped into an empty chair by the door and buried his head hopelessly in his outstretched arms. It was a wordless scene, which his two friends watched in silent concern and commiseration.

At length Patterson raised a despairing face, his haggard lines accentuating a new wanness.

"Well, you've caught the thief at last Ted." His words were grim and bitter, but without defiance. "What do you intend to do about it? Make an example of me, I suppose."

Stanton spoke roughly, to cloak his emotions. "Don't be a d—n fool, Ned!" he replied. "Of course, we'll see you through this. What good are fraternity brothers if they don't stand by you at a time like this?"

The detective swiftly took charge of the situation. "The money Mr. Savoulos gave you for the property you stole went to pay your gambling debts at the Morton club," he stated. "Isn't that so, Mr. Patterson?"

"Yes, Walton's debt and others." Wisely the boy tried to conceal nothing. "I settled with him last night for sixty dollars. I have been going there almost twice a week the past year to play poker and blackjack; and I also lost to Lew Meyer and a chap named Al Kahler. I used all the funds I could scrape together the last few months to square them—even what my folks sent for tuition and expenses; and I simply had to get hold of more."

"Why didn't you let us know you needed money, Ned?" Stanton admonished. "Some of the fellows would have been glad to help you out with a loan."

Patterson shook his head dejectedly. "Not for what I was in a hole, Ted; I've lost over a thousand dollars altogether. I borrowed a bit from Tony Graham, but made him promise not to tell. To be honest, I was ashamed to admit what I was doing and where I went; and afraid my family might learn what because of their checks. My people are strict, especially dad, who would have taken me out of school. Then I met Savoulos through Carl Walton. I figured my luck would turn if I continued to go back to the club, and I could redeem what I had pledged with him. Only, somehow, I never got any breaks."

"You could hardly expect them from the Meyer-Kahler crowd," Rankin commented bluntly. "But what made you delay pawning this watch until last night? You took it Tuesday morning and agreed to give Walton the money that evening. Yet on Wednesday, you still put off paying him."

"I . . . well, you see, that was because . . ." For the first time, the student floundered nervously, unwilling to answer.

"At the club on Wednesday," the detective pressed him, "you claimed something had prevented your settling with him in time." Abruptly he shot the question at him. "Was it the fact that Jordan discovered you in the act of robbery, so that you dreaded to get rid of the watch while he lived?"

"No, he didn't actually catch me at it!" Patterson corrected horrorly. "I was already leaving Bob's room with Jim; but he stopped in the hall and saw me coming out."

Rankin studied at the accuracy of his deduction. "You had decided on exactly what happened from the beginning. What time did you make the attempt?"

"A little after three o'clock; by two-thirty, all the boys were in bed and I allowed them a long enough to fall asleep. Even then, if Walton hadn't been pressing me, I'd have postponed stealing it until some night when things were less busy. I was positive Jordan would not hear him come up-stairs and had no idea he was about until I practically ran into him. He had changed his clothes in the dark below, he said, and was going to the bathroom. On the spur of the moment, I couldn't think of any explanation for my presence in Bob's room; so all I did was greet him and go on up-stairs. Then I was afraid that it would strike him as peculiar and rouse his suspicions."

"And still more scared," the detective stated significantly, "that after Jordan, he would be able to interpret the incident and identify you as the thief. That would have meant exposure and disgrace for you."

Flouting at his tone, Patterson nevertheless admitted the indictment.

"I was ready to replace the watch to stave that off," he said. "But it wouldn't have helped; the other burglaries would still tell him the truth. Then, when his death removed that danger, I didn't dare get rid of it until Walton grew insistent."

"Still, it was most opportune. Especially as on the day he died, you stole a quantity of cocaine and atropine from Mr. Kenneth Heyward's chemistry laboratory. You had heard of the supply of poisons he experimented with."

As though Rankin had touched a vital nerve, the student clutched his chair with a grip that whitened his knuckles, and moistened his dry lips.

"You know that, too!" he gasped in a hoarse whisper. "You must have found the test-tubes in my bureau!"

"I did, Mr. Patterson; I traced them to you as soon as Mr. Heyward reported to me about his tampered poison supply." Rankin's manner became definitely accusing. "That was my first clue that you were implicated in the murder. And there is other evidence, just as incriminating; throughout the case, your conduct has been suspicious and required investigation."

"Incriminating evidence! What do you mean? Surely you don't consider me responsible for poisoning Stuart!"

It was scarcely the response the detective expected to evoke. Instead of alarm, Patterson's consternation disclosed only astonishment, and he stared at Rankin with widened, incredulous eyes.

Nevertheless, the detective maintained his stand. "What else am I to believe?" he demanded harshly. "The motive obtaining the poison, you admit having the strongest reason for wanting to silence him. You could not face the scandal his speaking would cause; you were frantic to conceal your guilt at any cost. The opportunity was also yours; instead of acting as Jordan's sponsor during the initiation, you stood behind him in a position to administer the coma. And your nervous ness, afterward, . . ."

"But I didn't! I never thought of giving it to him! If the worst came to the worst, I was going to use it myself!"

The confession, rung from Ned Patterson by sheer desperation, caused a suspended silence of pure horror. The student's ghastly hue rivaled only that of his schoolmates as they regarded him in shocked awe.

"You took it for yourself, . . ." Rankin began, breaking the tension.

But Stanton snatched at his meaning more swiftly and a note of pain filled his voice. "Ned, my G—d, you weren't going to commit suicide! You wouldn't have done it, old man!"

Patterson shrugged his shoulders despairingly. "I don't know, Ted," he returned. "I can't tell whether I'd have had the nerve to go through with it. I was beside myself, brooding over it; I decided I couldn't bear discovery—the shame of it, the loss of people's respect, perhaps even a prison term. And I wasn't going to involve my family in my degradation. At any rate, I was ready if I finally got up against it. That's why I didn't take

"You Took It for Yourself!" Rankin Began, Breaking the Tension.

part in the ritual on Tuesday; the day was too much of a strain for me! Trembling, he buried his face in his hands again.

No acting could have been as convincing as his genuine wretchedness. It was too overwhelming to be assumed; his avowal sounded too solemn to be merely a cleverly concocted fabrication. Its very sordidness convinced its authenticity. Viewing the sponsor's conduct in this new light, Rankin scanned the fraternity council of his distress after the tragedy.

As in the present interview, he was certainly alarmed lest the intention be had harbored, now that he could abandon it, would be disclosed. And if his theft of the cocaine was related to his design of suicide only, the detective was satisfied to overlook it completely. He could almost sympathize with Patterson's predicament; it was circumstances he had a weak character rather than any real viciousness, that had driven him to stealing. Even his determination to take his life rather than be caught and punished suggested an inchoate sense of decency.

One particular needed explanation, however, before Rankin was ready to dismiss the possibility that he was implicated in the pledgee's death.

"Can you swear, Mr. Patterson," he asked sharply, "that no one was near any of either poison you selected? Either for your own purpose, or by anyone else in connection with the murder?"

The student looked up listlessly. "No one except myself touched them since I took them, sir."

"Then what happened to almost half of the coma? Mr. Heyward reported the loss of two grains of atropine and six drops of coniine; and all the missing atropine was in one vial in your dresser. But the other contained only three drops of coniine."

"I spilled a bit in pouring it out," Patterson responded unhesitatingly. "I was nervous anyhow, and hurried for fear Ken might return and interrupt me. And with the liquid, my hand shook a little and some fell outside the test-tube." He spoke earnestly, studying Rankin intently. "I'm telling the truth, sir," he added, "whether you believe me or not."

The detective definitely reached a decision. "I do believe you," he said more kindly. "In fact, there is just one more point I'd like settled before you go; then you can leave with Mr. Stanton and Mr. Crawford, and forget about the thefts. As far as I am interested, they are a closed book."

Patterson's eyes lighted with relief and Stanton expressed his appreciation.

"That's mighty fine of you, Mr. Rankin; it helps the fraternity out of a very bad hole. I'm speaking for all of us in saying how grateful we are."

"My question is about a student named Ralph Buckley," Rankin pursued, disregarding his thanks. "He is a freshman and a good friend of Larry Palmer. You recall him, Patterson, I'm sure; during rushing season, Palmer sponsored him as a candidate. Only he failed to make the grade and was not pledged."

"Ralph Buckley?" The boy nodded. "Yes, I remember him," he said listlessly.

"I expected you would, because I understand it was you who voted against accepting him. That's exactly what I'm after—why you didn't approve of him. Was it some information Jordan had given you that resulted in your vote?"

"Information from Stuart, sir?" A puzzled look crept into Patterson's face, echoed by his query. "That's news to me; I didn't even know he was acquainted with the fellow. He never once mentioned his name to me."

It was the detective's turn to be surprised. "Do you mean he had nothing to do with your rejecting Buckley? Then why did you object to him?" might know something about him that Mr. Merrick couldn't tell you."

The detective spoke gravely. "No, Mr. Warwick, my business with Buckley is more unpleasant than that. I am here to make an arrest for young Jordan's murder; and I regret to inform you I have a warrant to take him into custody."

Sudden anxiety clouded the supervisor's features and his gaze reflected his surprise and concern. He paused back his chair to regard Rankin.

"Arrest Buckley?" he exclaimed. "Why he isn't a member of Mu Beta Sigma at all! Surely you don't consider him guilty of the crime, Mr. Rankin."

"Some student did it," Rankin returned bluntly. "And I've ascertained how he entered the chapter room during the initiation. I had Buckley in mind when I asked you whether a student expelled from one college could get admitted to another by a false high school record. He also went to Aberdeen last year; and because of Jordan, he was disgracefully dismissed for gambling. Besides, he had other reasons for hating him."

Increasingly perturbed, Mr. Warwick pursed his lips. "Where did you hear about this?"

"In the first place from the young man who just left your office, Walter Randall. He too attended Aberdeen, where he heard of the incident though he didn't know either boy well."

"He can vouch for that?" Momentarily, this new charge appeared to disturb the supervisor more than that of murder. "If that is true, I must take immediate steps to have Buckley's matriculation stricken from the rolls."

Rankin was emphatic. "You can be sure I verified all my discoveries about Buckley, Mr. Warwick. In fact, I promised Randall to get the proofs from Aberdeen to save him from being involved in the case. This is the answer I received today."

He gave Warwick the telegram to read and then proceeded to summarize the evidence incriminating the student. The supervisor listened with lowering brow and ever tightening jaw to the details of the motive for the crime and his opportunity to commit it. Asking only a few pointed questions, he shook his head solemnly at the conclusion of the account.

"It's very upsetting, Rankin," he commented. "That every once in a while, an utter rotter finds his way into college. Fortunately that isn't often; the average representative student, whatever his weakness is, is of high caliber. You can usually count on his appreciation of fair play to make him essentially trustworthy. Still, it's hard to believe that even Buckley would actually poison the boy because of their feud."

"And just as difficult to conceive of any other explanation for his deliberate plotting," Rankin returned bluntly.

"I realize that. But before you serve your warrant, I should like an opportunity to question him. It's barely possible there is some mistake; and I am anxious to save the university additional notoriety. This dreadful affair has already tainted our reputation."

"It's hardly the proper procedure to cross-examine an intended prisoner, without the usual warning . . ." the detective began.

"I only want a few minutes," Mr. Warwick argued persuasively. "It is for the boy's benefit, if by any chance at all he's had nothing to do with Jordan's death. And it's also to your own advantage. Of course, if he cannot offer any visible . . . n, the law must take its ever . . ."

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

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