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Mammoth DETECTIVE

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All Stories Complete

HOWARD BROWNE is on his vacation (no doubt a sort of postman's holiday in which he just sits and thinks of new things for MAMMOTH DETECTIVE when he gets back). We wish he'd written his editorial before he left, because this editor hates work, and writing editorials is work. Besides, not having looked inside a detective magazine for ages, we hardly know what to say!

WELL, first, we see Frank Gruber's in this issue with "Whispering Master" which is labeled "a 65,000-word novel which is so fine that the U. S. Gov't is considering going off the silver standard and on the Gruber Standard." We haven't read it, so we don't know how good it is. But, we've seen a lot of Gruber plastered on newsstands for years—and that oughta mean something! Couldn't have been anything but the best, or Howard wouldn't have bought it!

PAUL FAIRMAN (whom Howard tells us is a guy which is going places!) has a very short one in this issue which we'll read this afternoon over our cup of coffee. But the editorial has to be written *before* coffee, so the very fact that this paragraph appears as is will mean we liked it and didn't phone frantically out to the printer to stop the presses.

WILLIAM P. McGIVERN (who, believe it or not, is sitting right this minute in Howard's office with Milton Ozaki and Bill Hamling playing poker and using paper clips for money (on account they ain't no checks being signed today on account the treasurer is home sick—and it's income-tax day too!)—oh, well, boys, that's what you get for writing stuff like this. What stuff? Oh, yes, McGivern's yarn is titled "You'll Wait Forever" and we hope you do—for a better story, that is.

GEORGE B. ANDERSON, creator of "Flamond" who broadcasts his file cards over "Crime Files of Flamond" has slipped a series of his famous cards into our lap. First card out of the file is "MD-1" and its title is "The Case of The Squealing Duck." We've read *this* one, and we can definitely say you'll get as big a kick out of it as you do listening to the guy over the radio, if not bigger. It's a clever yarn, and we wish we could have written it ourselves—instead of this editorial!

JOHN RAYMOND ENGLISH, it seems, has "Too Much Blood." Anyway, he's spilling it all over this issue in the story of the same name. We can't tell you it's 14,000 words long, but more than that would require reading it . . . and Howard, you didn't say we had to read the stories as well as write the editorial, did you?

LET'S see now, that makes a total of 102,000 words in this issue. Say, that ought to be two-bits worth! You pay two bucks for a novel like Gruber's in the book store, and here you got near another novel's length to boot.

LET'S see some more . . . yup, that makes sixty-seven lines to here, and we got to write one hundred and two to fill the page. So just so's we don't bore you entirely to death, let's take a peek at some of the novels coming up in the future, in both this magazine and its sister, *Mammoth Mystery*. We got some honey-dos! (dews)

HAROLD M. SHERMAN has one called "The Up and Up" (which title may be changed) which is something different from the usual run of stuff. Certainly it's not *today's* stuff. D'ja ever see so many Chandler imitators? Even Jimmy Durante did it over his show. Seems up to Chandler himself to create something new now, before everybody and his uncle climbs into his buggy!

WILLIAM BOGART has "One Hour to Kill" but it'll probably take him longer than that, because we note the manuscript isn't complete as yet. John Evans (ah!) is scheduled for another —and he's the boy Hollywood is dickering for. It seems a lot of important people are interested in his "Halo in Blood." Remember it? We don't read detective fiction, but we did read to page 17 of that! And brother, that's a concession from us. In case you wonder, our favorite is *Amazing Stories* and those little guys with the rays down in the caves. Paul Fairman has a novel coming up called "The Glass Ladder" which is a *hell* of a good story! Cut *that* out, you proofreaders, if you dare! 'Cause it's true! William P. McGivern has a novel in the house too, and *he* tells us it's good. But he would. Anyway, you know we're NOT short on good stuff . . . and that's the one-hundredth line! So, that's all for this time, and we hope you have a hot time reading this issue kiver to kiver.—*Rap*

Whispering Master

by FRANK GRUBER

When the master disc sailed through the open window, it made more sounds than music to Johnny Fletcher's ears—it whispered of death and murder—and a killer...

The whirling disc held the answer to the question of who killed him—and it started to speak!

SHE was twenty-four years old and she had a complexion for which a movie star would have given a husband. She had gloriously golden hair (natural) and the kind of clean-cut, fresh features that women hate, if they don't have them.

And she was broke.

She had exactly three cents in her purse as she stared at Mr. Peabody's third and positively final ultimatum. Thirty-three dollars and seventy-eight cents, by twelve o'clock, noon, or we must have your room, Mr. Peabody wrote.

Even at the Forty-fifth Street Hotel, this wasn't a lot of money for a girl to raise—a girl with Marjorie Fair's, shall we say, pulchritude? Except . . . well, that was the reason Marjorie was down to three cents.

She dropped Mr. Peabody's note on her unmade bed and went to the window. The sight was not a cheerful one, an eight-foot air shaft which let a very little light and a great deal of dank air into the rooms surrounding it.

She stared for a moment at the window directly opposite her. One of the two occupants of that room had smirked at her several times in the past week—times when she had encountered him in the elevator or in the lobby. It shouldn't be hard to get thirty-three dollars from him. His partner, an enormous heavy-set man, was obviously a wrestler or fighter and as such the two men should have money.

Even while she was thinking, the big man across the air-shaft came to the window. He was wearing shorts . . . and nothing else. Marjorie withdrew hastily.

She went into the bathroom, looked for a long time at the medicine chest. Finally she opened it. Toothpaste, toothbrush, mouth-wash, cologne, nail polish, a bottle of mercurochrome.

No iodine, no sleeping tablets. And only three cents. She was too poor even to commit suicide.

She came out of the bathroom. Of course, there was the window. She looked at it for a long time. It didn't appeal to her, but it seemed the only way and she might have decided on it eventually, but before she could come to a decision, Fate intervened.

A knock on Marjorie Fair's door.

The manager for the rent, she thought. He's written me for it, hounded me to my death—isn't that enough? She went to the door and opened it.

It wasn't the manager. It was a man Marjorie knew, a man who might . . .

He smiled at her. "May I come in?"

"Of course,"

He entered and closing the door, stood with his back to it. "I hope you don't mind my dropping around this early in the morning."

"It's all right."

"I had to see you," he went on, his eyes darting about the room. "It's about the—the audition you made."

"It was no good," Marjorie said. "I haven't the voice."

"Yes, you have. You need a little training, that's all."

"I've had training," Marjorie said. "I've had ten thousand dollars worth of training."

His eyes ceased their searching of room and fixed themselves upon her. "With your looks, you don't have to sing."

"I know," Marjorie said. "You're the twenty-eighth man in New York who's said that to me."

"And?"

"There's a man back in Iowa who said it. He's got a million dollars . . . and I still came to New York."

"Well," said the man, by the door,

"I haven't got a million dollars. But I'm going to have it in a year or two. That's why I'm here."

HIS mouth twisted in a crooked grin and he reached into his coat pocket and drew out a pair of skin-tight gloves. He began putting them on. Marjorie watching him, not understanding.

"It's the master," he said, "you've got it and I want it."

Marjorie's eyes widened in surprise. "You mean the . . . the Con Carson recording?"

"That's right."

"But it isn't yours."

"It's going to be." He reached behind his back and turned the bolt in the door. Marjorie knew what he was doing and retreated.

"Open that door!"

He started toward her. Marjorie opened her mouth. To scream was instinctive, but . . . in her mind flashed the message on the note the hotel manager had written her. Could a girl about to be evicted for non-payment of hotel rent, scream for help? Could a person in such a position cause a commotion in a hotel?

The scream died in her throat. She sidestepped the man's reaching hands. He started to follow, but caught sight of the flat metal disk on the top of the chest of drawers, half covered by a newspaper.

Marjorie saw his glance and in a rush beat him to the disk. She got it in her hand and then a gloved fist smashed her face, throwing her against the window sill. He leaped after her and . . . and Marjorie's hand came back, went part way out of the open window.

The disk sailed smoothly across the air-shaft and disappeared through a window on the other side.

A low cry of rage came from the man's throat. His gloved hands caught Marjorie's throat in a vise-like grip, squeezed horribly.

The girl, who five minutes ago, had been on the verge of suicide fought for her life. But the fingers tightened inexorably about her windpipe and after a moment or two, the man dragged what was left of Marjorie Fair into the bathroom.

He left her there and coming out, closed the bathroom door.

Knuckles rapped on the hall door. The man froze in his tracks like a tiger caught with his kill.

"Marjorie," a feminine voice called. "It's me— Susan!"

Fortunately, he had shot the bolt. The doorknob rattled, the knuckles rapped again on the door and then there was silence.

The man went to the door, put his ear against it and listened. He heard nothing and then for the first time in several moments he dared to breathe. Quietly he turned the bolt, opened the door and went out.

CHAPTER II

JOHNNY FLETCHER stepped out of the elevator and crossing the narrow hall, opened the door of Room 821. As he entered the room Sam Cragg popped out of the bathroom.

"Johnny!" he cried, "my clothes are gone!"

Johnny cocked his head to one side and sized up the apparel of his roommate and partner. "Shoes, socks, shorts," he enumerated, "shirt and necktie . . . "

"It's my pants and coat," Sam wailed.

"Oh yes, I didn't notice."

"What do you mean—you didn't notice? When a guy ain't got no pants on, you can't help but notice."

"All right, Sam, so you *haven't* got

your pants on. What of it? There's no law against not wearing your pants in your own room."

"But I'm telling you, Johnny—they're gone. Somebody swiped 'em."

Johnny looked thoughtfully at Sam, then stepped to the closet. He opened the door and peered in.

"Not here," he said. "Have you tried the bathroom?"

"I've looked everywhere—even under the carpet. They're gone." Sam seated himself heavily on the edge of one of the twinbeds. "And Peabody's going to throw us out at noon! How can I walk the streets without my pants on? "

"You can't."

"But what'll I do, what'll I do?"

Johnny stepped to the window and looked across the eight-foot air-shaft. "You can relax, Sam. I'll think of something. . . . Hello—what's Peabody doing in the good-looking blonde's room?"

"I don't know. There's some monkey business going on over there."

Johnny exclaimed. "Monkey business! Those are flat-feet with Peabody." Johnny turned to look at Sam, then caught sight of the metal disk on the nearest twin bed.

"Where'd this come from?"

Sam shrugged. "Search me. I was lookin' for my pants and I stepped in the bathroom and when I came out there it was on the bed. Guess somebody tossed it through the window."

Johnny looked at his friend in astonishment, then he stepped back to the window and peered across the air-shaft again. "I don't see the girl."

Sam groaned. "Johnny, never mind what's going on over there; think of us—me. I need pants and I need 'em bad. By twelve o'clock."

Johnny's eyes still searched the room across the air-shaft. "There's no hurry. We're not moving at twelve o'clock."

"Why not?" We got Peabody's third and positively final ultimatum, didn't we?"

"Yes, but I just paid ten dollars on account. We're good until . . ." Then Johnny caught himself. But it was too late. Sam came around the beds and caught Johnny's arm.

"Where'd you get the ten bucks?"

JOHNNY pulled his arm free of Sam's savage grip. "Why do you suppose I got up so early this morning? I went out and raised the money. Twelve dollars. I gave the hotel ten and—"

"You pawned my suit!" Sam howled. "You hocked the clothes off my back."

Johnny swallowed hard. "Take it easy, Sam. It's only for a couple of hours. I'm going down to Mort Murray's this afternoon and put the bite on him."

"Why didn't you see Mort this morning?"

"I tried. He wasn't at his place."

"At eight in the morning? Of course not."

"That's what I said. . . . You know Peabody; he hates my guts. On the stroke of twelve he'd lock us out. That's why I thought I'd be on the safe side."

"But we couldda gone out and sold some books before twelve."

"If we had any books, which we haven't."

Sam staggered back to the bed and sat down heavily. A sob shook his massive torso. "Johnny, we've been through thick and thin together. But stealin' my clothes is the last straw."

"I didn't steal them."

"It's the same as stealin'. Why didn't you sell *your* clothes?"

"How could I? I couldn't walk the streets without any clothes on, could

I?"

"Can *I?*"

"You don't have to. You can stay in here until I get your outfit back."

"But what if you don't get it back?"

"Have I ever let you down, Sam?"

"Yes!" cried Sam. "You've let me down a hundred times."

"So it's come to this." Johnny sighed wearily. "All right, I'll get you back your suit this afternoon and then we're through—finished."

Sam gasped. "What? What'd you say, Johnny?"

"I said we were through. You can go your way and I'll go mine."

Sam sprang to his feet. "Johnny, don't talk like that. For Pete's sake!" He grabbed Johnny's wrist and looked sharply into Johnny's face. "For a minute I thought you were serious." He tried a weak grin. "I never know when you're kiddin'."

"I'm not kidding."

Sam let go of Johnny's wrist and slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. "I take it back, Johnny. I apologize. Give me a swift kick, if it'll make you feel better."

"It wouldn't." Johnny shook his head sadly. "You hurt my feelings."

"Jeez, Johnny!"

The door resounded to the rapping of knuckles. Johnny leaped away from the window. "Get in bed, Sam," he whispered tautly, "and here, put this under the covers with you. . . . " He handed Sam the metal disk and started toward the door.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Fletcher," called back the voice of Mr. Peabody, the manager of the Forty-fifth Street Hotel. "I'd like a word with you."

JOHNNY turned, saw that Sam was scrambling into bed, then went to the door. He pulled it open. There was somebody with Mr. Peabody, a big, truculent-looking man of about forty.

Johnny handed Mr. Peabody a little slip of paper. "Sorry, old boy."

Peabody looked at the slip. "I just checked with the desk. All right, you're good for another week. But that's not why I'm here . . ." He stepped around Johnny and saw Sam in the bed.

"Hi!" Sam said.

Mr. Peabody nodded curtly, disapprovingly, then turned back to Johnny. "Mr. Fletcher, this is Lieutenant Rook of the Police Department. . . ."

"Crook?"

The lieutenant smiled without humor. "Rook."

"Rook as in rook?"

Rook's smile faded. "A wise guy!"

He came fairly into the room and surveyed Sam, sitting up in bed. "A rough night?"

"I ain't feelin' so good," Sam retorted, "so I thought I'd sleep late this morning."

"You sleep with your shirt and necktie on?"

"Any law against it?"

"For all of me," shrugged Rook, "you can sleep with your shoes on."

Sam brought his feet out from under the covers. "Well, I got them on too."

He'd forgotten about Mr. Peabody being present. The hotel manager stormed forward. "Mr. Cragg — our sheets!"

"He wanted feel at home," Johnny said, "he sleeps with his shoes on at home."

"There'll be an extra charge for those sheets."

Sam sprang to his feet. "Oh yeah."

Lieutenant Rook suddenly chopped the air with his right hand. "Just a minute, I'm here investigating a homicide."

Johnny recoiled. "Not that good-looking blonde!" His eyes went to the

window. "Over there?"

"You knew her?"

Johnny shook his head. "Only from seeing her through the window. And I saw her in the lobby once."

"She never even spoke to you!" cried Peabody.

Rook gave the hotel manager a dirty look. "Please— I'll do the talking."

"Go ahead," invited Johnny. He exhaled heavily. "That's a real jolt."

"Why?" snapped Rook.

"Are you kidding? A girl who looked like that. The only reason I didn't make her acquaintance was, well . . ." He cleared his throat and looked at Peabody. "I've b e e n a bit short of—"

"Money!" snapped Peabody.

Johnny smiled. "You took the words out of my mouth."

LIEUTENANT ROOK stabbed a stubby forefinger at Johnny. "All right, we've wasted enough time. Let's get down to cases."

"Shoot!" Then Johnny coughed. "I guess I shouldn't have used that word."

"Why not?"

Johnny nodded to the window.

"She wasn't shot," Rook snapped. The lieutenant took a huge object from his pocket, which on closer examination turned out to be a watch. "It's nine thirty-five," he said. "Where were you between seven-thirty and nine o'clock this morning?"

"At seven-thirty," Johnny said, "I was standing outside Uncle Ben's Loan Shop on Eighth Avenue."

"What for?"

"I was waiting for the place to open." Johnny smiled at Mr. Peabody and took a pawn ticket from his pocket and held it up. "See . . . ?"

"It didn't take you from seven-thirty to nine-thirty to pawn whatever you pawned," Rook snapped.

"Right. But the shop didn't open until eight-thirty. I was the first customer in the store and I was in there for about fifteen minutes."

"Why should it take fifteen minutes to pawn something?"

"Because there was a difference of opinion. Uncle Ben had one idea of the value of the—ah—merchandise and I had another. It took fifteen minutes to reconcile our viewpoints—reach a meeting point, so to speak."

Lieutenant Rook glowered. "All right, that's eight forty-five. It didn't take you over five or ten minutes to come back to the hotel."

"I stopped off at the Automat on Broadway and had some corned beef hash. They have the best corned beef hash in town at the Automat."

"What time did you reach the hotel?" Rook snarled.

"About nine-twenty. You can check that because I stopped at the desk downstairs to pay my bill."

". . . Ten dollars on account," Peabody corrected.

"All right, ten dollars on account. Anyway, I didn't come up in the elevator until nine twenty-five. I was in here six or seven minutes before you pounded on the door."

Rook looked steadily at Johnny for a moment, then walked to the stand between the beds and picked up the phone.

"Desk," he said, then: "This is Lieutenant Rook of the Police Department. I'm up here in Room 821 with Mr. Peabody, the manager. . . . Fletcher, who occupies this room claims he stopped at the desk this morning and paid something on his bill . . . What time was that?" He scowled at the phone. "You're sure?" He nodded unhappily. "All right."

He put the receiver back on the hook, looked down at it for a moment, then

suddenly whirled on Sam Cragg. "You . . . *you* were here in your room, all morning!"

"So were about two hundred other people in this hotel," cut in Johnny, coming to Sam's aid.

"Fletcher," Rook said ominously, "I didn't like you when I first came into this room. I'm liking you less every minute." He turned back to Cragg. "You can talk, can't you?"

"Yes," snapped Sam. "And I can read and write too. And I went clear through long division in school and was starting on decimals."

Johnny, glancing through the window, gave a sudden start. "Hey!" he cried. "I thought you said it was the girl." He rushed to the window.

Rook followed him.

SEATED in a chair in the room across the air-shaft was a girl—not Marjorie Fair, but a girl who looked very much like her, who was, if anything, even more attractive.

"It's her sister," Rook said. "She found the body." He turned away from the window, looked at Johnny Fletcher and Sam Cragg, then shook his head. Then he started for the door. Peabody after him. At the door, the lieutenant turned.

"Don't go taking any sudden trips," he said and went out. Peabody followed him. Sam Cragg opened his mouth to say something, but Johnny gave him a warning shake of the head. He went to the door, listened for a moment, then opened the door suddenly. There was no one out in the hall and he closed the door again. He exhaled heavily.

"Now, what *do* you know about it, Sam?"

"Just what I told you—nothin'."

Johnny went to Sam's bed and pulling back the covers, brought out the metal disk. Sam crowded over. "I thought phonograph records were made out of wax or some kinda plastic," he said.

"They are, but this is a master record."

"It says Mariota on it."

Johnny gave Sam a quick, chiding look. "That's the name of the record company. A master record is the—the record from which all the others are made. I guess."

Sam was reading the circular centerpiece on the record. "Con Carson; say, he's all right!"

"He *was* all right," Johnny corrected. "He was killed two days ago in that airplane crash in Neveda."

"Zat so?" Sam whistled a note or two, off-key. "I guess this must have been his last song. I never heard it. Mmmm, *Moon On The Desert* . . . wonder what it's like?" Then suddenly he looked at Johnny, wide-eyed. "Say, d'you suppose the girl across the way . . . ?"

"Threw this over here? You're sharp, Sam, awfully sharp today. I guessed that about nine and three-quarters minutes ago."

Sam winced. "Then why didn't you give it to the flat-foot?" Alarm came into his tone. "Johnny, you aren't figuring on playing detective again—not when I haven't even got a pair of pants?"

"You'll have your pants this afternoon, Sam; stop worrying. And your coat, too."

"The maid's due to clean up . . ."

"You're not feeling well today, you thought you'd stay in bed." Johnny suggested the alibi. "I'll go down again to Mort's." He started for the door, but Sam called him back.

"What about my breakfast?"

Johnny pointed to the phone. "Room service. Here's a buck." Johnny tossed a crumpled bill on the bed. That left

him with seventy-five cents.

CHAPTER III

DOWN in the lobby, Johnny encountered the bell captain, Eddie Miller, as slick a little man as ever shook down a hotel guest. Eddie was built like an overgrown jocket and he knew all the answers and practically all of the questions.

"I hear you're gonna be with us another week, Mr. Fletcher," he said, cynically.

"That's right, Eddie, I got in just under the wire." He took the bell captain's arm and led him to one side. "Look, what's the dope on the business up on the eighth floor?"

"Jeez, are *you* mixed in that?" Eddie exclaimed.

"I'm one of the chief suspects," Johnny said, proudly. "The only trouble is, I have a sweet alibi."

"Then what're you worried about?"

"I'm not worried. Just curious. The girl was about my size and I would have been doing something about it except that I've been a little short of what it takes."

Eddie Miller chuckled. "Ain't that normal for you?"

"What do you mean?" Johnny exclaimed indignantly. "I'm almost never broke. Why, two months ago I was worth fifty thousand bucks."

Eddie grinned cynically. "I'm only the bell captain, you don't have to sell *me* a bill of goods. Anyway, broke or rich, I'm on your team, Mr. Fletcher. I always have been."

"All right, then tell me about the little lady who got . . ." Johnny finished the sentence by drawing a finger across his throat.

Eddie Miller shook his head. "Uh-huh, choked."

"Then it wasn't suicide."

"Oh, no. It's murder and whoever done it almost got caught in the act." Eddie looked surreptitiously around the lobby. "Her sister tried the door and it was locked. Then she came downstairs and got Peabody to go up with a key. By the time they got there—the door was unlocked."

Johnny exclaimed. "You mean, the killer was inside when the sister was up the first time?"

"That's right. He snuck out while the girl was getting Peabody."

"Wait a minute," Johnny said, "there's something screwy about this. You say the sister went up and tried the door and when she found it was locked she went down and got Peabody to let her in; she must have been suspicious to do a thing like that, otherwise, why wouldn't she think her sister had gone out for breakfast or something?"

" 'Cause she just got in from out of town and didn't have any place to go to wait." Eddie Miller rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. "Funny thing, the Fair dame was in the same spot as *you*—she was gonna get the French key at noon."

"*She* was broke?"

Eddie nodded. "She owed three weeks rent." He shook his head. "A girl with her looks!"

Johnny groaned. "If I'd only known!"

"Yeah, you'd a put her bill on yours," Eddie said sarcastically.

"I can always raise money if I have to," Johnny said.

"Well, you raised some this morning."

"And I'm going to get some more before night—a lot more." He looked at the clock in the lobby. "I'd better be starting."

Eddie Miller looked wistful. "I'd give something to go around with you and watch you raise that money."

Johnny grinned. "Work out your own routines." He winked at Eddie and left the hotel. Outside he walked a half block to Seventh Avenue and turned left to Times Square.

HE DESCENDED to the subway level and was just in time to catch an express. A few minutes later he got out at Fourteenth Street and climbing to the street walked back to Sixteenth Street.

A few doors off Seventh Avenue he entered a gloomy loft building and climbed the stairs to the third floor. He approached a ground glass door bearing the lettering: *Murray Publishing Company, Mort Murray, President.*

The door was locked. Johnny rattled the knob angrily. Mort was his sole hope of getting Sam back into his clothes.

"Damn it, Mort, you can't do this to me!" he cried, rattling the door again.

A heavy-set man came puffing up the stairs and bore down on Johnny.

"Let me try it," he said. Johnny stepped aside and the big man knocked on the door. "Telegram, Mr. Murray," he called. "Important."

There was no sound from inside.

The heavy-set man exclaimed peevishly. "That's the third time I've climbed these steps."

"You don't look like a Western Union boy," Johnny said.

The other took a folded document from his pocket. "How many of these would I deliver if I told them I was a bailiff?"

"Oh, so you're what's keeping Mort away from his office? And because of you, I've got to suffer."

"Huh?"

"I'm trying to put the bite on him."

The big man snorted. "Fat chance." He held up the summons. "This'll keep him broke for awhile."

"How much is it for?"

"Six hundred smackers, that's all."

Johnny was impressed. "You mean Mort was able to stick somebody for six hundred bucks?"

"That's what it says on here. The one I slipped him a couple of weeks ago was for four hundred if I remember right."

"Mister," said Johnny. "You want some good advice? Throw that paper away, because what Mort has inside isn't worth four hundred bucks, much less a grand."

"It says on the door he's a publisher; publishers have money. . . ."

"There are publishers," said Johnny, "and publishers."

The bailiff shrugged. "I only deliver 'em." He shook his head and started for the stairs. Johnny followed and chatted pleasantly with the bailiff until they reached Seventh Avenue, where the bailiff turned right to Fourteenth Street.

JOHNNY looked around and saw a hardware store between Sixteenth and Seventeenth Streets. He entered.

"I lost the key to my office," Johnny said to a clerk. "Wonder if you've got some skeleton keys . . ."

"We don't handle them," the clerk replied, "but we can make you a key for your lock."

"How much?"

"A dollar for the key, but we'll have to go to your place and that'll cost three dollars."

Johnny had seventy cents in his pocket. "For that much I'll leave the place locked," he retorted. He started to leave the store when he saw a display of long, thin screwdrivers, the novelty kind with plastic handles.

"How much are these?"

"Twenty-five cents."

Johnny bought one and returned to Mort Murray's office on Sixteenth Street. He examined the lock and grinned. It was a Yale type of lock, but was not fitted too closely to the door.

He inserted the screwdriver in the crack, pressed the edge of it tightly against the lock of the bolt and twisted to the right. The bolt moved left a thirty-secondth of an inch. Retaining pressure he eased the screwdriver back to its starting position and repeated the process. Twice more and the door was open.

With the screwdriver still in his hand, Johnny pushed open the door . . . and looked at the astonished face of an enormously fat woman.

"I thought that door was locked!" the woman exclaimed.

"It was," Johnny gulped, "but Mort gave me the key . . ."

"Mort who?"

Johnny pointed at the door. "Mort Murray, the—uh—boss."

"Oh, you mean the fella used to have this place."

"*Used* to have?"

"He was evicted. I took over this morning."

"I was here a half hour ago."

"I just got in."

Johnny shot a glance about the one-room office. Stacks of books lined two walls. Each one bore the title, EVERY MAN A SAMSON.

"If Mort's been evicted, how come his books are still here?"

"The superintendent of the building hasn't had time yet to take them out."

Johnny moved carelessly over to one of the stacks and took down a dozen books. Then he reached into a paper carton and took out a six-foot length of chain.

The woman watched him through narrowed eyes. "Making yourself at home, aren't you, mister?" There was no uneasiness in her tone.

Johnny shrugged. "Mort and me was sort of partners."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh, I was on the road selling these books and Mort, uh, Mort took the mail orders."

"Is that so?"

THE woman moved around from behind the roll-top desk and went to the door, blocking Johnny's egress. "Put them back," she said.

"What, these books?"

"Yes."

"Look, lady," Johnny said, "the superintendent'll sell 'em for waste paper. He won't get a cent apiece for 'em."

"Put them back!"

Johnny tried the old charm. "Miss, I *need* these books."

"You can have them—for two dollars and ninety-five cents apiece. That's the price that's marked in them."

"I paid Mort fifty cents apiece."

". . . Or," continued the fat woman, "you can pay Murray's back rent. Three months at forty dollars a month."

"A bank owns this building," Johnny said, "a bank or a mortgage company. They don't give a good gosh damn for people like you and me."

"Save it, chum—it's the Sailor's Institute who owns this building. They're the toughest landlords in the world. They hold their superintendents responsible."

"All right, so it's the superintendent. But how's he going to know about a dozen measly books?"

"*I'm* the superintendent."

Johnny regarded her bitterly. "The Sailor's Institute, *and* a woman superintendent . . ." He shook his head sadly and put down the books. "I know when I'm licked."

"What's the chain for?"

Johnny turned back to the lady superintendent. "It's part of the pitch. I've got a partner . . . I put this chain around his chest and he takes a deep breath and breaks the chain."

"By taking a deep breath?"

"He's the strongest man in the world."

The woman came forward and took the chain from Johnny's hand. She examined it closely. "And after he breaks the chain?"

"Then I sell the books. It's a physical culture book—tells people how to be strong . . . like Young Samson, my partner."

The woman let one end of the chain dangle to the floor. "Let me get this straight, your partner puts this chain around his chest, takes a deep breath and breaks the chain—like this!"

The lady superintendent put one foot on the end of the chain, gripped it about three feet from the floor and heaved. The chain snapped in two.

"Like that?"

Johnny looked steadily at the Amazon. "Like that!"

"It's a phoney," the superintendent said. "I never read the book and I broke the chain without half trying. It's got a weak link or something."

"Goodbye," said Johnny and opened the door. He went through, descended the stairs to Sixteenth Street. He had lost twenty-five cents on the deal and Sam Cragg was still at the Forty-fifth Street Hotel in his underwear.

CHAPTER IV

HE TOOK a subway back to Times Square and arrived there with a net of forty cents in his pocket. It was almost lunch time and he had had only a light breakfast. But lunch would take practically all of the forty cents and a man needs *some* capital.

On a sudden impulse he went to the battery of telephone books in the basement of the Times Building and looked up the address of the Mariota Record Company.

He climbed to the street and walked briskly through the traffic of Forty-second Street to Lexington Avenue.

The offices of the Mariota Record Company were on the twenty-second floor of a tall building. Johnny rode up in the elevator and entered a reception room all furnished in soft leather and mahogany paneling.

A receptionists who should have been in a Sam Goldwyn line-up, looked through a little glass window.

"Like to see the boss," Johnny said, cheerfully.

"Who?"

"The boss, the head man—the king bee."

"What's his name?"

Johnny grinned. "That was supposed to be my question."

The girl looked at him with some disdain. "You expect to see the boss, just like that, and you don't even know his name. Did you ever hear of an appointment?"

"Yes, it's what you have to have to get a haircut these days."

"It's also what you need to see *anyone* around here."

"Okay," said Johnny. "Give me one of them—now."

"A character, aren't you?"

"Baby," Johnny said, "did anyone ever tell you you ought to be in the movies?"

"Oh, my God," exclaimed the receptionist. "What a corny line! The answer is no—no, you don't get an appointment, no, I'm not interested in having lunch with you—no, right down the line."

"I'll start over," said Johnny. "Marjorie Fair sent me. Does that get

me in?"

The girl looked at him steadily, closed the window and made a connection on her switchboard. She spoke into the mouthpiece, broke the connection and opened the window.

"Mr. Armstrong will see you." She pressed a buzzer that unlocked the door leading into the inner offices. Johnny went through and found himself behind the receptionist. "Last door on the left."

There was a large general office, containing eight or ten desks and beyond, a row of offices. Johnny found Mr. Armstrong's office had gold lettering on a paneled door. It read: *Mr. Charles Armstrong*, Vice President. Which meant nothing; anybody could be a vice president.

THE door was closed and Johnny pushed it open without knocking. A sandy-haired man who looked like a fugitive from a T.B. sanitarium got up from behind a huge mahogany desk. He looked inquiringly at Johnny.

Johnny smiled and seated himself in an armchair near the desk.

Armstrong frowned. "You said Miss Marjorie Fair sent you."

"You know her?"

"Of course I know her. She used to work here."

"Doing what?"

Armstrong exclaimed. "See here, what's this all about?"

"She's dead."

For a moment Armstrong's jaw went slack; then he seated himself slowly in his huge swivel chair.

"Murdered," Johnny added.

Armstrong flinched. "W-when . . . ?"

"This morning. She was . . . strangled."

"Good Lord," cried Armstrong. Then he shot a sudden look at Johnny. "Did the police get the . . . the—"

"The man who did the choking?" Johnny grunted. "Why do you think *I'm* here?"

"Marj . . . Miss Fair left our employment six months ago," Armstrong said, then did a sudden "take." "I say," you don't think *I*—uh—know anything about . . . ?"

"Do you?"

Before Armstrong could reply the phone on his desk rang. He picked it up automatically. "Yes . . ." He shot a quick look at Johnny, then said into the phone. "Send him in." He hung up and looked sharply at Johnny.

"Are you a policeman?" he demanded.

"Would I be here asking questions if I weren't?"

There was a knock on the door. Armstrong called, "Come in." and a man who was either a detective or a bookie entered the office.

Armstrong got to his feet. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name?"

"Kowal," said the newcomer. "Sergeant Kowal."

"With Rook?" Johnny asked.

"Why, yes."

Johnny clapped the detective's shoulder, the patronizing pat of the superior officer, "Good man, Rook."

"I don't think I know—" Sergeant Kowal began.

"Carry on," Johnny said. Then, to Armstrong: "I'll let the sergeant get the details, Mr. Armstrong. I'd appreciate your co-operating with him."

He patted Kowal's shoulder again and left the office. After he had closed the door, he began walking very fast to the exit.

But as he started to open the door leading to the reception room, he stopped by the receptionist. "Something I forgot to ask Armstrong," he said, "is he the e m p l o y m e n t manager here . . . ?"

"Oh, no, he's one of our vice-presidents."

"That's what I thought. Then, why—when I said that Miss Fair sent me here, did you refer me to Mr. Armstrong . . . instead of one of the other vice-presidents?"

"Why, because—" The receptionist caught herself. "There was no reason."

"No?" Johnny asked insinuatingly.

"No—positively!"

Johnny stepped through the door and let it swing shut behind him. Outside the offices he hurried down to the nineteenth floor by the staircase, then caught an elevator which deposited him swiftly in the building lobby.

CHAPTER V

HE WALKED west on 42nd Street, jingling the forty cents in his pocket and thinking: "I've got to make a stake."

He walked past a phonograph record shop, then turned and went back. He entered the store. "What's the latest Con Carson record?" he asked a clerk.

"*Chapel in the Subway,* and a pip!"

"Oh, I've got *Chapel in the Subway and a pip,*" Johnny said, carelessly and wondered why the clerk gave him a dirty look. "There's a later one than that. *Moon on the Desert,* or something like that."

"No such record."

"Mariota Records," Johnny said positively. "Look and see, will you?"

The clerk did not bulge. "Wrong, buddy. Con Carson was with Continental. We got 'em all—forty-some pieces. I *know.*"

"So you know. Well, *I* know Carson recorded a number called *Moon on the Desert,* for Mariota. . . ."

"Five'll get you ten you don't know what you're talking about."

"Twenty'll get you ten I'm right!"

The clerk signaled to one of his colleagues. "Sid, this guy says Con Carson waxed a ditty called *Moon on the Desert* for Mariota Records."

The number two boy smirked, "What's the bet?"

"He's laying me twenty to ten," Johnny said.

"You lose," said the second clerk.

Johnny pointed to a phone. "Call Mariota Records."

The first clerk hesitated. "Is that a bet?"

"You're laying me twenty to ten."

"I said ten to five."

Johnny pointed at the second clerk. "You want the same?"

"It's a sucker bet," exclaimed the second clerk. "But if you insist on giving me the money . . . call Mariota, Joe."

Joe turned to a typed sheet pasted on the wall behind the telephone, ran his finger down to the M's and made his call. "To settle an argument," he said into the phone, "did Con Carson ever make a recording for Mariota Records? What . . . ?" His face fell. "Okay," thinks."

He hung up and looked at his fellow-worker. "He made a record for them just before he died."

The second clerk recoiled. "W-what was the name?"

"*Moon on the Desert,*" said Johnny. The first clerk nodded a glum confirmation. "All right, sports," Johnny went on, "dig down."

The two record clerks exchanged glances. Then the one called Sid exclaimed, "It ain't been released yet, has it?"

Joe shook his head. "No, but—" Then he got his colleague's drift and, brightening, whirled on Johnny. "Wise guy, huh, you come in here with advance information."

"Advance information, hell," Johnny

snapped. "Con Carson was killed a month ago. You boys are in the business—if *you* don't know about Carson making a record for Mariota, who should know? Me? I don't even know how a record's made.'

"Scram, buddy," Joe snarled. "Get—"

Johnny placed both of his palms on the glass counter. "Ten bucks apiece, boys."

"You hear what he said," Sid cut in. "Beat it, if you know what's good for you."

"Twenty bucks is good for me, Johnny said. "Twen'y bucks or this counter gets busted . . ."

AN OLDER man came mooching along behind the counter. "Here, what's going on."

"A con game, Mr. Bezzerides," Joe whined. "This slicker comes into the store and tries to get me and Sid—"

"I came in to buy a record," Johnny said coldly, "and *this*—this *clerk*," pointing at Joe, "started making cracks about how bright I wasn't. He insisted on betting me that Con Carson never made a record for Mariota Records."

"He didn't," said Mr. Bezzerides. The two clerks winced.

"That's what *they* said. They insisted on betting me ten to five that I was wrong and then . . ." He stopped and looked at the two clerks. They were on the verge of letting Mr. Bezzerides walk into the trap. But Johnny needed an ally. He said:

"He made one just before he was killed. They telephoned the Mariota people."

Bezzerides scowled. "So you got took, eh?"

"It's a game," Sid cried. "He tricked us—like he almost did you."

"I?" Bezzerides was indignant. "You never saw *me* fall for any stunt like that. Teach you boys a lesson—you made a bet, pay the man."

"I'll settle for ten bucks cash," said Johnny.

It was a mistake. Joe took three dollars out of his pocket. "That's all the dough I got in the world. I haven't even got lunch money left over."

"I on'y got two bucks," Sid chimed in. He turned sidewards and took some money surreptitiously out of the far pocket.

"Ten bucks," Johnny snapped.

"Let them off for the five," Mr. Bezzerides said, relenting.

"Three apiece," Johnny insisted.

Sid dug up another dollar. Johnny collected the six singles, winked at the trio of music-shop men and walked out.

"A guy could make a living doing that," Johnny thought jubilantly as he continued his promenade down 42nd Street.

He tried it again near Sixth Avenue. It didn't work. The clerk was indifferent to Con Carson. One on Seventh Avenue and 43rd Street was a Con Carson fan and gave Johnny a bit of an argument, but wouldn't go for the bet. So Johnny gave it up. It's hard to repeat a good thing.

But he had $6.40 now—only $5.80 short of retrieving Sam's suit, including the $1.20 interest.

CHAPTER VI

THE maid had knocked three times and had been told each time that Sam was still abed. The fourth time around she didn't bother to knock. She just let herself in with her pass-key. Sam pulled the bedcovers up to his chin.

"I'm still in bed!"

"I got eyes, ain't I?" the maid retorted. "But I cleaned every room on this floor and now I'm gonna clean this one, or else."

"Just leave some towels," Sam said.

"I ain't comin' back later," the maid warned.

"It's all right," Sam said. "You c'n pass up the cleanin' this time. I'm not feeling so well and my room-mate told me to stay in bed."

The maid sniffed, but left the towels and went off. Sam got out of bed and went to the window. Someone was taking flashlight pictures in the room across the air-shaft.

The door resounded to a heavy fist. Sam bounded back into bed. "What is it?"

A man opened the door. "This is the day we disinfect," he said.

"Go 'way," Sam cried. "Can't you see I'm still in bed?"

"I know, but we on'y do this once a month and if we pass up one time the bugs get too thick. I gotta do it today, or else—"

"Get outta here!" Sam snarled.

The disinfectant man stood his ground until Sam threw back the bedcovers and got to his feet. The disinfectant man took one look at Sam's size and beat it, slamming the door urgently.

Two minutes later the waiter came to retrieve the breakfast dishes and banged the dirty dishes around when he failed to find a tip on the tray.

Five minutes later the houseman knocked; he wanted to do the bi-weekly vacuuming. Sam sent him off mumbling to himself. He was gone about four minutes, when somebody knocked again. Sam swore a mighty oath and heedless of consequences, strode trouserless to the door. He whipped it open.

"What the hell's going on here today?" he roared.

Eddie Miller looked up at him. "Hello, Mr. Cragg," he said, easily.

"You, Eddie," Sam snapped. "Is this the Grand Central Depot, or something? Everybody and his uncle and aunt have been banging on this door today."

"Well, the people have to do their work."

"Even when a guest don't want them in his room?"

"This is a dump, Mr. Cragg. It ain't like one of the big hotels where they have their own staff. We get the disinfectant people in from outside. They only come once a month and give the joint a quick once-over. This hotel don't encourage guests to stay in their rooms all day. Uses up electricity and such."

"But I'm sick today. Can't a sick man stay in his bed if he wants to?"

"You don't look sick."

Sam returned to the bed and sat down on it. He forced a hollow cough. "I may have to stay in bed all day."

EDDIE came into the room, glancing into the bathroom as he passed. He even tried to peek into the closet, but the door was closed to within an inch or so. Eddie leaned against the wall near the closet.

"Look, Mr. Cragg, my job ain't a lot of fun. It's scheming all day long to squeeze a dime or a quarter out of some tightwad guest. You got to work just as hard around here for a thin dime as you'd have to in a big hotel for a buck. The only fun is when you and Mr. Fletcher are here and you're broke, which is the only time you're here. It's fun when Mr. Fletcher works over Peabody, damn his guts. I'm on your side, you know, but I like to know what's going on."

"Nothing's going on."

"A guest was murdered here today and you're in on it."

"We are not!"

"Then why'd Mr. Fletcher try to pump me when he left the hotel?"

Sam leaped to his feet. "He promised me he wasn't going to get mixed in anything."

Eddie Miller reached out his left hand, slipped the fingers into the crack of the closet door and eased the door open.

"Also, how come you aren't dressed yet today? It's twelve o'clock and—" Eddie peered into the empty closet.

"I told you I'm sick."

"You've never been sick a day in your life." Boldly Eddie Miller swung open the closet door. "Where's your suit?"

"It's down at the tailor's getting pressed."

"That's a helluva note," said Eddie. "Keeping a guest waiting like this." He started across the room. "I'll call 'em and tell 'em what's what."

Sam Cragg snatched the phone away from Eddie's reaching hand. "I just called them a minute ago."

"I'll call 'em again."

"Cut it out, Eddie," Sam snarled.

Eddie's eyes suddenly lit up. "So that's how he raised the dough this morning!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The ten bucks Mr. Fletcher paid on the rent. He hocked your suit, didn't he?"

Sam reseated himself on the bed and groaned. "Peabody was gonna lock us out this noon."

Eddie Miller drew a deep breath. "That's one of the best ones I've ever heard—he pawned your suit and now you've got to stay in bed until he makes a stake. Boy, oh, boy!"

"Keep your trap shut about it," Sam snapped.

"Oh, don't worry about me, Mr. Cragg. I only wish you'd tell me how he gets the money when he *does* make the stake."

"He's out now, trying to put the bite on the fellow from who we buy our books."

"How come he didn't do that before pawning your suit?"

"He tried—Mort wasn't around."

THERE was a knock on the door, a gentle, but determined knock. Eddie Miller looked questioningly at Sam. The latter shrugged and called:

"Come in!"

The door opened and Susan Fair stepped into the room. Sam took one glance at her and threw himself into the bed, dragging the covers up over his chest.

"For the love of—"

"My name is Susan Fair," the girl said. "You've . . . heard . . . about my sister?"

Sam looked in alarm at Eddie Miller. The bell captain eased himself gently past Susan. "Excuse me, Miss," he said, smoothly, "I've got to leave."

He went out, closing the door and leaving Sam and Susan Fair alone. Susan came forward. "My sister was murdered," she said stiffly.

"Yeah, I know," Sam said.

Susan looked past Sam through the window, across to the room where her sister had met her doom. "You were her closest neighbor," she said. "You must have seen a lot of her these past few weeks, when . . ." She stopped.

"I never talked to her," Sam said.

"But living so close, with the windows. You couldn't have helped but look across now and then."

"Yeah, sure. I saw her through the window, lots of times. Only . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, Johnny and me—we ain't been doin' much with girls lately . . ."

"Johnny is your roommate? I understand there are two of you living here?"

"Yeah. Johnny's my sidekick. We

been together for years."

"I'm sorry you're ill."

"Oh, I ain't . . . I mean, yeah . . . I ain't feelin' so good, so I thought I'd stay in bed today."

Susan Fair seated herseif on the threadbare mohair-covered chair. "My sister and I were very close, until she came to New York a year ago. She had a beautiful voice."

"Yeah? I never heard her sing."

"She wrote that she was doing very well," Susan Fair continued, "but her letters became fewer and fewer and it seemed to me lately that she—she was holding things back. So I came here." She stopped, while her lips were pressed tightly together. Then she said softly: "I was too late . . . too late, by minutes."

Sam cleared his throat awkwardly. "Your sister was a good-lookin' babe—uh—I mean girl."

"She was beautiful! And she was . . . good."

CHAPTER VII

JOHNNY tapped the thin pad of check blanks on the counter. "Now, let me get this straight," he said to the teller. "These checks cost me ten cents apiece, whether I write them for fifty cents or fifty dollars."

The teller shook his head. "You've started a Ten-Plan account with this bank; that means you don't need any minimum balance in the bank, but naturally your checks will only be honored to the extent of your deposit. In other words, you've got $5.00 in our bank. We'll honor your checks up to a total of five dollars, whether it's in one check or in ten. . . ."

"Okay," said Johnny.

The teller looked after him, a worried frown creasing his forehead. That was the trouble with this Ten-Plan business —you got undesirable people to open checking accounts.

On Seventh Avenue, Johnny walked a block and a half and entered a haberdashery. He tried on a few hats and finally decided on one for $4.95. When it came to paying for the hat, he searched his pockets and exclaimed, "Doggone, I forgot to bring some money with me. But how about a check . . .?" He pulled out his pad of Ten-Plan checks.

The clerk shrugged. "For the amount of the purchase."

Johnny nodded and wrote out a check for $4.95 and left the store wearing the hat. In the same block he went into a music shop and bought a harmonica for $4.50. The man who ran the store fingered Johnny's check and finally picked up the phone. "Mind?"

Johnny shook his head.

The music shop man called the bank, found that Johnny's account would stand a $4.50 check. Johnny left the store with the harmonica, annoyed. He couldn't stand another phone call to the bank.

He walked over to Eighth Avenue and entered a shop that had three gold balls hanging over the door. Uncle Ben, a very youthful Uncle Ben, grunted when he saw Johnny.

"You want the suit back?"

"Well, not yet," said Johnny. "As a matter of fact, I need a little more money." He took the fedora off his head. "Brand new."

"You wore it, it's second hand. Fifty cents."

"Cut it out," Johnny cried. "I just paid $9.50 for it a couple of days ago."

"And the price tag inside says $4.95. I'll allow you seventy-five cents—no more."

Johnny brought out the harmonica. It was still in the box. "What about this?"

"Say," exclaimed Uncle Ben. "Are you shop-lifting?"

Johnny glowered. "How much?"

"Same's the hat—six bits."

"Uncle Ben," said Johnny sadly, "I've got a watch in a hock shop in Duluth, Minnesota, a genuine diamond ring in a little spot in Pocatello, Idaho, an overcoat in Kansas City, snowshoes in Tucson, Arizona."

"It's a tough world," sympathized Uncle Ben.

"It's guys like you that make it tough. What I'm saying is, I'm a man who's had experience with pawnbrokers. I know to a nickel what they should give on any object. But goddamit, you're the tightest, stingiest Uncle of all the uncles I've ever met in this great, big country of ours."

"Would I be in this business if I wasn't tight?" Uncle Ben exclaimed. "Somebody's got to run hock shops and there's gotta be some compensation, ain't there? I'll give you two bucks, not a red penny more."

"Make it three," Johnny pleaded.

Uncle Ben rang up No Sale on the cash register and took out two dollars and fifty cents.

JOHNNY carried the two dollars and fifty cents to his bank and deposited it along with the forty cents that he still had left. That gave him a balance of $7.90.

A jewelry store on Sixth Avenue received his patronage next. He emerged with a "shoful" wrist watch that had cost him $7.00, reduced from $9.95. The jeweler had not called the bank. In the same block he bought an overnight traveling bag—genuine leatherette, for $7.75. They, too, did not call the bank. That enabled Johnny to essay into another jewelry store and dicker for a plain band wedding ring. The jeweler reached for the phone and Johnny exploded.

"What kind of a crummy joint is this?" he cried. "Don't even trust a man for a cheap wedding ring. Here —" he thrust the purchase back at the jeweler. "Keep your ring." In high dudgeon he stalked out of the store.

But he couldn't chance it; the jeweler might call up the bank for spite. He took the suitcase and wrist watch to a pawnshop on Eighth Avenue—two blocks from Uncle Ben's. He realized $4.30 on them, which he took to his bank, giving him a balance now of $12.20.

And he still had six checks.

In the next two hours he increased his deposits to $94.00 and had bought his second book of Ten-Plan checks—using up every teller in the bank, as he thought it good policy not to repeat on the tellers.

It was now one o'clock and Johnny stopped in at the Automat and had a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee. With a stub of a pencil he figured out his financial status, or predicament, if you want to call it that.

He had $94.00 in the bank, and checks outstanding for $296.00. That meant he had to deposit $202.00 in the bank the following morning—if he wanted to remain out of jail. He had $16.00 in cash in his pocket . . . and $296.00 worth of merchandise in various pawnshops, which could be redeemed for $106.00 including interest. He could make it, with $4.00 left over.

He sorted out his pawn tickets and leaving the restaurant, engaged a taxicab. He rode in it to the various pawnshops, retrieved all of his pledged merchandise, then went to 59th Street and Columbus Circle and pledged the entire lot in another pawn shop for a total of $92.00. He paid off the taxicab from the four dollars he had had left before and going to his bank, withdrew all of

his money but $2.00. The teller who gave him the money counted it three times and still seemed hesitant about giving it to him, but finally did.

Johnny left the bank with $184 in his pocket, and crossed over to Lexington Avenue, where he opened a new Ten-Plan checking account, depositing $175. With this substantial amount he found it no trouble at all, within a half hour, to buy three wrist watches for $150, $125 and $125 respectively and in none of the three jewelry stores did they call up his bank. It's only when you're down in the $5.00 and $10.00 stores that they distrust you.

He pawned the three watches on Lexington Avenue for a total of $130, returned to his second bank and withdrew $150 from his account and got in just before three o'clock to a bank on Fifth Avenue, where he started a straight checking account and deposited $250, receiving a deposit book.

With thirty dollars cash still in his pocket, he took a taxicab across town and redeeming Sam's suit from Uncle Ben's, returned to the 45th Street Hotel.

CHAPTER VIII

EDDIE MILLER was standing just within the door of the hotel, staring gloomily out upon Forty-fifth Street. He brightened as Johnny came through the door.

"You made it!" he cried, indicating the suit in Johnny's hand.

"Made what?"

Eddie grinned. "You were just taking that suit out for an airing?"

"Naturally."

"It's okay, Mr. Fletcher, Sam Cragg told me. You hocked the suit this morning to keep Peabody from locking you out. You didn't have a dime, but in a couple of hours you raised enough dough to get the suit out of hock." He shook his head admiringly.

Johnny coughed and took his bank book out of his pocket. "I also raised a little money, over and above." He opened the book and let Eddie take a peek at the entry.

"Two hundred and fifty bucks!" Eddie cried. He stared at Johnny in fascination. "Mr. Fletcher, if I had what you've got I'd be a millionaire in a couple of years." In his admiration, he gripped Johnny's arm. "Tell me—how'd you get all that money?" A sudden thought struck him. "Or is the bank book a phoney?"

"I don't have to stoop to anything like that," Johnny said. He drew out a fat roll of bills—all ones, but Eddie couldn't see that for Johnny gave him just a glimpse. "I got a little small change, too."

"Oh, my God!"

Johnny winked and went into the hotel. Opening the door of Room 821, he found Sam Cragg seated on his bed, in the pose of The Thinker. He sprang to his feet when he saw the suit of clothes.

"You got it, Johnny!"

"Of course," Johnny said, indignantly. "I said I would, didn't I?"

"You put the bite on Mort?"

"Mort," Johnny said, sadly, "is out of business. He was evicted, for nonpayment of rent."

Johnny thought of the things he had been compelled to do, to get Sam's suit out of pawn. "That, Sam," he said, softly, shall remain a secret between God and me. . . ."

"Huh?"

Johnny tossed the suit on the bed. "Put it on and ask no questions. Your hairy legs offend me."

Sam slipped on his trousers. "More people seen those legs today!" He cocked his big head to one side. "Including a little lady, the likes of which

you've never seen." He indicated the window. "Her sister."

"I saw her through the window myself."

"*I* didn't see her through the window. She was here—sitting right in that chair you're sitting on."

"Susan Fair was in this room?"

Sam nodded. "That's what I said. She's even better-lookin' than her sister."

"What'd she want?"

"Talk, I guess, just talk. She didn't say. She's stayin' here in the hotel."

"What room?"

"Right above us, nine twenty-one. Uh—she said she'd like to talk to you, too."

JOHNNY got up and started for the door. With his hand on the knob he turned. "You said a lot of people saw your bare legs today . . . who else besides Miss Fair?"

"Well, Peabody and the copper, this morning and then while you were gone about a million people came in here."

"Who?"

"The maid and the disinfectant man and the vacuum man and the man from the disinfect . . . say, he was here twice." Sam screwed up his face. "That's funny, come to think of it, it wasn't the same guy . . . the second fellow, I mean."

"What'd he look like?"

"He wasn't wearing overalls, like the first fellow."

"Then how'd you know who he was?"

"He *said* he was from the disinfecting company. I was sore, they kept coming in here, one after the other, so when this guy opened the door, I threw the telephone book at him."

"But what did he look like?"

"I didn't notice. He was—just a guy."

"Sam," said Johnny, "all you did was throw a phone book at the man who killed Marjorie Fair . . ."

Sam blinked. *"W-what?"*

Johnny stepped through the door and closed it behind him. He went to the staircase, climbed to the ninth floor and knocked on the door of Room 921.

"Yes?" called a voice inside.

"Johnny Fletcher," Johnny called. "I understand you wanted to see me."

The door was opened by Susan Fair. For once, Johnny thought, Sam is right; she *is* more attractive than her sister.

"Will you come in?"

Johnny stepped into the room, that was a duplicate of his own, except that it contained only one bed, instead of two. He turned, saw Susan start to leave the door ajar, then close it. In Iowa, you kept a hotel door open when you had a male visitor. She had started to do that, then remembered she was now in New York.

She came into the room. "Won't you sit down?"

Johnny seated himself, but Susan Fair remained standing. Her face was drawn and her eyes were bright, but otherwise she showed no undue strain. Yet Johnny sensed that she was fighting to control herself.

"I'm sorry about your sister," he said, lamely.

SHE made a gesture, accepting the condolence. "I'm going to see that the person who did it is punished. I'm having her — her body sent home, but I'm going to stay here until . . . until . . . " She stopped, on the verge of breaking down.

Johnny said: "The New York Police Department is the finest in the world. They'll take care of—"

"No!"

There was so much vehemence in the word that Johnny looked at her sharply.

"I'm going to get him myself. I'm

going to make him pay."

Johhny got to his feet. "Go back to Iowa, Miss—"

"I talked to Doug, long distance," Susan went on. "He's flying here. Together—"

"Doug?" Johnny asked.

"Doug Esbenshade. Peggy's fiance."

Johnny seated himself again. "You mean your sister was engaged to marry a man back in Iowa?"

"Yes!"

"But I thought—"

"She wanted a year, to see what she could do with her voice. Doug was willing to let her try. The year was up—a month ago."

"And she didn't go back?"

"She even stopped writing. That was why—why I came here. We got worried. The family, Doug—"

"Your father and mother are both living?"

"Oh, yes. I—I couldn't tell them. That's why I phoned Doug. He's telling them."

Johnny looked down at his hands, then up at the smart beige suit that Susan was wearing. "Your family is not . . . well, poor?"

"Why, no. Dad's got a small business."

"This Doug?"

"He's one of the richest men in Des Moines. His father owned a big department store. He died two years ago. Doug was the only son."

Johnny shook his head. "I don't understand it." As Susan looked at him, puzzled, "Your family isn't poor, your sister's fiance has a mil—well, a lot of money . . . yet . . . she was being locked out for non-payment of rent."

Susan stared at Johnny for a moment, then exclaimed poignantly. "So *that* was it. That's why she wouldn't come back, why she stopped writing. Her money was gone and she — she didn't want anyone back home to know. It was just like Peggy. She was so proud she would die, before she'd admit—"

Neither Johnny or Susan knew that Marjorie Fair had planned just that.

Johnny said: "Did your sister write you—I mean, before she stopped writing altogether—of her life in New York?"

"Oh, yes, she wrote two and three times a week. She told me everything, what she did, the people she met."

"You knew then that she worked for the Mariota Record Company?"

"Yes, she took the job for the contacts. Her ambition was—" Susan stopped and looked sharply at Johnny. "Your roommate told me you'd never talked to Peggy."

"I didn't."

"Then how do you know so much about Peggy?"

"I went over to the Mariota Record Company this morning."

"Why?"

JOHNNY hesitated. "This morning . . . the police lieutenant came into my room and questioned me. He seemed to think I was the logical person to have kil—I mean, he intimated that *I* was under suspicion, so when I happened to be in the neighborhood of the Mariota offices I went in."

"What did you find out?"

"That she had worked there and had left six months ago."

"I could have told you that."

"But I didn't know you this morning."

Susan Fair looked down at Johnny, her forehead creased in thought. Finally, she said: "Mr. Fletcher, what is your business—what do you do for a living?"

Johnny shrugged. "I'm a book salesman."

"And the big man who lives with you?"

"He's my assistant."

"He's sick?"

"Why, no. He—he just felt like staying in bed today."

Susan drew a deep breath. "I'm going to talk frankly, Mr. Fletcher. When Lieutenant Rook and the hotel manager returned to Peggy's room this morning after talking to you they said . . some things about you."

"I can imagine."

"What is a hustler?"

Johnny grinned faintly. "Which one called me that—Peabody?"

"No, the police lieutenant."

Johnny coughed gently. "The term hustler is a rather loose one. Generally, it means a man who lives—well, without working. Working, at a regular job."

"Well, how do you make your living, then?"

"The New York hustler, and there are hundreds of them around Times Square alone, ekes out a miserable existence by small-time sharp-shooting. He steers suckers to floating crap games, he collects a few bets on the numbers game, he touts on horse races, he knows where to get you a bottle of Scotch—for a price. He makes a buck where he can." Johnny shook his head. "I never thought of myself as a hustler. I'm a book salesman, probably the best in the country . . ."

"Yet, Mr. Peabody said you owed three weeks room rent, even now."

"So did your sister." Johnny got to his feet, smiled at Susan Fair and left the room.

Down in Room 821, Sam Cragg, dressed for the street, was waiting for Johnny Fletcher. He was feeling quite chipper. "A guy don't appreciate clothes until he hasn't got any. I never felt so naked in my life as I did today. Especially, when that good-lookin' babe was here."

"Weren't you in bed?"

"Yeah, but I kept thinkin' about the pants I wasnt' wearing. Uh, what'd you think of her?"

"She doesn't like me, on account of Peabody told her I was a hustler."

"That Peabody," growled Sam. "C'n you imagine he was goin' to lock out this girl's sister? Some day that guy's going to give me an opportunity and he's going to take a good long vacation from locking people out of their rooms."

JOHNNY went to Sam's bed and threw back the covers. He grunted as he retrieved the metal phonograph record. "Like to hear this, Sam?"

"Yeah sure, but how're we going to play it when we ain't got a phonograph?"

"They've got them in stores, haven't they?"

Johnny picked up an old *Saturday Evening Post,* slipped the record between the pages and headed for the door. Sam followed.

Down in the lobby, Peabody scowled at them from behind the desk. Johnny went up.

"I say, there's a little balance I owe you, isn't there?"

"You know very well there is," Peabody said, sourly.

"How much is it?"

"Twenty-four dollars and sixty-five cents."

"Oh, is that all?"

"It's enough," Peabody said, sarcastically. "And don't tell me you've got the money to pay it."

Johnny drew a wallet out of his breast pocket and opened it about an eighth of an inch. "Damn!" he exclaimed. "I forgot to get some cash, when I was at the bank . . . A check be all right?"

"And what would I do with one of your checks?"

Johnny made a clucking sound with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Have I ever given you rubber?"

He drew a bank book out of his pocket, put it flat on the desk and moved it daintily toward Mr. Peabody with his little finger. Mr. Peabody sniffed and picked up the book. Then he almost swallowed his false teeth.

"Two hundred and fifty dollars!"

"Just a small account I started at a nearby bank, for convenience," said Johnny, carelessly.

"This is ridiculous," cried Peabody, "this morning you didn't have—"

"I told you last week, I had a remittance coming from home."

"Remittance! Home! You haven't got a home!"

"I resent that." With a flourish, Johnny drew out his checkbook, the one from the bank where he had the straight commercial account. Sam Cragg suddenly poked his elbow. "Nix, Johnny!" he whispered hoarsely.

Johnny ignored his friend and reached for the pen on the desk. "I better make this out for a hundred, so I'll have enough cash for the evening."

Mr. Peabody regarded him sullenly. "The bank's closed for business, but it's only four-thirty and it so happens that I know one of the tellers at this bank. Do you still want to give me a check?"

"Why, of course."

"All right," said Peabody, "make it out—but wait a minute."

JOHNNY yawned and leaned his elbow on the desk. Across the lobby, Eddie Miller was watching him, like a ferret peering down a rathole.

Mr. Peabody stepped into his office, behind the desk. He closed the door.

"He's calling the bank," Sam exclaimed to Johnny.

"Naturally."

"He'll find out, Johnny."

"Natch."

"But we ain't got any money in that bank—not there or in any other bank."

"Are you sure, Sam? I'm under the impression that we have accounts in three different banks."

"Aw, cut it out, Johnny!"

Mr. Peabody came out of his office, his face rather red. "You just started that account this afternoon."

"That's what I said."

Mr. Peabody picked up the check that Johnny had made out. He looked at it, snapped the paper, half expecting it to stretch, then shaking his head and mumbling under his breath, he stepped to the cash drawer. He gave Johnny seventy-five dollars and thirty-five cents.

"You realize, of course, Mr. Fletcher," he said, "that I told my friend not to permit you to withdraw your account until this check is cleared."

"From you, Mr. Peabody," Johnny said, pleasantly, "I expected that."

He picked up his money and turned away from the desk. He continued counting the money, all the way through the lobby—for Eddie Miller's benefit.

As soon as they had gone through the revolving door, onto the sidewalk, Sam gripped Johnny's arm. "Johnny—where'd you get the roll?"

"I raised it."

"Yeah—but how?"

"Do you really want to know?"

Sam looked into Johnny's rather grim face and suddenly shook his head. "No, no, I guess I'd rather not know. I worry." He cleared his throat. "Will there be cops around?"

"No," said Johnny. But under his breath, he added, "If I don't break a leg tomorrow."

CHAPTER IX

THERE was a big phonograph store on Seventh Avenue. Johnny and Sam entered and were met by a suave salesman. "Like to see one of your console models," Johnny said pleasantly.

The salesman led them to a mahogany machine. "Here's one of the best instruments on the market—it's a high frequency model with long and short wave bands and the finest tone it has ever been your pleasure to hear."

"Will it play a phonograph record?" Johnny asked.

The salesman smiled at Johnny's apparent flippancy. "My dear sir, this is the ultimate—the machine of tomorrow. It sells for twelve hundred dollars."

"That much? Mmm. Could I hear it?"

"Of course. The same machine is in this booth here. What would you like to hear?"

"Oh, something with violins, Beethoven, or perhaps Rachmaninoff — no, no, Tschaikowsky."

The salesman smiled vacantly, led them to the booth, then went out. Sam snorted.

"Twelve hundred dollars, Johnny! Please . . . !"

"I like a good tone with long and short wave bands, Sam."

The salesman returned with a handful of records. Johnny took them. "Mind if *I* play them? After all, I've got to learn how to operate it myself."

"If you wish, sir. I'll be out in the showroom."

The salesman went out.

Johnny removed the Con Carson recording from between the pages of his magazine and placed it on the twelve hundred dollar machine. He flicked a switch or two and the phonograph arm came down on the record touching it gently.

Sam seated himself on a leather-covered chair and relaxed to enjoy the latest—and last—Con Carson recording. A voice Johnny had heard too many times began moaning about the glorious moon on the desert. The lyrics were silly, the melody moved Johnny not at all and the voice, well, a hundred million people had gone wild over Con Carson, so it was probably Johnny who was wrong.

When Carson finished his moaning, Sam relaxed in ecstasy.

"That guy sure sends me!"

"He makes me sick, too," Johnny said, in disgust. "As an authority on the late, great moaner, Sam, would you say this piece of caterwauling was up to his usual standard?"

"One of the best songs he ever sung," Sam said, fervently.

"In the groove, eh?"

"And how!"

Johnny took the record off the turntable and stared at the other side. "Only one side's been—" He stopped. "Maybe I'm wrong—it's grooved like the other side, but theres' no label." He shrugged and placed the platter down on the machine, the second side up. He flicked the switches and Con Carson began warbling again, the same *Moon on the Desert.*

Johnny reached to shut off the machine, then with his finger on the switch, stopped. Carson was still singing *Moon on the Desert,* but another voice had cut into his song, a voice that spoke a single, harsh sentence in a whisper, a passionate whisper. It said: "Damn you, Seebright!"

In spite of the interruption, Con Carson's voice continued, full and throaty, to the end. Johnny shut off the machine.

"They must have been practicing on

that side," Sam said.

JOHNNY put the platter back in the *Saturday Evening Post* and opened the door of the sound-proof booth. Immediately, the suave salesman pounced on him.

"A great instrument," Johnny said.

"Splendid," agreed the salesman.

"The best I've ever heard," said Johnny. "But what I really came in for, though, was a package of needles."

"A package of—" the salesman began, then his jaw fell open.

"Needles. You know, the old-fashioned kind, a hundred for a dime."

The salesman was attacked by a choleric fit of coughing. "Okay," said Johnny, "if you don't want my trade I'll take it elsewhere." He headed for the door, Sam dancing along beside him, anxious to get out before the salesman could recover.

Outside, Johnny looked down Seventh Avenue. A big clock on the next corner read four-fifty. On a sudden impulse he thrust the magazine containing the record at Sam. "Guard this with your life, Sam," he said.

"Where you going?" Sam asked in surprise.

"I'm gonna buy a girl a drink." He thrust a hand into his pocket, whipped out money and handed a couple of bills to Sam. "I'll be back in an hour or two. Don't let that record out of your hands—understand?"

"Yeah, but—"

Johnny popped across the sidewalk to a taxicab parked at the curb, tore open the door and stepped inside. "Lexington and 42nd," he told the driver, "and whip up the horses . . ."

"This time of the day?" sneered the cabby. "You'd go quicker walking across town."

Nevertheless he made a fast U turn and scooted into the eastbound one-way crosstown street. He roared through to Sixth Avenue—beg pardon, *Avenue of the Americas,* and got caught by the lights. Five minutes later he was still stalled at Fifth Avenue. When he finally got through and then became tangled at Madison Avenue, Johnny threw a crumpled dollar bill at the driver and got out of the cab.

It was ten minutes after five when he entered the big building on Forty-Second Street. He headed for an elevator, stepped inside, then leaped out again as he saw the receptionist of the Mariota Record Company walk past the elevator, having apparently just come out of the adjoining elevator.

THERE was a man with her, a sleek smooth man wearing a two hundred dollar suit. There was a fresh carnation in the lapel buttonhole.

"Darling!" Johnny cried. "I almost missed you."

The receptionist whirled, started to give Johnny the freeze, then changed her mind. "Well," she said, "it's you again!"

"In person, sweetheart. And I'm going to buy you a drink before you crawl down into your cozy little Lexington Avenue local."

"A drink," the receptionist said. "But that's just what I was going to have with Mr. Doniger. Oh—Mr. Doniger, this is Mr. . . . Mr. . . ." she snapped her fingers as if Johnny's name was eluding her.

"Fletcher," Johnny said. "You oughtta do something about that memory of yours."

Doniger extended a fat, limp, well-manicured hand. "H'arya," he said, with an utter lack of enthusiam.

"Mr. Fletcher," the girl went on pointedly, "is the man I was telling you about, Mr. Doniger . . . the man who was up to see Mr. Armstrong this

morning."

Under that direct coaching, Doniger suddenly showed a little animation.

"Ah, yes, Fletcher, yes, yes."

'Yes," said Johnny. He winked at the girl. "Speaking of memory, damned if mine isn't playing tricks on me. Don't tell me, now. It'll come to me in just a second."

"Violet Rodgers, spelled with a D, for no particular reason."

"Violet," exclaimed Johnny. "I knew I'd get it. Violet Rodgers. And that drink—"

"We'd love to," said Violet sweetly. "Right over there in the Commodore."

They got a little round table at the Commodore and Violet ordered a Scotch and soda and drank the Scotch straight, in one gulp. Mr. Doniger sipped at a martini and Johnny got himself a daiquiri, just to be different.

"That was cute, this morning, Mr. Fletcher," Violet said, "your pretending to be a detective."

"Call me Johnny," said Johnny.

"It was still cute, Johnny." Violet caught the waiter's eye, made a circular signal with her index finger, indicating another round of the same.

"I thought so," Johnny said, modestly.

"Just because a girl once works in a place is no reason the police should be around all day," groused Mr. Doniger. "Kept the office in an uproar all day."

"A vice-president?" Johnny asked.

"Sales manager," Doniger replied.

"You look like a vice-president," Johnny said.

"You ought to see the president," Violet offered. "He looks like a janitor in his Sunday suit."

"What's his name?"

"Seebright, Orville Seebright."

Damn you, Seebright, the voice had whispered on the Con Carson record.

Johnny said: "Who's Mariota?"

Doniger blinked. "Mariota?"

"Mariota Record Company . . ."

Violet snickered. "I told you he was good, Mr. Doniger, didn't I? 'Who's Mariota?' Ha-ha-ha!"

"There's no one named Mariota," Doniger growled. "It's just a name."

"It must be *somebody's* name—or the name of something," Johnny persisted.

"It isn't the name of anybody, or anything."

"Then why's the company named Mariota Record Company?"

Doniger scowled. "I never asked."

Violet shook her head as Johnny looked at her questioningly. "I've only been with the company three years."

"Well, I'd like to know who Mariota is."

THE second round of drinks came. Violet threw her ounce of Scotch at her tonsils, again without benefit of the soda. Then she glowered at Johnny.

"Now, look here, Johnny Fletcher, we've played along with you, but we can't stay here all night, listening to you make with the words."

"Who, me?"

"Yes, you. Out with it—who the devil are you and what did you want with Mr. Armstrong this morning?"

"Armstrong's worried?"

Doniger suddenly banged a masterful fist on the little round table, causing Johnny's second daiquiri to spill out some precious drops. "Cut it out, Fletcher, you're making me mad."

"All right," said Johnny. "I'll come clean. Marjorie Fair worked for your company—how long?"

"Just a couple of months."

"She only took the job because she thought she could get into radio," Violet said tartly. "And all the time she was in the office she was playing up to someone."

"Mr. Armstrong, for instance?"

"He was—" Violet caught her elf. "You're at it again—you pretend you're going to say something and you switch it into a question."

"For the last time, Fletcher," Doniger warned through his teeth.

Johnny regarded the sleek one coolly. "When are you releasing the Con Carson record?"

The effect of that simple question was no more than if Johnny had suddenly handed Doniger a hale and hearty masculine rattlesnake.

"Wh-what!" he gasped. "What was that?"

"The Con Carson record—where are you releasing it?"

Doniger's fat chin trembled a few times more before he was able to finally control it. "How do you know we—we have a Con Carson record?"

"Fella in a record shop."

"What record shop?" Violet asked.

Johnny shrugged expressively. "Oh, somewhere around." He smiled brightly. "I'm an old Con Carson fan, you know, and I was asking if a new Con Carson platter wasn't about due."

"Carson's dead," Doniger said flatly. "Every Carson fan in creation knows that."

"Sure, but he made some recordings before he shoved off, didn't he?"

"It so happens," Doniger said slowly, "that Carson signed a deal with Mariota just two days before he took off on that last trip of his. That's known around the trade—to a certain extent. It isn't known that Carson actually cut a platter for us . . ."

"A piece called *Moon on the Desert?*"

Doniger shuddered. "H-how do you know the title?"

"I'll trade you," said Johnny. "You tell me about Marjorie Fair and I might tell—"

DONIGER shuddered again. "I don't know anything about Marjorie Fair; she was a girl who worked in our office, a typist. I didn't know her any better than I know any of the other girls in the office."

Johnny looked suggestively at Violet. Doniger flushed. "I'm a married man; I've got a wife and two children." Thought of them suddenly caused him to look at his wrist watch. "And I've got to run to catch the 5:52." He got up abruptly. "Thanks for the drink." He nodded to Violet and headed for the door that led from the Commodore directly into the Grand Central.

"A fella like you," Violet said, "sometimes gets a bust in the snoot."

"It's happened," said Johnny cheerfully. "How about another drink?"

"Oh, I couldn't possibly. I've already had two and that's my limit." But as Johnny began to shrug, "Well, if you *insist.*"

She signaled the waiter herself.

"Now," she said, "we'll cut out all the nonsense. What's your interest in Marjorie Fair? Was she your—?"

"Uh-uh, I never even talked to her while she was alive."

"Then why are you sticking your nose into all this?"

"I know her sister."

"Oh!" That seemed to rock Violet back. The waiter came with the new drinks and she downed her Scotch, sans soda, in the customary single gulp.

Then she said: "I didn't know she had a sister."

"In Iowa."

"You're from Iowa?"

"Heaven forbid! Her sister's here, now. She arrived today, in time to find the body. Why did Marjorie quit her job with Mariota?"

Violet groaned. "You've got a one track mind, Johnny."

"So have the cops."

"The cops have come and gone. Marjorie Fair worked in our place six-eight weeks. She made pitches at some of the men and when that didn't get her anywhere, she quit her job. I didn't like her and I don't want to talk about her."

JOHNNY caught the hovering waiter's eye.

"We'll change the subject," he said. "What do you think of Orville Seebright?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Don't like him?"

"Seebright doesn't even know I'm alive. I'm a voice on the telephone to him."

"Who owns Mariota Records?"

"It's a corporation."

"Yes, but someone owns the controlling interest. Is it Seebright?"

"He's the president."

"And Armstrong is vice-president. Or, are there more vice-presidents?"

"Armstrong is one more than we need, since we also have a treasurer and a secretary."

"Of course. Every corporation has to have a treasurer and a secretary. Who are they?"

"The treasurer's our bookkeeper, Mr. Farnham, Edward M—M for Milquetoast—Farnham."

"And the secretary?"

"Arthur Dorcas—he's out at the plant?"

"The plant?"

"You don't think we press the records up in the office, do you? We've got a big plant over in Newark."

"I don't even know what a record's made out of. Wax, or something like that?"

Violet gave him a pitying—and somewhat drunken—glance. "Wax—maybe beeswax . . ."

"Maybe," grinned Johnny. "Now, look, about Marjorie Fair—"

It was a tactical error; Johnny had assumed that the fifth and sixth drinks which had come and gone, would have fogged Violet's brain—like it had fogged his own so that he had to concentrate terrifically. The way Violet drenched her tonsils with the Scotches should have warned him, but he had never had experience with a real lush.

He got it now. The moment he mentioned the forbidden subject, Violet reacted. She caught up one of the half dozen glasses of soda water, untouched until now, and hurled it, glass and all, into Johnny's face. And she gave him words, practically all four-letter words.

Their regular waiter and an assistant were hustling Johnny and Violet out of the room while the soda water was still trickling down Johnny's face. Violet was quite willing to continue her abuse of Johnny in the expanse of the railroad station, but Johnny eased himeslf adroitly into a hurrying throng of train-bound home-goers and eluded her.

He emerged from the station on Vanderbilt and got into a taxicab. A few minutes later he alighted in front of the Forty-fifth Street Hotel.

CHAPTER X

THE door of Room 821 was slightly ajar and voices were coming from within. Johnny pushed open the door. Sam was seated on the edge of the nearest bed. Susan Fair occupied the only chair in the room and a chunky man of about twenty-eight or thirty was standing beside Susan's chair, scowling at Sam Cragg.

"Hello, folks," Johnny greeted the assemblage.

"Johnny!" cried Sam. "This is Marjorie Fair's boy friend."

"From Iowa," Johnny said.

Doug Esbenshade did not offer his hand. "I chartered a plane," he said.

"I'm going to stay here in New York until I send the man who killed Marjorie to the electric chair."

"Good luck," said Johnny.

"Every dime I've got will go into this —if it has to go," Esbenshade continued. "I've already engaged a private detective."

"You could have saved some money," Johnny said. "I'd have taken the job for half price."

"You?" Esbenshade shot a quick glance down at Susan. "I thought you said he was a—"

"A book salesman," Johnny cut in. "But I also have a peculiar talent for criminal investigation."

"Johnny," Sam exclaimed warningly, "you promised you wouldn't."

"When did I make such a promise?"

"The last time, after we left Las Vegas. You said from then on we'd stick to our business. Selling books."

"Fletcher," interrupted Esbenshade, "Susan's told me your story and I'm not at all satisfied with it."

"For that matter," said Johnny, "Susan told me about you and I'm not at all satisfied with *you.*"

Esbenshade reddened. "Now, look here, you—"

Johnny yawned deliberately. He looked pointedly at Susan Fair. "Is he a fair sample of the boys in Des Moines? The rich ones?"

Esbenshade took a quick step toward Johnny. "I've a mind to show you."

"What?"

Esbenshade clenched a fist. What he would have done with it remained undecided,for at that moment the phone rang and Johnny scooped it up.

"Yes," he said. Then he looked at Esbenshade in surprise. "I guess you told the desk you'd be in my room. This is for you."

Esbenshade took the phone. "Douglas Esbenshade. Oh, yes, send him up to Room 821." He hung up, a gleam of triumph in his slightly piggish eyes.

"That's the detective; now maybe we'll get somewhere."

Johnny groaned. "I don't know whether I'm in the mood for another detective today."

"You'll talk to this one. He's the best in the business."

"Jeez, Johnny," said Sam, "do we have to? They got a good picture on at the Roxy and I thought since we—uh —since we didn't have anything else to do tonight, we might . . ."

"I think that's a good idea, Sam. Do you mind, folks?"

"I certainly do mind," Esbenshade blustered.

Susan Fair got to her feet. "Doug, perhaps we'd better—"

Knuckles rapped on the door; good and loud.

"Your boy," Johnny said to Esbenshade.

THE door opened and Jefferson Todd came into Room 821; Jefferson Todd, the World's Greatest Detective . . . according to his own advertisement in the Classified Telephone Directory. He was about six feet four inches tall and so lean he had to stand twice in one spot to cast a shadow.

He stopped just within the door, his jaw slack in astonishment.

"Johnny Fletcher," he said, "by all that's holy!"

"Jefferson Todd!" groaned Johnny.

"Jeez," said Sam, "the long drink of water."

If Todd was surprised to find Johnny and Sam Cragg here, Esbenshade was even more chagrined to learn that Todd and Johnny were acquainted.

"You fellows friends?" he exclaimed.

Jefferson Todd finally looked at Esbenshade. "Mr. Esbenshade, I presume."

"Yes," said Esbenshade. "You were recommended to me by Congressman Wallencooper, but if you and Fletcher here are friends, I don't know . . ."

"Oh, it's all right, Esbenshade," Johnny said. "We're not friends. In fact, Todd hates my guts and I like him, too."

Todd bared wolfish teeth. "Always the card, Fletcher." He came further into the room. "I did a little job for Congressman Wallencooper a couple of years ago. He'd been mixed up with some—"

"Tut-tut, Jefferson," Johnny chided. "You're forgetting your ethics; a private eye doesn't talk about his client's affairs."

"Mr. Esbenshade," said Todd, "it shall give me great pleasure to work for you, especially if," with a dark glance at Johnny, "if Fletcher here is involved in the matter. It has long been my ambition to send him to jail."

"You should live that long, Todd," growled Sam. "Say the word, Johnny, and I'll tie him up into a pretzel knot."

"As for you, Cragg," Todd said, "you don't worry me one bit. You've got muscle and—" he snapped his fingers, "that's what I think of muscle." He turned to Esbenshade and tapped his forefinger dramatically. "It's this that counts, Mr. Esbenshade. I haven't failed on a case in three years."

"My fiancee was murdered here in this hotel, Todd," Esbenshade began.

"I know all about it," Todd interrupted. "My friends at Headquarters have given me the whole story."

"You mean you read about it in the evening paper," Johnny sneered. "You don't even know the name of the Homicide man in charge of—"

"Lieutenant Rook," snapped Todd.

"And he didn't mention my name?"

"He apparently didn't consider you worthy of mention. He told me he questioned some bums in an adjoining room."

"Bums!" cried Cragg.

"The room doesn't adjoin," Johnny corrected. "It's across the air-shaft."

JEFFERSON TODD raised the palm of his right hand and walked around the beds to the window. He peered out. The shade of the room that had been Marjorie Fair's was drawn and there wasn't a thing Jefferson Todd could see from his vantage point, but he gave it quite a bit of attention and finally turned back, nodding knowingly.

"You've got it all solved now," said Johnny. "Quick work."

"Doug," Susan said, suddenly, "this is about all I can stand."

"You're the—ah—deceased's sister?" Todd asked.

Esbenshade answered for Susan. "It's been a great blow to her, naturally."

"Naturally," said Todd. He frowned mightily. "Perhaps you and I, Mr. Esbenshade, could adjourn to your own —ah—quarters and discuss this."

Esbenshade hesitated, his eye on Johnny. But Susan was already moving to the door. "All right, Mr. Todd," he said.

He followed Susan out. At the door, Todd turned. "I'll be seeing you later, Fletcher."

"Not if I see you first."

"And your wrestler friend," Todd added, and went out.

Sam sprang to his feet, fuming. "There's something about that guy that gets my goat."

"I'm glad Todd's in this," said Johnny, "because where Todd is, there's money. Big, fat fees."

Sam's face turned bitter. "You're in it already, up to your neck. I can see it, Johnny."

"Sometime tomorrow, Sam," Johnny

said, soberly, "I've got to get a pile of money . . ."

"You've got a pile today."

"Yes, and that's why I've got to get a bigger one tomorrow."

"Why? You've got two hundred and some bucks."

"Do you want to know how I got it?"

"No," Sam said quickly. "I said this afternoon I didn't want to know."

"Then just take my word that we've got to raise quite a stack of do-re-mi. Dammit, Esbenshade's got it and he's dumb enough, but Todd's got his mitts on him first and Todd doesn't let go of money. It'll have to be one of the others."

"One of what others?"

"One of the Mariota people, I think. By the way—where's the record?"

Sam threw back the covers of his bed. "I put it back here, for safekeeping. But I don't see why this is so valuable."

"It may not be worth a nickel. But I've got a hunch it is."

Sam brought out the *Saturday Evening Post* containing the Con Carson master record. Johnny took the record out of the magazine, frowned for a moment, then went to the side of the room and, getting down on his knees, turned back the edge of the carpet. He slipped the record under it, got to his feet and stepped on it gently. "Can't tell there's anything under there." He inhaled deeply. "Well, let's go."

"Where to?"

Johnny shrugged, and picked up the telephone directory. "A vice-president, maybe." He searched in the directory, couldn't find the name he wanted, then tried another. He was successful this time. "Or maybe a president."

CHAPTER XI

JOHNNY and Sam stepped out of the taxicab in front of the big apartment house on Park Avenue as a liveried doorman held open the door for them. He followed them into the lobby.

"Mr. Seebright?" Johnny said.

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Mr. Jonathan Fletcher and secretary."

The doorman went to a house phone and buzzed Seebright's apartment. "Mr. Jonathan Fletcher and secretary to see Mr. Seebright," he said, into the phone. "He listened a moment, said, "Yes sir," and turned to Johnny.

"Mr. Seebright is in the midst of a business conference. He wants to know if it's important."

"I think it's very important," Johnny said.

The doorman said into the phone: "He says it's extremely important, sir. Very well." He hung up. "Apartment 12 C."

In the automatic elevator Sam grunted. "Important, huh?"

"To me, yes. And for all I know it might be important to Seebright. How do I know?"

"Oh, I'm not complaining, Johnny. The old boy with the brass buttons downstairs couldn't throw me far, anyway."

The elevator reached the 12th floor. Apartment C was nearby. Johnny pressed the door buzzer and the door was opened by a butler, who topped Sam Cragg by a couple of inches and was just as broad through the shoulders. Sam sized him up with interest.

"Good evening, gentlemen," the butler said smoothly.

"Mr. Seebright is expecting us, I believe," Johnny said, loftily.

"It better be good, though," said the butler, grimly.

Sam began to smile.

A door opened and a thin, nervous-looking man of about fifty popped out into the reception hall. "Yes, yes, what

is it?"

"Mr. Seebright," said Johnny, "is your conscience clear?"

Seebright gasped. "What was that?"

"Are you sleeping well these nights?"

Seebright shot a quick glance at his butler, who was hovering nearby. "Look," he said, "I'm in the middle of a very important business conference; I only let you come up because you convinced the doorman down below that you had something important to tell me."

"I have."

"Well, out with it."

"Here?" Johnny indicated the butler.

"Jerome is in my confidence," Seebright said, testily.

Johnny shrugged. "It's about Marjorie Fair."

"Who the devil is Marjorie Fair?"

"You don't know?"

"I never heard the name before in my life."

"She worked for you," said Johnny, "and she was murdered today."

"Oh, *that,*" snorted Seebright. "Armstrong told me about it."

"And Doniger?"

"What the devil does Doniger know about it?"

"I don't know—I'm asking *you.*"

Seebright looked again at Jerome, his butler. "Are you a police officer?"

JOHNNY shook his head and Seebright gestured to Jerome. The big butler came forward. "On your way, gentlemen."

"The bum's rush," Johnny observed.

An eager light came into Sam's eyes. "Yes or no, Johnny?"

"In a minute." He looked at Seebright. "Mr. Seebright, how much is the Con Carson record worth to you?"

Seebright, about to walk off, whirled back. "What do you know about the Carson record?"

"Call off the sheep dog."

Seebright signaled to Jerome, who was already reaching for Sam Cragg—a lucky reprieve for Jerome, only he didn't know it.

Seebright glowered at Johnny, then came to a sudden decision. "Come inside with me."

He turned and went through a door. Johnny followed him down a long hall, through another door into a beautifully paneled den, clouded with tobacco smoke. Seated about in leather armchairs were Charles Armstrong, vice-president of Mariota Records, Doniger, the sales manager and two other men.

Seebright stopped just within the door and announced dramatically: "Gentlemen, this man claims he knows something about the Carson record."

"I already know Mr. Armstrong and Doniger," Johnny said. He waved pleasantly, "Hi, fellows."

"The others are Joe Dorcas and Edward Farnham."

Armstrong got to his feet. "Mr. Seebright, I think you ought to know that this man called at my office this morning, pretending to be a policeman."

"I never said I was," Johnny retorted.

Seebright made an impatient gesture. "Sit down, Armstrong." He turned to Johnny. "This is a director's meeting, Fletcher. I brought you in to talk to these men, because I don't want them to think I'm doing anything behind their backs."

"No, you wouldn't want to do anything like that," said Johnny.

"Now, talk," Seebright snapped.

"About what?"

"The Carson record—that's why you came here, isn't it?"

"Well, yes. I guess so."

"All right, how much?"

Johnny brightened. "Right to the

point. You tell *me* how much?"

"If the decision was mine alone," Seebright said, "you'd get the toe of Jerome's boot."

"We can't do business on that basis."

"*I* don't want to do business with you," Seebright snarled. "But I've got a board of directors. They have minds of their own; bright minds. They ought to be bright, anyway, because they certainly don't use them very often."

JOE DORCAS, a sullen-faced man of about forty, bared his teeth. "You haven't done so well with your own brain, Orville."

"*I* didn't let the record get stolen," Seebright retorted.

"Neither did I."

"No, maybe you didn't *let* it get stolen."

Dorcas sprang to his feet. "Are you insinuating that I had something to do with its disappearance."

"I'm not insinuating, Dorcas. I'm telling you, right out. You—or one of these other great brains—*stole* the record. This man here," stabbing a wizened finger at Johnny, "is in cahoots with one of you."

"Uh-uh," said Johnny, "I'm not in cahoots with anyone."

"Bah! You never got that record by yourself."

Armstrong got slowly to his feet. "Mr. Seebright, I've had just about enough of this. I'm going home."

"You'll go when I dismiss you, Armstrong," Seebright said. "And that goes for the rest of you. We're going to settle this business right here and now. All right, we'll pay the ransom for the record. The question is, how much?"

"I hear you talking, gentlemen," said Johnny Fletcher.

"You shut up," Seebright snapped. He p o i n t e d at Armstrong. "How much?"

"You know what it's worth to us, Seebright."

"I do—but we're not paying that for it. Because we haven't got the money. Five thousand, Armstrong?"

Armstrong raised his shoulders and let them fall again. Seebright whirled on Doniger. "Doniger?"

"Five thousand's all right with me," Doniger replied.

Seebright turned to Edward M—M for Milquetoast—Farnham. He said: "Farnham?" Then he brushed him aside with an impatient gesture, as of no consequence. "Dorcas? Is it five thousand?"

"In Confederate money—yes," Dorcas growled.

"You're against paying for the record?"

"Yes!"

"You're outvoted." Seebright turned to Fletcher. "Five thousand dollars is our best offer."

"You railroaded t h a t through," Johnny said, easily.

"It's all you'll get."

"For a Con Carson record?" He shook his head. "If I had a Carson record I'd ask a lot more than that for it."

"*If* you had a Carson record?"

"Yes."

Seebright looked narrowly at Johnny. "Have you, or have you not, got the Carson record?"

Johnny looked surprised. "Me have a Carson record? Where would I get it?"

"I'm in no mood for games, Fletcher."

"Murder isn't a game, Mr. Seebright."

"What the devil are you saying?"

"Marjorie Fair was murdered."

ORVILLE SEEBRIGHT gritted his teeth. "We were talking about the

Con Carson record. Have you or have you not got it?"

"No."

"You said you had it."

"I said nothing of the kind," Johnny retorted. "I asked you what you'd give for the Carson record and right away you brought me in here."

Seebright went to the door, opened it and yelled: "Jerome!"

Johnny put his tongue in his cheek and looked at the paneled ceiling. Jerome did not appear. Seebright yelled again into the hallway: "Jerome, damn it!"

There was a loud thump somewhere near the outer hall. "Somebody fell down," Johnny said.

Seebright called for the third time. "Jerome, come in here and throw this man out."

"Oh, is that why you want Jerome?" Johnny asked, innocently.

Footsteps sounded in the hall and a cruel look came over Seebright's wizened face. But it was replaced by an expression of astonishment as Sam Cragg appeared in the doorway.

"Jerome can't come," he said. "He had a accident."

"I don't believe it!" cried Seebright.

"Ten'll get you twenty, Jerome's counting daisies," said Johnny.

Joe Dorcas came forward. "You manhandled Jerome?" he asked Sam.

Sam grinned. "You mean that sissy out there?" He winked at Johnny.

Johnny said: "Shall we go, Sam?"

Seebright and Dorcas followed them out to the door, where Jerome was sitting on the floor shaking his head, only one-quarter conscious. In passing, Sam stooped and shoved Jerome's head back to the floor. It struck the hard wood with a nice thump.

But in the elevator going down, Johnny was glum. "We still haven't got a client."

Sam was happier than he had been for a long time. "He had a nice grip, that Jerome lad, and his footwork wasn't bad, but he couldn't take it at all."

"Five thousand," Johnny muttered.

"Huh? Five thousand, what?"

"The record. That's what they offered me for it."

"And you didn't sell it?"

"It was Seebright's attitude. He wasn't interested in Marjorie Fair. It was the record he wanted, nothing else."

Sam groaned. "Look, I feel sorry as hell about the babe, but we didn't know her. She's dead but we didn't do it and five thousand is five thousand."

"He'll pay ten tomorrow."

CHAPTER XII

THE door shivered under the violent banging of a fist and Johnny Fletcher rolled over in bed and opened one eye. He looked at the door and groaned. In the other bed, Sam Cragg snored lustily, his slumber undisturbed.

"Go 'way," Johnny called to the door.

Knuckles beat another tattoo on the door and the voice of authority announced: "This is Lieutenant Rook, Fletcher. Open up."

Johnny threw back the bedcovers and shuffled to the door. He unlatched it and blinked into the angry face of the man from the Homicide Department.

"Can't you come back in the morning?" he complained.

"What the hell do you think this is?" Rook demanded.

"The middle of the night."

"It's after eight."

"That's what I said—the middle of the night."

"You got up early enough yesterday, according to your story." Rook came

into the room, revealing that there was someone behind him. Sergeant Kowal.

Kowal followed his superior, his lips curled back to show tobacco-stained teeth. "This is him, Lieutenant," he said.

"I thought it would be." Rook scowled at the sleeping form of Sam Cragg. "Every time I see that big lug he's in bed."

Sam's snoring stopped and his eyes opened. "I heard that." He sat up and scratched his body to the accompaniment of a yawn.

"Get your clothes on, Fletcher," Lieutenant Rook said, testily.

"What for?"

"Because I'll be taking you for a little ride."

"A pinch?"

"It could be. There are some questions I want to ask you."

"Ask them here. I'm not in the mood to go down to your crummy station."

"You'll come if I ask you."

"Not without a warrant I won't. And if you had one you'd have flashed it on me."

Rook jerked his thumb toward his assistant. "What was the idea of impersonating an officer yesterday?"

Fletcher looked at Sergeant Kowal. "Who, me?"

"Yes, you," said Kowal. "I caught you redhanded, giving Armstrong the third degree."

"Not me," Johnny retorted. "I never told Armstrong I was a cop—and I never told you that."

"You acted like one."

Johnny grinned icily. "I put my hand on your shoulder and I spoke patronizingly—like an important character. Is that acting like a cop? Answer yes or no."

Rook swore. "Goddamit, Fletcher, there's something about you gets me mad."

"You know, Lieutenant, you don't make me very happy either."

ROOK clenched his fists in a mighty effort to control himself. "Sit down, Fletcher," he said, through gritted teeth. "I never hit a man when he's sitting down and I don't want you to tempt me too far."

Johnny seated himself on the bed and Rook went to the shabby Morris chair and sat down.

"All right, now," Rook went on, "what were you doing up in Armstrong's office yesterday?"

"Talking to him."

Rook gripped the arms of the chair. "Why?" He held up a hand to check Johnny's reply. "Wait a minute. You told me yesterday you didn't even know the girl across the way. You'd never talked to her. You knew nothing about her death, you had a perfect alibi. Her death—and her life—didn't concern you in the least. Then why—why, in God's name, did you rush right over to the place she worked and start brow-beating the man who—"

"The man who—" Johnny repeated.

Rook caught himself. "You heard me. Why did you go over to the Mariota Record Company?"

Johnny remained silent.

Rook said ominously: "How did you know she had ever worked for the Mariota Company?"

"I didn't. I found that out when I went up there."

"All right, then—what made you go there? How did you connect Marjorie Fair with that one company?"

Johnny drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "She was interested in singing. I could hear her through the window, couldn't I?"

Rook's eyes slitted. "And because she sang in her bathroom, you rushed right over to the Mariota Record Com-

pany?"

"She had a good voice," Johnny said. "I guessed she could have been a professional and I figured a record company might know something about her."

"There's more than one record company in this town."

"I picked the Mariota Company because I like their records. It was sheer accident—and a coincidence that that was the outfit where Marjorie Fair had worked."

"But she wasn't a professional; she was only trying to get in."

"I didn't know that."

"Then Armstrong—how did you happen to pick on him, of all the executives of the company?"

"The switchboard operator did that. I mentioned Marjorie Fair's name and she sent me in to see Armstrong."

Rook shook his head. "You're lying, Fletcher."

"You can go back to Headquarters and get your warrant, Lieutenant. Then you can drag me down and ask me questions until you're blue in the face and you'll get the same answers. And a suit for false arrest, afterwards."

"And that goes for me, too," cried Sam. He got out of bed and went to the clothes closet. Rook watched him. "Oh, you've got clothes today."

"Something wrong about a man having clothes?" Sam snapped.

"You didn't have any yesterday." Rook's lip curled contemptuously. "You were about to be locked out for non-payment of rent and you," turning to Johnny, "pawned his suit to pay something on the rent."

"That's a libel," Johnny said warmly.

"Is it? I came back yesterday evening; the elevator man said you brought his suit back in the afternoon. He noticed it because he knew you've only got one suit apiece."

"My tailor's making us three apiece now. We left our warm weather clothes in Florida."

LIEUTENANT ROOK got to his feet. "You're a couple of four-flushers and I'm not going to waste any more time on you. I've wasted too much already. I'm just going to tell you one more thing. Keep your nose out of things that don't concern you, or so help me, I'll throw you in jail and forget that you're there."

"Goodbye, now," Johnny said sarcastically.

The two detectives stormed out of the room. Sergeant Kowal, the last to go out, slammed the door so that the windows rattled.

Johnny sprang for the clothes closet. "Damn that guy, it must be almost nine o'clock. I've got to hurry."

"What for? We're not going any place."

"I am," said Johnny. "And maybe you are, too." He pulled on his trousers, turned back to the bed stand and scooped up the phone. "What time is it?" he asked the operator.

She told him and Johnny slammed down the receiver. "Nine-fifteen. We're going to have to work like hell." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his money. He counted it hurriedly. "Seventy-one dollars. Damn, it's not enough. Who'll cash a check for you, Sam?"

"What for, Johnny? Seventy-one bucks is more than—"

"Don't ask questions, Sam—there isn't time. Who do you know will cash a check for you, up to fifty or seventy-five dollars?"

"Well, Coyle's Pool Room on Broadway—"

"Get over there right away. Here, I'll write out a check . . ." Johnny went over to the battered table that served as a desk and caught up a pen.

As he wrote he said: "Is there any other place you know that'll cash a check?"

"What's the matter with the bank?"

Johnny winced. "No!"

"You mean you haven't really got that dough in the bank, Johnny?" Sam asked in alarm.

"I have, but I don't want to cash a check there." Johnny tore the check out of his book. "I've made it out for seventy-five. Here's another fifty. The minute you get the money for the check, rush over to this pawnshop." He took a ticket from his pocket. "Get all the stuff this calls for and bring it here to the room. Got that?"

"Yes, but—"

"I said, don't ask questions. Time is of the essence, believe me. Better take a taxi from the pool room to the pawnshop. Now, get going."

Sam was already pulling on his coat. He left while Johnny hurried to complete his own dressing. He left the room only two or three minutes after Sam.

With twenty-one dollars in his pocket and a number of blank checks he rushed over to Sixth Avenue and began buying—a camera and flashlight equipment, a cheap wrist watch, a second-hand portable typewriter—a chipped diamond ring, a pair of opera glasses and a few other completely useless articles. His cash and checks lasted him until ten minutes to ten, then he hurried back to the Forty-fifth Street Hotel.

He was only a step behind Sam Cragg; the latter was piling stuff on the beds, a banjo, a mandolin, some cameras and jewelry, a few articles of wearing apparel, a watch or two.

Sam cried aloud when Johnny came in carrying the new merchandise. "For the love of Mike, Johnny, are we starting a novelty store, or something?"

"Grab it all up, Sam, there's no time to waste."

THEY loaded themselves down and left the room. Down in the lobby, they encountered Eddie Miller, the bell captain, who was so astonished by the sight of them and the merchandise that he could not even bother them with questions. Outside they piled everything into a taxicab and a few minutes later began unloading in front of Uncle Ben's Shop on Eighth Avenue.

Uncle Ben stared at them goggle-eyed as they entered the store. "So you *are* a burglar," he cried. "I got suspicious of you yesterday."

"Cut it out, Uncle," Johnny said harshly. "I haven't got time for words. Get out your pencil—check the stuff in, with the top prices and give me the cash."

"I wouldn't touch it," Uncle Ben howled. "The cops come around every day, looking for hot stuff and I'm not going to get caught."

"Believe me, Uncle Ben," Johnny said fervently. "Not one piece of this junk, I mean, merchandise, is hot. It was bought, on the level, open and aboveboard and I've got receipts for every piece here." He took a fistful of paper from his pocket.

Uncle Ben took the receipts from Johnny's hand, began to examine it. "All of this stuff was bought only yesterday and some today."

"I know it."

"Then what's the idea?"

"No idea. I buy high and sell cheap. That's the way I make my living."

"You're crazy!"

"All right, so I'm crazy. Just give me the cash for this and let me out of here."

Uncle Ben began mumbling to himself, but got out his pencil and scribbled down figures. "I'll give you three hundred and fifty dollars for the lot and

I'll be sorry for it," he announced after a minute or two.

"Give it to me!"

Uncle Ben was taken aback. "What, no haggling?"

"I haven't got time."

"I never heard of a man who didn't have time for dickering. Especially you. You weren't bad yesterday, not half bad."

"I told you I haven't got the time."

"I'll make it three-sixty," Uncle Ben said, in a tone of disappointment.

"All right, all right."

"Not a penny more than three seventy-five."

Johnny groaned. "Give me the money!"

MOROSELY, Uncle Ben counted out the money. Johnny snatched it from his hand and was separating it as he slammed through the door. The taxicab was still waiting at the curb and Johnny bounced in. Sam followed and before the cab was rolling, Johnny thrust a hundred dollars into his hand.

"I'll let you off at the bank on Seventh and Times Square," he said. "I want you to start a Ten-Plan Checking account and meet me in front of the bank on Lexington and Forty-seventh. Don't waste any time. Keep rolling."

"I think the man was right," Sam said thickly. "You're crazy."

"If you know of any other way of keeping out of jail, tell me."

"Jail!" cried Sam.

"That's where they send people who kite checks—and get caught . . ."

"What do you mean, kite checks?"

"What do you think I've been doing since yesterday?"

Sam winced. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"Then don't make any more remarks. Just do what I tell you. Here's your bank."

The taxi stopped and Sam got out. Johnny directed the driver to take him to his bank on Lexington Avenue, the one where he had the straight checking account. There he cashed a check for one hundred dollars. With it and a hundred dollars of his remaining money, he crossed the street and started another regular checking account in another bank. Two blocks away he went into a third bank and with seventy dollars started a new Ten-Plan account. That left him with about three dollars and fifty cents in his pocket.

And it was time to go back to the first bank and meet Sam. He found him waiting, bank book and checkbook in hand.

"Now, we start buying again, Sam," Johnny announced. "You come with me and watch how it's done, then I'm going to turn you loose on your own."

Sam said not one word as they went into a jewelry store and bought a wrist watch for seventy-five dollars.

"Get the idea?" Johnny asked, after they had left the store. "You give them a check, but try to do it with such an air that they don't call the bank. If they do, you're all right, because you've got the money in the bank, but once they call the bank, that account's dead and you can't write out any more checks on it—not until we cover. Now I'll go in this store and you go into that one. I'll meet you over by that mailbox, as soon as you get through."

Johnny went into the adjoining store and bought a trinket, then rejoined Sam.

Sam exhibited a wrist watch. "Ninety bucks. But they called the bank . . ."

Johnny swore. "You must have acted nervous, or doubtful. I guess I've got to do it all myself. But here, you can pawn these two watches and this rhinestone bracelet. They cost two hundred and forty dollars and you should-

n't take less than ninety dollars for them—eighty at the very least. I'll meet you at the hotel."

Sam nodded morosely and they again separated.

CHAPTER XIII

AT TWENTY minutes to twelve, Johnny descended upon Times Square and began depositing money in banks.

At the first, the teller gave Johnny a lecture. "It's a good thing you came in; there were four checks came in this morning, overdrawing your account. You can't do that on a Ten-Plan account . . ."

"I know," Johnny said meekly, "but I knew I was getting this money this morning and I thought it wouldn't matter."

"It *does* matter."

At the second bank, an assistant manager came over to talk to Johnny. "I don't like this Mr. Fletcher. You started an account here yesterday with twenty dollars and you immediately wrote out checks for eighty-eight."

"But here's the money to cover them."

The assistant cashier took the money. "Did you know you were going to write out all those checks when you started your account here yesterday?"

"Why, no. Only when I got home my wife took me shopping." He smiled amiably. "You know how wives are—just can't pass up a bargain . . ."

The assistant cashier hesitated. "I know, but don't do it again, or we'll have to close out your account."

Johnny promised to be a good boy and left, hurrying to a third bank. He got by without a lecture there and went across to Lexington Avenue, to deposit a straight check to his day-old account—enough to cover the outstanding checks on it. The deposit check was drawn on the new straight checking account across the street.

At one-thirty, Johnny reeled back to the Forty-fifth Street Hotel, to find Sam Cragg seated in the Morris chair, staring moodily at the beds, piled with junk.

"I bought some more stuff."

"What the hell for?" Johnny cried.

"Well, I got eighty-seven fifty from the pawnshop . . ."

"And you spent it?"

"Isn't that what you've been doing? You buy stuff, hock it and with the money you buy more stuff."

Johnny groaned. "You took two hundred and forty dollars' worth of merchandise, pawned it for eighty-seven fifty. Then you pawn the eighty-seven fifty stuff for twenty dollars, then you buy twenty dollars' worth, hock it for two dollars and the two dollar junk for twenty cents. Then you buy a ham sandwich with the twenty cents."

"Silly, isn't it?"

"With your flair for high finance, Sam," Johnny said, "you ought to be holding down a big government job in Washington."

"I've only been doing what you've been doing."

Johnny seated himself on the edge of the bed. "I only got into this thing because of your damn suit."

"What'd my suit have to do with it?"

"You raised a fuss about it, didn't you? You had to have it right away."

"Is it unreasonable for a man to want something to wear, Johnny? Could I sit around in my underwear all day long?"

"You could have waited until I got the money legitimately."

"Maybe I'm dumb, Johnny, but I don't see why you couldn't raise twelve bucks legitimately easier than two hundred and forty dollars like—like this."

Johnny laughed hollowly. "Two hundred and forty dollars! Do you really want to know how we stand, as of this moment?"

"You mean it's worse than two hundred and forty?"

JOHNNY took some scraps of paper from his pocket. He consulted them. "We have on deposit at this moment, in eight different banks, the sum of $855. There are checks outstanding against these deposits—checks that will go to the respective banks tomorrow morning—for $2460. I have cash on hand, three hundred and ninety dollars. Summing it up, we are short $1225 . . ."

"But what about all the stuff we hocked?" Sam cried. "And this junk here?"

"What about it?"

"It's worth a pile of money?"

Johnny exhaled heavily. "We have with Uncle Ben merchandise worth fifteen or sixteen hundred dollars. I haven't kept track of it all. But I pledged it for three seventy-five. It'll cost around four hundred dollars to get it out. If I add this stuff to it, and do some good haggling, I can hock it for around five hundred dollars. All right, add that to our assets. Eight fifty-five in the bank, three-ninety in cash and—another hundred that I can squeeze out of the stuff—"

"You said five hundred . . ."

"Yes, but it'll take four hundred to get back what's with Uncle Ben. We've got liquid assets of—mmm—roughly thirteen fifty . . . and outstanding twenty-four sixty. In short, we're over eleven hundred dollars in the hole . . ."

Sam stared at Johnny in astonishment. "What're you going to do?"

"Raise eleven hundred dollars."

"But how?"

"The same way—only tomorrow we'll wind up, owing over two thousand and the day after it'll be four thousand. It ends when we run out of banks and pawnshops, or when my legs wear out."

Sam moaned.

Johnny said bitterly: "All because you had to have a suit to wear!"

"Would it help if I gave you back the suit?"

"It'd help twelve dollars' worth. No, the solution is to liquidate as soon as possible. I can do it today for eleven hundred dollars." Johnny reached for the telephone book, turned the pages to the M's and picked up the phone. He gave the operator a number and a moment later said, "Gorgeous, let me talk to Mr. Seebright . . . Johnny Fletcher, yes, your old pal Johnny." He winced as Violet Rodgers lit into him. "He's expecting me to call, precious. Of course he knows me. I talked to him last night . . . What? . . . ? I don't believe it . . . " He hung up abruptly and stared at the phone.

Sam sprang to his feet. "Something happen to Seebright?"

Johnny took the receiver off the hook. "Have a boy bring me up a newspaper," he said into the phone, and put the receiver back. He turned to Sam. "Something happened to Seebright, yes, and all the other people over at Mariota." He paused. "The company filed a petition for voluntary bankruptcy."

"You mean the company's broke?"

"That's what the switchboard operator said. She may be lying. I'll know in a minute."

EDDIE MILLER brought the paper himself. He came into the room, handed Johnny the newspaper and remained, looking at the merchandise on the beds.

Violet Rodgers had told the truth. The Mariota Company had made the front page. Johnny skimmed through

the account. *"Des Moines Shellac Company, $79,850,"* the biggest creditor. Johnny re-read and pondered the line. Des Moines.

He put down the paper and met Eddie Miller's cynical eye. The bell captain indicated the bed. "Taking on a line of merchandise, Mr. Fletcher?"

Johnny picked up a ukelele. "Ever play one of these, Eddie?" He twanged the strings.

"I ain't musical."

"You don't have to be to play a uke. Simplest musical innstrument ever invented. Look." He strummed a moment. "Never took a lesson in my life. Can't read a note. A man can be the life of any party, if he plays one of these." Deftly he removed the price tag. "Worth fifty bucks, Eddie, but for you, twenty-seven fifty."

"Me, twenty-seven fifty!" exclaimed Eddie Miller.

"All right, I owe you a few tips, from when things were tough. Slip me a twenty and she's yours." He thrust the ukelele into Eddie's hand.

His eye fishily on Johnny's face, Eddie twanged the strings. He twanged them again. "Make it ten, Mr. Fletcher."

"Fifteen and I'll throw in a free lesson, when I get time."

Eddie hesitated and made the mistake of twanging the strings once more. Then he sighed and took a roll of bills from his pocket. He peeled off a ten and a five.

Johnny took the money, patted Eddie's shoulder and led him to the door. When he turned back into the room, Sam exclaimed, "I didn't pay fifteen bucks for that."

"Nine ninety-five, the tag says. That's better'n pawning the thing. If I had time." He shook his head. "We've got to get a client today."

"Who?"

"Well, who is there to pick from? Charles Armstrong, Esbenshade, Farnham, Dorcas, Doniger and Seebright. Esbenshade would have been my best bet, but Jefferson Todd grabbed him off. I don't think Seebright likes me very much."

"Who are the others?"

"Armstrong's a vice-president and I gather there was something between him and Marjorie Fair. But I don't think he likes me too much. And Doniger hates me."

"That only leaves you two, this Farnham and Dorcas."

"Farnham's of no consequence."

"So it's Dorcas?"

Johnny picked up the phone. "Get me the Mariota Record Company, in Newark, New Jersey," he said to the operator. "I don't know the number."

AS HE held the phone, someone knocked at the door. Johnny signalled to Sam Cragg, who went to the door and opened it. Doug Esbenshade stood in the doorway.

"Never mind that call," Johnny told the operator. He hung up. "Well, Mr. Esbenshade, how are you today?"

Esbenshade closed the door and came into the room. "Rotten," he said sourly. "I had a bad night."

"So did I," Johnny said cheerfully. "I was thinking of you in the hands of that four-flushing beanpole who has the nerve to call himself a detective."

"He speaks well of you, too."

"Naturally. Did he tell you about the time were were both working on the same case—the Winslow affair?* I made a monkey out of him."

"You solved the case?"

"I got the guy who did it—and Todd got the dough."

"And you think you can get the man who—who killed Marjorie?"

* *The French Key*—Ed.

"It's a cinch. Right now I know more than Jefferson Todd does about it."

"Just what *do* you know?"

"How much are you paying Todd?"

"Never mind that. If you know anything I'll pay you — what it's worth."

Sam Cragg crossed the room, went to the far bed and seated himself. For the first time in days he felt relaxed. A man was about to make a deal with Johnny Fletcher. Which to Sam meant that things were going to be all right. He knew Johnny.

Johnny said to Esbenshade, "Charles Armstrong, vice-president of the Mariota Company, had a crush on Marjorie."

Esbenshade took out a wallet, opened it about a half inch and skinned out a nice new bill. A one hundred dollar bill. Johnny took it from his hand.

"Go ahead," said Esbenshade.

"A man named Doniger thinks himself quite a lad with the girls. *He* made passes at Marjorie."

"You're not making much out of Marjorie," Esbenshade said morosely.

"Do you want the truth?"

"I want the man who killed Marjorie."

"Then you've got to have the truth." Johnny picked up the newspaper from the bed. "You knew about the Mariota Company going into bankruptcy?"

"Yes."

"There's a Des Moines Shellac Company listed as a creditor."

"*I'm* the Des Moines Shellac Company."

Johnny nodded quietly. "I thought you might be. You put the squeeze on them?"

"There's a man named Dorcas in that company, said Esbenshade. "He runs their plant. He was out to see me some time. Wanted to buy a lot of shellac. Naturally, we looked up the company. I didn't like their financial statement too well."

"But you sold them the shellac?"

"Dorcas showed me a copy of a contract they had just made with Con Carson, the crooner. He said they were going to make a recording that would sell a million records. I gave them the shellac."

JOHNNY looked down at the newspaper. "The Mariota Company gave Marjorie an audition." He looked up suddenly and met Esbenshade's eye. "It's pretty hard for a girl to get an audition with a phonograph record company . . . especially a girl that the company knows only as a secretary."

"Yes," said Esbenshade.

"I guess that's why you really sold them the shellac."

Esbenshade hesitated and then took out two more hundred dollar bills. But he closed the wallet and put it into his pocket. "All right," he said, "you've got a job."

"I ought to have a thousand dollars," Johnny complained.

Esbenshade snorted. "I've given you three hundred. There'll be another thousand when you hand me the murderer . . ."

"How much are you paying Todd?"

"Do you want this money, or don't you?"

Johnny stowed it away in his pocket. "I'll get in touch with you at the Barbizon-Waldorf."

"How'd you know where I was staying?"

Johnny smiled. "We'll walk out with you, Mr. Esbenshade."

The three left the room together. Outside, Esbenshade got into a taxi, while Johnny and Sam turned left to head for Times Square.

Sam said: "So the guy really fixed

it for Marjorie to get her audition—and she didn't even know about it."

"That's about the size of it."

"Yeah, but how did *you* know about it?"

"I didn't. I guessed. A lucky guess."

"All right, now guess the murderer."

"Guesswork's no good for that. I've got to have proof."

"Yeah, well, where we going now?"

"Newark."

CHAPTER XIV

THE plant of the Mariota Record Company was a sprawling, four-story brick building that had seen better days. It was a silent building. When there's no money in the main offices over in Manhattan the machinery in the plants in Newark, Jersey City, Brooklyn, stops turning.

There was a little office in a corner of the first floor of the Mariota Record Company. A stout woman with hennaed hair sat at a desk, working a crossword puzzle.

"What's a four-letter word meaning chicken?" she asked as Johnny and Sam came up.

"Gump," said Johnny.

"Gump? I never heard of such a word."

"That's because you've never raised gumps. Quiet around here, isn't it?"

"If you're selling something—yes, we're not doing much these days. In fact, we're not doing anything, as of this morning."

"Because of a five-letter word meaning *kaput?*"

"Oh, you read the newspapers, do you?"

Johnny grinned. "I'm looking for Joe Dorcas."

"With a summons?"

Johnny held up both hands, palms out, so she could see they were empty. "No summons."

"Well, he's somewhere in the plant, but I don't think he'll be in a talkative mood this morning."

"I'll talk for both of us."

"Since I'm probably not getting paid for today anyway, I don't see what point there would be in my stopping you from going into the plant."

"Thank you, miss."

Johnny led the way into the plant. The first floor was taken over by a number of huge mixing vats, boxes, barrels, cartons and supplies necessary to a phonograph record company. There wasn't a soul on the floor.

They climbed a flight of stairs to the second floor. Here, there were rows and rows of strange machines and the pungent, tangy odor of shellac. A man was wandering forlornly among the machines. He saw Johnny and Sam at a distance.

"Here, you fellows, what are you doing here?" he called. Then, still fifty feet away, he recognized Johnny. "What the hell do *you* want?"

"Why, I thought I'd stop in and say how sorry I was."

Joe Dorcas came up and scowled at Johnny. "Do you go around every day to companies that go into bankruptcy and tell them you're sorry?"

"No," said Johnny. "But I was talking to my friend Doug Esbenshade this morning—"

Dorcas' face twisted. "That dirty—!"

"Is that the way to talk about the man who sold you all that nice shellac?" Johnny asked chidingly.

"Sure, he sold us shellac—and he threw us into bankruptcy, too."

"It takes three creditors to do that."

"He lined up two besides himself. This company's as sound as it ever was. Our accounts receivable and physical

assets amount to more than our debts."

"Well, maybe the receiver will bring you through."

"Receiver!" snarled Dorcas. "A receivership is a political plum. A judge appoints a relative as a receiver and the receiver bleeds the business." He swore luridly. "One good receivership and a receiver is fixed for life. When he gets through with this company, you can carry off what's left in your vest pocket. And all because of your friend Esbenshade!"

"Esbenshade didn't ask much, did he? An audition for his girl."

"I gave it to her, didn't I? I even made a record. It was that skinny punk, Armstrong, killed it, over in the main office. He said she sang like a hungry cat with fleas."

"Her voice couldn't have been *that* bad."

"It wasn't bad at all. With any effort, we could have sold ten thousand platters and even made a few bucks on the deal. But no, those wise guys couldn't see it. We only handle artists, they said. Well, they can handle artists now." He picked up a black lump of some substance and threw it to the floor.

JOHNNY stooped and picked up the black stuff. "What's this?" The lump was a flattened piece of plastic, about an inch thick and two or two and a half inches in diameter. It weighed several ounces.

"That's a record—in the rough. We call it a biscuit."

"And that becomes a shiny phonograph record?"

"Why not?" It's heated and put in one of these pressing machines. See—the master record is pressed down on it, like this." He brought down the hinge of a pressing machine.

"You mean each individual record is pressed out like that? That seems like a rather slow operation. Take you a long time to press out a hundred thousand records."

"Not as long as you'd think. One man can press a thousand records in a day and we've got two dozen of these machines."

"Two dozen? But if you've only got one master record . . ."

"Who said anything about one master record? We make as many masters as we want."

"Then why was Seebright so excited about a single master record last night . . .?"

"Oh, that! That was THE master record—the one from which the other masters would have been cut." He grunted. "That's what ruined us." Con Carson made that recording and rushed off, to fly to Hollywood. He got killed and he couldn't make any more recordings. And then our original record was—disappeared."

"Before you'd a chance to make any other masters off it?"

Dorcas nodded. "That record would have saved this company."

"Do you suppose somebody who wanted this company to go broke, took it?"

Dorcas looked sharply at Johnny. "Who would *want* to wreck this company?"

"Maybe a competitor? Wasn't Continental Records sore when you got Carson away from them?"

"Sure, but companies don't hire burglars. Or do they?"

"I wouldn't know—I've never been a company."

A loudspeaker blasted the stillness of the plant. "Mr. Dorcas," the loudspeaker called, "Mr. Dorcas."

DORCAS grunted and walked away from Johnny and Sam. In the

center of the big room was a small stand on which reposed a telephone. He picked it up.

"Dorcas talking."

He listened for a moment, nodded. "Okay."

He hung up and came back to Johnny and Sam. "They want me over in New York. I've got to get ready." He started to walk off, but suddenly turned. "Say—just what did you come over here for?"

"No particular reason."

"What was that business last night —pretending you had the Con Carson master?"

Johnny shook his head. "I never told Seebright I had a master. I just asked him what it was worth?"

"It was worth plenty—yesterday."

"Today?"

"Nothing, to the Mariota Company."

"But to another company?"

"They'd have to buy it from the receiver. They probably will."

" . . . If the record's ever found."

"It'll be found!"

As they walked away from the plant of the Mariota Record Company, Sam Cragg said: "I don't see that we got anything here."

"We got the motive for the murder of Marjorie Fair."

"Oh, we did? What is it?"

"The record we've got in our room. Sam—the master record."

Sam screwed up his face in thought. "You mean Marjorie swiped it from the plant here?"

"I hardly think so. She got it by mistake—in place of the record she made."

Sam thought that over for a moment, then exclaimed, "That means Dorcas murdered her!"

"Not necessarily. Almost any employee in the place could have known—or guessed about the mistake."

"Yes, but would the record be worth anything to *any* employee?"

"He could have thought so. As a matter of fact, yes. Seebright was so desperate last night he offered me five thousand dollars for it and no questions asked. With a bit of tact, I could have run it up to ten thousand."

"Why didn't you? We could certainly use ten grand."

"Could you sleep nights knowing a girl had been murdered for that record?"

Sam shook his head doggedly. "Your ethics are too much for me, Johnny. You think nothing of skinning eight banks."

"I haven't skinned any banks—yet. If I can get that other G out of Esbenshade I'm an honest man tomorrow. Besides, a bank isn't any sitting duck. It's a sporting proposition. If I juggle a few checks and get away with it, I've scored. If I slip up, I'm in the clink. But nobody's going to get murdered over it." He took Sam's arm and squeezed it. "Don't look around now, but I think we've got a tail."

Sam exclaimed, "Where?" and despite the cautioning pressure on his arm, he looked around.

Some forty yards behind them, a heavy-set man stopped and looked idly into a shop window.

"I'm almost sure he was on the subway, coming from New York," Johnny said.

"I'll find out." Sam tore loose from Johnny's grip, started toward the man in front of the window. The man, without seeming to look at Sam, turned and sauntered away.

Sam quickened his step. The man walked faster. Sam started running. The man ran. He was a good runner and Sam, seeing that he was out-distanced, stopped and trotted back to Johnny.

"D'you see him run?" he cried.

"I see he's stopped," Johnny said.

Sam looked back. The man he had chased was standing a hundred yards away, looking at Sam and Johnny.

Johnny reached into his pocket and took out a twenty dollar bill. "I'm going to lose him. Here's some money. Stay here and keep him from following."

"You mean I've got to go back to New York alone?"

"That's why I'm giving you this money. Take a taxi back."

LEAVING Sam watching the shadow, Johnny started off briskly. The shadow crossed the street and came forward, intending to by-pass Sam and continue after Johnny. Sam headed for the middle of the street.

Stopping at the next corner, Johnny looked back. Sam and the shadow were both in the street, the shadow trying to pass Sam and the latter trying to block him.

Johnny darted around the corner, sprinted a block and crossing the street, darted into a store. He emerged on the side street, cut across and went into another store. Two blocks away he got into a taxicab. "One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street ferry," he told the driver.

"That's quite a long haul," the cabby remarked.

"It's nothing to me—I've got money to throw to the birds," Johnny retorted.

A half hour later he boarded the ferry that would take him over to One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street in Manhattan. There was a wait of two or three minutes before the ferry was to pull out . . . and just before the barrier was lowered, a man came aboard . . . the man that Sam Cragg was supposed to have stopped in Newark.

Johnny went up to him.

"Oh, hello," the man said cheerfully.

"Where'd you leave my pal?" Johnny asked.

"In Newark. I let him chase me into a drug store. I guess he's still waiting out in front."

"Smart lad, aren't you?"

"You mean figuring you'd head for the ferry here?" The man grinned. "I put myself in your place, in Newark, and I said to myself, now suppose I was trying to lose a man in Newark and get back to New York—what'd be the best way and I answered myself, Union City and One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street in Manhattan. So I jumped into a cab and here I am—and here you are."

"How are you at swimming?" Johnny asked.

"You and who else are going to throw me overboard?"

Johnny walked away and seating himself inside, got a shoeshine. As the ferry docked at 125th Street the shadow rejoined Johnny.

"Figuring on giving me the slip over here?" he asked, grinning.

"I'm going to my hotel," Johnny replied. "Feel like taking a cab with me and splitting the fare?"

"To Forty-fifth Street? Why not?"

"Is it against the rules to ask who you're working for?"

"Be kind of silly for me to tell, wouldn't it?"

"Well, you're shadowing me and from the looks of it, we're going to be together for awhile. I can't just keep on calling you YOU, can I?"

"Call me Joe—because it ain't my name."

THE barrier went up and the passengers began to get off the ferry. Johnny and Joe walked through the building, had someone leap into a taxi ahead of them and caught the second

one.

"Forty-fifth Street Hotel," Johnny said to the cabby.

"Uh-huh," said Joe. "Make that Eighty-eighth Street and Second Avenue."

Johnny looked down at Joe's left hand. It was partly in his coat pocket, but enough was out of the pocket to show Johnny a neat little .32.

"Oh," said Johnny. "It's like that."

"Yep!"

"I could yell, you know."

"In which case I'd have to plug both you and the driver."

"Tough guy, eh?"

Joe leaned back, away from Johnny. He smiled confidently. Johnny slid morosely over to the far side of the seat and the taxi jerked and jolted through the streets of upper Manhattan.

Crossing Fifth Avenue, at 110th Street, Joe leaned forward and called to the driver, "I've changed my mind. Drive to One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street and Lennox Avenue.

Ten minutes later the cab pulled over to the curb.

Johnny and his abductor got out. Joe kept his left hand in his coat pocket as he paid the cabby. Then he fell in beside Johnny.

"Now, we walk."

They walked two blocks, turned off Lennox Avenue and went another block. Then Joe nodded to the dingiest building in all New York. The windows of the building were grimy and so covered with dust it would have been difficult to look through one of them.

But Joe led Johnny up to the door and taking a key out of his pocket, unlocked the door.

He stepped back for Johnny to enter.

Johnny went in. The building had apparently been vacant for years, so musty was the smell that assailed his nostrils. Inside Joe closed the door and took his left hand out of his pocket. He prodded Johnny with the .32.

"Up one flight, first door—left."

They climbed the stairs and Joe unlocked an apartment door, revealing a small apartment furnished with worn, shabby furniture, but showing signs of recent occupancy.

"Little hideaway," Joe said cheerfully.

"So?"

"So now we talk business. You've got a phonograph record."

"Says who?"

Joe shook his head. "Let's keep it on a friendly basis and no hard feelings, what do you say? All right—you've got a phonograph record."

"Just for the sake of argument, let's say I've got a phonograph record. What then?"

"Why, you give it to me. That's all. Then you go your way and I go mine and nobody's hurt."

"Who wants this phonograph record?"

"I do."

"Somebody's paying you for this job?"

"Of course. I can't work just for the fun of it, can I?"

"That'd be against the rules, wouldn't it?"

"Natch!"

"But what if I don't give you this phonograph record?"

"Are you kidding?"

Johnny seated himself on a threadbare sofa. "I've got an awfully stubborn streak in me. A girl was murdered because of that phonograph record and somehow it goes against me to make her murderer a present of that record."

THERE was a telephone across the room. Joe went to it and keeping

an eye on Johnny, dialed a number. Then he put the receiver to his ear. After a moment he said: "Georgie? What about it? What . . .?" He nodded. "I've got the chump here. Better come over." He hung up. "The record wasn't in your hotel room," he said to Johnny.

"Did your chum try the hotel safe downstairs?" Johnny asked, sarcastically.

"Oh, so that's where it is!" Joe seated himself in a chair, facing Johnny across the room. "We'll give your friend time to get back to the hotel, then we'll give him a buzz, huh?"

"Buzz all you like, but it won't get you the record."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." Joe toyed with his little revolver. "Don't go making up your mind. A fella makes up his mind too hard he hates to change it. And that makes things kinda tough. So keep an open mind, huh?"

Johnny glowered. "How much are you getting paid for this?"

"Enough."

"A hundred dollars if I walk out of here."

Joe showed interest. "You've got a hundred dollars?"

Johnny winced. "Not with me, but—"

"Turn your pockets inside out," Joe said.

Johnny sat stubbornly still.

"This gun don't make too much noise," Joe went on. "Besides, the building is empty except for us."

"You kill me and you kill your chance of getting the record," Johnny said grimly.

"Who said anything about killing?" Joe demanded. "I wouldn't bump a guy for no amount of money."

"You mean that?"

"Why, of course. They execute guys for murder. But I was thinking about your knee. One of these little slugs would kinda chew up the knee-cap and make it hurt pretty bad, but a broken knee wouldn't kill a man. So how's about standing up and emptying the old pockets, huh?"

Johnny looked steadily at the man with the gun. Something he saw in the man's eyes caused him to get up. Joe cocked his gun as Johnny reached into his pocket.

JOHNNY took out his money, including the three nice new hundred dollar bills. He tossed them across the room. Joe looked down and saw the figures on the new bills.

"Pay dirt!" he cried.

"Me and my big mouth," said Johnny bitterly.

"Oh, don't worry, chum," Joe said consolingly, "we'd a searched you anyway, when George got here." He scooped up the bills. "Uh—we'll keep this little deal a secret between us, huh?"

Down in the building a door slammed. Then heavy feet pounded creaking stairs. Joe went swiftly to the door, opened it a crack and peered out. Then he pulled open the door.

"Hi, Georgie!" he greeted the newcomer.

A man very much the size of Sam Cragg, but with the meanest look Johnny had ever seen in a human, came into the apartment. He sneered at Johnny. "So this is the sucker. He doesn't look like much."

"Oh, he isn't such a bad sort, Georgie. A little unreasonable maybe, but I think he means right."

"I do like hell," Johnny snorted. "And what's more you took four hundred bucks out of my pocket."

Georgie brightened. "Four hundred coconuts?"

Joe shook his head sadly. "Not quite,

George, not quite four hundred."

"Give!"

Joe took the money from his pocket, gave Johnny another hurt look and divided with Georgie. "Fifty-fifty, right down the line. That's being partners, Georgie."

"You said it. Same with the grand that—"

"Hold it, Georgie!"

"Oh, I wasn't gonna spill the guy's name. Don't worry. I can keep my trap shut. Well, how about it, Sher—?"

"Joe's my name!" snapped Joe. "Watch it."

"Okay, okay . . ."

Joe pointed to the telephone. "Fletcher, your friend ought to be back at the hotel by now . . ."

"Maybe."

The geniality faded from Joe's face. "You'll call him. He'll get the record from the hotel people and he'll bring it up here. And he won't say a word to anyone — anywhere. On account of what'll happen to you, if he does. Got that?"

"I've got it," said Johnny, "but I'm not calling Sam Cragg."

Georgie's eyes widened. "I thought you said he was okay?"

"Maybe I didn't ask him polite enough. Fletcher, I'm asking you again—for the last time, polite. Call your chum on the phone."

Johnny folded his arms stubbornly. "Go to hell!"

Joe sighed. "All right, Georgie . . ."

Grinning wickedly, Joe walked up to Johnny. He reached down and gathered up a handful of Johnny's coat front, his shirt and a bit of skin. He lifted Johnny to his feet. And then still smiling, he smashed his fist into Johnny's face—a blow so savage that it went through Johnny's hurriedly thrown up defense and sent him reeling across the room. The wall brought him to a stop, but it didn't hold him. He slid down it to a sitting position.

In a haze, Johnny saw Georgie bearing down on him. Even as the big man stooped to catch him up, he raised his foot and kicked Georgie in the groin. Georgie went back, gasping with pain.

Johnny struggled to his feet and met Georgie, maddened with pain. Georgie hit him in the stomach, straightened him with an uppercut and smashed him to the floor with a terrific left hook. Johnny fell into a black, bottomless pit and then—although he didn't feel it—Georgie kicked him.

He was still kicking Johnny when Joe tore him away.

CHAPTER XV

IT WAS shortly after one o'clock when Sam Cragg returned to the 45th Street Hotel. He expected Johnny to be waiting for him and was surprised when he found the room locked. He opened the door with his own key and went in.

The place looked as if a cyclone had struck it. The beds were torn up and scattered all over the floor. Even the rug was turned back.

The master phonograph record was gone.

"Holy cow!" Sam cried, aloud.

He went to the phone. "Bell captain," he said.

A couple of minutes later he was seated in the morris chair staring at the wreckage of the room, when Eddie Miller knocked on the door and came into the room, in response to Sam's invitation.

Eddie surveyed the room. "What's the game?"

"Whaddya mean, game?"

"Fletcher's figured out something he's going to pull on Peabody."

"Eddie," said Sam, "get ready for a

shock. We're not pulling anything on Peabody. Johnny and me left this room, about three hours ago. It was all nice and clean like the maid left it this morning. Johnny hasn't come back yet and me, I just got in about three and one half minutes ago. It was like this when I come in."

Eddie Miller put his tongue in his cheek. "Your jewels been stolen, maybe?"

"Nothing was swiped, Eddie. It's just—well, Johnny's going to blow the roof off when he comes back and sees this. I suppose I should call up Peabody, but aside from who's behind in his room rent he doesn't know a damn thing about this hotel. You do, Eddie, so I want to know what's been going on around here today."

"Nothing at all."

"Nobody came asking for us?"

"Not that I know of."

"Any suspicious-lookin' birds in the lobby?"

"Half of the guests of this hotel look suspicious, but that don't mean nothing."

"What about packages? Nobody with a package leaves this hotel that you don't know about it."

"Nobody left the hotel with a package that shouldn't have. Besides—you said nothing was stolen."

"Nothing that was worth anything."

"Then something *was* taken?"

"I made a phonograph record of my voice yesterday. It's gone and a record ain't something you can carry out in your pocket."

"You could break it up and carry the pieces in your pocket and nobody'd know it."

"This was a master record, made out of steel. You coudln't bend it without a sledge-hammer."

"A guy could carry it under his coat."

"Did anyone?"

Eddie scratched his head. "Not that I know of. Honest, Sam, I'm on your side. If I knew anything, I'd tell you. People go up and down in the elevators all day long. I don't know them all—and I don't see them all. What goes on in the rooms above the lobby is something we never know about . . . until after it's done, usually. Besides, since this murder yesterday—well, the place is crawling with cops. And private detectives. Jefferson Todd, the famous detective's been in and out of the hotel . . ."

"Today?"

EDDIE nodded. "He's working on the case, but for who I don't know. He's been up to see the Fair girl, I know. And I saw him leave the lobby right after lunch with that big butter and egg man from Iowa, who's been with Miss Fair."

"Esbenshade. We're working for him."

"How do you mean?"

Sam scowled. He shouldn't have spilled that. But it was too late. "Oh, we're doing a little work for him."

"What kind of work?"

"Detective work, Eddie, what do you think?"

Eddie looked at the damaged beds. "I see. Then I don't think you can blame the hotel for *this*."

"Because we're working for Esbenshade, this is our fault, Eddie? How do you figure that?"

"Well, you're asking for trouble, when you're mixing with murderers, aren't you?"

"I catch the guy who tore up this room," growled Sam, "and there'll be blood all over the wallpaper."

Without knocking, Jefferson Todd opened the door and came in. "My, my," he said, looking at the damage.

Sam sprang to his feet. "You got

hands, Todd? Or, ain't you used to knocking on doors?"

"I heard your voice, so I just pushed open the door."

"Well, push it shut again, as you go out."

Todd said: "Where's Fletcher?"

"Hiding under the bed."

"You're a very funny man, Cragg," Todd said sourly. "Ever think of going on the stage?"

"I got an offer last year from George Abbott. He was gonna put on a play called *The Dumb Detective*. It was all about a private dick who called himself the greatest detective in the world. I told him I couldn't play the part because I wasn't dumb enough."

"I guess I'll be getting back to work," Eddie Miller said, suddenly and slid out of the room.

"Did you l o s e something here, Todd?" Sam snapped.

"I want to see Fletcher. Any objection to my waiting for him?"

"Yes."

Todd sneered. "He's trying to muscle in on me."

"So?"

"That glib tongue of his sold Esbenshade a bill of goods. You tell Fletcher I'm not going to put up with it."

"All right, I'll tell him you're going to slap his wrist. Anything else?"

"I'll save it for Fletcher," snarled Todd and stalked out of the room.

SAM got up and began straightening up the bed. He put the sheets and blankets back, with a few wrinkles here and there and kicked the rug back into place. He was just finishing when the phone rang. Sam lunged for it.

"Yes?"

A man's voice said. "Is this Mr. Fletcher?"

"Who's calling?"

"Never mind who's calling," said the voice on the telephone. "Let me talk to Fletcher."

"He ain't here now. But this is Sam Cragg, his assistant. I'll take a—" Sam stopped as he realized he was talking into a dead phone.

He hung up and stared at the telephone. The things Johnny got into! And where was Johnny now? Sam had wasted a lot of time over in Newark, waiting outside that drug store. Johnny should have been home an hour ago.

On a sudden impulse, Sam picked up the phone again. "Miss Susan Fair's room," he said to the operator.

The operator rang the room, but after a moment said to Sam: "I'm sorry, there's no answer."

Sam slammed down the receiver and leaving the room, rode down to the lobby. He went into the cocktail lounge, just off the lobby and ordered a glass of beer at the bar. He was tilting it to his mouth, when he looked into the back-bar mirror. Susan Fair and a wisp of a man Sam had never seen were seated in a booth.

Carrying his glass of beer, Sam headed for the booth.

"Hi, Miss Fair," he greeted Susan.

Susan Fair did not seem overjoyed at seeing Sam. "Hello," she said shortly.

Sam seated himself across from Susan, crowding the skinny man back into the booth. He said: "Johnny'n me are working for Mr. Esbenshade, now. Did he tell you?"

Susan frowned. "No, I hadn't heard. Where . . . where is Mr. Fletcher?"

"I left him over in Newark."

"Newark," exclaimed the man besides Sam. "What's he doing over there?"

Sam turned and looked over the other man quite frankly. "You know Johnny?"

"I've met him."

Susan Fair said: "Excuse me, Mr.

Cragg, this is Mr. Armstrong."

Sam's face lit up. "Oh, Armstrong, huh? You're one of the suspects."

Armstrong recoiled. "Suspects!" He shot a quick glance at Susan Fair. The girl looked down at her cocktail glass that contained the remnants of a dry martini.

Sam said, naively: "Johnny was tellin' me about you. Says he went a couple of rounds with you yesterday."

"Is that what he called it?" Armstrong asked, grimly. "And did *he* refer to me as a suspect?"

"Yep."

"Who else does he call a suspect?"

"Seebright, Joe Dorcas, a guy named Doniger and you."

"What's the matter with Ed Farnham?"

"He said Farnham didn't amount to anything."

Susan Fair suddenly looked up. "Mr. Cragg—please . . . do you mind?"

"Mind, what?"

"Mr. Armstrong and I . . ."

"Oh, it's all right," Sam said cheerfully. "I don't mind. Like I said—me'n Johnny are working for Esbenshade. Which is the same as working for you. Johnny figures one of these guys knocked—did for your sister."

"Mr. Cragg," Armstrong said sharply.

"Huh?"

"Miss Fair prefers that you leave."

"Why? I didn't do anything."

Armstrong's mouth twisted contemptuously. "Are you as stupid as you pretend to be?"

Sam's huge hand shot out and grabbed Armstrong's throat. "Why, you wizened little monkey, I got a good notion—"

Armstrong sputtered and choked and tried with both of his hands to tear away Sam's grip, but it wasn't until Sam himself loosened the hold that Armstrong was able to free himself.

Sam got to his feet and waved away the bartender, who was already coming around the bar to intercede. "Sorry, Miss Fair," he said and with simple dignity walked out of the cocktail lounge.

IN THE lobby he waited for the elevator and the clerk caught sight of him. "Mr. Cragg!" he called.

Sam walked over to the desk. The clerk reached into the key slot and took out some slips of paper. Since they carried their keys with them and seldom received any but bad news, Sam and Johnny had gotten out of the habit of stopping at the desk.

Sam was surprised therefore to receive the message slips. There were four. Three of them read: "Mr. Seebright telephoned. Anxious to have you call him." The fourth read: "Miss Rodgers called."

Sam took the slips and went up to the eighth floor. In his room he got the telephone directory and looked up Seebright. There were three or four in the book, but none on Park Avenue. Sam turned to the M's and got the number of the Mariota Record Company.

A few moments later, the hotel operator connected him. "Look," said Sam, "I'm calling for Johnny Fletcher—"

"It's about time," exclaimed Violet Rodgers. "Put him on, I want to talk to him."

"He ain't here. I was just calling to tell Seebright that I found his messages in our box and I thought maybe Johnny—"

"Mr. Seebright's called Fletcher?" Violet Rodgers asked.

"Of course, that's why I'm calling. This is the Mariota Record Company, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I didn't know Mr. Seebright had been trying to get Fletcher.

I—I wanted to talk to him myself."

"Who're you?"

"Violet Rodgers."

"Oh," said Sam, "I got a message here from you, too. What'd you want to talk to Johnny about?"

"Something personal."

"Well, he ain't here. I thought maybe Mr. Seebright might know where he was."

"Mr. Seebright hasn't been in the office all day."

"Then where'd he call from?"

"His home, no doubt."

"What's the number there?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not allowed to give out the home numbers of the staff."

Sam grunted. "Who're you working for now, Seebright or the creditors?"

Violet Rodgers hesitated. "You've got a point there, lad," she said then, "the number is Plaza 1127. And look, if your friend Fletcher shows up, tell him to buzz me right away. Until five-thirty I'll be here at the office and after that, the same place he and I were yesterday evening. Got that?"

"Got it."

Sam hung up and called Plaza 1127. Mr. Seebright was not at home, a gruff voice told Sam.

"How do you feel today?" Sam asked the man who gave him the Seebright data.

"Who's this?" the voice on the phone snapped.

"Oh, just the guy who slapped you around last night," said Sam and, chuckling, hung up.

CHAPTER XVI

JOHNNY FLETCHER'S body was a solid, aching mass of bone and flesh. Dried blood was plastered over his left cheek and chin. A tiny trickle of warm, new blood was running from the right corner of his mouth.

He looked through a haze at the giant, Georgie, who stood over him.

"Never saw a guy sleep so long from a coupla little smacks," George grunted.

"How long was I out?" Johnny asked.

"Over an hour."

Georgie stooped and twisting his fist in Johnny's coat collar, dragged him across the room. He dropped him limply on the sofa. Johnny saw Joe, then. He was seated before a low table, a few feet away, playing solitaire. He caught Johnny's eye.

"Well, Fletcher?" he asked. "Do you need any more coaxing?"

"Yeah," said Georgie. "You was lucky before. You kicked me and that made me mad, so I knocked you out. But I'm not mad, now, and when I slap you around again, I ain't going to hit hard enough to anes—anesthetic you."

"Anesthetize," Joe corrected.

"It's really gonna hurt this time."

Johnny looked from Joe, to Georgie, then back to Joe. "I'm no hero," he said. "Not for free. Give me back my money and you can have the damn record."

"What money?" asked Georgie.

"The four hundred dollars you and Joe split."

Georgie showed snaggled teeth in what was supposed to be a grin. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Money's too hard to get in the first place," said Joe, cheerfully. "We've got a rule about giving it back."

"So just pick up the telephone nice and call your pal, huh?" said Georgie.

"What'll I tell him?"

"The record," Joe said. "He's to bring it to the corner of Lennox and Thirty-fifth Street. He's to stand there, until Georgie comes up and asks him for it."

"Does he know Sam?"

"I lamped him this A.M. when you'n

him left the hotel."

Johnny raised himself from the couch to go to the telephone and could not quite repress a groan. He picked up the phone, dialed the number of the Forty-fifth Street Hotel and said: "Room 821."

Sam's voice came over the phone. "Hello, who's this?"

Johnny pressed the receiver tightly to his ear and lowered the mouthpiece. He looked at Joe. "There's no answer."

"Johnny!" cried the voice of Sam Cragg, "where are you?"

Johnny hung up. Joe threw down his cards and got up. "Whaddya mean, no answer? I distinctly heard talking."

"The operator . . ."

"Is the operator a man?"

JOE gestured to Georgie. The big man started for Johnny. Hastily, Johnny took off the receiver. "I'll try again." He dialed the number and got Sam.

"What's happening, Johnny?" Sam cried in panic.

"Listen, Sam," said Johnny. "I want you to get the record from under the carpet—"

"It's gone," Sam exclaimed. "Somebody swiped it!"

"From under the rug, near the bathroom, persisted Johnny.

"But it's gone, I'm telling you."

Johnny went on: "Take the subway to Harlem. Stand on the corner of Lennox and One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street until a man comes up and asks you for the record. Got that?"

"But I can't bring the record, Johnny," Sam wailed. "I told you it's gone!"

"And you're not to bring anyone with you and don't tell anyone where you're going. Catch on?"

Joe reached down and put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Hang up!"

Johnny put the receiver back on the hook. It was up to Sam, now. Although what Sam could do, he didn't know. The ransom instructions were simple enough, but the fulfilling of them was fool-proof. Sam didn't have the record and if he coudn't deliver it to Georgie . . .

Joe said: "It'll take him about a half hour to get to Lennox and One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street. Better get down there now, Georgie, so you can spot anyone that might be loafing there and you won't confuse them with any newcomers."

Georgie slapped his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "And there better not be any monkey business!"

Johnny returned to the couch and Joe went back to his table. But as Georgie left the room, Joe took out his little .32 and put it on the table within easy reach.

"We could play a little gin while waiting," Johnny suggested.

"And you make a grab for the gun?" Joe smiled. "That's how Billy the Kid got out of jail. I read about it in a book. He killed the jailer, with his own gun."

"That's the trouble with people these days. They read too much."

"So you sit there on the couch, nice and quiet. And if you make a sudden move—well, you still get a hunk of lead in your knee-cap."

"I'll tell you what," Johnny said. "I'll match Sam against Georgie. Two falls out of three and we'll let Georgie have the first fall."

"Oh, your friend's tough, is he? Georgie fights for keeps."

"So does Sam, and I'll make it even more interesting. You can tie Sam's right arm down to his body."

"You're crazy, Fletcher. What'd be the point in letting them fight?"

"A little side bet."

"What would you use for money?"

Sam carries our bankroll. He's got a thousand dollars in his pocket right now."

Joe looked sharply at Johnny. "Why didn't you tell me that before."

"It interests you?"

"It's more than we're getting for this job."

"Then you're a piker. I was offered five thousand for that phonograph record last night."

Joe exclaimed angrily, "Who offered you five grand?"

"A fellow named Orville Seebright. There were some fellows with him, fellows named Dorcas, Doniger, Armstrong and Farnham."

"Never heard of them," said Joe. But there was a slight pause before he said it.

"A thousand dollars," said Johnny. "And all you've got to do is tell me the name of the man who hired you for this caper."

"It's too late."

"We can get to the corner before Georgie meets Sam."

JOE slammed his fist on the table so hard that his cards bounced up and scattered over the floor. "I've never double-crossed a client in my life."

"Ethics?"

"Damn right. It's your reputation in this racket that brings you the business. You double-cross a customer and it gets around. We said we'd do this for five C's and keep our mouths shut . . ."

"All right," said Johnny. "You can have the record and I'll still give you the thousand dollars."

"Without the record?"

"Yes. You've made four hundred already, you can get your five hundred from the customer . . . and another thousand from me. A total of nineteen hundred dollars." He paused for emphasis. "A nice day's work."

Joe stared at Johnny, his mouth slightly open.

"Nine hundred," said Johnny, "or nineteen hundred."

"No, goddamit!" cried Joe. And to brush away the temptation, he began gathering up his cards. His mind still preoccupied, he stooped to pick up those that had fallen to the floor.

That was when Johnny started moving.

From near the floor, Joe saw Johnny diving for him. He cried out hoarsely, started to jerk up to reach his gun that way lying on the table.

Johnny hit the table and sent it crashing over Joe and spilling the gun. Then Johnny was swarming over the table. Joe was muscular and tough, but he wasn't Georgie. And he hadn't taken the beating Johnny had taken. He was only trying to protect his financial interest and resist a medium-sized beating.

Johnny was fighting—for everything.

He used his fists, elbows, teeth, knees and even his feet. He clawed Joe, smashed him with his fists, kneed and kicked him. And when Joe tried to gouge out his eyes, he used his teeth on Joe's hands.

He dragged him across the room, away from the vicinity of the gun, banged his head on the floor, pounded and battered him with his fists. And within thirty seconds of the launching of the attack, Joe lay on the floor, a quivering hulk of flesh.

Johnny got to his feet, searched for Joe's .32 and finding it, stuck it in his pocket. He started for the door, but detoured to stoop over Joe. He got all the money out of Joe's pocket, then picked up his head and banged it back on the floor . . . to make sure that Joe

would get a nice long sleep.

Then he left the apartment and staggered down the stairs.

CHAPTER XVII

SAM hung up the receiver, after talking to Johnny Fletcher on the phone. His jaw slack, he stared wildly about the room. Johnny was on a spot, he had gathered that much. And it was up to Sam to get him out of it. But how?

He was to meet a man on a street corner. That was good enough. Sam thought he could hold onto whatever man showed up and convince him that it was wise to lead him to where Johnny was being held. And there Sam's two fists could get to work.

But Johnny's instructions had been explicit. He was to bring the phonograph record with him. Without it, the man he was to meet, probably wouldn't come up to Sam and identify himself.

The phonograph record.

A phonograph record. They all looked alike from a distance, didn't they?

Sam slammed out of the room, rode down to the lobby in the elevator and saw Eddie Miller standing beside his little stand at the far end of the lobby. He hurried over to him.

"Where's the nearest place that they sell phonograph records, Eddie?" he asked.

"Why, there's a place over on Seventh Avenue, right around the corner."

Sam winced. That was the place he and Johnny had visited the day before. He didn't think he would be welcomed at that particular store.

"I don't want to go to that place," he said. Isn't there another shop handy?"

"I can't think of any offhand. You see them everywhere when you aren't looking for them, but when you want one—"

Sam groaned and whirled away from Eddie, leaving the bell captain staring after him. He burst out of the hotel and half-ran, half-walked over to Seventh Avenue.

He entered the phonograph shop and, of course, out of a half dozen clerks, the one he didn't want, came up. He recognized Sam. "A package of needles?" he asked sarcastically. "Or do you want to examine the twelve hundred dollar model again . . .?"

"I want a record," said Sam, "that's all—and I want it in a hurry . . ."

"A record?" the salesman smirked. "What good is a record without a phonograph to play it?"

"Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out some money. "Gimme a record and give it to me quick."

The salesman shrugged. "What record?"

"Any record. I don't care what it is."

"But thats' ridiculous. No one buys just any record."

Sam strode past the salesman to a rack. He reached in and brought out a record. "This—how much?"

"Seventy-five cents, plus city tax."

Sam thrust a dollar bill into his hand. "Keep the change."

He ran out of the store and headed for the Times Square subway station, several blocks away.

TWENTY minutes later he emerged from the subway station at Lennox and One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street. Holding the phonograph record conspicuously in front of him, he walked to the street corner.

Georgie, at the moment, was on the opposite corner, standing in front of a drug store. He spotted Sam immediately, but remained where he was, drag-

ging on a cigarette butt.

No one approached Sam, but Georgie didn't like the way Sam kept looking around. Finally, Sam crossed the street and took up a stand only ten feet from Georgie.

Georgie waited a moment, then threw away his cigarette stub. He walked up to Sam and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Is that a phonograph record, chum?" he asked.

Sam whirled and sized up Georgie. He was a nicely built lad, Sam thought. Husky enough to make it interesting.

"It ain't a pie plate," he retorted.

"Give it to me."

"Why?" Sam demanded.

"Because your pal ain't going to feel so well if you don't."

"That's all I wanted to know," Sam said.

He pushed the phonograph record into Georgie's face, breaking it into about a thousand pieces. Then he grabbed Georgie's right arm and clamped on a double-wrist lock.

Georgie cried out, in anger and alarm. "This is gonna cost Fletcher his life!"

He hit Sam in the face with his free fist, a blow that would have been much harder, had Sam not put vicious pressure on the double-wrist lock. Georgie screamed and went back. Sam followed, side-stepped and threw Georgie to the sidewalk. If Georgie hadn't gone down his arm would have been broken.

But the fall broke Sam's hold and he rolled quickly aside as Sam lunged for him. His feet came up and one of them caught Sam in the chest. Sam went back, grunted and came forward as Georgie struggled to his feet, tugging at his right hip pocket.

Sam caught Georgie's shoulder, whirled him around, just as Georgie's hand came free of his pocket. It held a leather-covered blackjack, which he swung at Sam's face.

Sam let go of Georgie and ducked, even as he drove a smashing blow through at Georgie. He took the blackjack on his left shoulder, but his fist caught Georgie's face and knocked the ruffian back against the drug store. Georgie barely missed the plate glass window.

In the middle of the intersection, a policeman's whistle blasted. But Sam didn't hear it. He was moving forward to decimate Georgie.

Georgie was reeling, but he still had the blackjack in his fist.

Feet pounded the pavement. Johnny Fletchers' voice cried: "Sam." Sam didn't hear him. He was watching the blackjack in Georgie's hand and cocking his right fist for the haymaker. Johnny Fletcher grabbed Sam's arm and then ducked as Sam whirled and struck. The fist swished past Johnny's ear, missing him by one-sixteenth of an inch. Then Sam recognized Johnny.

"Johnny!"

The policeman's whistle blasted again, nearer. Johnny caught Sam's arm. "Come on!"

They ran then, leaving Georgie and his blackjack to the mercies of the Harlem policeman.

FIFTY yards away, Johnny shot a quick glance over his shoulder and saw Georgie mixing it with the policeman, blackjack against club. The blackjack lost and Georgie went sprawling to the pavement.

Then Johnny and Sam whirled around a corner and shot across the street. There they slackened their pace to a walk and Johnny caught his breath.

"What happened, Johnny?" Sam panted.

"I walked into something."

Sam studied Johnny's face. "Jeez, you sure took a beating."

"About eight of my ribs are floating." He thrust a hand into his pocket. "And I'm out sixty dollars on the deal."

"They took your dough?"

"They took it and split. But I got Joe's share back, with a little extra. Too bad I didn't have time to go through Georgie."

"Georgie's the lad with the blackjack? I woulda murdered him in another minute . . ."

"You did well enough. Hey, taxi."

Brakes squealed as a cruising taxi pulled up beside them. Johnny and Sam piled in.

"Forty-fifth and Broadway," Johnny said. "And whip up the horse-power!"

A half hour later they climbed out in front of the Forty-fifth Street Hotel. While Johnny waited for the elevator, Sam stepped to the desk. There was another telephone slip. Sam got it and handed it to Johnny as they stepped into the elevator.

The message was from Seebright. It said: "Important you phone me. Plaza 1127 until eight, after that, Club Mague."

"What time is it?" Johnny asked the elevator operator.

"I don't know, I haven't got a watch."

"I've got eight of them," Johnny exclaimed, "but they'll all in pawnshops."

The elevator operator grinned at the joke. He was new at the Forty-fifth Street Hotel and didn't know Johnny Fletcher. On the eighth floor Johnny and Sam got off the elevator and hurried to their room. Inside, Johnny scooped up the phone.

"What time is it, sweetheart?" he asked the operator.

"Ten minutes after eight," was the reply.

"Well, get me the Club Mague, will you, precious? And have them page a guy named Orville Seebright. Call me back when you get him on the phone."

HE HUNG up and headed for the bathroom. He recoiled when he saw his face in the mirror. Both eyes were in mourning, the left one swollen to a slit. There was a mouse on his left cheek and a few other assorted bruises, including a bad cut on his mouth.

He started the hot water in the bathtub and began stripping off his clothes. As he climbed into the tub he groaned. Same came into the bathroom.

"Shall I call a doctor?"

"What for?"

"You don't look so good. Maybe you better go right to bed, after you soak awhile. A good sleep'll help."

"If I had time to sleep. See if I've got a clean shirt in the drawer, will you?"

Sam exclaimed, "You're not figuring on going out!"

"I've got to. I've only got three hundred and ten dollars to meet those eleven hundred dollars' worth of checks tomorrow. We've got to get the murderer of Marjorie Fair and grab that thousand bucks from Esbenshade. We've used up all the banks within walking distance and it's going to be tough kiting checks tomorrow. And even if I make them good tomorrow, we'll be working the banks in Brooklyn the day after."

Sam groaned. "Couldn't we just skip town?"

"And have every bonding company in the country after us? You murder somebody and only the cops are after you. They're easy compared to the bonding companies that cover the banks and stores. Giving rubber checks is almost as bad as stealing a car. Uh-uh, we've got to make those checks good tomorrow—and keep them good!"

Sam started to leave the bathroom. "Hey—that guy Georgie, the cop grabbed him. Well, the fellow that hired him, isn't he—?"

"Yes," said Johnny, "but he isn't going to volunteer any information to the cops."

"They can sweat it out of him."

"If they knew there was something to sweat for." Johnny shook his head. "If the cops break this case, we don't get one thousand bucks. Catch on?"

"Yeah, but couldn't you tell Esbenshade that Georgie knows who killed his girl friend? That's almost the same as naming the guy yourself."

"It's what I'm thinking of, Sam. Call up the Barbizon-Waldorf and tell him we're coming over to see him with some information. I'll try to sell him on the idea that we've earned the grand."

Sam went into the bedroom, while Johnny stepped out of the tub and began drying himself. Before he was finished, Sam came to the bathroom door.

"He went out, they said."

"Try Susan's room upstairs."

Sam grimaced. "Me and Susie ain't on such good terms."

"How come?"

"Well, I went into the saloon downstairs to get a beer and there was Susie with this guy Armstrong. Armstrong insulted me and I kinda choked him a little. Susie didn't seem to like it."

"Armstrong and Susan Fair," mused Johnny. "Armstrong had a crush on Marjorie."

"Oh, they didn't look like that," Sam said. "They was just talking together, serious-like."

Johnny began dressing himself. "Call her room."

Sam did, but received no answer. "You'd think people would stay home."

"Maybe they're having dinner together?" suggested Sam.

"I'm so hungry myself I could start eating the furniture. But there isn't time to eat."

The phone rang and Johnny went out and caught it up. "Yes?"

It was the hotel operator. "I'm sorry, Mr. Fletcher, but they say at the Club Mague that Mr. Seebright isn't there. Shall I try again later?"

"No," said Johnny. "Thanks." He hung up. "I guess he's on the way over. Well, we'll run over, too, and maybe get time to grab some dinner."

Sam headed into the bathroom to clean up.

IT WAS nine o'clock when they got out of a taxi in front of the Club Mague, a dive in the basement of a dingy brownstone building on Fifty-second Street. A liveried doorman gave them the once-over and opened the door reluctantly.

Inside a velvet rope was up, even though Johnny, looking into the restaurant saw vacant tables. The head waiter shook his head condescendingly.

"All filled up."

"Where?" asked Johnny. "You got room in there for Coxe's army."

"Reserved, all tables reserved."

Johnny dug into his pocket, and bringing out his money, sorted out a five dollar bill. The head waiter looked at it and at Johnny's unprepossessing face. "Sorry," he persisted.

Johnny swore under his breath and skinned out a ten-spot. "Bet you this you can find a table."

The waiter palmed the tenner and took down the velvet rope. "Right this way, *sir*." He led Johnny and Sam to a tiny table at the far, far end of the room where the lights were dim. He held out a chair for Johnny and said, solicitously, "An accident, sir?"

"Fight," said Johnny.

"Ah, Madison Square Garden?"

"Alley. Just an alley fight . . ."

The head waiter smiled vacantly and signalled to a waiter. When the latter came up, Johnny brushed away the 36-sheet menu. "Two steaks," he said, "and a ham sandwich apiece for an appetizer, while we're waiting. And two double Scotches for me and one for my friend."

"Make that two for me, too," said Sam.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE waiter went off and Johnny, leaning back, searched the interior of the Club Mague for familiar faces. He saw two in a booth a short distance away. Doniger and Farnham, late of the Mariota Record Company. A woman with a bosom sat beside Doniger.

"Holler when the meat comes, Sam," he said, getting to his feet. He bore down on the trio in the booth.

"Hello, fellows," he said as he came up.

Doniger looked up at him coldly. "Yes?"

"Too bad about the old Mariota outfit, isn't it?" Johnny sympathized. "Although I don't suppose it'll mean so much to you two. With you backgrounds you shouldn't have any trouble getting jobs."

"How long is it since *you've* had a job?" Doniger asked pointedly.

Johnny chuckled. "Right there with the old one-two! Guess I asked for that one." He seated himself in the booth beside Farnham and facing Doniger and the woman with the bosom. He smiled confidently at Farnham. "H'arya, Eddie?" Then, without waiting for a response he looked across at Doniger again. "I've got a friend named Doug Esbenshade might be able to give you something, Donny."

"You know Esbenshade?" Doniger exclaimed.

Johnny held up two fingers, pressed tightly together. "Like that, Doug and me. One of the richest men in Iowa, Doug is. But sharp, too. That's why he foreclosed on Mariota."

The woman beside Doniger nudged him sharply. Doniger started. "Oh, excuse me—Ruthie, this is Mr. Fletcher. Fletcher, my wife."

"Mrs. Doniger! Well, I'm certainly glad to meet you." To Doniger: "You sly dog, I didn't know you were married. Why don't you tell people?"

"He's very much married," Mrs. Doniger said sharply. "And there are two children at home, too. I don't suppose he told about them either?"

"Now, now, Ruthie," said Doniger, squirming.

"Two kids!" exclaimed Johnny. "Well!" He leaned back and looked fatuously at Doniger. Then he said: "By the way, Vi phoned me today."

"Vi?" asked Mrs. Doniger.

"Violet Rodgers, the switchboard operator at Mariota. A stunner!"

Doniger was as pale as the newly washed sheet of a Ku-Kluxer. He said nervously, "When do you expect to see Esbenshade again?"

"Oh, probably tomorrow. Don't worry, I'll put in a good word for you. But I was going to tell you about Vi—"

"Cut it out," Doniger snarled.

"Oh, no, Mr. Fletcher," said Mrs. Doniger in a deadly calm voice. "Tell us about Vi. A stunner, I believe you said."

JOHNNY whistled suggestively and rolled his eyes. Then he appealed to Farnham. "Isn't she, Eddie?"

Farnham just looked dumb, which was par for him.

"I suppose Vi's going to lose her job, too," purred Mrs. Doniger.

"With her looks she's got nothing to worry about," said Johnny.

Sam Cragg hissed loudly, "Johnny, grub!"

Johnny got up. "Oh, excuse me, folks. I'll drop by again later."

He walked quickly back to his own table, where the ham sandwiches, loaded with lettuce, butter and mayonnaise, were just being placed on the table. Johnny scowled as he sat down and picked up his sandwich.

"Is there a law says you've got to put mayannoise on a sandwich?" he demanded of the waiter.

"Why, I don't think so," said the waiter. "The cook—"

"Tell him there are more people don't like mayonnaise than do. When I get back to Congress I'm going to introduce a bill forbidding the manufacture of the damn stuff. Take this back—and see that the cook doesn't just put new bread around the ham. I don't want a speck of mayonnaise on it. Not even a smell. Understand . . . ?"

"And that goes for me, too!" growled Sam.

The waiter gathered up the sandwiches. Johnny looked over at the Doniger booth. Mrs. Doniger was giving her husband the business and the latter was defending himself warmly and with the expression of a cat being whipped, after upsetting the cream bowl.

"I just fixed up Doniger with his wife," Johnny said, cheerfully to Sam.

"He's sure catching it, too. What'd you say?"

"It wasn't what I said; it was the way I said it. Mrs. D. is sure now that her husband's been two-timing her with Violet Rodgers."

Sam jammed his hand into his pocket and pulled out a slip. "Jeez, I forgot—she telephoned today. Said she'd meet you at the same place as last night."

"This is a fine time to tell me. Oh-oh . . . !" He looked past Sam.

Susan Fair was coming into the room. Behind her was Orville Seebright, wearing a neat blue suit with white piping around the vest lapels, and black piping on the coat. The head waiter was bringing them to the table next to Johnny's and Sam's, and as they approached Johnny got to his feet.

"Miss Fair and Mr. Seebright! Why don't you join us?"

Susan didn't seem to like the idea, but Seebright was all for it. Ensued a bit of business with the head waiter and the other table was pushed against Johnny's.

The quartette seated themselves.

"You got my phone call?" Seebright asked.

"Four of them, but I had a little trouble at the gym." He indicated his battered face. "Picked a rough sparring partner and had to teach him a lesson."

"Or he you," remarked Susan.

Johnny smiled. "You ought to see the other guy."

THE waiter came back with the ham sandwiches. Johnny said, "Just a moment," and picked up the top layer of bread. He examined the ham critically. "Just as I thought—he brushed the mayonnaise off the ham and put new bread on it. Take it back again and tell him I want *new* bread and *new* ham—untainted by mayonnaise."

The waiter gave Johnny a dirty look, but said, "Yes sir," and took the sandwiches away again. "I'm going to get me some cards printed," Johnny went on. "They're going to read: 'People DON'T like mayonnaise,' and everywhere I go I'm going to pass them out." He shook his head. "When you were in the record business, Mr. Seebright, you should have hired only former

mayonnaise salesmen. They're the best salesmen in the world, the way they've pushed that goo all around the country."

Seebright smiled. "You said when I *was* in the record business. What makes you think I'm not still in the record business?"

"Why, I read something in the papers today. . . ."

"True, true. But what does the receiver know about the record business? They've got to keep someone in the place who knows things. Besides—the firm will be in receivership only a day or two."

"You raised the dough?" Johnny looked pointedly at Susan Fair.

"I expect to," Seebright said calmly. "I've been talking to a bank that's practically agreed to refinance the company." He cleared his throat. "As soon as I show them the Con Carson master."

"Oh, you've found it?"

"Why, no—not yet. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Mmm," said Johnny.

"I wanted to continue our little talk of last night."

"Is that so?"

"I thought I might sweeten that offer I made you. Say twice the amount?" He looked inquiringly at Johnny and as the latter shook his head, added: "And I'll personally add, out of my own pocket, another five thousand."

"Fifteen thousand altogether? That's a lot of money, Mr. Seebright."

"I think so."

"It's enough to make a man want to go out and *find* the record for you."

"I had that in mind."

"Only I don't know where to start looking."

Seebright regarded Johnny steadily. "Think it over."

"I have, Mr. Seebright, I have. As a matter of fact, I'm going to let you in on a secret. I didn't get this face massage in a gymnasium today. I got it because of the Con Carson record; somebody thought I had it. Somebody paid a couple of fellows five hundred dollars to persuade me to give it to them."

SEEBRIGHT exhaled heavily. "I never know when you're telling the truth or talking nonsense, Fletcher."

"This time I'm not talking nonsense. I might add that I've got some assorted bruises where they don't show; such as a couple of awfully sore ribs. In fact, I'm sore all over."

"Me, too," chimed in Sam.

"I'm no hero, Mr. Seebright. I would have given them the record when they were asking for it, but I couldn't, because I didn't have it at the time."

"At the time?"

"An idiom of speech."

"It seems to me," Susan Fair said, "one or the other of you two is always going around looking for trouble."

"You're referring to Sam's little fracas with Mr. Armstrong? He told me about it."

"Armstrong?" Seebright. asked, looking at Susan. "Charles Armstrong?"

"He called this afternoon to offer condolences," Susan said quietly.

"Armstrong was *interested* in Marjorie," Johnny amplified.

Seebright showed interest. "I didn't know that. In fact, I find it a little hard to believe. I seem to recall that it was he who voted against giving your sister a contract. I liked the recording myself but in the interests of unity in the company . . ." He shrugged.

"Armstrong makes the decisions at Mariota?" Johnny asked. "Dorcas was all for Marjorie, you were for her, the sales manager liked her voice, but Charles Armstrong decided against her,

so you turned her down."

"Unity, Fletcher, unity. Miss Fair . . ." to Susan, "forgive me, Miss Fair, your sister made a fine recording, but her name was after all, unknown. It's more difficult to sell an unknown and since a vice-president of the company seemed to feel so strongly . . ."

"I understand, Mr. Seebright," said Susan in a low tone.

Seebright suddenly pushed back his chair. "I declare, there's Doniger over there now. And Ed Farnham. Will you excuse me, Miss Fair? There's something I'd like to ask Doniger."

He got up and went over to the Doniger table. Johnny winked at Sam and hitched his chair around so that he was virtually on Susan Fair's side of the table.

"When are you going back to Iowa, Susan?"

"In a few days—why?"

"Why, I was thinking, what can you do in Iowa that you can't do in New York? I know some people here in the show business . . ."

"And you'll get me a job in the Follies?"

"They don't put on the Follies any more, not *the* Follies. Ziegfeld's dead. But they still have plenty of other shows and with your looks . . ."

"Sorry, not interested."

"Modeling, maybe?"

"No modeling."

"I was thinking of magazine covers."

"I was thinking of your line," Susan said. "I've heard better routines back in Des Moines."

JOHNNY grinned. "Well, suppose you consider that I've broken the ice, then. What do you say we ditch old Seebright and go some place where there's a little more life?"

"Why, Mr. Fletcher!" Susan mocked. "I came here with Mr. Seebright. It wouldn't be right for me to walk out on him, would it?"

"It's been done."

"What sort of place did you have in mind? I mean, the place you'd like to take me—a nice, cozy little Hungarian restaurant, where the lights are kind of dim and the man in the gypsy uniform plays *'When a Gypsy Makes His Violin Cry'* on the violin? Is that the kind of place you had in mind?"

"All right," said Johnny. "Man to girl, then, let's get away from all these people, where I can tell you all about myself and you can tell me what *you've* been doing all of your life."

"Object—what?"

"Object, how do we know, unless we get better acquainted?"

Susan pursed up her lips and studied Johnny's face. "Well, your looks haven't been improved any by the plastic surgery. I'll admit your personality is a bit on the picaresque side and I like the picaresque; but girl to man, Johnny Fletcher, do you really think you're the sort a girl can take by the hand and lead into her home and say, 'Ma, this is the man'?"

"I haven't got hydrophobia."

Susan smiled. "I was talking to one of the bellboys at the hotel this afternoon, the little chap who seems to be the head of the bellboys."

"Eddie Miller."

"Yes, Eddie. He's an admirer of yours. He was telling me of some of the outrages you've perpetrated upon the hotel management at one time or another. Oh—all in a spirit of tremendous admiration, for Eddie thinks you're wonderful."

"I pay him a small salary to plug me to the right people."

Susan looked at Sam Cragg. "I see you've gotten your trousers back."

Sam reddened. "Oh, we're in the dough."

"Because of Mr. Esbenshade?"

'I suppose *some* girls prefer men like Esbenshade," said Johnny. "But what fun is there in counting money and clipping coupons? You just get callouses on your fingers. Although I wouldn't mind counting about a thousand dollars right now."

"What would you do with a thousand dollars?"

"The question should be, what am I going to do if I *don't* get *a* thousand dollars?"

Susan looked at him in surprise. "You're in debt a thousand dollars?"

"Not exactly. As a matter of fact, I not in debt at all. I don't owe anyone a dime. I did owe a little hotel bill yesterday, but I took care of that."

"Then why do you need a thousand dollars?"

"Why, as the bright young bellboy told you, I—ah—pledged Sam's suit to pay a hotel bill. And then in order to get Sam's suit back for him, well, that's cost me eleven hundred dollars. So far . . ."

"That suit certainly didn't cost eleven hundred dollars."

"Twenty-seven fifty, lady, said Sam Cragg. "I walked up a flight of stairs and saved ten bucks. They've got 'em all over the country."

CHAPTER XIX

ORVILLE SEEBRIGHT came back to the table. He seated himself and looked reproachfully at Johnny. "I've just had to assure Mrs. Doniger that there isn't and hasn't ever been anything between her husband and a switchboard operator named Violet."

"Well, who said there was?"

"They seemed to think you intimated such a thing."

The waiter brought the steaks for Johnny and Sam.

"Where're the ham sandwiches?" Johnny demanded.

"The cook says he hasn't got no more ham and furthermore, customers we got plenty of, customers that don't all the time send things back to the kitchen."

"That'll hold me," said Johnny, "but remember, comes the revolution and the customer's going to be right again."

"Maybe," said the waiter. He slammed down the dishes and went off, in the direction of the kitchen.

Johnny shook his head sadly. "And I was going to give him a fifty cent tip."

Jefferson Todd and Doug Esbenshade bore down on the Seebright - Fair - Fletcher-Cragg table. "Well, well," said Johnny. "Look, who we've got here."

"Whom," corrected Todd.

"Just to pick a fight, Jefferson, I stick to who."

"Fletcher," said Esbenshade, "I'd like a word with you."

Johnny got up. "Me, too, with you." He led the way to the men's washroom, where he handed fifty cents to the attendant. "Mind stepping out for a minute?"

The attendant went out. "Fletcher," Esbenshade began. "I've been thinking things over and I've decided—"

"I'm ready for that thousand dollars," Johnny interrupted.

"What thousand dollars?"

"The thousand you said you'd give me when I got the murderer."

"What are you talking about?" Esbenshade demanded angrily.

"We made a deal, didn't we? A thousand dollars when I gave you the name of the person who killed Marjorie Fair."

"And you know?" Esbenshade said, grimly. "And can prove it?"

"The police will prove it."

"All right, what's the name?"

Johnny evaded a direct question. "About seven o'clock this evening a man was arrested at the corner of Lennox Avenue and One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street. He attacked a policeman with a blackjack, but was beaten into submission. He gave me what you see on my face. He was hired to do it by the man who killed Marjorie Fair."

"Who?"

"The police can make him tell."

"But you don't know yourself?"

"After all, Mr. Esbenshade, I was kidnapped and tortured for hours. I was glad enough to get away. But that's a technicality. The police are very good at making people tell things."

ESBENSHADE went to the door of the washroom. He opened it and looked out for a moment. Then catching someone's eye he signaled. After a moment Jefferson Todd came into the washroom with Doug Esbenshade.

"Todd," Esbenshade said, "you told me that you had an in with the police department."

"Sure," Johnny said, "he can fix a parking ticket anytime, by paying the fine."

Todd scowled at Johnny. "I'll have some things to say to you, later. What is it you want to know from the police, Mr. Esbenshade?"

"A man was arrested this evening," Esbenshade said, then looking at Johnny: "Where did you say?"

"One Hundred and Thirty-fifth and Lennox, in Harlem."

'And?"

"Fletcher claims that this man was employed to beat him up. Employed by the man who killed Marjorie Fair."

Jefferson Todd snorted. "You see, Mr. Esbenshade, this is the sort of thing I meant—the man gets in to brawl somewhere and makes a story of international intrigue of it."

"Are you talking about me, Todd?" Johnny demanded.

"I wasn't talking about Sherlock Holmes."

Johnny reached under a wash bowl and brought out a Manhattan telephone directory. He found the number he wanted and took a nickel from his pocket. Then he stepped to a wall phone, took down the receiver and dropping in his nickel, began dialing.

"Hello, Police Station?" he asked a moment later. "Well, look, one of your officers arrested a man this evening, shortly after seven o'clock. On the corner of Lennox and One Hundred and Thirty-fifth Street. The man attacked an officer with a blackjack and I believe the policeman had to subdue him with his club . . . What . . .? You've got the report right there? That's right . . . Officer Holtznagle, a fine man . . . Eh? . . . ? No, no, I was merely one of the witnesses 'Bye . . . !"

He hung up. "He didn't handcuff Georgie and while he was putting in the call for the wagon, Georgie made a break for it. He got away."

Todd laughed raucously. "See what I mean, Mr. Esbenshade?"

"Are you calling me a liar, Todd?" Johnny asked savagely.

"What do you think?"

Johnny brought out another nickel. "Here, you call the Harlem Police Station this time."

Todd brushed away the suggestion. "Oh, there might have been some such incident in Harlem. It's nothing unusual. You probably saw a squib in the paper. But the man involved is probably someone you never even saw in your whole life."

Johnny looked at Esbenshade. The Iowan's face was cold and impassive. "Keep the money I gave you, Fletcher. But forget the rest of it, will you?"

"If I'm not working for you," Johnny said grimly, "I'll work for myself. And I'll get the man who—"

"And stop annoying people," Esbenshade went on curtly.

JOHNNY slammed out of the washroom. He returned to his table. "Come on, Sam!"

"But I ain't through eatin' yet, Johnny," Sam protested.

"You've had more'n I've had." He nodded to Seebright and Susan. "Excuse us, please . . ."

"Think over what I've told you, Fletcher," said Seebright.

Johnny didn't bother to answer. He started to leave and the waiter who had served them, headed him off. He had a bill for $14.80 in his hand. "Your check, sir."

Johnny noted the amount. "That was a great dinner, *garcon*. And well served." He took a ten and a five dollar bill from his pocket. "Keep the change."

The waiter said some things, but Johnny was too angry to bother retorting. He stalked out of the Club Magué.

A taxi was at the curb. Johnny and Sam climbed in.

"Where to?" asked the cab driver.

"Forty-fifth Street Hotel," replied Johnny and instantly changed his mind. "Make that the Grand Central Depot. To Sam he explained: "Violet Rodgers."

"She said she'd be at the Commodore at five-thirty. It's almost ten o'clock."

"So I'm late."

"Yeah, about five hours."

"She may still be waiting."

She was. She sat at a corner table, an empty glass in front of her, her body rigidly erect, her eyes glazed.

Johnny sat down at the table. "Sorry, Vi. I didn't get your message until a little while ago."

"J-Johnny Fle-Fletcher," Violet said thickly, "I wouldn't wait for any man, no matter who he is. When I say six o'clock, I mean six o'clock. I'm going home."

"Sure," said Johnny, "why not?" I'm going your way; I'll drop you off."

Violet struggled to get to her feet. She wouldn't have made it if Johnny hadn't helped her. Then she looked owlishly at Sam Cragg.

"Who're the two fellows with you, Johnny?"

"The one on the right is my pal, Sam Cragg.

"H'arya, Vi," said Sam.

"Harya, yourself. Hey, Johnny, walk to the subway with me, willya? Wanna talk with you."

Johnny took her arm and with Sam on the other side assisting, they led Violet Rodgers out of the bar, to the sidewalk and into a taxicab. They got in and seated themselves, Sam on Violet's right, Johnny on the left.

"What station do you get off at, Vi?" Johnny asked.

"Whatsamatter? Don't you think I know I'm not in a subway? I'm not drunk, you know. I live on Eighty-fourth Street, near Second Avenue."

"Eighty-fourth and Second Avenue," Johnny called to the driver.

The cab jerked off and Violet grabbed Johnny Fletcher's hand. "Listen, big boy, I wanna talk to you. I'm scared, see."

"Of what?"

"Of what—of what happened to Marjorie Fair. You think I don't know anything about that, huh? Well, I do—I know more'n anybody thinks, see. And the fella that did it knows that I know, see? Otherwise he wouldn't a sent me this letter."

SHE fumbled with her purse and finally found a soiled and folded

envelope. Johnny took it from her hand, saw that it was postmarked Station C, New York City. It was addressed in penciled printing: Miss Violet Rodgers, Mariota Record Company, Kamin Bldg., New York, N. Y.

Inside was a sheet of cheap ruled paper on which had been pasted, in words clipped from a newspaper, the message:

"Keep your trap shut or you'll get what she got."

"When'd you get this?" Johnny asked, soberly.

"It came in the mail this morning. Tha's why I wanted to talk to you."

"It says here to keep your trap shut."

"Yeah, well I did. I kept it shut all day, didn't I? I didn't say a word to nobody at the office. And didn't tell the police that I got a threatening letter. The fella that wrote this isn't kidding and I know enough to keep my mouth shut."

Johnny hesitated. "Just what is it you're not supposed to tell anyone?"

"That's the thing that gets me. I don't know."

"You just got through telling me that you know more than anybody thinks."

"I guess I do."

"Well, what?"

"I told you I don't know."

"Look, Vi," cut in Sam Cragg. "How can you know something when you don't know something."

"Stop tryin' to confuse me, big boy. I know plenty."

"What?" Johnny repeated patiently.

"I got this letter, didn't I?" demanded Violet, indignantly. "It says to keep my trap shut, don't it? That means I know something I'm not supposed to tell."

"For the last time, Violet," said Johnny, *"what do you know?"*

"For the last time, Johnny Fletcher, I don't know what I know. But I *must* know something or I wouldn't have got this letter. That's simple, isn't it?"

"If it is, I'm a Quiz Kid."

"Le's try it again," said Violet Rodgers. "I know somethin' the person who killed Marjorie Fair knows I know. Only I don't know what it is. D'you understand that?"

Johnny exhaled wearily. "Have you got a key to the office?"

"What office?"

"The Mariota Record Company office."

"Of course I have. Why?"

Johnny leaned forward and spoke to the cab driver. "Change that to Lexington and Forty-second."

Brakes squealed and the taxi made a careening U turn and began to zoom southward.

"Hey, where we going?" Violet demanded.

"To your office, to see if we can find out what you know."

"We can't go to the office in the middle of the night."

"Why not? You've got a key, haven't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"But what?"

"You two—you don't work for Mariota."

"If you want to be technical, neither do you. But you've got a key and we can get in."

"That'd be burglary."

"So it's burglary."

Violet groaned. "I need a drink."

"You've had a drink."

"I had two, but they're beginning to wear off."

"That's fine," said Johnny.

CHAPTER XIX

THE taxicab pulled up before the Kamin Building and the three

climbed out. Johnny paid the bill and they headed for the door of the building. It was a huge glass door and locked, but peering through into the dimly-lighted corridor, Johnny could see a man sitting behind a high stand near the elevators. Johnny rattled the door and when that produced no results took a half dollar from his pocket and tapped it on the door.

That got results. The man inside came up to the door and unlatched it from the inside.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"We want to go into the building," Johnny replied. "The Mariota Record office."

"You work there?"

"Yes, and we've got the key."

The night watchman hesitated, then pulled the door wide open and led them to his little high stand. "You'll have to sign the book."

Johnny siged for all three: *Jefferson Todd, George Molotov* and *Helen Gahagan.* Then they stepped into the elevator, which the night watchman operated himself.

On the twelfth floor they went to the offices of the Mariota Record Company, the door of which Violet unlocked with her key. Inside, Johnny switched on all the lights in the main part of the office, then went back and locked the door on the inside.

"Now, what do we burglarize?" Violet asked.

"What is there to burglarize?"

"The safe's locked and I don't know the combination. If you ask me, there's nothing here but the office furniture and records."

"Records," said Johnny, "where do they keep those?"

"In the stock room."

"Where's that?"

Violet led the way to a door and opening it switched on a light inside, revealing a long, narrow room, lined on both sides with shelves. Several contained nothing but office supplies, another contained bookkeeper's ledgers and several had narrow slots in which reposed several hundred records, all arranged alphabetically.

"If we had a phonograph we could play some records," Sam said.

"Are you kidding? Every private office here has a phonograph. But it seems kinda silly to come up here at night and play phonograph records."

"Pay no attention to Sam," said Johnny.

He cast another glance around the room and was about to leave when his eye fell on the bookkeepers' ledgers. "Say, are the list of stockholders in any of these books?"

"I'm the switchboard operator. I don't know anything about the books. But I guess I've got the names of all the big stockholders in my own book."

"But you don't know who owns what?"

"I know who's the boss, don't I?"

"Who?"

"The president, naturally."

"And who's next in line; the vice-president?"

"Uh-uh, old clammy Farnham. *He* runs the office."

"But he's only the treasurer."

"After Seebright, he's the boss. At least as far's the office is concerned."

JOHNNY pulled out one of the big ledgers and opened the cover. Inside the pages were headed: *"Accounts Receivable."*

He closed the book and tried another. It said: *"Disbursements."*

He tried a smaller book, opened it casually and became interested. *"Stockholders, as of the fiscal year ending, June 30,"* he read. Then he grunted, "Who's the biggest stockholder in

Mariota Records, Violet?"

"Seebright's name is Number Six on the list."

'You're kidding!"

"It says here that he holds 14,500 shares of preferred and 150 of Common."

"What's the difference between preferred and common?" Sam asked.

"The common is the big voting stock. The preferred is what the suckers get. If there are dividends, they get them—if the common stockholders decide to let them have any. The guys that own the common run the company. Edwin Farnham, it says here, owns 200 shares of common and 21,600 of preferred."

"More than Seebright?" exclaimed Violet.

"That's what it says in the book, but even Farnham isn't on top. That place goes to the East River Trust Company, who, on behalf of Con Carson, owns 25,000 shares of preferred and 225 of common. That's what the firm gave him, I guess, to come over from Consolidated Records."

"Yes, but Carson's dead—and besides, he wouldn't have been active in the company, anyway," Violet peered past Johnnw into the ledger.

She exclaimed, "Who's Martin Preble?"

"Number Two on the list, with 22,500 preferred and 200 common? It says here he lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa."

"Iowa?" exclaimed Sam. "That's the place where Doug Esbenshade comes from."

"Right, my boy, Iowa. Only Cedar Rapids happens to be a couple of hundred miles from Des Moines. But I still think you've got something, Sam. Yes, I think you have."

"You mean this Preble is Esbanshade?"

"By proxy, maybe. He could be a dummy for Esbenshade. Mmm, Number Three is none other than our friend, Joe Dorcas, 23,000 shares of preferred and 200 common. Nice going, Joe."

"Who's Four?" Sam asked.

"Our friend Armstrong, 30,000 shares preferred, but only 25 common. In fact, that's all the common stockholders there are. But there's a whole page of preferred stockholders, down to Charlotte Zyskind, who owns 2 shares. Oh-oh, here's Walter Doniger, 1000 shares preferred. But no common and—what do you know, Violet Rodgers, 5 shares preferred!"

"My life's savings," said Violet bitterly. "Two hundred and fifty bucks, gone blooey."

"You bought at fifty a share?"

"Well, it was supposed to be worth fifty a share. Now I won't get a nickel."

"You say it was *supposed* to be worth fifty a share? What did you actually pay for it?"

"I didn't *pay* anything."

"You said your life's savings."

"That was just an expression. I mean, he told me it was worth two hundred fifty dollars."

"Who told you?"

"Mr. Farnham, who d'you suppose? He gave me the stock for a—a Christmas present."

"Farnham," said Johnny grimly. "I thought you and Doniger . . ."

"Whaddya mean, me and Doniger? Donny's married."

"I've met his wife."

"There's nothing between me and Donny. He buys me a drink now and then, that's all. Oh sure, he makes passes at me. Who doesn't?"

"Does Armstrong?"

"That guy? He's got X-ray eyes. But he really had it for the Fair girl. When she quit here he was so nervous for a couple of weeks nobody could hardly talk to him."

JOHNNY closed the ledger. "Suppose we take a look in the private offices."

"What for?"

"For whatever we find in them."

Violet, almost completely sober by this time, struggled with her loyalty to the defunct Mariota Record Company and pouted for a few minutes. But when Johnny led the way into Charles Armstrong's office and discovered all the drawers of the steel desk, securely locked, she brightened. The door of Farnham's office was locked and Violet's key did not turn the lock. Nothing was locked in Orville Seebright's office, but there was nothing interesting, or incriminating, in the desk. In fact, it contained very little. Mr. Seebright was an orderly man.

Doniger's office revealed some nice pictures of his wife and a few personal bills from liquor stores, a dentist and a tailor, but very little else.

The office clock in the main office said that it was ten minutes after one. Johnny gave up in disgust. "I might as well go home and go to bed."

"That's where I'm going right now," Violet declared.

She headed for the front door. Johnny and Sam followed, but as Violet reached for the door, Johnny stopped at the switchboard. "Let me see your private telephone directory."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because it's against the rules to let anyone have the home addresses and telephone numbers of the employees."

"Who's rules?"

Violet hesitated, then took a small kep from her purse and unlocked a drawer. She took out a black loose-leaf book. "Here it is, with the addresses and telephone numbers of everybody."

Johnny picked up a pad of paper and a pencil and opened the book. He found that Doniger lived in Scarsdale, Farnham on West 72nd, Joe Dorcas in Newark and Charles Armstrong on Sutton place. He wrote all their addresses on a slip of paper and was about to put the book back when he turned the page from the D's to the F's and saw Marjorie Fair's name. Her address had been on Forty-eighth, but a line was drawn through that and above it written: *Forty-fifth Street Hotel.*

"How'd you know Marjorie Fair lived at the Forty-fifth Street Hotel?" Johnny asked.

"Is that what it says in the book?"

"Yes."

"Then it's right; I keep the book up pretty well."

"That's fine, but who told you she lived at the Forty-fifth Street Hotel?"

"She made an audition for the company just last week. I suppose she gave me her address at the time. Otherwise, it wouldn't be in there, would it?"

"You mean she was up here, at the time of the audition?"

"Where else would she make it?"

"I thought at the plant, in Newark."

"Our recording room's here."

"Where?"

"Right over there. I didn't take you in because there's nothing there."

JOHNNY strode to the door that Violet indicated, threw open the door and switched on the lights inside. He went into a room twenty by thirty, in which stood three or four microphones, a bandstand and a phonograph recording machine.

Sam and Violet followed him into the room.

"There's nothing in here," Violet said.

"Nothing, but the evidence of who killed Marjorie Fair," Johnny said, tersely.

"You're crazy!" exclaimed Violet.

"I was here when she cut the record. It was right before Con Carson made his . . ."

"I know," said Johnny. "Who else was here at the time?"

"Nobody," said Violet. "Nobody, except the people who were supposed to be."

"And who were supposed to be?"

"When Marjorie cut the record, or Carson?"

"You said Marjorie went right on before Carson."

"That's right. And she waited out in the waiting room for the verdict, which she got right after Carson got through."

"Was she supposed to wait?"

"No, but she insisted and when I went in about the telephone call I told Mr. Armstrong."

"What telephone call?"

"The one for Carson. I wasn't supposed to ring this room, so I came over. The red light went out, so I came in and told Mr. Carson he was wanted on the phone. Then he left. Mr. Seebright didn't like it, but there wasn't anything he could do about it."

"When you came in to give Mr. Carson the message, Violet, who was in the room?"

"It was full of people."

Johnny gritted his teeth. "A minute ago you said there was nobody here."

"I said only the people that were supposed to be."

Johnny said, very patiently: "Close your eyes a moment, Violet—try to get a picture of this room as you saw it when you came in to give that message to Con Carson. Now . . . tell me who was in this room when you came in?"

Violet kept her eyes tightly closed. "Well, there was Mr. Carson and the orchestra and Jimmy Bailey, the leader and—and Mr. Seebright, of course. And Mr. Armstrong and Donny Doniger. And Mr. Dorcas was over by the recording machine. I guess that's about all."

"About all isn't close enough. Think—was Farnham in here?"

"Mmm, no, I don't think so. He doesn't care much about music. He's the treasurer of the company, you know."

"What about Marjorie Fair?"

"Oh, she was out in the waiting room. It wasn't until after Mr. Carson left that Dorcas called her in. Or was it Mr. Armstrong? No, come to think of it, Armstrong and Marjorie weren't on speaking terms any more."

"Hold Marjorie a moment, Violet. Let's come back in here with Con Carson. Just where was everybody in the room when you came in.

VIOLET frowned mightily. "Well, Con—Mr. Carson was by that microphone over there; the musicians were all in their places and Mr. Armstrong and Mr. Seebright and—gosh, I don't know *where* they were. I was looking for Mr. Carson; in fact, he was about the only one I *did* see."

"Once more," Johnny persisted. "Where was Mr. Dorcas?"

"At the machine, of course. The red light went out just as I got to the door, so they must have been recording . . . Yes, now I remember, Mr. Dorcas was fooling around with the machine."

"And Seebright?"

Violet shook her head. "I don't remember. I told you I was bringing in a message to Mr. Carson and *he* was the one I was looking for. He—he called me sweetheart and . . . uh—patted me . . ."

"Where?" asked Sam.

Violet gave him a dirty look. "Not where you think."

Johnny thought for a moment. "After Carson left, Armstrong called in Mar-

jorie Fair, you said—"

"No, he came out to tell her the bad news."

"Had you gone back to the switchboard when he went out to see her?"

"Oh, no. I—I was still here."

"Who was taking care of the switchboard?"

"Nobody, in fact there was a call when I came back out here with Mr. Carson . . ."

"You followed him out?"

"Yes—I left the recording machine room the same time he did. That's when—when he patted me. While we were walking out to the switchboard. He was in a good mood. Because of going to Hollywood, I guess. He asked—if I'd like to go to Hollywood with him."

"Did you?"

"With Con Carson? Are you kidding?" She sighed. "I said yes, and then he left."

"If he said yes, how come you didn't go with him?" Sam asked.

"Because he was only giving me a line." She shuddered. "But if he'd been on the level, I'd be dead now. As a matter of fact, I *am* dead right now. Dead tired. I'm going home."

Johnny switched out the lights in the recording room. At the outer door he took another last look over the offices, then shaking his head, followed Violet and Sam out into the hallway.

They rang for the elevator and after being taken down to the lobby, were compelled to sign the register again.

Fortunately, the names Johnny had written were on the same page and he merely copied them. The night watchman wrote *1:45 OUT* after the signature.

Outside, they walked to the Grand Central Terminal where Johnny saw Violet into a taxicab. Then he and Sam went down into the subway and took the shuttle train across to Times Square.

CHAPTER XXI

DESPITE the fact that it had been after two o'clock when he went to bed, Johnny was up and dressed at eight in the morning. He had not slept well. Murderers stalked through his dreams, murderers and policemen and bank tellers.

As he came out of the bathroom he looked at Sam Cragg, snoring blissfully. Sure, Sam could sleep. He let Johnny do the worrying and the conniving. And Johnny had never failed him.

Although how he would manage today, Johnny hadn't the slightest idea. He had stretched himself out too far the day before. It was a physical impossibility for one—or two—men to scurry about and make purchases and pawn the merchandise and make bank deposits and withdrawals; enough of them to keep solvent. Eleven hundred dollars, deposited in eight banks, would save him. But Johnny was short about seven hundred of those eleven hundred dollars.

Well, tomorrow fifty-four merchants would be after him; fifty-four merchants whose checks had bounced for lack of funds. Fifty-four merchants would notify four or five bonding companies, all of which would promptly begin hounding the authorities to apprehend a large-scale check passer.

Johnny picked up the phone. "Room service, please," than "Room service? Johnny Fletcher, Room 821. I'd like some orange juice, and an order of ham and eggs, a dish of oatmeal and a stack of flannel cakes, with a side order of sausage. And some home fried potatoes and a pot of coffee."

Sam Cragg sat up in bed. "Make that two!"

"Make that two orders of everything," Johnny said into the phone and hung up.

Sam yawned prodigiously. "What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock."

"What're you doing up so early?"

"Big day ahead of us, Sam. Or have you forgotten?"

Sam winced. "Ouch!" He swung his feet to the floor. "Why don't we buy a car and light out for Canada? Wouldn't it be the safest thing to do?"

"Probably—if they didn't extradite crooks from Canada."

"Isn't there some country from where they can't extradite people?"

"There's one in Central America, but I forget which it is. Guatemala or British Honduras. But I don't like the food in those countries. They use too much pepper."

"We could do our own cooking."

"We tried that the winter we were snowbound for four weeks in that shack up in Minnesota. Remember? You made a dried apple pie."

"The apples were no good."

"Neither was the crust—and the cooking couldn't have been appreciated by a starving Hungarian. Uh-uh, we've got to face it here, Sam. Seven hundred bucks today or some tall running tomorrow."

"How come only seven hundred? You said eleven last night."

"We've got around four hundred in cash."

SAM got up from the bed and went to the chair on which lay the morning paper he had bought on the way home the night before. "Four hundred, eh? Then, relax, Johnny."

He opened the paper. "*El Lobo's* running today at Santa Anita and as usual, the handicappers have got him down the line. Mmm, six furlongs and he's listed at eight to one. Let's see, who's running against him . . .? *Fighting Frank,* three to one, *Sir Bim,* ten to one, *Miss Doreen,* four to one, *High Resolve*, five to one . . ."

"Dogs, every one of them," said Johnny sarcastically.

". . . *El Lobo*'ll win by three lengths. That four hundred will bring us thirty-two hundred, Johnny."

"I don't doubt it. By the way—what was the name of that horse that was such a sure thing a year or so ago—the one on which we sank the bankroll . . .?"

"I don't remember."

"The horse that went to the post a one to two favorite and came in eighth in an eight-horse race?"

"Gay Dalon? He died a few months ago."

"From sorrow?"

Sam threw down the paper. "Okay, okay, I was only trying to help."

"I appreciate it, Sammy, old boy. Now, if you could locate a nice floating crap game somewhere I might be tempted. Or maybe a little table-stakes poker game, with a sociable bunch of second-card dealers."

Someone knocked on the door and a voice called: "Room service."

Sam opened the door and a waiter rolled in a cart, on which reposed a huge tray containing their breakfasts. Right behind the waiter came Lieutenant Rook and Sergeant Kowal.

"For the love of Mike, Lieutenant," cried Johnny, "are you going to spoil my breakfast?"

"I couldn't eat my own, thinking about you," retorted Rook. He came into the room and stood to one side while the waiter prepared the dishes. Kowal's nose sniffed like a rabbit's as he inhaled the odors emanating from the tray.

The waiter went out and Rook closed

the door behind him. "Go ahead and eat," he said.

Johnny looked at him sharply. "Aren't you feeling well today?"

"Never felt better in my life."

"Well, something's up; you're too pleasant."

"Oh, I'm just going to make a pinch this morning." He nodded toward the windows. "The man who killed the little girl over there."

Johnny seated himself on the bed and picked up his glass of orange juice.

"Who's the man?"

"Fella named Esbenshade . . ."

Johnny choked on his orange juice. "Esbenshade was in Iowa when Marjorie Fair was killed."

"Says who?"

"Well, wasn't he?"

"If you call the Barbizon-Waldorf Hotel, Iowa, then I guess he was in Iowa."

"You're sure of that?"

"He registered there last Friday."

Johnny put a forkful of ham into his mouth. "He couldn't have registered on Friday and gone back to Iowa?"

"He was at the hotel Tuesday morning, the day Marjorie Fair was killed."

JOHNNY pointed to the telephone. "Pick that up and call Susan Fair's room. Ask her just one question . . . how she got in touch with Douglas Esbenshade, when she told him about the death of her sister . . . ?"

"Oh, I asked her that yesterday. She says she telephoned him long distance and he flew to New York, in a chartered plane. Only she didn't talk to him long distance and he didn't fly here in a chartered plane. He was already here."

"All right," said Johnny. "So Susan Fair lied. Now, tell me *why* Doug Esbenshade killed the girl he loved?"

"She threw him over, didn't she? Guys kill girls for that every day in the week. And she was two-timing him, wasn't she? Forty-seven dames get killed by guys, every month, for two-timing."

Sam Cragg swallowed a huge mouthful of food. "So she owed three weeks' room-rent and threw over a guy with a million bucks, huh?"

"Money isn't everything," Rook said sullenly.

"That's what they told me in school," retorted Johnny, "but I read a piece in the paper yesterday, where a school teacher was arrested over in Jersey City for shop-lifting."

"Yeah, and I know a guy worth ten million who's got stomach ulcers from worrying."

"And if he didn't have the ten million he'd worry twice as much and have twice as many ulcers. But to get back to Doug Esbenshade, if you're going to arrest him this morning why come to me?"

"Because I don't like it," Rook snapped. "But I've got to make an arrest today. The captain's riding the hell out of me. I've got to make an arrest today and I've got to make it stick, or I'm going to be walking a beat out on Staten Island—and I just bought me a little place out in Mount Vernon." He added bitterly: "Do you know how long it takes to go from Mount Vernon to Staten Island—twice a day?"

"About as long as it took you to come up here and ask me for help."

"Who's asking you for help?"

"Then why're you here?"

Rook scowled. "Jefferson Todd came down to Headquarters last night, about eleven o'clock." He made an expressive gesture. "Yes, I know, he's a pompous four-flusher, but about once every three years he gets onto something. He told me you got an awful

beating yesterday." Rook grunted. "And he didn't lie about *that*."

"Did he tell you how I got it?"

"He was up at the Harlem Station and they ran him out—that's why he came downtown. I got it out of him that he was interested in a Harlem cop named Holznagle who made a pinch about seven o'clock at a Hundred and Thirty-fifth and Lennox . . ."

"A lad named Georgie."

"Georgie Starbuck, Holtznagle says."

"He knows him?"

"Georgie's got a record. Strong-arm stuff."

"He's got a partner, a fellow named . . . about five-eight or nine, thirty-five, thirty-six . . ."

"Sherman Hoke," said Rook.

"All right," said Johnny. "Get Georgie and Sherman Hoke and ask them who it was hired them to beat me up. When they tell you, forget Doug Esbenshade and grab the lad the boys name. He's your killer."

"The only trouble is finding Georgie and Sherman," grunted Rook. "I put out a call for them at eleven-thirty last night. I haven't had a nibble. They've gone into a hole. But look, Fletcher, why should Georgie and Hoke want to beat you up?"

"They thought I had something they wanted."

"What?"

"A phonograph record."

"What sort of phonograph record?"

"A master recording of the latest Con Carson yowling."

"Put out by the Mariota Record Company?"

JOHNNY nodded. "And the reason the company went into bankruptcy, yesterday."

"How can a company go into bankruptcy just because of one record?"

"This company could—because that record's worth about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Con Carson was killed a few days ago, in a plane accident. This is the last number he recorded. It'll sell a million copies . . . if anyone ever puts it into production."

"That record," said Rook. "What made Georgie and Sherman think *you* had it?"

"I don't know. They didn't tell me. But they sure'n hell tried to make me give it to them."

"Did you?"

Johnny grinned. "How could I? When I didn't have it?"

"What make them think you had?"

"You asked that question before."

"I'm asking it again."

Johnny frowned. "Maybe it was my own fault. The night before, I crashed a director's meeting of the Mariota Record Company. I asked them what a Con Carson record was worth."

"And?"

"They offered me five thousand for it."

"But you couldn't sell it to them because you didn't have it."

"That's right."

"Who was at the directors' meeting?"

"Orville Seebright, the president; Armstrong, vice president; a fellow named Farnham; another named Dorcas and a guy named Walter Doniger."

Lieutenant Rook studied a worn spot in the rug on the floor, then suddenly he looked up at Johnny Fletcher, as if hoping to catch a fleeting, give-away expression. "Which one of them killed Marjorie Fair?"

"*You* think Douglas Esbenshade killed her."

"I do, but I want to know who *you* think is the guilty one?"

"What difference does it make what *I* think?"

"Because you've been dipping your beak into this more than you've a right.

You've poked and pried and you've gotten someone so scared that he took the trouble to beat the hell out of you. That means you've picked up some things you weren't supposed to—from the murderer's viewpoint. I want to know what those things are."

"I'll give you a tip, Lieutenant. The switchboard operator over at the Mariota Record Company got a threatening letter—telling her to keep her mouth shut."

"Her trap," corrected Sam.

"All right, her trap. The girl knows something the murderer's afraid of . . . the only trouble is she doesn't know what it is she knows. And that's me, Lieutenant. I know something—yes. Only I don't know what it is."

Rook groaned. "Tell me everything you know. I'll sift it out and maybe I can make sense of it."

JOHNNY drew a deep breath. "The Mariota Record Company signed up Con Carson, the crooner. How or why, isn't important; except that they practically gave him the business to get him away from Consolidated Records. Carson made one record—not even a good one and then was called to Hollywood. He took a plane and was killed in Nevada, along with about twenty other passengers. So the recording the company made of Con Carson is the last Con Carson record there will ever be. It's worth a hundred thousand dollars to Mariota . . . or would have been worth that, if it hadn't disappeared."

"Do you think the company could have staved off bankruptcy if the record hadn't been stolen?"

"Unquestionably. Only the record wasn't stolen."

"But you said—"

"I said it disappeared. The people over at Mariota think it was stolen, that is, all except one of them. *He* figured out where the record went."

Lieutenant Rook exclaimed. "What are you trying to do—leave me hanging on the cliff? Where *did* the record go?"

"Marjorie Fair got it. She was scheduled to make a recording at the same time as Con Carson. They had the orchestra there and they wanted to polish her off, without having to bring them in again. So, right after Carson walked out of the studio, Marjorie Fair went in. She made her recording . . . but the executives of Mariota voted against Marjorie. She asked them for the master of her recording. Somebody sent it to her, or gave it . . . at least that's what they thought. But a mistake was made and Marjorie received instead of her own record, the one made by Con Carson. And because of that she was murdered."

"I follow you part of the way, Fletcher," said Rook, "the business about the Carson record meaning life and death to the company. But this mistake about sending the record to the girl—why should that be a motive for murder?"

"That's the part I'm working on now."

"What do you mean you're working on it?"

"I'm thinking about it—why the mistake should make someone want to kill Marjorie Fair."

Rook exclaimed angrily. "It doesn't make sense. Who mailed the record to her—a clerk in the office? Anybody can make a little mistake like that—you don't kill for it." Suddenly he stabbed a forefinger at Johnny. "Say—the company turned her down; she got sore at them and then somebody made a mistake and sent the Carson record to her . . ." His eyes widened in astonishment. "That's it! That's it! She saw what the record was, knew

how important it was to the company . . . and she called them up. 'Pay, boys,' she told them, 'pay or you never see this record.' It was life and death to the company, so . . . she got killed and the killer grabbed the record."

"That's a good theory," said Johnny. "It was the first one I thought of. There's only one trouble with it, one thing wrong with it."

"What?"

"Whoever killed her didn't take the record back to Mariota. He didn't save the company."

Rook's face fell. Then he cocked his head to one side. "He's holding the record for ransom—he knows they've got to pay . . . any amount."

"Who, the receiver?" Johnny snorted. "Do you think a receiver will pay a ransom—and let a company get back on its feet? You underestimate receivers. They *liquidate* companies . . . and pay themselves nice, fat salaries."

"You're telling me! There was a ward-heeler down in my precinct, whose uncle was a judge. The judge appointed him receiver for a furniture company . . . and when the receiver got through liquidating the company he was fixed for life. I think the creditors got four cents on the dollar."

HIS eyes suddenly narrowed. "Say, Esbenshade's the biggest creditor of Mariota, isn't he? It was kinda silly of him to throw the company into bankruptcy. As long as they were a going concern he had a chance to get his money, or most of it, but by closing them down, he's going to lose quite a roll."

"On the other hand," said Johnny, "he could have made a deal to move into the company."

"Why didn't he? From the company's viewpoint it was better than going into receivership and losing everything."

"You're getting warm now."

"What do you mean—warm?"

"Marjorie Fair was Esbenshade's girl. He put the squeeze on them to give her an audition . . . and then they turned her down. So he got sore and threw them into receivership."

Rook thought of that for a moment but didn't like it. "If he thought that much of the girl—"

"Yes," said Johnny, "if he thought that much of her, he wouldn't kill her, would he?"

Rook slammed his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "What'd you have to tell me that for? Now, I can't arrest him."

"If you had arrested him, you'd have bought yourself a one-way ticket to Staten Island."

"Maybe that's where I ought to be," Rook said, bitterly. He jerked his head at Sergeant Kowal. "Come on."

Kowal started for the door, but Rook turned back to Johnny.

"Look, Fletcher, do you or do you not know who killed Marjorie Fair?"

"If I knew," said Johnny, "I could collect a thousand dollars this morning . . . and I need a thousand dollars more than the devil needs a deep-freeze cooler."

His lips protruding in a big pout, Rook left the room.

When the door closed, Johnny turned to Sam and exhaled heavily. "He almost had me a couple of times."

"What do you mean, Johnny?' '

"When he got on the subject of me getting beat up. I was afraid he was going to ask why someone thought I had the record." Johnny shook his head. "That's such an obvious question, too."

"I don't see what's so obvious about it."

"You're thinking like Rook, Sammy.

You and I don't work for the Mariota Record Company. We never had any contact with them until Marjorie Fair was killed . . . so how could anyone have thought I had such a record? Unless he *knew*."

"Repeat that, Johnny?"

"He had to know I had the record. And the only way he could have known would have been for him to be in Marjorie's room when she sailed it over here. And the person who was in that room killed Marjorie Fair."

SAM blinked once or twice, then exclaimed. "Why, sure, Johnny. The guy killed her because she threw it over here. . . ."

"Well, maybe not quite. Maybe he had to kill her because he revealed himself to her—or his intentions. They had a fight and she managed to throw the record over here. Then he had to go through with it, and kill her."

Sam nodded. But there was a cloud in his eyes. "Yeah, Johnny, only there's something that bothers me."

"What?"

"Georgie and that other guy—Sherman. They worked you over to make you give them the record. They were working you over when they made you telephone me. And then—then the record was already gone."

Johnny smiled wanly. "*That* is what's been driving me crazy, since yesterday. The *murderer* hired those lads to dig up the record, but somebody else got it. Or, was it the murderer himself?"

"What'd be the point in that?"

"To cover up. To throw me—or the police—off the track." Johnny picked up a piece of cold toast from the breakfast tray and nibbled at it. "There's one other thing keeps annoying me."

"All of it annoys me," declares Sam.

"Last night," Johnny mused, "Orville Seebright and Susan Fair together at the Club Mague."

He suddenly nodded, as if coming to a decision and headed for the door. "Wait here, Sam."

"Where you going?"

"Upstairs. I want to ask the fair Susie a personal question."

He left the room and climbing the stairs, knocked on Susan Fair's door.

She called from inside: "Yes?"

"Johnny Fletcher," Johnny said. "Like to talk to you a minute."

Susan's voice was quite cool. "I'm sorry, but I can't see you right now."

"It's important."

"I'll see you down in the lobby, in about an hour."

"You'd better see me now," Johnny said, meaningly.

CHAPTER XXII

THERE was a pause, then Susan opened the door. She was fully dressed and wearing a hat, ready to go out. She held the door open a few inches and blocked ingress to the room.

"Well, what's so important?" she demanded.

"It's about your fingerprints," Johnny said softly. "You left them in my room."

Her eyes widened in shock. For a moment she stared at Johnny, then she opened the door. Johnny went into the room and Susan closed the door.

"You got the record from my room yesterday," Johnny accused.

"What record?"

Johnny smiled. "It's a little late in the day for that, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then why'd you let me into the room?"

"All right," she said, "I *was* in your room yesterday. I had a right, after

the way you've been prying into my sister's affairs."

"Then why didn't you wear gloves?"

"I don't believe you found my fingerprints, at all."

"I didn't."

"Then, why—?"

"Why were you with Orville Seebright last night?" Johnny asked quickly.

"I don't see that that's any of your business."

"Maybe it isn't, but I kept asking myself that question and suddenly I had the answer. You were with him last night because you were discussing a deal with him."

A slow flush started to spread across Susan's face. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Fletcher, and I don't think I care for the tone, nor the trend of your conversation."

"I'm getting too close?"

"Too close to what?" Susan exclaimed scornfully.

"The truth."

"You want the truth?" Susan cried. "I'll tell you. You killed my sister and I can prove it."

"I thought you might think that," said Johnny. "Because of the record."

"If you hadn't killed Marjorie you wouldn't have had the record. You *couldn't* have had it."

"Then, if you believed that, why didn't you go to the police yith your story . . . and your proof?"

"Because you'd have told them you merely found the record."

"That's right. That's just what I'd have told them. And the jury, too. And I'd have told them about my alibi —which Lieutenant Rook verified a half hour after your sister's death."

"I heard about that alibi," Susan said grimly. "But I didn't hear one for that strong-arm pal of yours."

"So you searched my room?"

"Yes! And I satisfied *myself*."

"At the time you were searching my room," Johnny said, "a couple of hirelings of the *real* murderer were giving me this," indicating his battered face, "to make me tell them where I'd hid the record." He paused. Susan's expression told him that she didn't believe a word he was saying. Nevertheless, he went on. "The record was *thrown* into my room by your sister; thrown through her window, across the air-shaft and into my room . . . to keep it out of the hands of the man who killed her a moment later."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Whether you do or not, it's the truth. I never talked to your sister. I had no reason to kill her. I wasn't in love with her, I wasn't jealous. She had no money, so there was no reason for me to kill her for profit. I didn't *know* her."

"Suppose for the sake of argument that you didn't kill Marjorie," Susan said. "And suppose she *did* throw the record through your window. Why— why did you keep it; why didn't you turn it over to the police?"

"That was my mistake. Your sister was dead. It was obvious that the record was important. Important enough for *someone* to want it badly enough to commit murder. And I— well, you said yesterday that I was a picaresque character. I live by my wits . . . and I thought I could make some money . . ."

"By selling the record to the murderer?"

"Not by selling the record—no. Orville Seebright offered me five thousand dollars. And I didn't sell it to him, did I?"

"Because you wanted more?"

"If he'd offered ten times five thousand I wouldn't have sold it. But for finding the man who committed the

murder, for *that* I would take money."

"You're not a detective."

"That's where you're wrong. I *am* a detective—yes, an amateur detective. But a good one. There was a man killed in this hotel once, right in my own room. I got the man who killed him, after the police had failed. You can check up on that. Ask Eddie Miller. Or Peabody, the manager."

DOUBT began to come into Susan's eyes. "Doug paid you some money yesterday to work for him—investigating. Then he discharged you later in the day."

"Because of the blacklisting of a private detective who hates me. And because . . . Look, you lied to me about this Doug, yourself. You told me you telephoned him in Iowa to tell him about your sister. He was here in New York, all the time . . . Why did you tell me—and the police—otherwise?"

Susan frowned. "Because Doug asked me to do it. He—he telephoned *me* in Iowa. That's why I came to New York. He'd tried to see Marjorie and she'd refused to talk to him. She told him she never wanted to see him again, so he—he telephoned me. I—I came here and found . . ." She broke off.

"She was down on her luck," Johnny said, quietly. "She didn't want to admit to Esbenshade that she had failed. People are that way; when everything goes wrong they crawl into their holes. Sometimes they pull the hole in after them. I can understand that, but I can't see why Esbenshade should lie about his having been here in New York."

"He explained that to me; it was the Mariota Record Company. He was a creditor—in fact, he's also a large stockholder. He thought there was something wrong with the company and he came here to investigate them . . . secretly. He didn't want them to know, at the company, that he was here."

"And it was he who had you go out with Seebright last night?"

Susan regarded Johnny steadily for a moment. Then she went to a chair and seated herself. "I knew Doug Esbenshade, in Iowa," she said, "I knew him as my sister's fiance. I didn't know him as a businessman and I didn't know him as a jilted lover. *That* Doug Esbenshade I've just learned to know. He's cold, he's vindictive and cruel. The first Doug Esbenshade let my sister come to New York, so that she could do something with her voice. The same Doug invested a huge amount of money in a record company, to help Marjorie. He did it secretly, too, so she'd think she was succeeding in her own right. And then something happened; despite everything, Marjorie failed—she was turned down by the Mariota people."

"Because of a man named Armstrong, who also loved her and was so vindictive when she threw him over that he wrecked Marjorie's chances with Mariota."

"It was Armstrong then who was responsible for t u r n i n g Esbenshade against Marjorie. When he came here last week he heard about Armstrong and Marjorie. He believed the worst. As a result he destroyed the Mariota Record Company—and Charles Armstrong. And now he hates Marjorie's memory so much that he won't do for her the one little thing that would have made her life worthwhile." Susan paused. "That's why I made the deal with Orville Seebright last night."

"You gave him the Con Carson record, so that he can go to his bank and get the money to pay off Esbenshade

and get the Mariota Record Company out of bankruptcy?"

Susan nodded.

"And in return, Seebright will give your sister fame—posthumous fame?"

Again Susan nodded. "Her voice was good. The recording was an excellent one . . . It's going to be on the reverse side of the Con Carson record and everybody who plays the Carson record will hear Marjorie's voice. I—it's the least I could do for Marjorie. I somehow think she'll know. . . ."

"Maybe," said Johnny, softly, "maybe she will." He hesitated. "Susan, I know who killed your sister."

She looked at him steadily. "Doug. . . .?"

He exhaled heavily and shook his head.

"Don't tell me," Susan said quickly. "I hate too many people now."

"You'll read about it in the papers tonight," said Johnny and went out of Susan's room.

He returned to room 821 to find Cragg fully dressed.

"All right," Johnny said, "let's go wash this up."

Sam exclaimed, "You mean . . . you know who did it?"

"I've known since last night," Johnny said. "Only I couldn't prove it." He scowled. "I still can't."

"Then how're you going to pin it on the guy?"

"I'm going to make him admit it."

They left the hotel and walked to Times Square. In front of the Times Building, a heavy-set man of about forty was standing reading the Want Ads in the *Times*. He looked like a substantial citizen, wore a rolled brim fedora and a nicely pressed dark blue suit.

Johnny walked up to him. "Like to make a fast twenty-five bucks, Mister?"

The man sized up Johnny across his opened newspaper. "Driving the getaway car?"

Johnny grinned. "Acting."

"Not me," said the man. "I get goose-pimples all over when I have to stand up in front of anyone."

"You can do this sitting down—and the audience will be a small one. It'll be all nice and private and it'll take you an hour."

"Mister," said the man, "you've hired yourself an actor."

Johnny signaled to a taxicab and the three of them climbed in. Johnny gave the cab driver the address and then coached his actor in the lines he was to speak.

CHAPTER XXIII

THEY got out of the taxi in front of the Kamin Building and rode upstairs to the offices of the Mariota Record Company. The door was unlocked and seated behind the switchboard was Violet.

She shuddered when she saw Johnny and Sam.

"You two lads were in my nightmare," she said.

"Violet," said Johnny, "for a girl who had a nightmare and *has* a hangover, you look pretty good to me."

"Here we go again!"

Johnny grinned. "Hear the good news? Mariota's back in business."

"Is that why Sir Orville looked so chipper this A.M.? He said good morning to me—and smiled, when he said it."

"That's it. And now—can we see him?"

"You can't get killed for trying." Violet winced. "Did I say *killed*?"

She put a plug into a hole and spoke into her mouthpiece. "Mr. Seebright, Mr. Fletcher is here to see you." She grimaced and broke the connection.

"He says to tell you he can't think of a thing he wants to talk to you about."

"Tell him that *I* can think of something very important to tell him—the name of the man who killed Marjorie Fair."

Violet stared at him. "You're kidding!"

"Tell Seebright."

"But do you really know?"

"Of course I know. I knew last night."

"You didn't act like you knew."

Johnny smiled gently. "After Seebright, you'll be the first to know, Violet. So . . ." He tried the door that led into the offices, but it was latched. Inside Violet pressed a button and the release catch clicked. Johnny opend the door.

"You'd better make him forget I let you in," Violet cautioned.

"He won't even think about it."

Johnny started down the vacant main office, toward Seebright's door. As he came to Armstrong's office he saw that the door was open. Armstrong was inside, seated at his desk, his hands thrust in his pockets and looking gloomily at a print on the wall.

"Hi," Johnny called.

Armstrong made no response and Johnny continued to Seebright's office. He opened the door without knocking. Ed Farnham was in with Seebright, huddled in a huge leather chair, listening to Seebright lecturing him from behind his big desk. Joe Dorcas lounged on a leather couch.

"The bank—" Seebright was saying, then saw Johnny. He scowled. "Who let you in, Fletcher?"

"I did," Johnny said. "The switchboard operator tried to keep me out, but I sneaked past her."

"You can just sneak out again."

"What's happened between us, Orville? We were pals last night. Remember?"

"Get out of here, Fletcher!" Dorcas said irascibly, "and take your friends with you."

JOHNNY stood his ground. "You boys are p r e t t y chipper today. You're getting your loan from the bank and the old goose is hanging high." He made a clucking sound with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "And all because you got back one thin little phonograph record!"

Seebright's mien changed. "Where'd you hear about that?"

"From the person who gave it to you."

"All right," said Seebright. "So she told you. Did she also tell you that she told *me* where she found the record?"

"Yep."

Seebright glowered. "I'm satisfied, Fletcher. But don't crowd me or the police are going to hear—"

"Oh, didn't you tell them?"

"I've had enough trouble. I've got a business to run here and I'm not going to waste hours or perhaps days, testifying in a court room. . . ."

"You mean you don't care who killed Marjorie Fair?"

"Apprehending a murderer is the business of the police. My business is selling phonograph records."

"Would you still feel that way if you knew that the murderer—the *murderer* I said, is a member of the House of Mariota?"

"You're talking nonsense again, Fletcher and I've heard enough nonsense from you."

"Do you or do you not want to know, Seebright?"

Seebright pushed back his swivel chair. "No! And for the last time—!"

Then Ed Farnham spoke the first words Johnny Fletcher had ever heard

him speak. "*I'd* like to know."

"You're not too busy, Mr. Farnham?" Johnny asked, with heavy sarcasm.

"Murder isn't my business," said Ed Farnham, mildly, "but I think it's the duty of every citizen to do what he can to—to apprehend a murderer."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Farnham, thank you. And you, Mr. Dorcas?"

"You talk too damn much, Fletcher, but you never say anything."

"This time I'll say something. Uh, would it be possible to have Mr. Doniger and Mr. Armstrong come in here?"

Seebright p i c k e d up the phone. "Miss Rodgers, ask Mr. Armstrong and Mr. Doniger to step into my office." He hung up and leaning back in his chair, linked his fingers together over his stomach.

"This better be good," he said.

Johnny nodded to the man he had picked up in front of the Times Building. The latter seated himself at the far side of a leather sofa. Dorcas looked at him curiously, but as Johnny obviously had no intention of introducing him, he made no overtures.

ARMSTRONG came into the office. "You wanted me?" he asked sourly.

"We're going to put on a little show," Johnny said.

"Without me," Armstrong retorted. "I'm in no mood—"

"Sit down, Armstrong," Seebright snapped.

"As for you," Armstrong said to Seebright. "You can go take a running jump out of the window." But he did not leave the room.

Seebright showed his teeth in a frosty grin. "Mr. Armstrong," he explained, "is no longer vice-president of the Mariota Record Company and he is—well, to put it bluntly, sore."

"You reorganized him out?" Johnny asked.

"I had that pleasure, yes."

The door was opened again and Walter Doniger entered. With him was Douglas Esbenshade.

"Surprise," said Johnny.

"Mr. Esbenshade, gentlemen," Doniger said smoothly. "He happened to be in my office and I suggested that he come along."

"I'm glad he *happened* to be here," Johnny said, "because he, too, will be interested in what's going to be said—and done. . . ."

"All right, Fletcher," growled Joe Dorcas, "get to it."

"We've a quorum here," Johnny said, "we could hold a stockholders' meeting."

"And how much stock do *you* have in this company?" Dorcas asked.

"Well, none if you want to be technical about it. But I think I could get the proxy for five shares." He looked at Ed Farnham. "From Violet Rodgers."

The mild little Farnham suddenly looked very uncomfortable.

"As a matter of fact," Doniger said, "it might be a good idea to hold a little stockholder's meeting."

"We've a l r e a d y had a directors' meeting," Seebright said, impatiently.

"A premature one," Doniger offered, "Mr. Esbenshade wasn't here at the time."

"Mr. Esbenshade is not a director of Mariota," Seebright retorted.

"He might become one, though," Doniger said. "Since he happens to own a nice block of Mariota stock."

"Four hundred, common," Esbenshade said, casually.

The announcement surprised almost everyone in the room, but Seebright looked as if he had swallowed a live mouse. "Four hundred shares of com-

mon stock?" he cried.

Esbenshade smiled. "I'm down on the books for two hundred—under the name of Martin Preble."

Seebright looked at Farnham for confirmation. Farnham nodded. "Of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Last year when we needed—"

"Yes, I remember," Seebright scowled. "But that's two hundred. You said four hundred and twenty-five."

"The estate of Con Carson," Esbenshade amplified. "I made a deal with the East River Trust yesterday."

Seebright shuddered as if he had suddenly seen a ghost. "It's funny I wasn't notified."

"How much common do *you* own, Mr. Seebright," Walter Doniger asked.

SEEBRIGHT looked at Farnham again. The treasurer of Mariota took a little notebook from his pocket. "It might be apropos for me to give the names of all the common stock owners." He cleared his throat: "The estate of Con Carson," nodding to Doug Esbenshade, "225 shares. Martin Preble of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, also Mr. Esbenshade, 200 shares, Charles Armstrong 25 shares, Joseph Dorcas 200 shares, Walter Doniger five shares and . . ." he smiled apologetically, "Edwin M. Farnham, 200 shares."

"Last, but not least," said Johnny, but no one paid any attention to him. Something was about to happen in the affairs of the Mariota Record Company and the common stockholders were interested in that, above everything else. Almost.

Doniger said: "I move that we have a formal stockholders' meeting."

"For what purpose?" Seebright demanded.

"For the same reason you called the directors' meeting this morning."

"There was a reason for that meeting," Seebright said, "the resumption of this business."

"With you running it," Doniger said. "Well, maybe we ought to have a recount of votes."

"I second that motion," Armstrong said loudly.

Doniger winked at Armstrong. "Good work, Charlie, old boy, old boy."

"Thought you'd freeze me out, did you?" Armstrong said grimly to Seebright.

Seebright glowered at Armstrong, then shifted his glance to Esbenshade. "This is the man who—"

"I know, I know," Esbenshade said testily. "That was another matter. Let's get on with the roll-call."

"Farnham just called the roll," Dorcas said. "We all know who owns what."

"What Mr. Esbenshade meant," Doniger said, "was that we should vote again on the matter of reorganization of this company—how it should be done . . . and who should be the new officers of the company."

"Just a minute," Seebright cried. "I told you men this morning that I had assurance from the Uptown Trust and Savings Bank of a loan of $100,000. That loan—let me repeat—is contingent upon *me* being the president and general manager of this firm. Me, Orville Seebright, and no other."

"As to the loan, Doniger said easily, "Mr. Esbenshade is willing to advance the same amount."

"Seventy-nine thousand of which will go to satisfy his lien," Dorcas snapped.

"An honest debt," Esbenshade pointed out. "You got the shellac and my shellac company is going to get its money."

"Vote," said Armstrong.

"Vote!" cried Doniger.

Seebright surrendered. "All right, let's see how we stand. Ed, how do

you vote?"

"I'm F," Farnham squirmed. "Armstrong is A. . . ."

"I vote for Mr. Esbenshade," Armstrong cried ringingly. "Whatever he does."

"Doniger—no, Carson, comes next. That's you, Mr. Esbenshade?'

Esbenshade merely smiled.

"Four hundred and twenty-five votes for Mr. Esbenshade," Farnham announced. "Dorcas?"

"Dorcas passes his vote," Johnny Fletcher cried.

CHAPTER XXIV

ALL eyes went to Johnny. Dorcas said evenly, "Who the hell asked you to talk for me?"

"Why," said Johnny, "I think we ought to hold up the rest of the voting for awhile. Because I'd like to prove to the rest of you here that Mr. Joseph Dorcas is the man who . . . who killed Marjorie Fair!"

Joe Dorcas sprang to his feet. "Goddamn you, Fletcher!"

Johnny held up a chiding finger. "Sticks and stones, Mr. Dorcas . . .!"

"You'll take that back, or—"

Sam Cragg moved easily in between Johnny and the advancing Dorcas. "Or what?"

Dorcas tried to sidestep Sam, but the latter reached out, placed a hand on Dorcas' chest and pushed gently. Just enough to throw Dorcas back against the couch, where he seated himself heavily.

"I won't stand for this," Dorcas said thickly.

"Mr. Dorcas," said Edwin Farnham, "shut your mouth awhile, will you?"

"That'll cost you, Farnham," Dorcas snarled.

"Let him talk, Joe," Seebright said suddenly.

"*I'd* like to hear him," Esbenshade said quietly.

"As the majority stockholder, Mr. Esbenshade," Johnny said, "you'll hear, although you may not like everything you'll hear."

"I'll listen just the same."

"Marjorie Fair," Johnny said, "got a job in this office, because she thought the contracts would advance her career as a singer. "Armstrong," Johnny pointed dramatically at the vice-president. "You fell for her, but she couldn't see you, could she?"

Armstrong said: "That's my own business."

"Maybe it is," said Johnny, "and maybe it isn't. Anyway, you made things so uncomfortable for Marjorie here, that she quit her job. But that didn't stop you from annoying her. And then—when Marjorie was given an audition by the company you raised such a fuss about it that her recording was voted down."

"I didn't like her voice," Armstrong said tonelessly.

"You didn't like her voice because all it said to you was no, *no, no*!"

Armstrong gripped the arms of his chair.

Johnny looked at Dorcas. "Dorcas, you bought shellac from the Iowa Shellac Company, $79,000 worth of it. Mr. Esbenshade gave you credit for it and when he told you about a friend of his who was in New York, trying to get a start in the recording business, you offered her an audition. It was a small favor to do for a man who was willing to give you $79,000 worth of credit, that you couldn't get anywhere else."

"*I* voted for Margaret," Dorcas said warmly.

"That, you did. But you didn't vote hard enough, or loud enough. And neither did Mr. Seebright or Mr. Doniger, or Mr. Farnham, because by that

time you had cut a wax of Con Carson's latest song and it was only a matter of a week or two, before the company'd be back in the black. It wasn't so important to keep a creditor happy. But then a catastrophe struck Mariota. Con Carson was killed and his latest record—and the only one you had—disappeared."

JOHNNY paused. "Stolen, Mr. Dorcas?"

"How should I know? It disappeared."

"Yes, it disappeared. Shall I tell you how?"

"I don't give a good gosh—" began Dorcas.

"I do," said Esbenshade. "Tell us, Fletcher."

"Marjorie Fair's recording was made here in the office studio, just before you made the one of Con Carson. In fact, you made it while you were waiting for Con Carson. When Carson showed up and you shooed out Marjorie, Con Carson ripped off his song twice, didn't he? And then he breezed right out, because he got an important phone call. Mr. Seebright, while Carson was yodeling, what were you doing?"

"Listening, of course."

"Yes, but during the intermission between the first and second singing of the song, to whom were you talking in the studio?"

"Nobody, that I recall. . . ." Seebright's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Charlie, weren't you harping at me then . . . about the Fair girl. . . .?"

"I wasn't harping. I talked to you—"

"And Dorcas," Johnny cut in, "at the instrument was watching you. He knew from what was already said . . . and probably from seeing Seebright give it to you, that the Marjorie Fair record was a dead duck. And he couldn't quite hold himself in. He said . . . what was it you said, out loud, while Carson was singing, Mr. Dorcas?"

"I know better than to talk when the machine's going." Dorcas snapped.

"Do you really? Then weren't you even aware, while the microphone was on that you said, in a distinct, very, very angry whisper: 'Damn you, Seebright!' "

"I said nothing of the kind."

Johnny appealed to Seebright. "Have you played the record since you got it back?"

"We played it this morning, but I didn't hear Dorcas' voice."

"Then you played only one side—the wrong side. But we'll hold that for a moment. After Carson rushed out of here, and Dorcas took the record over to the plant with him. The next day Carson was killed and everybody got excited about his last record. And Mr. Dorcas discovered that he didn't have the record. He didn't have it, because it had gone out of the studio five minutes after Con Carson. It was given to Marjorie Fair, who was waiting for her verdict, out in the reception room, by . . . who *did* give her the record?"

"I did," Armstrong said. "That is, I gave her the recording of *her* voice. . . ."

"And broke the news to her, too, that you were turning her down? All right. But the record you gave her, Armstrong—it was handed to you by Dorcas, wasn't it?"

"Why, yes, the records are his, once they're made. . . ."

"Is it customary to give disappointed auditioners their recordings?"

"It isn't customary, but Marjorie asked for hers. So I asked Dorcas and he gave me—"

"The Carson record."

"I didn't look at it."

"If I gave Armstrong the wrong record, it was a mistake," Dorcas said.

"A MISTAKE, yes. You were so mad you didn't know what you were doing. You gave him the Carson record and put away the Fair record. And then, the next day, after Carson was dead you got out the record and ran it off. You found that what you thought was the Carson record was actually the Fair record. You guessed how the mistake had occurred, but by that time you had a scheme in your brain. Carson was dead, he couldn't make another record. And you knew where the single, remaining Carson record was. You went to get it—and you killed Marjorie Fair . . . only . . . you didn't get the record. Marjorie Fair sailed it out of the window, right across the air-shaft into my hotel room, where it landed on the bed, without a scratch."

"Is that how *you* got the record?" Seebright cried.

"That's how."

"Prove I killed her," snarled Joe Dorcas, "prove I killed her!"

"I will—in a minute. But first, tell us, what your idea was for the record? Were you going to sell it to the highest bidder, or were you going to wait until the Mariota Record Company went on the auction block and you could buy the company for a song, *find* the long-lost Carson record and be back in business?"

"You can't prove a thing!" Dorcas persisted.

"Mr. Seebright," Johnny said, "have you got the Carson record handy?"

Seebright pointed to the phonograph.

Johnny went to the machine, took the record off the spindle and reversed it. Then he flicked the switch that started the phonograph.

The turntable started to revolve. The pick-up arm moved in its gentle arc across the machine to descend slowly on the revolving record.

Con Carson sang. And then, suddenly a harsh voice said, said over the singing: "Damn you, Seebright . . ."

Johnny shut off the machine. "I appeal to you, gentlemen, is that the voice of Joe Dorcas?"

"It is," Seebright said promptly.

Armstrong nodded. Doniger looked pop-eyed.

"All right," Dorcas admitted, "I forgot myself. But that doesn't prove I killed anyone. It proves exactly one thing—that I was sore at Seebright at that particular moment. And that's all it proves. That and not one thing more . . ."

"That's right," said Johnny, "that's all it proves. Just that you were sore enough toward Mr. Seebright for giving in to Charles Armstrong that you were willing to wreck the company. That's all it proves. Gentlemen, you've all noticed a strange face in this room and some of you may wonder who this man is."

HE WALKED toward his hired hand. "You, sir, may I ask your name?"

"Clifton Mainwaring."

"Do you mind telling us where you live, Mr. Mainwaring?"

"Why, at the Forty-fifth Street Hotel."

"That's the same place I live—and the same place Marjorie Fair lived . . ."

"That's right. As a matter of fact, we all lived on the same floor."

"Oh? What is your room number?"

"Eight-forty-three. It's right across the hall from Room Eight-forty-one."

"Eight-forty-one was Miss Fair's room." Johnny nodded, then suddenly stooped and looked straight into Clifton Mainwaring's face. "Mr. Mainwaring, two mornings ago, at around seven-thirty in the morning, when you were leaving your room, did you happen to see someone coming out of Miss Fair's

room . . . someone who walked from the room, very, very quietly, as if he was hoping no one would see him?"

"Yes," said Mainwaring.

"Did you get a look at that person's face?"

"Why, yes—a rather good look, because I thought he was acting suspiciously."

"And that face . . . have you seen it here in this office, today?"

"That's a lie!" screamed Joe Dorcas. "You never saw me. There wasn't a godam soul out in that hall . . ."

He reeled to his feet and stood there, swaying.

Johnny faced him, coldly, remorselessly. "Mr. Mainwaring is going to identify you at the police station and he's going to identify you again in court. He saw you and he's going to swear to it."

Joe Dorcas sobbed, reeled and suddenly ran . . . straight for the window. He went through the glass, head first.

SAM CRAGG was quiet all the way back to the Forty-fifth Street Hotel. And Johnny Fletcher was not in a talkative mood, either. But as they entered Room 821, Johnny whirled on Sam and snarled: "All right, I bluffed him. But he was guilty as hell—and the cops would have sweated it out of him, anyway. All they needed was somebody to do their deducing for them. That's all I did."

"I didn't say a word, Johnny."

"But you've been thinking . . ."

"I was thinking of something else, Johnny. That grand that Esbenshade didn't give us. Tomorrow *we* catch it."

"Oh, that, said Johnny, "forget it."

"Forget eleven hundred bucks we ain't got?"

"We've got four hundred dollars, haven't we?"

"That's seven hundred short."

"Four hundred," said Johnny, "will get the junk from the hockshop."

"What good's that going to do us?"

"It's twelve o'clock," said Johnny. "We've got all the afternoon to take the stuff back."

"Back to where?"

"The stores where we bought it—naturally."

"You think they'll take it back?"

"What else can they do? They say, no, I tell them I made a mistake—I didn't have as much money in the bank as I thought I had. The check I gave them is going to bounce. Am I a crook, when I come back of my own free will and return merchandise for which I can't pay? Are they going to turn me over to the cops, or the bonding companies?"

Sam stared at Johnny. "But can we come out that way?"

"Of course we can. Oh—we lose a little, yes, the interest we paid to all the pawnshops, but you remember we got three hundred from Esbenshade. So, we're out that much." He shrugged. "We had the use of the money for a couple of days . . . and you got your pants back."

★ DETECTIVE IN WOOD ★

IT WAS not the painstaking labors of an American Sherlock Holmes which brought the kidnapper of the Lindbergh baby to justice. Arthur Koehler, a quiet hardworking scientist who has made a specialty out of the study of the characteristics of wood, was the man who more than anyone else, wrapped the kidnap ladder around Hauptmann's neck. Koehler, a carpenter who was the son of a carpenter, greatly expanded his knowledge of the biology and anatomy of wood when he studied forestry at the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin. He is the unique combination of scholar, scientist and practical woodsman, and serves his county well as the government's expert on wood identification.

When Koehler was called in to work on the Lindbergh case in May, 1932, the identity of the kidnapper was still unknown. The scientist was assigned the task of tracing the materials used in the kidnap ladder which was found outside the missing child's window. Other scientists had carefully examined the ladder for clues leading to the maker's identity. They had daubed it with silver nitrate in an attempt to find fingerprints; they wrapped it in blankets and shipped it all over the countryside to more or less informed "experts," who could unveil none of its very important secrets.

Koehler's preliminary observations were those of a practical carpenter and woodsman. He was quick to see that the ladder was made in three sections and contained four kinds of wood. All the lumber was of run-of-the-mill stock. There was nothing that the ordinary eye could find distinctive about it. But Koehler's practiced vision took in the fact that the uprights were of North Carolina pine; the pins or dowels that held the sections together were made of birch and the crosspieces were fashioned of Ponderosa pine. The man who had built the ladder had evidently run out of material for the upper left section had been pieced out with an odd board, probably a strip of fir flooring. The nail holes showed no signs of rust and Koehler therefore concluded that this board had been used in an interior. He took accurate note of the four nail holes and determined to find four similar nail holes in another piece of lumber somewhere, for this might be all that would be needed to give the kidnapper away.

The work of the wood expert can in the next step be compared with that of the fingerprint or handwriting expert. Just as two samples of handwriting and two fingerprints are never identical, so no two tools can ever make identical marks on a piece of wood. Koehler looked for some distinctive tool-markings on the ladder which might have been acquired during the planning, sawing, and fitting of the timber.

Aided by his microscope and a special type of oblique light, Koehler soon found the first of the marks he was searching for. Those were the marks put on at the saw mill where the flying circular knives had done the job of smoothing the lumber down for use. Koehler was able to count the number of cutting blades the planer had and also the signature the cutting had left on the wood through nicks in the individual blades. After much study, Koehler was able to conclude that if he sought the mill from which the ladder's lumber had been obtained, he must look for one which used a planing machine with eight knives in its top and bottom cutting-heads, and six knives in the cutting-heads which dressed the edges.

THIS discovery narrowed down the hunt to 1,595 mills which might carry that type of machinery. Koehler systematically wrote to each of them asking for samples of work done on 1 x 4 pine stock of the type used in the ladder. Among the fifteen hundred samples he studied, one was found which filled the bill perfectly. Here was the clue he had sought for so long and until now without hope!

This sample had come from the Dorn Mill in South Carolina. Koehler flew down there to examine the planer and make the necessary inquiries. No doubt now remained in his mind. The lumber in the kidnap ladder *had* been planed in the Dorn mill. Now the real hunt could begin. Koehler now had to trace the lumber from the mill into the hands of the kidnapper.

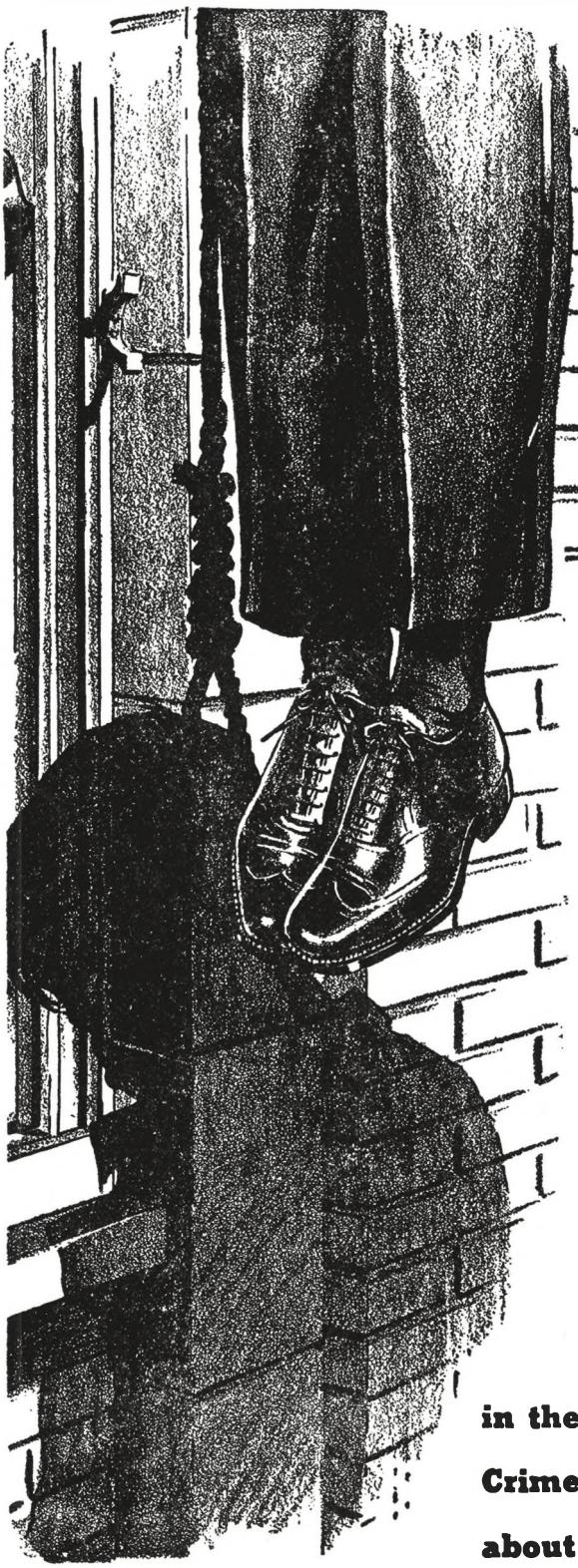
Twenty-five lumber companies were possible outlets for the boards with the tell-tale markings. The patient scientist traveled in twenty states and examined thousands of pieces of lumber until, after eighteen discouraging months, he discovered what he had been searching for. The National Mill Work Company of the Bronx, New York, had sold the lumber which was used in the construction of the kidnap ladder. At this point in the investigation Koehler found himself up against a brick wall. Unfortunately the company did a cash business and didn't keep a list of its customers. If such a list had been kept, Koehler no doubt would have snared Hauptmann single-handed and achieved the widest renown ever won by a scientific director of crime. But without that list, Koehler had gone as far as he could go. He returned to his Madison laboratory and held himself in readiness as a corroborative witness ready to check all evidence.

KOEHLER had set the trap of evidence, and Bruno Hauptmann was picked up for passing a five dollar bill of the ransom money every piece of the scattered puzzle fitted neatly into place. One of the first things that Hauptmann admitted was the fact that he was a former employee of the National Mill Work Company. A search of cash sales slips showed that he had purchased ten dollars worth of unitemized lumber there in December, 1931. The shipment from the Dorn mill had been made the first part of the same month, which just about supplied the missing link in the long chain of evidence. The jaws of the trap sprung and closed about Hauptmann when Koehler discovered four holes in a floor joist in Hauptmann's attic which corresponded precisely to the four nail holes in the odd bit of board on the ladder. Hauptmann had run out of material for his homemade ladder and had used a board from his own attic floor to piece it out. The wood in the attic floor board and the piece in the ladder were matched before the jury in respect to nail holes, grain, pitch streaks, and annual rings as well as a knot hole.

The case against Hauptmann was made even more convincing when the signature, the unmistakable trail of his own plane was found on every cleat and rail of the ladder. The ragged track of that dull-edged plane probably did more to convict Hauptmann than all the rest of the evidence combined.

—*Sandy Miller*

The owner of the Lisette swung gently at the end of a rope



The Case of The Squealing Duck

by George B. Anderson

FLAMOND'S office door swung open and framed an amazing little man in a brilliant purple suit. A yellow sports shirt and violent hand-painted necktie added voltage to the ensemble, but the clothes weren't as loud as the little man who filled them. He looked explosive.

Flamond's jaw hung open. Even Sandra Lake, his sleek blonde secretary who had grown accustomed to startling clients, looked a trifle startled herself.

The little man took two quick, short steps forward and then a long, slow one. It was an entrance. When he spoke in a raspy, metallic voice, both the detective and his secretary had to stifle an impulse to laugh.

"My name's Danny Dole, Flamond,"

Danny Dole tried to put them in the aisles as a comedian, but the Crime File of Flamond said something about murder—and it wasn't funny...

the little man said. "I guess I don't haffta tell you any more."

"Not unless you want to, I suppose," Flamond answered.

Sandra turned on her smile. "Oh—the night club comedian—of course!"

That clicked the switch and Danny Dole lit up. "Yeah—night club, musical comedy, movies, radio—I guess they know me just about any place."

Flamond was unimpressed. "I don't go in much for night life."

"That's right, doggone it," Sandra grinned. "But you really are a night club celebrity, Mr. Dole."

Danny lit a cigaret with a flourish, focusing an invisible spotlight on his gold-ribbed Dunhill lighter. "Yeah," he said, "I suppose I am. I always think, the celebrities come to catch my act—but I guess I'm one, too. And I'd sorta like to go on bein' one."

His voice went to an amazing falsetto. "My problem, Mister Ant'ony, is—aw nuts, it ain't funny. Here!"

He shoved a penny postcard at Flamond. Scrawled in pencil across the face of the c a r d w e r e the words, "You're a dead duck, Danny."

Flamond came to attention. "You think this is a death threat?"

"I dunno," Danny admitted. "Whatever it is, it isn't good. Somebody's tryin' to louse me up, for sure."

"There've b e e n attempts against your life?"

"Not that." Danny shook his head. "But somebody is tryin' to crab my act, kill my laughs, keep my best material from gettin' across."

Flamond made a wry face. "Mr. Dole," he said, "I don't know a thing about night club material. I don't know how people kill laughs. When I investigate a killing, it's another kind."

Dole grinned. "I know all about you. I listen to your radio show every week. 'Flamond,' " he mimicked the announcer's voice, " 'famous psychologist and character analyst, who looks beyond laughter and tears, jealously and greed, to discover their basic origins.' Your bein' a showman was one reason I came to you."

F L A M O N D winced. ,"I'm not a showman. My more interesting file cards are used for a series of radio mystery dramas."

"And this psychology business of yours," Dole continued. "I like that because there's some of the old psychology stuff connected with what's bein' done to me. There's angles I don't get, and they tell me you're the hottest guy on angles in the country."

"Just what," Flamond demanded, "are you worried about—your life or somebody s p o i l i n g your night club act?"

"Both," Danny said solemnly. "With me, bein' made to look like a cellar-club ham is a matter of life and death. If you'd spent years learning your timing and how to sock a gag, and you'd learned your lessons to the point where they'd started payin' off—after sluggin' your way to the top—and all of a sudden you started playin' to audiences that acted like you was givin' a funeral sermon for their best friend —" He looked to Sandra for help.

"Who's trying to spoil your act, Mr. Dole?" she asked.

"And why should anyone be that jealous of you?" Flamond demanded.

Danny tapped the ash from his cigaret onto the carpet. "You know what I'm drawin' down at the Club Lisetta? Fifteen hundred bucks a week. And not newspaper publicity dough, either. Cash."

Flamond was thoughtful. "That postcard threat looked like a death threat," he admitted. "Any idea where it came from?"

"Sure," Danny said. Flamond and Sandra both showed surprise. "The same person that killed my duck-hunting gag deader than a stiff on a morgue slab last night." The thought of it brought anguish to his face.

"What was the gag?" Sandra prompted.

"It's a wow, the way I do it." Danny went into action. "Never fails to get five boff laughs with a sock finish. Stops the show cold sometimes. It's a whole routine, see? I go through the imaginary motions of gettin' ready to shoot. I'm crouched down in the duck blind. I get my shotgun up to my shoulder—all make believe, see? No gun, no nothin'. And then I make with the imaginary trigger."

Flamond was dead-pan. "When does the laugh come?"

"Right then. When I make with this imaginary trigger, a dead duck drops down from the ceiling, right over the heads of the customers. It's the funniest, bedraggledest-lookin' duck you ever see in your life. I had it made up special."

Sandra made a face. "How cute," she said. "Flamond, wouldn't it be a scream to get a dead duck in your soup?"

"That's where the laugh comes," Danny protested. "Nobody gets the duck. Everybody's scared they're gonna. But this duck is suspended by a thin wire. On accounta the dim lights an' all, you can't see what's holding the duck up, but it quits fallin' about ten feet above the folks' heads."

"Yes." Flamond nodded thoughtfully. "I can see how that might get a laugh. The discomfiture motive."

"It's a socko," Danny agreed, "but last night it was strictly from hunger. I pull the trigger and nothin' happens. There I am caught with my pants in the sprocket and my New Departure coaster brake not workin'."

"Mechanical contrivances sometimes get temperamental," Flamond suggested. "Did you look over the gadget that's supposed to release the duck?"

"Sure," Danny said. "An' somebody'd put in a new spring and release lever that was too strong to let the duck fall. I got a hunch it was Sheila Ray."

"SHEILA RAY! What a nice name," Sandra said.

"There's nothin' nice about her," Danny said. "She gets by on her looks and," he eyed Sandra appreciatively, "you could give her eight to five odds there. But if it wasn't for her—uh—curves, her voice wouldn't get her a job callin' trains in Winapausaukee, North Dakota. She drools songs into a mike, and had the top spot on the show til I come in. Then she got second billing. She stayed."

"Do you have any proof that she rewired your duck gadget," Flamond asked.

"Not an eye-ota," Danny admitted. "But it sure killed my big laugh."

"I think somebody's interested in killing more than laughs, Mr. Dole," Flamond said. "We'll catch your act tonight and then talk things over after the show."

"Fine," Danny beamed. "I'll see you get a ringside table. And don't worry about the tab. It's on me." He swaggered out of the office as quickly as he had come in.

"Well?" Sandra shrugged her shoulders.

"Find out who owns the Club Lisetta," Flamond asked.

"I already know. Gus Klumb."

Flamond rubbed his chin. "That name sounds familiar."

"It doesn't," Sandra protested. "Why don't you come right out and ask me what I know about him? He's not one

of our sterling citizens but his club is extra-lush and the best people go to it to see the best night-spot shows and eat the best food—at the biggest prices." She hesitated. "It's sultra-swank. You're supposed to dress. And it's four o'clock now and my hair's a sight,"

"Danny Dole didn't seem to mind," Flamond grinned.

"It isn't Danny Dole I'll be trying to impress tonight," Sandra answered. "You can p i c k me up about seven o'clock."

She was already at the clothes closet, putting on her coat.

THE Club Lisetta would look better out front, with soft-tinted lights p l a y i n g on the room. Backstage, though, would never look any better than this. Cracked plaster. Unshaded light bulbs. Penciled notations on the walls. Narrow halls leading to small dressing rooms. Danny Dole's dressing room had a gold star on the door and it had a lavatory. Aside from that, it was like all the others.

Gus Klumb, owner of the Club Lisetta, sat on the dressing room table, and there wasn't any room to spare. It wasn't that Gus was fat; he was big. His made-to-order cigars were super-king size, and they accentuated his hugeness. He rolled one to the corner of his mouth now.

"You g o n n a be funny tonight, Dole?" he asked.

Danny didn't look around from the makeup mirror. "I ain't had any complaints 'til I hit this beanery," he said.

"At these other places, they must have been giving away dishes. Or maybe having bank nights. We ain't got fifty reservations for the dinner show."

Danny sighed. "The w o r d gets around when you clip the customers," he said.

Gus Klumb took the cigar from his mouth and looked at it. "When I pay a comedian fifteen hundred dollars a week, I expect to get crowds. That's the idea of putting out that kinda money. You don't want a drawing card, you get a hundred dollar comic."

"I only been here two weeks," Danny said hopefully. "Folks'll get wise. Business'll build."

"Get wise to how you kick your material around?" Klumb demanded.

"It's not me," Danny argued. "I got nothin' to do with the things that's been happenin'."

"Maybe not," Klumb admitted. "But if they aren't your fault, you're not able to take care of yourself very well, are you?"

"I've got a contract for ten weeks—an air-tight contract. That's not takin' care of yourself so bad."

Klumb eyed his cigar. "Suppose I throw you out and refuse to pay off?"

Danny looked at the club owner for the first time. "Your joint'd be closed in two hours. You couldn't get a band or an act. You can maybe shove people around, but you're not big enough to get tough with a union contract."

"Suppose you leave," Klumb suggested. "Suppose you jump the contract?"

"You've got a different script from mine."

"I've got some wonderful friends," Klumb said. "They think the world of me."

"What about 'em?" Danny started to turn back to the mirror.

"They don't like people who give me bum deals," Klumb said coldly. "Sometimes they get sore about it. And when they get mad, they do funny things—a lot funnier things than you do in your act."

"Funny things like tryin' to kill a comedian's laughs?"

"No," Klumb shook his head. "Like

tryin' to kill a comedian, period."

DANNY tried to look tough, but he wasn't that good an actor. He was trying to think of something to say when a knock came on his door.

"Come in," Klumb muttered, and there was Sheila Ray. She was wearing a bare-midriff evening gown, but the bare part of her somehow managed to be the least suggestive. The curves were all high-lighted, and they hadn't been bad curves to start with. Her henna rinse was all right, too, and the make-up job was the kind worn only by headliners. She smiled at Klumb and then turned to Danny.

"Joe said to tell you that you go on five minutes early for the dinner show tonight, Danny," she said insolently.

"Why?" Danny demanded.

"Not for an encore for your act, that's for sure," Sheila said. "If you've got any beefs, talk to him." She started to leave and Klumb reached out his hand, the cigar still in it.

"Hey," she protested. "Don't get that dirty old cigar on this dress."

"Don't you worry about my cigars," Klumb said. "How come you're bringing Danny a message about going on early?"

"Why—" She was startled. "Joe asked me."

"You're doin' what the head-waiter says now?"

"I was only coming backstage anyway, Gus."

"To Dole's dressing room?" Klumb demanded.

Sheila laughed. "Don't tell me you're jealous, Gus. If you were—say, what's eating you, anyway?"

Klumb lifted his bulk from the table and it was a slow, laborious process. He put the cigar back into his mouth and grabbed the girl by the arm.

"How long were you standing outside that door before you knocked," he demanded. "Answer me!"

"Hey, you big ape," she protested. "Let go of my arm."

"I'll break it off, you go trying any funny stuff. One bum comedian's enough for this place. What did you hear?"

"Ouch!" she winced. "I didn't hear anything. Honest."

"Honest," he laughed. "That's very good from a tramp like you. What did you hear?"

"Nothing," she insisted. "And ease up on my arm. You'll have it black and blue. What do you want me to say?"

Suddenly Klumb let go of her arm, spinning her around in the process. "I want you to say exactly what you just said, kid—nothing."

The girl looked indignantly at Danny Dole. "If there were any gentlemen around here," she began.

"There ain't," Klumb said. "And no ladies, either. Now, get outta here."

She got, slamming the door behind her.

KLUMB turned back to Danny Dole, grinning, but the grin froze on his face. Danny had a neat little .32 revolver in his hands.

"What're you doing with that thing?" the club owner said. "You think you can get tough with me, you little—"

"No bad words, please," Danny admonished. "I wouldn't dream of hurting the goose that's laying the golden eggs. But you said something about friends before we were interrupted—friends of yours who do funny things. I got a great little gag for them, Klumb. They'll die laughing."

"You wouldn't have the nerve to pull the trigger on that thing if it was loaded with blanks," Klumb said.

"If any of these friends of yours

want odds on that one, just send them around," Danny offered. "And now, if you'll get out of here, I have to get ready to do a show."

KLUMB backed out of the room. All the way down the hall he kept his head slightly turned. "Comics are all crazy," he muttered. "A guy like that could do almost anything." He ducked his head to go through the door leading to "out front," and a little smile lit his face. Business wasn't good, but at least eighty tables were filled and the waiters were rushing back and forth with trays of drinks. The ringside tables, reserved for parties of four or more, were all filled except one. Klumb frowned. What did Joe mean, giving a couple a table like that? Joe needed talking to, anyway. Joe was probably getting a fast double-sawbuck out of it and Klumb would get half the normal take of the table. He ambled toward the back of the club, looking for the head-waiter.

Sandra Lake, at the table in question, was enjoying herself. "Flamond," she said, "I wish we'd get a client like Danny Dole at least once a week. You know, you're not half bad when you relax and forget to work at being a character analyst and psychologist."

"I hate to disappoint you, Sandra," he smiled, "but I'm not relaxing. This is a job."

"But a light one."

Flamond frowned.

"You mean you took that egocentric little comedian seriously?" Sandra was incredulous.

"I'm afraid I did," Flamond admitted. Then he grinned. "All right," he said, "your evening gown's a knockout."

"Not as flashy as the singer's, maybe," Sandra said, "but—say, speaking of the singer, she wasn't nearly as bad as I expected, after what Danny Dole told us.

"Maybe Danny's jealous of her instead of the other way around. We haven't seen his act yet."

The chorus danced off the floor to loud applause and the orchestra went into an exaggerated fanfare which built up and up and then stopped abruptly. A funny little man took quick, mincing steps to the center of the floor and then drew himself to a halt with a long, slow step.

"I was right," Sandra whispered. "I knew that was an entrance he made in our office this afternoon."

"Shh," Flamond hissed, and all over the room, noise diminished. The little man in the spotlight blinked and smiled. Finally, the room was absolutely still. Danny Dole heaved a big sigh and an expansive smile lit up his face. All the customers smiled in unconscious imitation of the comedian.

"Welcome," he said. "Welcome to the Club Lisetta—the Club Lisetta where you pay plenty for what you getta. Such happy faces. Wait 'til you get your checks." He eyed a couple being seated at a table far back. "Waiter," he called, "waiter! Bring that young couple a bottle of the best imported vintage chapagne—the twenty-two-fifty stuff."

"Yes, m'sieu," the waiter called.

The crowd applauded. Everyone watched the waiter run up to the table with a bottle of champagne.

"And waiter," Danny called, "put it on this man's bill over here." He pointed toward another table.

Danny visited with people in the audience. He burlesqued the earlier acts in the show. He grabbed a trumpet from one of the band boys and began doing bugle calls. "That last one," he said, "—you know what that was? The Hunt. You know—the Hunt. Yerks!

Yerks! This is the Brooklyn Hunt Club. Imagine dem bums chasin' a little fox. I'm not a fox man, myself. I'm a duck man."

"This is it," Sandra whispered. Flamond looked toward the high dimly lit ceiling of the room.

"Yes, I'm a duck man," Danny said. "One day I'm blind—no, that's another day. I'm out in the blind . . . waitin' for the ducks to fly over. From the north, I see a flock of fifty ducks headin' south. They're southern ducks. I know they're southern ducks because I hear 'em quackin' as they get closer —quack, quack you-ll . . . quack, quack you-all. I pull my shotgun out of my pocket. I can carry it there because the pocket has a hole in it. I get down on one knee, just like Jolson. I put the gun to my shoulder."

THE comedian went through an amazing bit of pantomime. Without any props, he made his audience see this funny little man in a duck blind. He had difficulties loading the shotgun and the audience suffered with him. The gun kept sliding down from his shoulder and he kept hoisting it back up. He got all ready to shoot.

"And then," he said, "I remembered the old adage: never shoot into a flock of ducks 'til you can see the whites of their—eyes. I wait. The ducks get closer. The time is ripe. I pull the trigger."

A chair clattered on the night club floor. Sandra Lake screamed simultaneously with the crash of the chair, because she was sitting on it and Flamond had pushed it over. Amazed spectators heard a terrific crash and a few of them saw something plummet right through the top of the table. Splintering china added to the noise.

The audience came to life. Women screamed. Men stood on chairs to try to see what had happened. People began edging up to the badly wrecked table. Danny Dole was the first to make it.

"What was it," he gasped. "I heard the crash and—"

He stooped over and tugged to lift what he found on the floor. "That's a swell gag, that is," he said. "Switchin' my feather-stuffed duck for one made of lead. Why, this thing must weigh close to twenty-five pounds."

Josef, the head-waiter, was at Danny's elbow, out of breath. "And it was not attached to any wire, m'sieu," he said.

Sandra Lake was still sprawled on the floor. "Hey," she demanded, "isn't somebody going to help me up?"

"Sandra—" Flamond was apologetic. "I saw the thing coming and I had to get you out of the way. You—you're hurt!"

"My ankle," Sandra admitted. "I tried to twist out of the chair when it tipped and—"

Flamond turned to the head-waiter. "Isn't there somewhere we can take her?"

"Yes, m'sieu." Josef bobbed his head. "Down to M'sieu Klumb's office. I can call a doctor if you like."

"We'll see first if that's necessary. Whoever tried to murder her is going to need one, anyway."

Josef was visibly shaken. "Murder? M'sieu, please—the other people—you must not—"

"Never mind what I must do. Take her arm, on the other side. And be quick about it."

Josef was quite quick, all things considered. Danny Dole led the way down the narrow stairway and knocked on Gus Klumb's door. There was no answer.

"Open it," Flamond ordered.

"But, m'sieu," Josef protested.

"Open the door, Dole," Flamond insisted. Danny opened it and Flamond and Josef let Sandra down onto a red leather davenport.

"Say," she said, "this is all right. And I certainly learned something tonight."

"That going to night clubs is dangerous?" Flamond suggested.

"No," she grinned, "that interfering with a comedian's laughs is serious business."

"I don't get it," Danny shook his head.

"Maybe I do," Flamond said. "Josef why did you seat us at the particular table we occupied?"

"What?" Josef seemed astonished at the question. "Why, M'sieu Dole told me to."

"I didn't mean any particular table," Danny said. "You know I didn't. I just said, a good one. Ringside."

"And the other ringside tables were all taken," Josef smiled. "As you knew, if you took the trouble to look over my reservation chart."

"Did you see his chart?" Flamond asked Danny.

"No. I didn't even know he had one."

"He did not see the chart to my knowledge," Josef admitted. "It was Miss Ray who—"

Danny looked gleeful. "Who what?"

"She said M'sieu Klumb had ordered this table for M'sieu Doles' guests," the head-waiter said.

A THROATY feminine voice blasted in from the hall. "I heard that one, Josef," Sheila Ray yelled, charging in.

"You're gettin' the habit of listening in on other people's conversations, ain't you?" Danny sneered.

Sheila wasn't bothered, except to see that her dress was still tight in the right places. "Listening looks like a healthy thing to do around this place," she observed.

"How about it, Miss Ray," Flamond asked. "Did you tell Josef that Gus Klumb had ordered that table for us?"

The singer forgot to be dignified. "You're not pinning this onto me, you bum!" she shouted.

Danny grabbed her by the shoulder. "You hated my guts because I was getting top billing and top dough. You've been pulling stuff on me ever since I came into this joint."

Sheila started to tell him off and then regained her composure. "I'm not denying that I told Josef about the table," she said.

Sandra was startled. "You admit it? But what could you possibly have against me? Why, you don't even know me. And if Flamond hadn't kicked my chair over, I'd have been killed by that lead duck."

Sheila nodded in agreement. "You're forgetting one thing, sister—one awfully important thing. I told Josef what Gus Klumb had told me to tell him. I remember, Gus told me to tell Josef it was very important Danny's guests should get that table."

Josef rubbed his forefinger along the side of his nose. "It is funny, that," he said, "very funny — that M'sieu Klumb is not around, with all this excitement."

"Say, that is kinda queer," Sheila agreed. "I haven't seen him, either."

"The last time I saw him," Josef remembered, "was when we were bringing this young lady down here. He was across the room."

Flamond was surprised. "He must still be upstairs, then. He wouldn't dare try to get away. Go up and tell him—"

A faint tap on the window stopped his sentence. Josef hadn't heard it.

"M'sieu," he asked, "do you have a revolver?"

This was one of Flamond's pet phobias. "I never carry one," he said. "A gun is a sign of weakness. It's an admission that you aren't able to handle things with your head. It—"

"Flamond's scared to death of firearms," Sandra explained.

Again, the tapping on the window. This time, it was loud enough to get everybody's attention. Sandra walked over to the window and tugged at the lowered shade, disregarding a warning from Flamond. Danny Dole gripped the revolver in his pocket as the window shade snapped up.

A long rasping scream was Sheila Ray's contribution to the scene. Dangling outside the window, his neck firmly held in a rope noose, was the corpse of Gus Klumb.

THE body swung in the breeze like a pendulum, occasionally swinging inward far enough for the shoe-tips to tap against the window pane. Sheila Ray's scream had settled down into a continuous moan, but the others stared in mute fascination. Danny Dole broke the spell with the observation, "The rope's tied to the railing of that little exit balcony upstairs. The other end of it, I mean."

Flamond raised the window and reached out for the dead man's legs. On the inward swing of the pendulum, he caught them. "Well," he asked, "doesn't anyone have a knife?"

Josef reached into his pocket and thrust a pocket knife toward the detective. "Here," he said.

"Stand up on the window ledge, reach out and cut the rope at the neck," Flamond directed.

Josef was white. "I—I'd rather not, m'sieu," he said.

Danny was less shaken. "Give it to me. I'll do it."

"All right," Flamond agreed. "You can at least help me pull his body into the room," he added to Josef.

Danny Dole clambered up onto the window ledge, knife in hand. Sandra had a quickly repressed impulse toward hysterical laughter at the picture of the grotesquely made up little man crawling out to cut the rope. He made it, and Flamond and Josef struggled with the huge body. Sweat stood out on their faces as the body seemed on the verge of getting away from them. Even in death, Gus Klumb was a tough customer to handle.

Danny was back in the room, directing the procedure. "Maybe you just oughta let it drop an' go outside an' pick it up," he suggested. Sheila Ray looked at him in horror. Finally, the dead man's knees were inside the window ledge, and from then on the process of hauling him into the room became less laborious.

"There!" Flamond sighed, as he eased the body onto the rug. They all started at the corpse.

"I'd never guessed he was yellow," Sheila Ray said. "The minute it looked like he was gonna get caught, he killed himself."

Flamond was unbuttoning the man's coat. "No, Miss Ray," he said, "Klumb didn't commit suicide. See this sharp little cut in his stiff shirt-front, right over the heart?"

"I—yeah. But there's no blood." she protested. "No wound."

Flamond nodded. "The knife wasn't the murder instrument," he said. "It was the thing that forced him off the balcony after he was given that hemp necktie."

"But—nobody could shove that guy around," Danny protested. "He was too big."

"I can't see Gus Klumb standing

still for somebody to tie a noose around his neck," Sheila added.

Flamond smiled, but it was a weary smile. "It's another instance of a duck that didn't work," he said. "Let's call the police."

LIEUTENANT RIORDAN of the homicide squad could never have held a job as a movie detective. He simply didn't look the part. The darkly handsome, neatly dressed Irishman received his aide's report that there were no fingerprints on the iron balcony without comment. "It looks like another gang murder," he observed. "Tell me, Flamond—did you notice any of 'the boys' in the crowd upstairs?"

"Plenty of them. Why?"

"I'll want a list of them. We'll have to round them up and have a little chat with them. Not that they'll be talkative, but somebody may make a slip."

Josef nodded. "Some of M'sieu Klumb's friends were—most unsavory. And they had poured a great deal of money into the Club Lisetta."

"Big spenders, hm?" Riordan asked.

Josef smilled. "Indeed no," he said. "They seldom bothered to even tip satisfactorily. But they had put up much money to keep the club from going into bankruptcy."

"I don't get it," Riordan said, puzzled. "You say the place was losing money and yet Klumb hires a headline act at fifteen hundred dollars a week."

Danny stepped forward. "I've pulled plenty of joints out of the red," he said. "You take a spot that's dying on its feet and what it needs is a hypo. That's me. I got a draw that'll put money in the bank for any night spot."

"That is how M'sieu Klumb reasoned," Josef volunteered. "He felt a big-name act would draw the big spenders."

"Was it working out?"

Josef shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. Instead of losing six hundred a week, there was an additional fifteen hundred dollar loss. Danny Dole's salary."

Lieutenant Riordan had an idea. "Were you collecting your pay all right, Josef?"

Josef smiled. "My pay wouldn't make much difference. Sixty dollars a week."

"In times like these," Riordan observed, "that isn't much. I should think a headwaiter with your reputation could do a lot better than that."

Josef's smile widened. "I was doing all right," he said. "Well enough to loan M'sieu Klumb six thousand dollars."

"But you said the club was losing money," Sandra protested.

"Quite so," Josef nodded. "The club was doing badly but I was doing very well. It doesn't take many five and ten dollar table reservations a day to do satisfactorily."

Sandra turned to Flamond. "Maybe you're in the wrong business," she said.

FLAMOND seemed preoccupied, but Lieutenant Riordan was pressing. "Had you had any quarrel with Klumb, Josef?" he asked.

Josef denied any difficulty. "But it was M'sieu Klumb who instructed Sheila Ray to have me put Flamond and Miss Lake at Table 16—so she says."

"Well, it's true, Sheila snarled.

Josef lifted his brows and gave an eloquent shrug. "You don't believe Miss Ray?" Riordan continued.

Josef bowed toward Sheila. "Oh, I always believe a lady. But—it is unfortunate that M'sieu Klumb is dead."

Danny Dole laughed. "Unfortunate or inconvenient. Me, I wouldn't know which."

Sheila spun toward Danny. "I'd keep that funny mouth shut if I were in your big shoes, Danny boy."

"Yeah? Why?"

Sheila took her turn at smiling. "I heard that row you had with Klumb before the dinner show."

"I thought you weren't listening."

Sheila was unperturbed. "I was listening, all right. And it was quite a thing to hear."

Lieutenant Riordan said, quickly, "What was it, Miss Ray?"

Sheila opened her mouth, but Danny Dole was already talking. "If you don't keep your mouth shut, I'll make you sorry you ever snooped around my dressing room," he threatened.

"Like you made Gus Klumb sorry?" she inquired sweetly. Then, turning to Riordan, "Gus tried to get Danny to tear up his contract, because Danny's act was the prize floperoo of the year. Gus was losing money on it."

"That's a lie," Danny yelled. "He hadn't given it a chance. In another couple of days, I'd of been packing 'em in."

Sheila ignored him. "Gus told the funny man here that if he didn't quit, things would happen to him."

Riordan turned toward Danny. "Sure," Danny admitted. "He threatened me. So what? I called his bluff, and that lead duck was his idea of a way to crab my act."

Sheila thought that was funny. "Why, you big ham," she laughed, "do you think that lead duck took its dive just to crab your act? Just how important do you think your act is?"

"All right, Voice of Experience," Danny said. "I'm gettin' mad. I'll give you a thing or two to think about."

"You'd have to get it out of a book."

"Never mind the wise cracks," Danny said. "Josef and Flamond and me brought Miss Lake down here. And none of us left this room 'til Gus—till the body was found. When we left the club floor, Gus was standing across the dining room—and you were still upstairs, cracker-voice. It was after you came down here that Klumb was doing a one-way stretch."

Sheila was blazing. "You can't pin it onto me. I didn't do it. There's only one person who—" Her voice faltered and died.

Flamond prompted her, without much apparent interest. "What were you going to say, Miss Ray?"

"I—nothing. I'm afraid maybe I've said too much now."

THE telephone jangled and Lieutenant Riordan picked up the receiver. "Hello," he said . . . "Nice work, Jim. You're positive? Fine. Thanks. No, nothing else right now." He put the phone back in its cradle and turned to Flamond.

"They've found where the lead duck came from," he said. "It was a lawn decoration at Gus Klumb's summer cottage up at the lake."

"What does that prove, except that Klumb was trying to louse up my act?" Danny demanded.

Riordan sighed. "Nothing," he said. "It doesn't prove anything at all. And I'm tired. You leaving, Flamond?"

Flamond shook his head. "I think I'll stick around awhile, Riordan," he said. "Your boys didn't find the knife that jabbed the slit into Klumb's shirtfront."

Danny snapped his fingers. "Say," he said. "When you had me cut the rope—Josef pulled out a knife. I forgot to give it back to him."

He reached into his pocket and fished out the pocketknife. "Let me see it," Riordan asked. Danny handed it to him and Riordan snapped open the blade. He shook his head, "Not the

one," he said.

Sheila gulped. "How can you tell?" she asked.

Riordan smiled. "Much larger blade on the knife that gouged Klumb's shirt-front," he explained. "And it was hollow ground. That made a little curve in the incision made by the blade. This knife isn't hollow-ground."

"Say," Sheila said, "you cops figure things out, don't you?"

"You're wasting your time, baby," Danny advised her. "Flattery's got you quite a ways, but it won't salve over a murder."

"Oh, what's the use of talking with a wise guy like you around?" Sheila said. "I'd be better off getting some shut-eye."

"An excellent suggestion," Josef agreed. "If its' all right for us to leave now?"

"Go ahead," Riordan waved his hand. "But don't try to get out of town or forget to come back here tomorrow."

SANDRA LAKE couldn't keep down a feeling of fear as she followed Flamond through the deserted hallway backstage at the Club Lisetta. Shadows from the dim, unshaded bulbs distorted the place, and each footstep gave off a hollow echo.

"I suppose Danny Dole's dressing room will have a gold star on the door," Flamond mumbled.

"Danny Dole's dressing room? What do you expect to find there?"

"With any luck," Flamond said quietly, "I expect to find that knife."

"Flamond, you surely don't think Danny Dole—"

"Here it is," Flamond pointed to the gold star on the door.

"This next dressing room," Sandra said, "I wonder—" She walked up to it. A card pinned to the door with a thumb tack bore Sheila Ray's name.

Flamond opened the door to Dole's dressing room. "Just a minute," Sandra said. "I thought I heard something."

"Your imagination," Flamond laughed. "Come on."

"It's odd the door doesn't have any lock on it," Sandra observed.

"Nothing odd about it. Gus Klumb wasn't the kind of fellow who wanted his performers to have any secrets. Where the devil's the light switch?"

Sandra held his arm as he groped along the wall for the light switch. Suddenly there was a dull, wooden thud. Sandra gasped. "Flamond," she whispered. "What was that?"

Flamond swept his hand along the wall. "Somebody just threw a knife at us," he said. "It's sticking here in the wall." As he ended his sentence, the door closed.

Sandra was getting panicky. "Flamond," she said. "The door."

"Forget it," Flamond whispered. "Whoever did the knife-throwing act is gone, now. Hey—I think this is the light switch."

The room jumped into reality as the switch clicked. Sprawled in a corner was the unfunniest comedian either Sandra or Flamond had ever seen. Danny Dole, for the first time in his life, was completely oblivious to an audience.

"Is he—dead?" Sandra whispered.

Flamond was bending over the body. "He's breathing," he said. "Been hit over the head. A mean blow. We'll have to get him to a doctor. But before I do anything else, I want to hide that knife."

"Hide it? Why?"

"Because, from what Lieutenant Riordan said, I'd bet my last dollar it's the same knife that was used on Gus Klumb."

The door was squeaking open again. Sandra jumped back and Sheila Ray

sailed into the room. "Well," she said. "Fancy seeing you—" Her eyes caught the inert comedian. "What's happened to him?" she demanded. "Is he—?"

"Never mind about him," Flamond said. "I thought you were anxious to get some sleep. Did you change your mind?"

"I thought I'd do a little investigating on my own," Sheila defended herself.

Danny moaned. He was trying to sit up. "Where am I? What happened? What—?"

"Cut the act," Sheila sneered. "You know where you are, all right. And you know what happened. You came here to get rid of that knife and you got trapped."

"Knife? What knife? I gave the knife to Riordan."

"I'm talking about the knife that shoved Klumb over the stair-side of the balcony," Sheila said. "You were going to hid it, but Flamond got here too soon. You threw the knife, pulled the door shut and pretended to be knocked out."

"You seem to know more about what happened to me than I do," Danny said. "How do you know the knife was thrown."

SHEILA was frightened. "All right," she said. "I was listening again."

Danny glared at her. "Somebody was in here when I came to lock up my stuff. I hadda keep my trunk locked, what with no lock on the dressing room door. And I got hit over the head, from behind. It felt like a blackjack."

Sheila wasn't convinced. "You arranged the whole business, to keep from looking bad, you ham."

Danny laughed. "I never looked bad in my life," he said indignantly.

Sheila wasn't to be stopped. "You knew Gus Klumb was all set to give you the old heave-ho. You'd never been bounced from a job and you figured the publicity would ruin you. And so you worked out a way to make him look like a murderer and get rid of him, at the same time."

"You got the brains of an underprivileged gnat," Danny snarled. "Tell me how I could hang Gus Klumb while I was down in his office and him upstairs, and I'll get you fifty-two weeks booking as a headliner—which would be just about as good a trick."

"I don't know how you did it," Sheila admitted, "but you figured how to drop a lead weight on somebody's head. You're crazy, anyway."

Danny had suffered enough. "Arrest her, Flamond," he ordered. "She's the one who told Gus Klumb to seat you and Miss Lake at the table right under the lead duck. And she didn't show up in Klumb's office until after Klumb was hung. It hadda be her. She's the only one it could be."

Footsteps echoing along the hallway stopped him. Everyone stared toward the door as Josef entered. The headwaiter beamed.

"So!" he said. "You have caught them. Congratulations. Have they confessed?"

That was too much for Sandra. "Really, Josef—you could hardly accuse Danny Dole and Miss Ray of working together."

It wasn't too much for Josef. "But I could," he said. "Those spats of theirs—they are an act. Sheila was mad because he was about to be fired. The two planned a dual revenge."

"Now, there," said Danny, "is a new one."

"And not a very good one, either," Flamond added.

"You don't think so?" Josef was persistent. "Look, Danny Dole invited

you and Miss Lake here. Two things had to happen for you to be the victims of the dead duck. First, you had to be invited to the club. Second, you had to be seated at the death table. Sheila Ray gave me instructions where to seat you."

Flamond nodded. "Miss Ray admits giving you those instructions. And that convinces me of her innocence."

"What?" Josef was shocked. "She admits her guilt and—"

"If she were guilty," Flamond continued, "she'd never in the world have admitted giving you those instructions. She'd have denied it from hell to breakfast—and nobody could proved it, either way. The one man who had proof was already dead. It would have been your word against hers."

"She knows she is guilty," Josef persisted. "Consider. The only one of us who was upstairs in the club when Klumb was murdered was Sheila Ray."

"Who says so?" Flamond demanded. "Who saw Gus Klumb after the lead duck crashed on our table? Only you, Josef."

Josef gulped. "Surely, M'sieu, you do not suspect me."

Flamond nodded. "I not only suspect you, Josef. I think you're guilty as hell."

JOSEF tried to laugh. "That a slight man like myself could manhandle Gus Klumb—that is something of a compliment, M'sieu. But a fantastic compliment.

Danny was beginnning to grasp the general idea. "We've all been takin' Josef's word that Klumb was still alive when we took Miss Lane down to Gus' office. His word!"

Josef managed to make the smile stick. "Just how, I repeat, do you think I could manhandle Gus Klumb?"

"Simple," Flamond told him. "Klumb always stood over by the balcony exit to watch the acts. It was easy enough for you to get out on the balcony a few minutes before the duck incident and tie the loose end of a noose or rope around the railing."

"Easy as feeding ham to a comedian," Sheila agreed.

"Josef knew Danny Dole's duck routine and he knew he could depend on Danny's timing. A few seconds before the lead duck started to fall, he slipped the noose over Gus Klumb's head from behind, and pulled toward the exit door for all he was worth. He wouldn't have had to pull too hard, because Klumb was undoubtedly anxious to see what was happening. Once he got out on the balcony, he had a knife in his ribs—a knife that forced him right over the side of the balcony where the steps were. It was all a matter of a couple of seconds. Then Josef stepped back inside."

"Fantastic," Josef smiled. "You think anyone could perform an exhibition like that without being seen?"

"Of course," Flamond said. "You were a smart killer, Josef. You knew that every eye in the club would be on what should have been another murder in the center of the room. You knew that the human eye can't resist following the broadest sweep of movement. And you were quite right. We were creating excitement that stopped any chance of your being caught."

"It's a frameup," Josef insisted. His hand darted for his pocket. "And it's one frameup that isn't going to work. Stick up your hands, all of you."

"Hey!" Danny's eyes were popping. "That's my revolver you got there!"

"Yes," Josef agreed. "And I'll use it on you, too, if you try to get funny. Take one step toward me and I shoot."

Danny laughed. "You aint' got the

nerve, Josef." He took a couple of quick, short steps toward the head-waiter.

"I'm warning you, funny man. All right—you asked for it!"

Josef's trigger-finger squeezed—and a thin stream of water squirted from the barrel of the gun. Flamond jumped into action, locking his hands over Josef's face from behind. He jerked the waiter's neck back and the lethal-looking squirt gun clattered to the floor. Josef followed. He opened his mouth, trying to bite Flamond's hands, but instead yelled in pain as Flamond's knuckles began massaging his nose.

DANNY DOLE was retrieving his water pistol. "Hit him over the head with it," he advised Flamond. "Just enough to cool him off a little, like he did with me."

"Give it to me," Sheila said grimly. There was a hollow sock as her arm completed a sweeping arc. Josef wouldn't have much to say for awhile. He relaxed on the dirty dressing room floor.

"Can anyone tell me," Danny asked, "why Josef would want to louse up my act?"

"Either he wanted to get back the six thousand dollars he'd let Klumb borrow and thought it would be simpler to get it from the mans' estate or he wanted to get control of the Club Lisetta for himself," Flamond explained.

"He'd tried to buy the joint," Sheila contributed. "I know that. He had a coupla stooges acting for him in a deal—but Klumb wasn't interested—not until just lately."

Sandra wasn't completely convinced yet. "Miss Ray said Gus Klumb told her to have Josef seat us at that table."

Flamond could explain that one, too. "Gus Klumb wanted to get rid of Danny Dole's act. It was breaking him." Danny started to interrupt. "Because somebody was spoiling Danny's material," Flamond mollified the comedian. "I have a hunch that Josef went to Gus Klumb with a plan for getting rid of Danny Dole. He tipped off Klumb that Dole had hired a detective and said he had a way of getting rid of the comedian."

"How?" Sandra wanted to know.

"Josef told Klumb to send Sheila to him with instructions on where to seat the detective—me. He wouldn't tell Klumb what the plan was but he guaranteed it would work."

"That adds up," Sheila agreed.

Sandra still was bothered. "But why did he try to murder me?"

"He didn't," Flamond explained. "What was supposed to be murder at the table was simply his method of attracting all attention away from the important murder."

"A nice guy, Josef," Danny mused. He did a double-take. "Say!" he growled, "he was the guy that was killing all my jokes."

"You can't murder the dead, Danny," Sheila snickered.

Flamond turned to Sandra. "How about it?" he asked. "Do you want to buzz down to the office and make out the file card while everything's still fresh in our minds?"

"It's been a long night," Sandra sighed, "but—yes. There are still some things I want to find out."

SANDRA stopped typing to take a deep gulp from a paper cup full of coffee.

"About through?" Flamond asked.

"No," she said. "You claim you knew right from the start that Josef had to be the murderer."

"That's right."

"I don't get it."

"Well," Flamond said, "first, I could eliminate Danny Dole because the dead duck trick hadn't worked the night before the murder."

"That doesn't make sense," Sandra protested.

"Oh, but it does," Flamond insisted. "One person in the room and only one wouldn't be particularly impressed by the duck's descent—one person who might possibly see the murder. Danny Dole. He'd seen the duck fall so many times it wouldn't have any effect on him, ordinarily. And the murderer had to be sure Danny would have his eyes on the duck. He made sure by fixing things so there was some doubt about the duck's working. That way, Danny's thought proccesses forced him to watch it the next night. The pattern had been broken."

"All right so far," Sandra agreed. "But Sheila Ray—how could you be so sure about her?"

"I've already explained," Flamond said. "She admitted she delivered the message from Klumb to Josef. Had she actually been implicated, she'd have done exactly what Josef did—planted suspicion on someone else, not herself."

"But what," Sandra persisted, "made you suspicious of Josef?"

Flamond laughed. "His saying he'd seen Klumb across the room when we carried you down to Klumb's office. That was a dead give-away."

Sandra frowned. "I don't see it."

"If Klumb had actually been there," Flamond explained patiently, "he'd have gone down to his office with you, himself. It's beyond my experience in human behavior to imagine the owner of a place staying away from the kind of excitement we created. How about you?"

Sandra nodded, and her fingers banged on the typewriter keys.

"If I ever want to use this file card for one of your radio dramas," she said, "I have a honey of a title."

Flamond leaned over her shoulder to read.

At the top of the file card, she typed, "The Case of the Squealing Duck."

WEANED ON CRIME

By PETE BOGG

☆ **Sometimes *criminals* can say in truth— "All that I am, I owe to my mother!"** ☆

WHILE few and far between, by far the most thoroughly detestable cases in the files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation are the "like mother like son" criminal cases with which the Bureau has had to deal. Such a case was that of Shoebox Annie French and her ratlike son, William Donald Mayer.

Shoebox Annie got her colorful name back in prohibition when she carried her bootleg liquor in a shoebox. She weaned her son in crime by writing fictitious checks and allowing him, young as he was, to take the blame. Mayer did not waste too much time before graduating himself into burglary and as his first offense, he was sentenced to the Whittier Reform School in California in 1912, under the alias, C. D. Montaine. His mother's pathetic appeals obtained a parole for her son and the next scene was set for bigger and more rewarding crimes.

Under the alias of C. C. Skidmore, Mayer embarked on an automobile stealing racket in Montana, for which he was sentenced to serve from four to nine years in the Montana State Prison. His mother's tears were effective again in winning him a parole after serving only three years of his sentence. Mayer and his dear mother began to plan again in an attempt to make up for the lost prison time. They became fast partners in a lucrative narcotics racket, but with the police hot on their trail, they decided to lay low for a while.

Mayer met a man named Ole Larson shortly afterwards and together they sold some oil stocks in Montana City. All seemed to go smoothly and legitimately until Mayer learned that his associates had a draft worth $750. Mayer in-

vited his friend to his mother's house for a home-cooked meal. Larson was never seen again after he passed through the door of Mayer's home. Shoebox Annie forged Larson's name to the draft and cashed it. Neither Annie or her son ever faced trial for this forgery (and the strange disappearance of Larson) since the state could not produce absolute proof of the death of the missing person as the law dictates.

Shoebox Annie and her son continued to live in Montana City, again plotting their criminal ways. Mayer befriended a rich woman who became attracted to the tall, good-looking young man. Mayer invited her to his home to visit his mother. She accepted the invitation and again, a human being disappeared without a trace. It wasn't until their neighbors complained of the vile smoke odor coming from the Mayer chimney that the police began their investigation of the house and, consequently, discovered jewelry and other personal possessions belonging to a young woman, but the two murderers—mother and son—denied all accusations. With no corpus delicti, no charge could be brought against the accused.

Finding it too hot to remain in Montana any longer under such suspicion, Shoebox Annie and her dutiful son headed towards Idaho in a stolen automobile which they sold, and then they disappeared. The purchaser took the car to his garage for repairs, and it was noted that the engine numbers had been altered, thereby indicating that it was a stolen vehicle. F.B.I. agents were called and restored the original numbers. They traced the stolen car to the original owner who identified the vehicle. The F.B.I. agents wasted no time in starting on the trail of Mayer.

MEANTIME, the Pocatello, Idaho, police were busily investigating the actions of an old woman who sold toilet articles as a blind for selling abortion medicines and whiskey. They noted that her son drove around the town in different model automobiles every day. Officers were sent to the house to investigate further. Mayer was leaving the house just as the officers arrived. He was relieved of the gun which he was carrying in addition to some interesting and conclusive evidences of planned and executed theft—wire cutters for snipping ignition connections, stolen auto license plates and keys for every make of car. Mayer was put under arrest but suddenly whirled from his captors and disappeared into the darkness. Mrs. French was also taken into custody.

Shoebox Annie begged an attorney with whom she had done some business previous to her arrest to drive her car out of the garage and turn it over an embankment. Suspicious of such a strange request and of Annie's distraught actions, the attorney related the request to the police who investigated the garage and found the car with fresh blood splattered on the floor. In the corner of the garage the police made an amazing discovery—Mayer, himself, was crumpled on the floor bleeding profusely. The police bullets, which were shot at the time he escaped from his home, had found their mark.

After his recovery, Mayer was sentenced to a maximum of ten years in the Utah State Penitentiary for theft. Shoebox Annie was set free since no actual legal charge could be brought against her. Annie's tears again won her son a parole after serving three years in Utah.

In 1928, a young naval officer named James Eugene Bassett arrived in Seattle soon after he had been appointed secretary to an American admiral in Manila. He was driving a blue Chrysler roadster which he was anxious to sell before embarking for his duty in the Philippines. The interested purchaser named De Castro Earl Mayer—alias William Donal Mayer—answered the advertisement of the car in the newspaper. He negotiated the deal with the officer who agreed to drive it to the home of Mayer's "aunt" so that she might see it before he purchased the car. This was the last ever seen of the young naval officer whose body was never found.

The Seattle police decided that if the officer was murdered, the theft of his roadster was the motive, and they began their hunt for the missing car and the purchaser. Mayer and Shoebox Annie were picked up in the roadster by the Oakland, California, police. Mayer was wearing Bassett's watch, cuff links and pocketbook. Again no corpus delicti meant that no charge of murder could be brought against the pair; however, they were sent back to Seattle to face a third theft charge.

The state of Washington had a criminal law providing that conviction on three felonies means life imprisonment and Mayer, therefore, received a life term in Walla Walla Penitentiary while his mother was sent away for an interminate sentence of from five to ten years.

★ ATOMIC BOMB ★

THE anticipated postwar crime wave is now in progress and the Chicago police department through its super scientific crime detection laboratory has announced the invention of a new machine which makes it impossible for detectives to mistake the truth when they hear it.

The inventor of this new device is John E. Reid whose device does its lie detecting with balloons.

Mr. Reid explained that super liars control their blood pressure by muscular contraction or muscular pressure, hence, the balloons. The balloons are placed under the arms and thighs and connected with highly sensitive electrical apparatus. The balloons make the lie detector so sensitive that the lie sign flickers if the suspect so much as wiggles a toe.

—J. Shaw

How could McMurdo help the woman he loved when he knew she was hopelessly in love though not with him? He was only a dumb flatfoot—but McMurdo the dick, wasn't as dumb as he looked!

Sweet Dreams, Darling

by Paul W. Faiman

McMURDO was up early, walking in the dawn. But, somehow, it wasn't the beginning of a new day. It was the death of an old day. He carried the last of its darkness with him, up a lonely street.

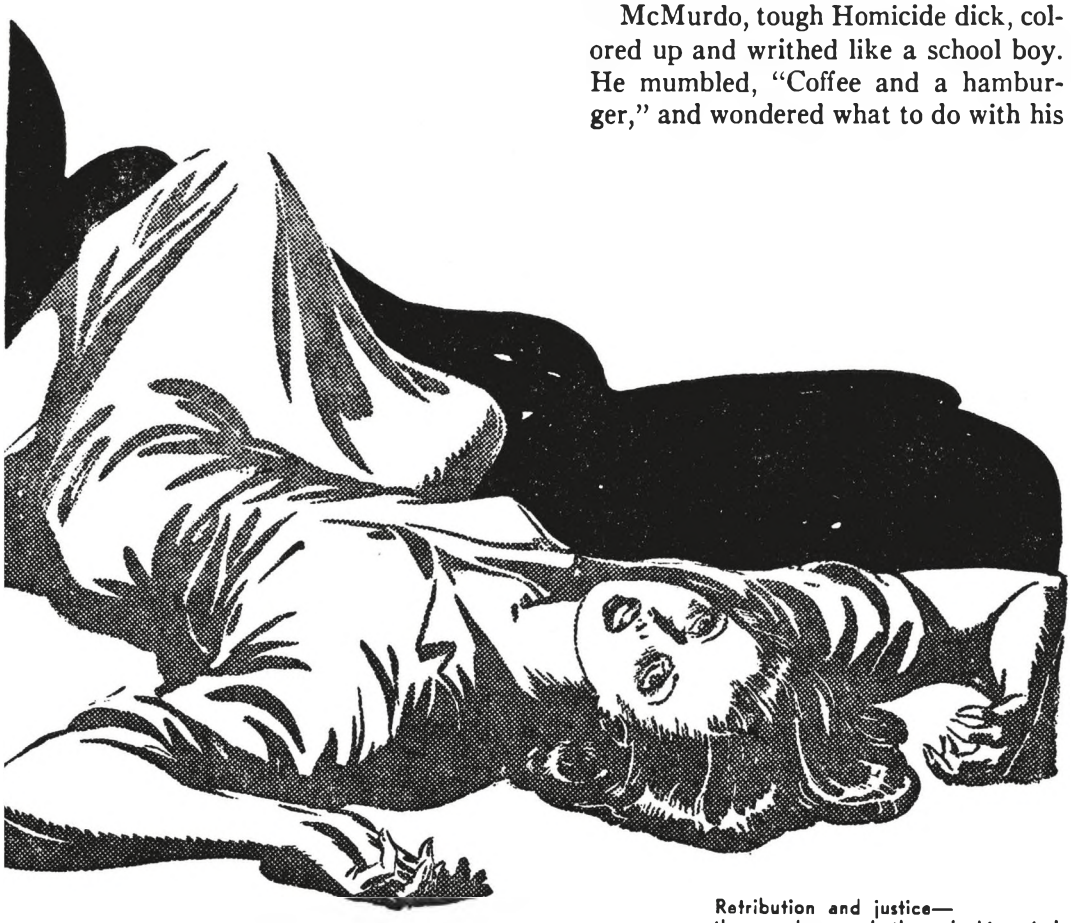
McMurdo stopped walking. This was it. The lunchroom. Not open yet. Quiet, waiting. This was where he had met her—a long time ago. His mind went inside while he stood in the street with the night around him.

She gave him that first smile, all over again, and asked:

"What's your pleasure, copper?"

McMurdo had probably scowled. He didn't remember now. Copper? Did it show that much? The smile turned into an imp's grin. "The feet," she said. "I saw them come in."

McMurdo, tough Homicide dick, colored up and writhed like a school boy. He mumbled, "Coffee and a hamburger," and wondered what to do with his



Retribution and justice—
the words raced through his mind

hands.

He didn't watch her that first time. He stared straight ahead, at a pumpkin pie on the shelf. He wolfed his sandwich. He gulped down the coffee and got out of there.

But he came back again. McMurdo, to whom women hadn't meant a thing. Women were pictures on magazine covers. Women were unreliable witnesses. Women screamed and carried on. You found them dead, sometimes, and they didn't look as nice as they did on magazine covers.

But impersonal—always impersonal. Until he saw Wava. Then he began coming back.

The same smile every time. The friendly eyes. A crack, maybe, about the feet, while she got prettier, and the gnawing in McMurdo's stomach got more demanding.

The tenth time in he asked her. Casually: "What are you doing tonight?" Casual? Like hell! He'd rehearsed it a thousand times. McMurdo, the tough dick. He'd stood in front of the mirror and watched his own lips while he said it. Stiff, clumsy lips.

They went to the movies and he walked along beside her on wooden legs, like a puppet, freakishly happy. They went out a lot. Wava, with the far-away eyes, and McMurdo, the tough dick; the boy they were all afraid of; the lad who smacked them and watched them bleed; the cop who could get answers out of wooden Indians. McMurdo.

He didn't have to tell her. She told him. They were having a drink one night and she laid her hand on his doubled fist and said, "You love me. You love me don't you, Steve? She said it in a catching, far-away voice, that matched her far-away eyes. Not gaily—not even happily. She could have been saying: "It's a long way to Brazil."

He didn't answer. He didn't have to.

Her eyes softened. She said, "I don't know. I—wouldn't want to hurt you. You're so—damn swell."

Suddenly there wasn't enough air to breath. He said, "Let's get out of here."

It hurt him like a soft nosed bullet.

McMURDO walked on down the empty street. He walked and stopped again.

This is where he had brought them together. Tony's Dine and Dance. McMurdo didn't dance, but Larry Sales did. Sales was smooth. He had graceful, smooth hands. They could make a deck of cards violate every law of chance on the books. He had a smooth way about him; a glossy, confidential manner, that brought plenty of suckers to his floating poker game. He could inflame the greed in a man's heart, or the sleeping desire in a woman's eyes.

McMurdo didn't care about the poker game. A Homicide man, McMurdo. But he cared about the way Sales came over to the little corner table, that night, a long time ago, and said, "So this is the gal I've heard about, copper. No wonder you've kept her under wraps."

McMurdo introduced them. They danced. Sales brought her back and went away. That was all. It didn't look like much, but McMurdo knew, and his stomach froze into a lump.

Three weeks later, in the lunchroom, he said it, and tried to make it sound like not much of anything. He said, "You've been seeing——

She nodded swiftly and went into the back. He paid his check and left. But it wasn't a breakup. Nothing like that. Not for another month.

. . . McMurdo walked on, hunched into his coat. It wasn't cold, but he

shivered. After a while, he looked up. This was where she'd told him—over a chocolate soda. She told him while a crowd of school kids bounced around the juke box and made it a happy place.

"We're going to be married, Steve," she said. She was happy underneath and sad on the surface. He could see that the sadness was for him.

He sat there like a man whose guts had been ripped out and thrown on the floor.

He said, "Swell."

They got out of there and he took her home and she kissed him, swiftly, and went in without saying anything.

That was the last he saw of her for six months.

It was a bad six months. All he had was his work, but he'd always had that, so it didn't help much. He began seeing it in a different light, though. The impersonal feeling he'd had about it, faded away. The shabby little human drama, which had meant nothing, before, now made him think.

Like the affair of Henry Treble, for instance. Henry Treble's landlady had found him, one night, and had called the law. McMurdo went in and pieced the thing together. Before, his mind would have catalogued it and filed it away in two words: Suicede—despondency. Cold. Impersonal.

It meant more to him now. Treble, a middle aged man, all alone, living in a boarding house. He'd come home late one night, wrapped a towel around a .38 automatic, so as not to bother anyone, and dealt himself one through the skull.

McMurdo gave it thought. With good years ahead, Treble didn't want anymore of life. Why?

Alone. That was it. You had to have somebody. Somebody had to care whether you came home or not. Somebody had to be sore as hell if you stayed out and didn't call up. Alone, everything eventually lost its meaning, lost sense. It had ceased to mean anything to Treble. It had reached a point, with him, where a gun was the answer.

McMurdo thought a lot, about Henry Treble, and other people.

McMURDO walked along a street with shiny street car tracks splitting its middle. He stopped under a large red sign: Palm Gardens. He had met her again here—after six months. She'd phoned him. He waited for her at a small table in the back. She came in and gave him the old smile and sat down.

After a while, she said;

"He's going to kill me, Steve."

It was as if it hadn't quite registered. He looked at her, without shock, and asked, "Why?"

She talked for quite a while and it came to McMurdo as through a mist. He remembered exactly the way she said most of it.

"He's tired of me and he's afraid of me. For me it's one man, Steve—for always. You can't doubt that. It's just my luck that it had to be a heel. That one guy.

"I told him he'd never get away. The only way he can leave me, is dead. I told him that and he knew I meant it and he's afraid of me. But he doesn't want me anymore and when I look at him I can see his mind working. It's working out a way. I don't know how he'll do it, but he's going to kill me."

There was something in her eyes, then, that McMurdo would never forget. A look. She stared at her glass and said, "He'll have to kill me, because I'll never let him go."

McMurdo flunked out miserably. He didn't know what to say. He didn't

know what to do. There were no rules covering this.

He tried to talk her out of it. He told her that Larry Sales would settle down; that she didn't have anything to worry about. He said a lot of things that meant nothing to him, or to her.

He dropped her a block from her home and he didn't see her again for a month. Not until the call came in.

Then he went over to her house and saw her huddled by the gas stove—her head on the burner, the gas on.

She was dead.

Suicide. That was the way they wrote it down. Open and shut. There was a note. And there was Sales' beautiful alibis.

They wrote it off as suicide, but not until McMurdo beat himself to a pulp trying to make a case. He worked like a fiend, but it was no good. To put a man in the chair, you have to go before a jury. The butcher, the baker, the hair dresser, and the accountant. Twelve good men and true, who have to go to bed with their consciences afterward. They don't want some guy's blood dripping on them in their dreams. You've got to give them something solid. Beyond a shadow of a doubt. You've got to give them a case against the defendant.

McMurdo had no case. Sales had had time to plan. He'd done a good job.

McMurdo saw him afterwards. He met him in the street and stopped him and said, "You killed her, you rat! You murdered her as sure as Hell's full of gamblers. I don't know how you did it, but you killed her."

Sales was safe. He luxuriated in a little gloating. The gloating was in his eyes, his handsome face. They sneered: Sure I killed her copper. What are you going to do about it? Aloud he said, "Couldn't make it stick, could you sucker? Maybe you ought to turn in your badge. You're stealing your salary from the taxpayer's."

Sales sneered and walked on.

McMURDO stared somberly at his watch. Blood pounded through his head. He was visualizing a big gray building, upstate. A building with narrow, high windows, and iron bars.

In that building, right now, *they were slapping the seat of Sales' pants into the electric chair.*

Standing there, in the early morning, on a deserted street, McMurdo laughed. Sales wasn't dying for Wava's murder. He was dying for Henry Treble's suicide.

McMurdo remembered, with relish. He remembered finding out about the thousand dollar gambling debt, Treble owed Sales. From there it had been easy. Funny what a few bucks could do—McMurdo's bucks.

The pawnbroker who had sold the gun, for instance. Money changed the buyer from a middle aged, lonesome faced man, to a handsome young gambler. Look upon the defendant. Is that the man? Sure, that's him.

The landlady too. She was a poor woman. A few dollars and she could remember seeing a figure duck out of Henry Treble's room and leave the boarding house just before the body was found. She told all about it in court.

There was more. McMurdo got it all together, tied it up with a pink ribbon, and threw it in Sales' face.

It stuck.

Twelve good men and true said, burn the skunk. Then they went home and slept all night with their consciences and got up in the morning with bright shining faces.

Sales had skidded into hell, by now, on a bolt of man-made lightning.

McMurdo walked down the street. His back was a little straighter. There was more spring in his step. He was whispering into the dawn. He was whispering;

"Sweet dreams, baby — Sweet dreams."

THE END

QUALITY—IN BLACK AND WHITE

Tell me about your handwriting, and I'll tell you what you are—where you came from—and why!

A FEW doodles or even whole paragraphs have sent criminals to their deaths. One of the most powerful pieces of evidence which criminal investigators use in their convictions and captures is a fragment or documents bearing their suspect's handwriting. The police laboratory joins forces with the dectective in analyzing handwriting in ransom notes, letters, written imprints or any other handwritten evidence found at the scene of the crime.

Originally, only a person who had actually seen the accused write was permitted to testify at a trial that the defendant was the writer of a questionable written piece of evidence. Obviously, this limited the amount of witnesses usually available to submit such an important bit of confirmation. The development of the scientific study of handwriting became increasingly necessary and it wasn't long afterwards that the crime-scientist was devising methods of establishing, without any doubt or reliance upon the layman, a criminal's handwriting. He used the camera, the X-ray, an enlarging machine and, finally, the chemical analysis of paper and ink. Before he proceeded with his scientific tools, the scientist always kept in mind the fact that the basic characteristics in a person's handwriting is acquired in youth and that no matter how much a criminal disguises his foreign script, these characteristics too will eventually be revealed by careful analysis, comparison with similar specimens of handwriting and, finally, placing all these findings beneath his camera, X-ray or enlarging machines.

Simply stated, writing is a habit, a number of automatic acts which are made unconsciously by the writer. The arrangements and spacing between words and figures, the formation and spacing of capital and small letters, the size of letters, the general movement and speed and the general slant of the writer's strokes, and even the muscular pulsations of the writer—all are indicated in the natural penmanship of all men. The criminal soon finds that his every stroke convicts him and that often his attempts to hide these blaring indications of his guilt make his guilt more definite and conclusive to a jury. If a considerable number of individual characteristics are evident in a criminal's handwriting, it is now practically a mathematical certainty that if the same number appear in a document or specimen of handwriting of the accused, the two can be definitely said to be written by the same hand.

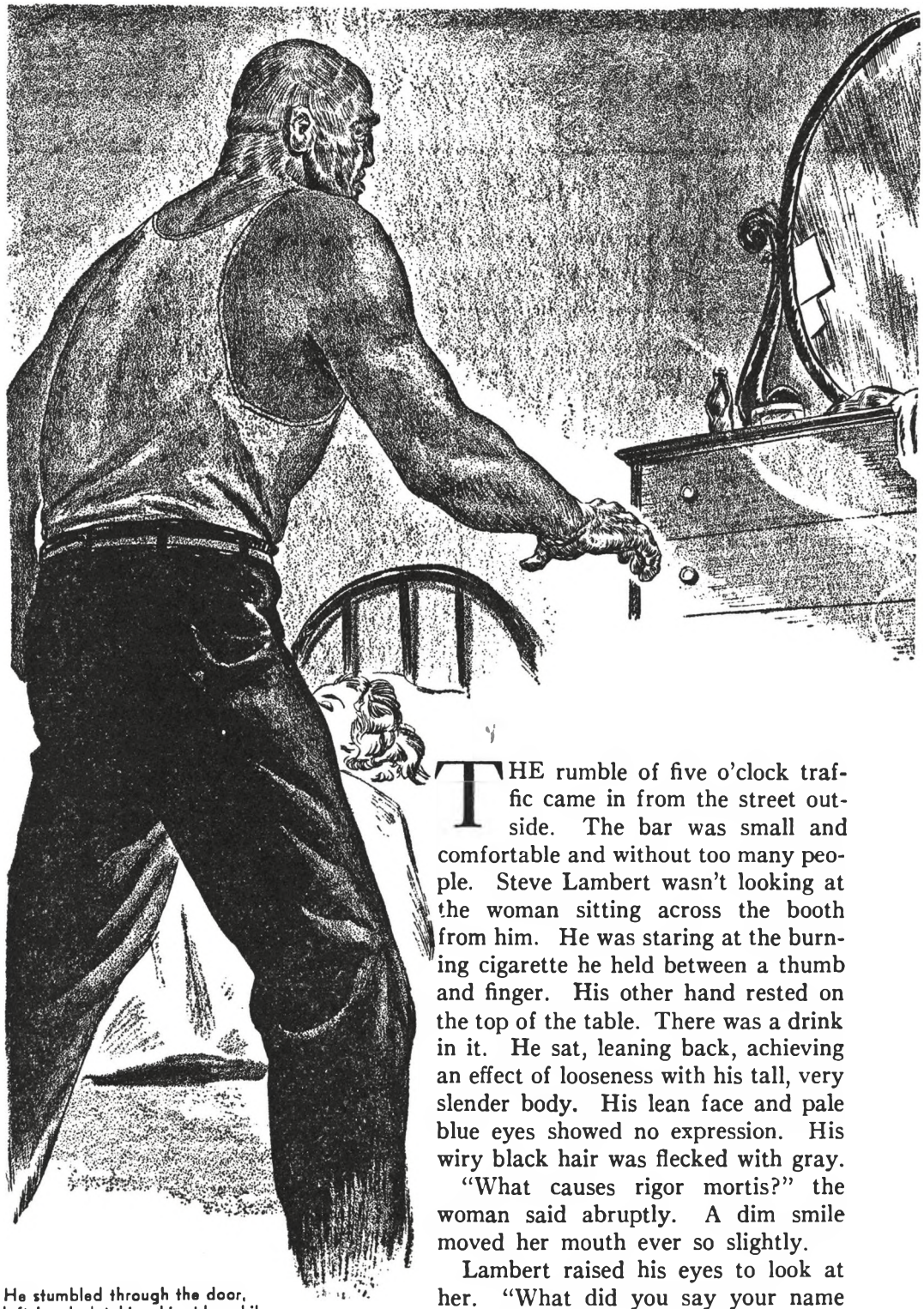
Handwriting experts have been the most highlighted figures in some of the greatest criminal trials in this country. One of these trials—the Hauptmann kidnap-murder trial—clearly demonstrated how handwriting convicted an arch criminal.

NEXT in evidentiary importance to the finding of the Lindbergh ransom money hidden in Hauptmann's garage was the similarity of his handwriting to that in the ransom notes which were sent to Colonel Lindbergh, the famous father of the kidnapped baby. These fourteen notes soon became the main feature of the trial and handwriting experts began their analyses of every stroke and foreign characteristic in these ransom notes with a specimen of Hauptmann's handwriting. The experts' evidence of positive identification of the author was the "clinching" of the case and the final verdict of guilty.

Hauptmann's handwriting revealed many characteristics which convicted him without any doubts. The similarity of the writing, and paper and the strange perforated symbol which he used as a signature when compared in the notes and the murderer's general scrawl clearly demonstrated that one hand had written all of them. The notes did not testify to the facts of the crime; they were the facts in themselves. Handwriting speaks for and against the criminal, and so conclusive and definite are the experts' findings and final analyses to the jury that it is, indeed, rare that any refutation is made of such testimony. A person's handwriting is as vital a part of his general personality as his face; both give clues to some of his character traits and habits.

Handwriting is one of many elements in the test tubes of the scientist and criminologist, both of whom unite to fight one of society's most dangerous "diseases"—Crime.

—Wayne Morris

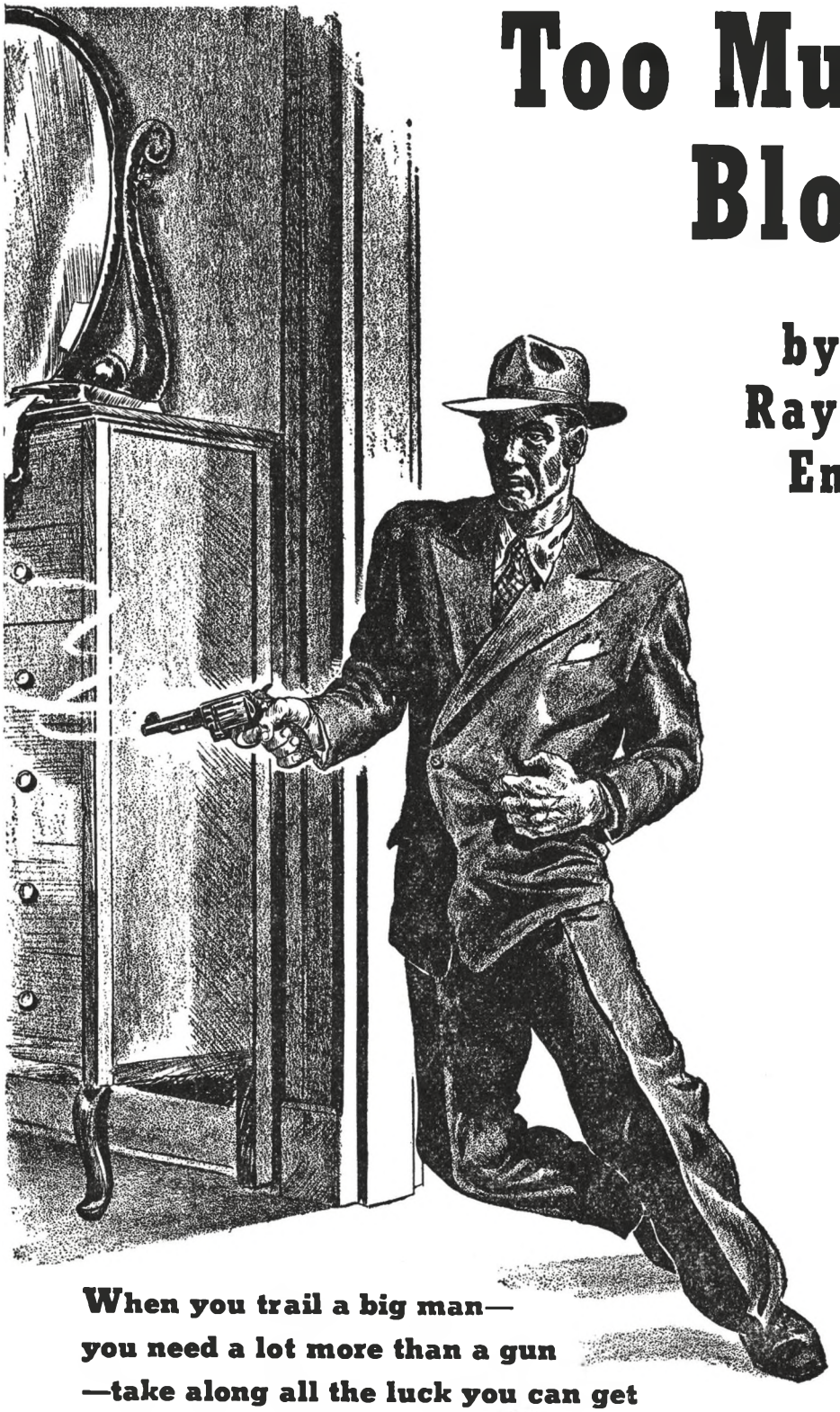


He stumbled through the door, left hand clutching his side, while smoke drifted from the gun in his right

THE rumble of five o'clock traffic came in from the street outside. The bar was small and comfortable and without too many people. Steve Lambert wasn't looking at the woman sitting across the booth from him. He was staring at the burning cigarette he held between a thumb and finger. His other hand rested on the top of the table. There was a drink in it. He sat, leaning back, achieving an effect of looseness with his tall, very slender body. His lean face and pale blue eyes showed no expression. His wiry black hair was flecked with gray.

"What causes rigor mortis?" the woman said abruptly. A dim smile moved her mouth ever so slightly.

Lambert raised his eyes to look at her. "What did you say your name was?" he asked painfully.



Too Much Blood

by John Raymond English

When you trail a big man—
you need a lot more than a gun
—take along all the luck you can get

"Grace Lewes," said the woman. She might have been in her late twenties or early thirties. She was fairly tall and pretty with her red hair and she had a lot of style. A trifle hard around the mouth, Steve Lambert thought, but nice. Her hands were very slim and graceful. Her voice was soft and there was a faint music in it.

"What does your boss, this Johnson, want with me?" Steve asked. He spoke hoarsely.

"I don't know."

Steve took a deep swallow from his glass and set it down. The ice tinkled gently. He saw that Grace Lewis had a cigarette in her hand, waiting. He held his lighter for her.

She blew a thin cloud of smoke and said: "You haven't answered my question."

"What was it?"

"About what causes rigor mortis?"

"Death," said Steve Lambert dryly.

"No," she insisted, "I'm serious. Really, what is it?"

Steve looked at her sourly. "Well," he said slowly, "the stiffening or rigidity is caused by coagulation of the muscle plasm if that's what you mean. Of course, in my case it's due to a ten-day bender. Stick around. I'll come out of it."

Grace Lewis laughed quietly. "I didn't mean that last at all. I'm not ritzing you. You've told me what I wanted to know and I thank you. Do you go on benders often?"

"No," said Steve, "not often. This is the first one in a year. I was getting stale and I decided I needed it." He lifted his glass and finished his drink. "Barkeep," he called.

"Is it true that cyanide is hard to get?" Grace Lewis asked.

Steve frowned at her. "Say, why are you asking me all this stuff? You planning on knocking somebody off? Or is this one of your grim, sordid days?"

"No," she said, "I'm just curious. I've always wondered about these things. And you're a detective. I thought you could probably tell me."

THE waiter brought Steve's drink. After he had gone, Steve made a wry face and said: "No, cyanide isn't hard to get. You can buy it in almost every photograph supply store. Potassium cyanide, that is. KCN. It's cheap and no questions asked. I also know a good ranch where you can blaze weed. Reefers . . . if that's one of the things you've been curious about."

"No, that's all, said Grace Lewis. She was smiling fully now. Her teeth were white and even. She glanced at the small delicate watch on her wrist. "If you're going to see Mr. Johnson at five-thirty, you'll have to hurry."

"Relax," said Steve. "I won't be sober enough until I finish this drink. I'll feel sad if I'm late, but that's all."

"Mr. Johnson won't like it."

"What kind of a party is your Johnson?"

"He's a pompous sort of little man."

"You like being his secretary?" Steve asked.

"It's all right. Grace Lewis ground out her cigarette. She was looking at some point beyond Steve Lambert's shoulder. "It pays well, but you sometimes have to run a pretty fast race."

"One of those, eh?" Steve sipped at his drink. "How did you locate me here?" he asked.

"That broken-down dentist in the office next to yours said this was one of your hangouts. He also made a tired pass at me."

"Carl? He would." Steve smiled. "But you sound like you can take care of yourself. How'd you get my name?"

"Mr. Johnson's lawyer, Mr. Gray-

son, recommended you—although I don't why."

Steve grunted softly. He raised his glass high and emptied it. Then he put a cigarette in his mouth. He pinched it with his thin, colorless lips and lit it. A man who had been playing the pinball game said, "Nuts to you," and turned back to the bar.

"Where did you say Johnson would be?" Steve asked.

Grace Lewis shook her head hopelessly. "In the Prentice Building. On Butler. He manufactures women's hats. Remember? You're a hell of a detective."

Steve stood up and grinned. "You're a pretty good egg yourself," he said.

He paid for the drinks and helped Grace Lewis into her coat. Out on the street they squinted their eyes against the March wind. They stood for a moment as people moved past them from either direction.

"Do you have a phone?" Steve asked.

"Uh-huh. I'll wait till you're between benders. Good-bye. I've got to hurry to catch my bus." She disappeared into the evening crowds.

"Nice kid," Steve said under his breath. He dropped his cigarette to the pavement and walked two blocks to the parking lot where he last remembered leaving his car. The dusk made the lights seem brighter and the sky was a dusty blue. There was the smell of smoke on the air. Steve's head ached dully.

"We thought you'd got lost, Mr. Lambert," the attendant said as Steve swung his rangy body into the driver's seat. He was a hungry-looking youth with very thick glasses. The skin of his face was pimply.

"I been drunk, Sammy," Steve said. He handed the boy some money.

"Thanks, Mr. Lambert."

"It's O.K., Sammy."

STEVE parked his car in front of the Prentice Building just the required distance from a fire hydrant and went into the small lobby entrance. A large man, very heavy with thick lips and a frame like a wrestler's, was coming out. He bumped Steve, nearly knocking him over, then shoved him aside and passed through the door before it swung shut. He was gone.

Steve landed against the wall and caught his balance. His wrist scraped a radiator. He straightened up and looked at the red skin and scratches on the inside of his arm just above the hand. He stared after the big man a moment.

"Thanks, pal," he said gently. "I hope I see you again some time."

He turned toward the elevator bank. Only one was running. The operator was an old Negro with sad, half-closed eyes and cottony gray hair. Steve rode in silence to the fourth floor. The door slid back and Steve stepped into the corridor. *C. H. Johnson Company, Main Offices* was painted neatly on the wide frosted glass doors in front of him. The doors were unlocked; he went in.

He was standing in a fenced-off area that separated him from the rest of the very large room with its long rows of desks. The place was dimly lighted, shadowed. There were only two lights burning besides the one the charlady was using far at the other end. She continued to work quietly without looking up. In the area on either side of Steve were glass display cases. Inside were women's hats on mannequin heads. Beyond the little fence the vacant PBX seemed lonely, and Steve saw a line of three doors fifty feet or so away. He opened the gate and walked to the one that said *C. H. Johnson, Office.* He whistled softly through his teeth. This room was well lighted. A small beveled block on the desk had *Miss Lewis*

on it. Steve saw this after he saw the fragile vase filled with flowers. The door ahead of him said *C. H. Johnson, Private.* He knocked. There was no answer, not the slightest sound. He opened the door.

It was a large office. Only a desk lamp was lit. The black velvet curtains that hung like arras over the big window behind the desk were partially closed. Three slanting strips of something that looked like gold braid were on each the the curtains high up. When the curtains were closed all the way, they would form an inverted V. Some of the papers on the large polished desk seemed in mild disorder. It was very quiet in the room. Steve saw two phones. One was perched dangerously on the edge of the desktop. A thin, bright line of light shown from the door an inch open on Steve's right. There was another door on his left, closed. Evidently, Mr. C. H. Johnson was out. Steve felt in his pocket for his cigarettes. Through the stretch of window, he saw the lights of the city blinking in the twilight.

"Stood up, Stevie," he said softly.

THEN he saw the small foot and the thin ankle that extended just beyond the corner of the desk. He felt his nostrils become taut. He left his cigarettes in his pocket and went around behind the desk. He could see some of the blood now. He was a little man all right, just like she had said. But he wasn't pompous any longer.

There was a wound in the man's chest just over his heart. The blood made a large wet stain on his white shirt. A little trail of it led away from the body. There were bloody prints on the two sheets of paper that had fallen from the desk and more on the desk itself. The man's eyes were staring at the ceiling without a care in the world in them. Thin, reddish hair was slicked down on the top of his flat skull and the skin of his face was loose and puffy. His suitcoat of expensive dark blue looked too big for him. His expression made him seem to be on the verge of a nervous, mirthless giggle.

Steve reached down and felt him carefully. The little man was very thin, almost cave-chested. Steve fingered the material of the suitcoat and sucked at his lip. Then he straightened up.

"So you wear your clothes padded to make you look bigger," Steve said in a solemn voice. "You don't care now, eh? Brother, you shouldn't. You been dead a good half hour." Steve glanced at his watch. It was five-forty-one. His lips moved noiselessly as he swore.

He frowned and sat in the chair behind the desk that the dead man had fallen out of. He stood up again abruptly and stared at the chair. It was an ordinary office chair that could be raised or lowered simply by turning on its axis. He touched it gently with his long fingers. There was a dim smile on his mouth.

"As high as it will go, eh?" Steve said softly. He looked at the little man's very short legs. "Your little high chair, eh?"

"Ohhh-oh . . ."

It was very soft. It was a sob. It came from the room with the strip of light showing through the barely open door.

Steve turned and went quickly toward the sound. He swung the door back. It was a washroom. A woman who looked in her forties was clinging to the chromium braces of the washstand. Her coat was open and there was blood smeared on the front of her gray dress and on her white gloved fingers. Her flowered hat dangled at a crazy angle from her head, supported by one hatpin. The skirt of her dress

was well above her knees, showing thick legs and one torn stocking. Her hair was dyed. Steve could see the pale gray-brown roots. She was dumpy with middle age. Her face was utterly white and the flesh sagged under her eyes and chin. She was making senseless moaning sounds in her throat. Her shoulders shook and her eyes were shut tightly.

A knife with a gilt handle was lying on the floor beside her. There was blood on the blade. She had dropped her large alligator purse near the door.

"Break it up, sister," Steve said.

The woman didn't open her eyes, didn't stop sobbing. She hadn't heard him. He wasn't in this world.

STEVE watched her for a moment, then stopped and picked up the purse. His fingers probed it carefully. He withdrew his hand and looked at the tiny nickel-plated, bone-handled .22 automatic in his palm. He sniffed the barrel, and dropped the gun into his pocket. His fingers went into the purse again, felt through lipstick, handkerchief, cigarettes, compact. He took out the car keys and stared at the leather tag on the key chain. On the tag, under a celluloid window, was a driver's license. The name on the license was *Mrs. Cora W. Johnson.*

"Nice," Steve said through his teeth.

He bent over again and picked up the knife, cautiously, with his handkerchief. He closed the door to the washroom, went back in to the office and set the knife on the desk. Then he walked to the opposite door. It opened on to a kind of conference room. Steve went through it, past the long, oaken table lined with chairs. He opened the door at the other end and was standing in the large outer office again. The busy charlady still did not look up. She was working at Steve's end of the big room now.

"You hear anything since you been out here?" Steve asked.

The charlady's sullen face was blank. Then: "You gotta fag?"

Steve held his cigarettes out to her. She took one, struck a match with her thumbnail before Steve could get his lighter out, blew a thick cloud of smoke. She was a swarthy, ox-like woman.

She smiled sourly. "Ain't life hell?" she said. "Some people take their winters in Miami and eat champagne for breakfast. Naw, I didn't hear nothin'."

"How long has you been working in this office?" Steve asked.

The charlady belched. Steve's nostrils caught the faint, thick odor of alcohol.

"Hell," she said. "Two years. Pay no damn good." She muttered something under her breath and kicked her bucket bitterly. Then she turned away and continued working, the cigarette hanging from one side of her wide mouth.

CHAPTER II

STEVE shrugged, went back through the conference room to Johnson's office. The phone, the one with its base sticking partly over the edge of the desk, rang shrilly. Steve hesitated, picked it up in his handkerchief.

"Hello," Steve said.

"Mr. Johnson?" It sounded like a young man's voice.

"Yes," Steve said. He held the mouthpiece a little way from his face and kept his tone empty, wooden.

"This is Thayer's, Johnson. About that article you ordered from us. Nobody answers at that Church Street address. Do you still want us to keep trying there?"

"That isn't necessary," Steve said carefully. "You can deliver it to my

office. I'll be here this evening."

"Well, that's fine, Mr. Johnson. I really didn't expect to catch you in this time of day. That's fine. We'll send our man over then. Thank you, Mr. Johnson."

There was a dry click at the other end and Steve listened to the hum of the wires for a moment and then cradled the phone. He lit a cigarette and shook the match out slowly.

"Sucker," he said to no one but himself.

He went back into the washroom.

"Mrs. Johnson!" he said sharply.

The woman still didn't open her eyes. Steve leaned over and slapped her face. She kept on moaning. Steve filled the glass on the basin and splashed her face with the water. She blinked her eyes open. Her breath came in quick, short gasps.

"Mrs. Johnson!" Steve said again.

"Uhh . . ." the woman choked. Her body began to twitch and jerk and her teeth started to chatter.

"Mrs. Johnson!"

"Uh. W-what . . . Get me a d-drink . . . P-please! . . ." She looked at him with large terrified eyes.

"Sure," Steve said. He started to fill the glass again.

"Whiskey . . ." she sobbed.

Steve stared at her a minute. His mouth was set, grim.

"Okay, lady."

He went quickly to the outer office. The charlady was on the point of leaving. Steve almost ran to her. She turned to look at him with dull eyes.

Steve grinned. "Be a pal," he said. "Let me have that bottle. My friend needs a drink." He let her see the crisp five dollar bill in his hand.

The charlady smiled. She didn't have all her front teeth.

"What bottle?" she said coyly.

"Go on with you," Steve said. "I saw you sneak a finger when I came in."

The charlady's smile widened. "Is that right, rube? Well, I ain't had a drink since I left home. How do you like that?"

Steve made his face very solemn. "Have it your way," he said casually. He started to put the five dollar bill back in his pocket.

"Aw, hell," the charlady said. She pulled a pint of cheap rye from somewhere out of her dress. "I keep it for the foot-ache," she added as she handed the bottle to Steve.

Steve handed her the money. "So does my mother," he said.

"Yaw!" the charlady said. Then she went out mumbling profanely.

STEVE hurried back to the washroom. The woman was still in the same place, trembling uncontrollably. Steve poured some of the rye into the glass and held it to her lips. A wide trickle ran down her chin. She coughed once and her body began gradually to stop its shaking. Steve helped her into the office and into a chair. He poured more rye for her.

What a hangover this had turned out to be, he thought.

He said: "Feeling better, Mrs. Johnson?"

"Who are you?" the woman asked in a thin voice.

"I'm a friend, Mrs. Johnson," Steve said very matter-of-fact. "You better tell me exactly what happened."

"Are you the police? I called the police!"

"I'm a detective, Mrs. Johnson."

Mrs. Johnson covered her eyes with a pale hand. "I didn't kill him. I didn't mean to do it. Honestly." She looked as if she might become hysterical again.

Steve held his breath, waited.

"I had the gun in my purse," she

began again. "I was sure he was with that woman." She was panting a little now. "I-I came in and found him like this."

"What woman, Mrs. Johnson?"

"I don't know. I think . . . there may be another one, but there's the Lewis woman." She lowered her hand. Her eyes were wide, vacant.

"Isn't she his secretary?" Steve asked.

"Yes."

"You said you called the police, Mrs. Johnson?"

"Yes. I came in and found him. The telephone was in his hand. I told the operator I wanted the police, but I couldn't seem to make her understand. There was the strangest little buzz. It kept coming on and off. The operator kept saying something, but I couldn't make her understand what I wanted. I put the phone on the desk. I didn't know if he was dead or not. I was frightened when I pulled the knife out of him. I thought that might help. Oh, I don't know what I did. The blood made me feel a little sick. I ran into the bathroom. I think I must have fainted." She stopped talking, quite suddenly, and stared at the floor.

"Then you really haven't called the police," Steve said. His voice was very quiet and his manner was aloof but sympathetic.

"I don't know, I don't know."

She's nuts, Steve said to himself quite coldly. He picked up the same phone in his handkerchief, looked blankly at the electric clock on the desk. He called Police Headquarters and told them that there had been a murder committed in the office of Mr. C. H. Johnson on the fourth floor of the Prentice Building. He did this as he lighted a cigarette.

"Another drink," Mrs. Johnson said dully as he hung up.

"Sure."

HE POURED more rye into the glass and studied her while she drank. In fifteen minutes two big, meaty cops arrived. They looked at Johnson's body and then at Mrs. Johnson. The one who was chewing gum turned to Steve, said:

"She do it?"

Steve shrugged.

"Who is she?"

"His wife."

Mrs. Johnson wailed very softly. "I didn't," she said simply. She wasn't looking at any of them. Her limp, gloved hand seemed pasted to the glass.

The cop spotted the bottle of rye on the desk, popped his gum and grinned.

"Who are you?" he asked Steve.

"Lambert your name, huh? And a shamus." His eyes hardened, but he kept on grinning.

Two detectives from Homicide, a medical examiner, a fingerprint man and a photographer were there in another twenty minutes. Mrs. Johnson's eyes were glassy now. She had poured herself more rye. One detective was of medium height and fat; the other one was tall with a smooth fishy face. The gum-chewing cop spoke a few words to the fat dick and pointed to Steve. Both the dicks surveyed the room, looked at Johnson's body, looked at the bloody knife, looked Mrs. Johnson with the blood on her dress and white-gloved fingers. The fat dick came over to Steve.

"I'm Lieutenant Angus. I understand you're a private eye."

"Yeah," Steve said.

Angus nodded and looked around at Mrs. Johnson again. She was just reaching for the pint of rye. Angus watched her for a moment, then said: "Take the hooch away from her, George." The fish-faced dick walked over and gently lifted the glass and bottle from Mrs. Johnson's hands.

Faint anguish pulled at her face. A bewildered sound came out of her throat.

"I'm sorry, ma'm," Lieutenant Angus apologized solemnly.

Mrs. Johnson moved her head slowly and stared at her stained gloves.

"Better take her in the other room, George," Angus said.

The fish-faced dick led Mrs. Johnson into the conference room and closed the door.

Angus turned back to Steve. "Where'd she get the booze?" he asked.

"I gave it to her," Steve said.

"Why?"

"She asked for it. She was a bad case of hysteria when I found her."

The laboratory man, the medical examiner and the photographer were working quietly and efficiently now.

"Give me the story," Angus said. His mouth was thin and straight under the graying mustache. He had dark and lifeless opaque eyes.

Steve gave him the story. When he handed him the small automatic he had taken from Mrs. Johnson's purse, Angus broke it open, looked through the barrel into the light.

"Dusty. Ain't been fired." His voice was bored. "How come you took the gun out of her purse and brought the knife in here?"

"I told you she was hysterical," Steve said. "I didn't want her shooting me or herself. Same with the knife."

ANGUS was silent for a moment. He took a cigar out of his breast pocket, unwrapped it, lit it. Finally he said: "What was your business with Johnson?"

Steve said: "I told you. I don't know."

Angus nodded. "Tell it to me again. I want to hear it again."

Steve told it again.

"Jealous wife carves husband, eh?" Angus said to Steve when he had finished.

"It could be."

Angus stared at him. "Stop being sarcastic. She did do it, didn't she?"

"I didn't see her do it," Steve said. "I'm not being sarcastic."

Angus bit hard on his cigar. "What kind of a game are you playing, Lambert?"

"No game at all. She could have come in and found him just the way she told me. The woman was hysterical and still . . ."

"I know that," Angus said quickly. "But you will admit it looks like she done it. " His tone was impatient.

"That's what I said."

"The way I see it," Angus said, "is that she thought he was playing with his secretary and came in and stuck the knife in him. Maybe she accused him and they quarreled. Then she got sorry like all dames do and pulled the knife out, ran into the bathroom, blew her top."

Steve didn't say anything.

Angus chewed on his cigar. "She'd naturally deny she did it now."

Steve said: "Sure."

Angus grinned bitterly. "By God, you're a help. Look, I don't like you private guys, but I try to get along with anybody. I'm a good guy to get along with. You'll be sorry if you crowd me."

Steve said: "Sure." His face was blank.

"Come on," Angus growled, "let's go in and see if this screwy hairpin is able to talk."

They went into the conference room. Mrs. Johnson was sitting down and leaning over the long table, her chin in her hand. George, the fish-faced dick, was quietly smoking.

Angus said: "How do you feel, Mrs. Johnson?"

"A-all right," she faltered.

Angus looked thoughtful. "George," he said, "see if you can round up the cleaning woman. Also that boy running the elevator."

George went out.

Angus took his cigar out of his mouth, looked at it. "Mrs. Johnson," he said, "did you suspect your husband of being unfaithful?"

"Y-yes." She almost gagged on the word. "But I didn't do it!" she added desperately. She began to cry.

Steve said: "I wouldn't answer any questions, Mrs. Johnson, until you've talked to your lawyer."

Angus turned on Steve. "Mind your manners, shamus," he said very softly.

"Her husband was my client," Steve said. "I sort of fell down on him. I want to see that Mrs. Johnson gets her rights."

Angus sneered. "An eye with ethics. That pitch was too sad even for one laugh. You didn't get paid for your trip up here so you're trying for a dirty dollar now."

Steve's pale blue eyes were steady, but his mouth was a tight line.

Angus grinned. "Did I get a rise out of you?" He spat.

Mrs. Johnson began to wail again.

Angus glanced at her, turned back to Steve, glaring. "Wait out there, shamus," he said roughly. He waved his thumb at the door.

"Sure," Steve said quietly.

HE WENT past the gum-chewing cop into the outer office. The same two lights were still burning and the far end of the room was dark now. Steve sat on one of the desks and lit a cigarette. There was a frown on his face. Finally he shook his head slowly and picked a piece of tobacco off his upper lip. "Are you being a damn fool, Stevie?" he asked himself. He smoked two more cigarettes.

Then the door to the corridor opened and the other cop came in with a bewildered beetle-like man with a large nose. The little man wore a gray uniform and he was carrying a small parcel. Steve waited until they had crossed the greater part of the room and were even with him before he spoke.

"You better get back on the door," he said. "I'll take this bird in to see Angus."

The cop hesitated, then nodded his head. "Yeah, that's best," he said. His thick features became very serious. "Did that dame really pull the bump off?"

"That's right."

The cop said, "Damn me," and went out.

The little man shifted uneasily in front of Steve. His large nose seemed to twitch.

Steve said: "You're from Thayer's?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me see the package."

The little man handed it to him. The label was neat and attractive. Under the *Thayer and Co. Jewelers* was the Church Street address. And there was a name. Miss Audrey Brooks.

"Okay, I'll take this. You can go," Steve said.

"But Mr. Johnson . . ." the little man stammered.

"Mr. Johnson's been croaked, buddy," Steve said harshly.

The little man blinked. Then: "But someone will have to sign for it, sir."

"Okay, I will," Steve said. He took the little man's pad and scrawled *Serg L. W. Edwards, Homicide Bureau.* "Okay, you can go," he said coldly.

The little man left, still bewildered. Steve slipped the small parcel into his inside coat pocket and lit a cigarette. He thought, so the old boy really did have a frill on the string. Or maybe she had him on a string. He tapped the cigar-

ette and a thin stream of ashes floated down to the floor.

CHAPTER III

IT SEEMED a long time to Steve when they all went down to Headquarters. He was hungry and his head still ached. He drove his own car and George, the silent, fishy dick, rode beside him. Neither one of them said a word. Then Steve just sat and waited in a small, square room. He waited with an old scratched desk, a dusty electric light fixture, three scarred chairs, a gallows-type telephone; and he breathed air that smelled like long dead butts and damp laundry. He managed to smoke most of the rest of his cigarettes. Finally, Lieutenant Angus came in with George behind him. Angus was smiling the faintest of smiles.

Steve looked at his watch. It was five minutes after eight.

Steve said: "You're late."

Angus' grin widened. He sat down, said: "She confessed. She spilled it. It's finished."

"Just like that," Steve said.

"Just like that."

Steve's mouth became a little crooked. "That woman was in no condition for your kind of questioning. What did you do, scare her into it?"

Angus still smiled with his mouth, but his eyes were hard.

He said: "Still trying to dig some dirty money, eh? You guys make me sick."

"Sure," Steve said. "I stoop to anything. I suppose you've let her have a lawyer."

"She's getting her lawyer."

George suddenly turned away from the window he had been staring out of and cleared his throat. He looked at Angus and drawled: "You did kind of squeeze it out of her, Floyd."

Angus flushed, said: "Goddamnit!" He unwrapped a cigar and bit the end off it. His eyes were hot. "Look, can either one of you smart guys give me one reason why she didn't or couldn't have knocked off her husband?"

"No," George said. "But you did push her, Floyd."

"Can you?" Angus asked Steve.

"You're too anxious, Angus," Steve said. "She had a gun. Why didn't she use it? She couldn't be sure of doing it with a knife. Where did the knife come from anyway?"

Angus was chewing his cigar fiercely. "It was Johnson's letter-opener, shamus. He always kept it on his desk. All she had to do was reach out and grab it and stick him with it. Look, I've seen a lot of killers, and if they ain't hired gunsels that use snow to keep their nerve up, they're screwballs like this one. They're always sorry after they done it and they always wet themselves or throw some kind of a wing-ding. And that's the time to put it to them. Before they clam up. We got a sawbones and a police woman with her now. She's okay. This case is all washed up as of immediately. You get me, shamus? I been nice to you so far, but I could make trouble."

The room was silent for a moment. Angus struck a kitchen match on the desk and lit his cigar.

"You get anything out of the scrub woman or the elevator operator?" Steve asked George.

George shook his head. "That scrub woman has been pickled in alcohol for the last ten years and she hates cops. All I could get out of the old Negro was that he was damned old and his daddy was a slave."

Steve grinned, nodded. He had begun to like George in spite of his fish-like face. Angus was puffing away quietly, looking at the ceiling. The flat

sound of a police loudspeaker floated in to them from another room.

Angus said: "Okay, Lambert, beat it. Be down here at nine in the morning to make your statement."

Steve stood up. "What's your last name, George?" he asked.

George's face was cold, fishy, empty. "Sergeant Purvis. I'm always around."

"Thanks."

STEVE went to the door, gave a farewell salute with two fingers, and stepped out into the corridor. He rode the elevator to the first floor and walked out of the City Hall into the biting night coldness. Feels like snow, he thought. He turned up the collar of his overcoat and lit his last cigarette, rolled the empty package into a little paper ball and tossed it into the gutter. He stood for a minute just watching the cars go past and thinking.

"Hello."

It was Grace Lewis. Her hard prettiness was shadowed, but he thought he could see the pink the cold air brought to her cheeks. She wasn't exactly smiling. Nervousness was working at her mouth.

"Hello," Steve said. "I've got my car. I can give you a lift home, but if you missed supper like I did maybe you want to eat first."

"All right." There was a brittle edge on her voice that was ready to crack.

They drove to a small restaurant on Pine Street. Steve bought fresh cigarettes and they ordered drinks.

"I think I need one," Grace Lewis said.

Steve could see that her face was pale under the flush of the cold.

He sipped his drink, grinned. "Where's the old zest? I thought you liked crime. We could go down to the morgue and see your ex-boss. You could study rigor mortis first hand."

Grace Lewis shuddered. "It's not really funny, is it?" she said softly.

"No."

"Give me a cigarette."

"Your fingers are trembling."

"Yes."

Steve watched her tight, white face. Her red hair was a muted copper under the soft lights.

She said: "It's a mess, isn't it? I mean he was such a nasty little man. He's better off dead. He had his suits padded, you know, and he fixed his chair as high as it would go so that he would look bigger than he was when he sat behind his desk. Those curtains with the gold on them were supposed to give a throne effect. One of the girls saw him once in his shirt sleeves and didn't recognize him. He didn't allow anybody to smoke. Oh, he was so pious. He was against drinking, too. I remember once he tried to run his hand over my leg. It was like a snake crawling on me." She paused.

Steve didn't say anything. The waitress brought their food.

Grace Lewis stared at her fork. "And that poor, bewildered, unhappy woman. She thought I was his . . . Well, you know. They let her see me. It was horrible. The poor thing was out of her mind. Are the police always so brutal?"

"Cops have to be tough," Steve said. "They have to be that way because of the majority of the people they have to deal with. They develop a manner. It's called copper-hard. Most of them are basically honest and they try to do their job well, but they're always bucking a system. Every town in the U. S. A. has a certain amount of graft. So sometimes they get so they try to wring too much out of it."

"You can't make in sound noble."

Steve looked at her. "I was on the cops once. In Baltimore."

"What happened?"

"There were too many rules and I broke them all. They have to have rules, but you have to be a certain type of person to conform."

THEY ate in silence for a time.

Steve asked: "Did Johnson keep a mistress?"

Grace Lewis stopped eating. "You're kidding me."

"I'm not kidding," Steve said gently.

She stared at him. "No. I mean I don't think so. I don't know."

"Ever hear of Audrey Brooks?"

"No," Grace Lewis said slowly.

"What did Johnson want to hire me for?"

"I have no idea. I told you that."

"Sure," Steve said, "but you know. You were his private secretary. You couldn't be that and not know his affairs inside and out."

"I told you the truth," Grace Lewis said quickly. She brought her hand up to her cheek. "Say, what . . . You haven't got any interest in this anymore. I don't like this. What are you trying to do?"

Steve's face was totally without expression. "Once a cop, always a cop, or so they say," he said in a flat voice.

Grace Lewis watched him closely for a long minute. Her fingers shook slightly.

"His wife did kill him?" The words dangled between them, lingering like a slow echo.

Steve said: "I don't think she did."

"My God! Who?"

Steve broke a roll in half. "What time did you leave the office?"

"A quarter to five. You're not in the least amusing, you know."

"I know. But it was possible for you to kill him."

Grace Lewis' face and eyes were hard. "Don't be silly. The police said he hadn't been dead that long, and anyway the office was still full of people. Anybody could have walked in . . ." Her voice faded, died in her throat.

Steve grinned. "Yeah, I know. It wasn't hard to figure out. Johnson wasn't the kind of boss that his employees would bust in on without getting your O.K. first. And it was only fifteen minutes to closing time. Who would bother? It would be easier to wait till in the morning. Also, the cops can't set the exact minute of death. Fifteen or twenty minutes one way or the other would make all the difference in the world."

Grace Lewis straightened in her chair. Her body was stiff, tense, tight.

"Do you think I did it?" she asked bitterly.

Steve shrugged.

"I don't think I like you at all. I'm going home."

Steve's strong fingers grapsed her wrist. She gave a little cry of pain. He let let go. She held the arm close against her and rubbed it gently.

Steve said: "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you, but there's one more thing I want to ask. There were two phones on Johnson's desk. I called the police on one of them and an outside call came in on the same phone. Did your PBX operator plug him in to the outside before she left the office every night?"

Her eyes were uncertain, puzzled. "No. He had a separate outside line. It was an unlisted number."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot."

She just looked at him a long time. "You *really* don't think she did it?"

Steve didn't say anything.

Grace Lewis turned her head away slightly. "They let me call a lawyer for her. I phoned Mr. Grayson. If you wanted to help, you could get in touch with him."

"Thanks," Steve said. "I'll take you home now if you like."

She nodded quickly.

Steve paid the check and they left. He said good-bye to her in front of her apartment and drove home.

When he walked into the small lobby of his own apartment, the large eyes of the night clerk looked up at him through almost invisible rimless glasses. The eyes were sad and tired.

"Hi, Dave," Steve said.

"You've got visitors, Steve," Dave said. "A Mr. Grayson and another guy. He said he knew you and it was very important. They're upstairs waiting. I let them in. Okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Dave."

Steve went to the self-operating elevator. As he rode up, he looked at his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. He walked down the hallway humming softly. His door was unlocked. He opened it.

The two men stood up as he entered.

CHAPTER IV

"THANK God, you're here," said the other one. He was short, rather squarely built, with gray hair and a strong, heavy jaw.

"Hello, Grayson," Steve said. He took off his hat and overcoat and dropped them over a chair. "Care for a drink?"

Grayson ignored the question. "Did the woman do it, Lambert?" he asked. He spoke very huskily.

The other man, a fleshy forty with thinning hair, stood behind Grayson, looking serious and grim.

Steve grinned slightly. "Want a drink?" he asked.

The man was momentarily jarred by the question. It was, Steve decided, as if somebody had passed him a flask during a funeral service. Entirely out of keeping with the occasion.

Grayson gave a jerky wave of his hand. "Excuse me, Lambert," he said hurriedly, "this is Mr. Gohdal, Mrs. Johnson's cousin. Gohdal, Mr. Lambert."

Gohdal recovered himself. "I'm the only relative Cora Johnson has," he said gravely. "I want to see that everything possible is done. This has been a terrible shock to me."

Steve grunted, nodded. "I'll get the drinks," he said. Grayson followed him out to the kitchen.

He took hold of Steve's arm, tugged it anxiously. "Did she do it?"

"It looks that way," Steve said calmly. "I don't know." He looked squarely at Grayson. "If you're asking me what I think, I'd say no."

"But you were there!"

They went back to the living room with the three glasses and sat down. Gohdal appeared as solemn as before. Steve told Grayson what had happened that afternoon. The gray-haired man rubbed his face with his hand and moved uneasily in his chair. He didn't bother to taste the drink. Gohdal listened seriously, nodding pointlessly at intervals.

"But what in the world did Johnson want with you?" Grayson asked Steve.

"I never found out. Didn't he tell you?"

Grayson shook his head slowly.

Steve reached inside his pocket and brought out the small parcel.

"This is the package from Thayer's," he explained. "I guess you're the one to take charge of it." He began to unwrap it carefully.

IT WAS a small black leather box. Steve opened it. On the blue-black velvet a dazzling platinum and diamond bracelet lay curled up like a cat.

Gohdal's eyes bulged. Grayson slid

his tongue over his lips. Steve leaned back in his chair and sipped his drink.

"I'll be damned," Grayson said softly.

Steve said tonelessly: "He was a sugar daddy to somebody and her name was Audrey Brooks."

Grayson said: "Look here, Lambert, I want to retain you. I'm going to need all the help I can get. As you know, I'm not a criminal lawyer, but . . ." he cleared his throat, ". . . there's an ethical consideration in this case. The woman has absolutely no one to look after her interests . . ."

"Which are considerable, I imagine," Steve interrupted.

Grayson looked at him steadily. "Yes, they are. The estate, aside from the business, amounts to several hundred thousand dollars. I wasn't his company attorney. I only handled his private affairs."

"Did you like Johnson personally?" Steve asked.

Grayson didn't answer for a minute. Then: "No, frankly, I didn't like him at all. He was a secretive, sneaky sort of devil. We didn't see each other very often."

"Did he leave a will?"

The question seemed to surprise Grayson. "Er-yes. He did. It was drawn up several years ago. He left everything to his wife. I think it was purely a matter of routine with him. Johnson was the sort of man who could watch other people die, but he never really believed it would happen to him. He was elderly, of course, but healthy, and not quite so old that he had begun to worry about who was going to get his money. In fact, he apparently felt he was still a young man." He made a gesture at the glittering bracelet and smiled dryly.

"Johnson have any relatives?"

"No."

Steve looked at Gohdal, said: "Then if they hang his wife, you'll be in line for all that dough."

Gohdal's large face turned a deep red. "Look," he began, "I won't stand for this! Y-you . . . The veins stood out on his forehead.

"For that much money," Steve said calmly, "you could stand plenty."

"Say, listen . . ."

Steve said: "Have you got an alibi?"

"I most certainly have," Gohdal said indignantly. "Why, I . . ."

"Don't you think this is a little ridiculous, Lambert?" Grayson interrupted impatiently.

Steve shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe no. This is a funny case. Or maybe it's just my hangover. Are you sure you haven't any idea as to what Johnson wanted to hire me for? Did he seem worried when you talked to him about me?"

"No," Grayson said, "that was over the phone. It was a very brief conversation as a matter of fact." He became thoughtful. "There was one thing. It startled me at the time, but I didn't attach any importance to it. I met him for lunch one day last week and he asked me if it wasn't against the law for convicts on parole to carry guns. He suddenly blurted out the question. It was completely irrevalent to what we had just been talking about. I don't suppose that helps you much. It probably doesn't mean a damn thing." Grayson looked very gloomy now.

He stood up. "She's charged with murder right now," he said. "You won't have a great deal of time to work. If you aren't able to uncover anything, I'll have to enter a guilty plea."

STEVE handed him the leather case containing the bracelet. "You spoke of retaining me," he said casually.

Grayson stared at him a moment,

then took out his billfold and counted out five bills. They were all twenties. He handed them to Steve.

"Thanks," Steve said, "I'll do the best I can."

Gohdal said: "Look, Lambert, I'm afraid I lost my temper unnecessarily a little while ago. No hard feelings?" He held out his hand.

Steve said: "I bet you were an eagle scout."

"Huh?" said Gohdal, confused.

"Did you kill him?" Steve asked.

Gohdal flushed again, and his nostrils arched.

"No, I did not!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "And I refuse to be intimidated in this manner . . ."

Steve said: "Where were you at five this afternoon?"

"W-why, I-I was home. With my wife. As a matter of fact, I tried to phone Johnson about that time. The line was busy. I—"

"The line was busy!"

"Yes."

"Did you tell the cops this?" Steve asked.

"Er-no."

"Why?"

"Well, they didn't exactly . . . They didn't ask me."

Steve leered at hm. "You do want to help Mrs. Johnson?"

Gohdal licked his lips. "Why, of course," he stammered, "I want—"

"You mean you want to help hang her," Steve said harshly.

"Why you cheap—" Gohdal began. He lumbered toward Steve, his thick arms raised clumsily.

Steve laid his palm on Gohdal's chest and gave him a quick, firm shove. Gohdal stumbled back against the wall, gasping.

"Damn it, Lambert, stop it!" Grayson's voice had a hard edge.

Steve said: "Sorry, if I'm cross, but this is murder. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know what progress I've made."

Grayson looked into Steve's empty blue eyes and nodded. He helped Gohdal to his feet. Gohdal's face was sullen.

"Good night."

They went out.

STEVE picked up the wrapping off the parcel from Thayer's and looked thoughtfully at the Church Street address. Then he went into the kitchen and mixed himself another drink. It was nearly eleven now. He lit a cigarette. Why are you fooling with this thing? he asked himself. She probably did kill him. Why don't you leave simple things alone? He looked at the five crisp bills Grayson had given him. He smelled them. They smelled good. A hundred bucks. He stared at the bills. For this?

He finished his drink and dropped the cigarette into the sink. He tore the address from the Thayer wrapping and folded it in hs wallet. He walked back into the living room, put on his overcoat and hat, stuffed a small flashlight in his pocket, and went out.

The night air was clean and cold. He drove across town, north.

It was an old four-storied brownstone apartment building in a neighborhood of apartment buldings. 5733 N. Church St. He parked his car down a block and walked back. Standing in the small foyer he read the names on the letter boxes. Carey, Smith, Reed, Brooks. Miss Audrey Brooks. He pushed the little button under the name plate.

Nothing happened. He rang the bell again. He put a cigarette in hs mouth, lit it slowly, pressed the button a third time. The little square foyer was beginning to get hazy with smoke. He

looked at the name plate and decided that Miss Audrey Brooks must be on the third floor, that James J. Reed must reside on the fourth and top floor. He pushed in the Reed bell.

Then the buzzing sound came that unlatched the door. He stepped quickly in and stood at the bottom of the stairs. It was very quiet. He heard not the slightest noise. They were evidently waiting for him to come up and knock. He dropped his cigarette, mashed it out with his foot. He stood for ten minutes without moving. Finally it happened.

"Hello . . ."

"Who is it Jim?"

The voices were faint. They floated down the well of the stairs to him, dulled, muted.

"No one, I guess."

Then he heard the door shut. He waited another five minutes and went noiselessly up the stairs. The place was very still. It was late, after eleven. People were going to sleep. He turned the knob on Miss Audrey Brooks' door slowly, cautiously. It was locked.

He bit his lip and looked out of the window on his right. There was a similar hall-window in the next apartment and the space between them was perhaps five feet. Then the walls of the two buildings angled sharply, forming a V, and joined. There was a window on each angled section of wall; these opened into the apartments proper.

Steve raised the hall-window carefully and swung himself out on to the sill. He took out a small pocket knife and forced the blade into the crack where the angled window met its sill. He pried away gently. The window was unlocked. He stopped prying when he had it open an inch, a space large enough to get his fingers through. He reached out and raised the window. He was panting a little.

Somewhere very close a phone shrilled.

He felt his body jerk and he nearly fell backwards out of the window at the sound.

HE TURNED his head quickly and through the angled pane of the other apartment he saw a dumpy woman in a flowered dressing gown uncradle the instrument and begin talking. He held his breath, afraid to move. The woman was staring directly into his face.

Her fat features widened as she half-laughed at something that was said. She was nodding her head. He could barely hear her. It was like a pantomime. There was a mole on the side of her thick neck. Her teeth were small, white, uneven, ugly. His fingers, clingng to the window frame, began to ache. He couldn't take his eyes off the mole now. There was a few hairs growing out of it.

He realized that she hadn't noticed him. That she was seeing him without seeing him. That whoever she was talking to had her complete attention. There must be a glare on her window. That helped too. His stomach felt hollow and cold.

The mole seemed to vibrate with her laughter.

Then, after an endless, dragging stretch of time, she hung up. She disappeared from the window. She went out of his life.

He let out his breath and swung himself across to the open window of Audrey Brooks' apartment and climbed awkwardly in. He reached back, shut the hall-window hastily. Then he closed the window he had just come through. His breath was coming fast. He moved a few steps away into the darkness.

There was no sound in the apartment. The air had a faintly dusty, faintly

sour smell. He took his flashlight out of his pocket. The beam was dim and yellow. His batteries were nearly dead. He saw that he was standing on the threshhold of the living room. Behind him a corridor led to the back of the place, to the bedroom, or bedrooms, the bathroom, the kitchen. He coughed once. It was a dry noise in the stillness.

He waved the beam across the room ahead of him, over the walls. There were love-seats, a tall radio, a couple of chairs with faded flowered slipcovers. The wallpaper had flowers, too. There was a wide, clumsy davenport. Everything seemed too ornate and a little shabby. The ashtrays were full and ashes were littered across the tops of the two tables. There were a few magazines, an empty, smudged glass. A crumpled, mussed newspaper lay forgotten on the floor. It was two days old.

Steve turned, moved back down the narrow hall. The bedroom door was open. He pointed his light inside.

CHAPTER V

THE eyes jarred him. He started to back up. The eyes were bulging. Then he saw it didn't matter. He went into the room.

The woman was a bleached blonde. It was hard to tell, but it looked like she was crowding thirty. Was, that is. She was dead now. There were blackish bruises on her neck. Her face was dark, twisted. Her tongue protruded, dangled from her mouth like a dog's. She was nude except for stockings and a wrapover of thin cotton stuff that fell loosely open. There was a large ring on her right hand and one of the stockings had a wide run in it. Steve leaned down and felt her. She was stiff. It was like touching cold brass. He straightened up, shivered slightly.

He looked at the room. There was spilled powder on the dresser, a hairnet, two handkerchiefs, another dirty glass, several bottles of perfume, a brassiere, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, two more brimming ashtrays, more spilled ashes. A blue dress lay wadded in a chair with some underthings. Several shoes, not all pairs, were strewn over the floor. The closet was full of women's clothes, hats and more shoes. Against one wall was a small desk, a secretary type. Steve opened it.

It was scattered with blank stationery, bills, pencil stubs, cheap bits of costume jewelry, still more cigarette ashes. Steve picked through the litter carefully. In one of the drawers he found a small thirty-eight revolver. It was loaded. He sniffed it, held it thoughtfully in the palm of his hand for a moment, then dropped it in his pocket. This is your day to collect guns, he thought. He looked under the stationery in another drawer and found several snapshots.

They were mostly pictures of the woman on the bed. They were casual, ordinary things, except for one. It showed her in a state of almost total undress. Her face wore an idiotic expression. She looked drunk or drugged. Steve thought her figure looked better in the photograph. Or maybe it was just the face on the one lying on the bed. The sprung eyes and the twisted mouth. He put a cigarette between his lips, but he didn't light it. He was staring at the last picture.

She was standing with a man on a beach in this one. The ocean was behind them. She was wearing a two-piece white bathing suit and he had on trunks. His black hair was wet, stuck against his forehead in flat curls. He had evidently just come out of the

water. His eyes were small and his thick lips were smiling and he had a heavy, powerful frame. Steve felt a strange coldness spread over his back. It was a wrestler's frame. Steve held his lighter to his cigarette and frowned.

It was the man who had bumped into him coming out of the Prentice Building.

Steve smiled faintly. "Now I wonder why you were in such a hurry, pal," he said softly. "Yeah."

HE FINGERED the picture a minute, then put it in his pocket and closed the desk. He was careful to wipe off what he had touched with his handkerchief. He didn't find anything that helped him in the drab bathroom. He went through the dinette and into the kitchen. There were dirty dishes stacked in the sink and more cigarette butts and stale garbage. The room had a bitter smell. A bottle of whiskey, nearly full, stood on the enameled white table next to the stove. A moth flitted across the pale shaft from his flashlight.

Then he heard the dry click, the rattle, the slight noise of the hinges. These drifted down the corridor to him like smoke or a smell of pollen, hardly anything but sounds. Someone was coming into the flat. He tossed his cigarette at the garbage in the sink. His fingers felt the metal frame of the .38 in his pocket. Not such a dumb idea after all, he thought.

There were steps now. He could hear them. There were two of them. At least two. Yes, two. Then he could hear their voices. Low, careful.

"This is real stupid, Al."

"Shut up," said the other one.

There was an interval of silence. Steve stood in the dark kitchen, not moving, waiting. A cat whined somewhere in the night.

"This is sappy, All," said the first one. "The cops may have the joint spotted right now. They may be just playin' it smart."

"Shut up, Doc," Al said.

"They been known to do it before."

"Shut up, Doc."

"It's morbid, Al," Doc said. "It ain't natural. The dame's dead."

"Leave me alone," Al said. His voice was hoarse.

"Sure, Al."

"Leave me alone, do ya hear?"

"Sure, Al. Let go, will ya?" Doc made a small noise of pain.

There was silence again for a minute. Steve took the gun out of his pocket. Moonlight was suddenly streaming through the windows now. Steve looked out. There was still a few torn clouds, but they were moving away. The moon was a cold naked disc. Steve heard Doc in the corridor. He was coming toward the kitchen.

From beyond, from the bedroom perhaps, came a jagged sob.

"That poor crazy damn fool," Doc whispered harshly.

Steve backed into a shadow, flattened himself against the wall. Through the frame of the doorway he could see Doc's dark, short, slight form. In the sharp, brief flare of a match he had a quick vision of Doc's small ball-like face. Then there was just the red end of his cigarette in the darkness. It brightened and faded as Doc smoked. It bobbed, danced, got closer.

Doc stepped into the kitchen and looked around.

"Heist 'em, cowboy!" Steve whispered. "Now!"

Doc turned, his body jerked. The moonlight caught his plump Chinese features. The cigarette dropped to the floor. His hands seemed to flutter aimlessly.

Steve whispered: "No noise. Don't

even breathe. Your card is the ace of spades."

Doc stared at the revolver, nodding dumbly. He raised his hands above his head now. Steve couldn't see any expression in his eyes. His face was back in a shadow. The cat howled again in the alley below. Steve stepped forward soundlessly.

"Not too high, cowboy," Steve said softly.

Doc lowered his hands slightly.

Steve said: "A chink, eh? Move, cowboy." He spoke tightly, barely audibly through his teeth and gestured at the corridor with the .38.

THEY went out of the kitchen, Doc walking ahead of Steve. The little Chinese marched stiffly, lifting his feet daintily like a woman. His voice hadn't had the trace of an accent, Steve thought. You never would guess.

Then they were standing in the doorway to the bedroom.

Steve looked over Doc's head at the wide sagging shoulders of the big man in the chair. He was staring open-mouthed at the dead woman on the bed. He had covered her body with a sheet. Her distorted blackish face lay against the white pillow like something alone, separate. The big man's eyes were wet. Steve pushed the barrel of the gun into Doc's back.

"Al," Doc said nervously.

The big man didn't look around. "Beat it," he said hoarsely.

Steve shoved the gun against Doc, harder.

"Al, they had the place spotted." Doc spoke the words sadly.

"Leave me alone," All said savagely. "It's the last time I tell you." He still didn't turn his head, kept staring at the bed.

Steve put his hand on Doc's back and pushed him roughly into the room. The little Chinese stumbled, cracked his shin on the bedpost, fell. He gripped his injured leg with both hands and whimpered softly. Al, the big man, moved his head slowly to look at Steve. The moonlight made his face seem grayer than it probably was.

Steve said: "Easy, strangler." He put his free hand behind him and switched on the lights.

Al blinked his red-rimmed eyes at the abrupt brightness. He had black curly hair and loose heavy lips. He was the man wearing the trunks in the snapshot. He was the man who had shoved Steve against the radiator in the lobby of the Prentice Building. He had on the same suit he had worn that afternoon. But he looked tired now, older. He stood up heavily. His features were swollen, puffy.

He said: "I didn't want to kill her. She made me do it. Leave me alone." His voice was lifeless, as if nothing mattered anymore.

"Sit down and relax, strangler," Steve said.

"She said she'd wait for me," Al said. "Wait till I got out. She didn't keep her word." He took a step towards Steve.

Steve squeezed the gun in his hand. His mouth was dry. "Stay put or you're finished," he said quietly.

Then he saw the flash the shiny metal made out of the corner of his eye. He tried to throw his body sideways, but the dresser blocked him. The little gun jerked in Doc's faintly yellow hand when he fired. The shot was a brief hard sound. Steve felt something burn across his side just above the belt line.

He grinned, fired the .38 revolver almost blindly. He shot twice. Doc gave a short, tinny shriek that stopped suddenly when the second bullet ripped the side of his face open. He fell on

his side and lay still, his back arching slightly. His small automatic went sliding over the carpet toward the baseboard.

STEVE stood up. Al stood motionless, staring at him. Steve leaned against the dresser. His breath was coming in uneven gasps. He leveled the gun at Al.

"Okay, strangler," he said huskily, "you can relax."

Al grunted. Then he suddenly lunged at Steve.

Steve shot him in both legs.

Al crumpled slowly like a drunk man. He lay on his back and held his legs and moaned. His eyes were shut and his mouth was open a little, his lips pulled back from his teeth. Lying on the floor, his body partially doubled, he didn't seem quite as big. A tattered squeak came out of his throat.

Steve bent over the dresser and let his head fall in his arms. He stayed that way for a long time. Finally, he straightened himself slowly and rubbed a hand over his sweaty face. The perspiration was chilly, sticky. The .38 hung in his limp fingers, almost forgotten. He looked vacantly at Al.

"Don't go away, strangler," he said tiredly, "I'm gonna call the cops."

He went unsteadily out into the hallway. The telephone must be in the living room, he thought. His side was hurting now. It had begun to bleed. They always hurt after the bleeding started. He had a sudden impulse to laugh and he had to pause and lean against the wall and choke off the hysteria. If he laughed, it would just make his side hurt more.

He switched on the living room lights and stared dully for a moment at the shabby, untidy, ugly furniture. The phone was on a small square table under a mirror. He dropped the gun in his pocket and walked toward it, dragging a light chair behind him. Then he sat down carefully and gave the operator the number of the Detective Bureau. There was the hum and the regular buzzes over the hum and the slight click as the receiver at the other end was lifted.

"I want to talk to Sergeant George Purvis," Steve said.

There was a quiet minute. Steve could hear steps above him, muffled voices. The other tenants had been awakened by the gunfire. He lit his lighter, watched the flame, blew it out. Then:

"Purvis speaking." He even sounded fishy over the phone.

Steve said: "This is Lambert. I'm at 5733 North Church. The third floor apartment. I found another killing. There's been a little shooting. I was nicked myself."

The wire was silent. Finally, Purvis said: "Have anything to do with the Johnson caper?" He spoke casually in his smooth drawl as if he was inquiring about the weather.

"Yeah," Steve said.

"Uh-huh. You hurt bad?"

"Not too bad."

"Okay, we'll take a run out there."

"Swell," Steve said. "The house is a mess, but I'll try to straighten it up. I just had no idea you'd be able to make it."

Purvis said: "Oh, don't touch a thing. We're not coming formal."

"Well, bring your own rhubarb." Steve said.

"Sure. Just a minute, Angus wants to talk to you."

"Nuts to Angus," Steve said and hung up.

HE LEANED back in the flimsy chair, stuck a cigarette in his mouth, lit it. Then he pulled out his

shirt tail and raised his undershirt cautiously. The clothing was stained and sticky with the blood. The bullet had dug a long, narrow and fairly deep gutter in his side. There was mild interest in his thin face as he stared at the wound. A little cluster of ashes fell from the end of his cigarette and slid down his bare belly. The small pain caused him to give a slight start and he swore. He took the clean handkerchief from his outside breast pocket and folded it lengthwise along the raw gutter and pulled his undershirt down. His eyes were watering a little.

He looked at his watch. It seemed like they were taking a long time. Well, maybe not so long. The hands pointed to a few minutes after eleven. Hell, it must be later than that. He held his wrist to his ear. There wasn't even the breath of a tick. The watch had stopped. He swore again and wound it and picked up the phone.

"Republic 400," he said to the operator.

"Republic 400," the operator repeated.

There was the hum again and the buzzes over the hum. There was the funny rattle over the wire. There was the click. There was silence.

Steve dropped his cigarette on the floor and scrubbed it out with his foot.

"At the next tone signal," a flat voice said, "the time will be twelve-oh-four and three-quarters."

The tone signal sounded. The line was still again. Steve set his watch.

"At the next tone signal," the flat voice said, "the time will be twelve-oh-five."

Steve started to hang up, frowned, brought the instrument back up to his ear. There was the small, shrill, momentary noise of the signal.

Seconds passed. "At the next tone signal, the time will be twelve-oh-five and one quarter." Steve cradled the phone gently.

"You're not so dumb, or are you?" he said very softly to himself. He spoke the words a little bitterly.

CHAPTER VI

HE RODE the automatic elevator to the sixth floor. His lean face seemed more lined, older, grayer. It was five o'clock in the afternoon, a day later. He walked along the path of dark blue carpeting to apartment 6-C. That was the one he wanted, the one he was looking for. He pressed in the small button that was the doorbell with his forefinger.

"Hello," she said. "You look all in."

"I am," Steve said. "Is there a drink in the house?"

He followed Grace Lewis into the living room. She took his hat and coat. He stretched his long frame out in a large chair and looked at the place. It was attractive. He liked the soft blue-gray of the walls and the pictures she had put up and the easy furniture. It wasn't too arty, to crowded, to busy, too flashy. It was a comfortable, lived-in room. She returned from the closet and stood in front of him. The late sunlight caught part of her copper hair and made it glow. She was quite pretty, he thought, in spite of the faint hardness in her face. Prettier than yesterday afternoon, prettier than last night.

She smiled and said: "Would you like bourbon? Hurry up and tell me. I want to get the drinks fixed and hear about everything."

"Bourbon will be fine, Red," Steve said. "Make mine double."

She came back very quickly with two glasses, handed him one, sat down opposite him and curled her slim legs up under her. Her expression became solemn and concerned.

"Well?"

Steve said: "It's an ugly story. Johnson really was keeping a woman. Her name was Audrey Brooks and she lived out on Church Street. It's hard to know how much he spent on her, but he at least bought her a diamond bracelet. She may have been blackmailing him, but we'll never know for sure exactly what the relationship was. Anyway, he had Thayer's deliver the bracelet to her at her address. Or rather try to deliver it. Nobody answered the door. Nobody was there but Audrey Brooks and she was dead. Strangled." Steve sipped his drink.

Grace Lewis' mouth was slightly open. "Do they . . . you know who did it?" she asked. Her fingers were fumbling with a cigarette.

Steve nooded. "A big guy, name of Al Taffer. Alias 'Bugs' Taffer. A paroled convict and an old boy friend. He was up for forging checks. They looked us his history. Sort of a simple-minded guy who was a football hero in high school. Played a little pro after he graduated, but accidentally killed another guy in a game. Just didn't know his own strength. After that he began to hit the sauce and took up with a fast gambling crowd. They liked him because he was strong and he probably did work for them that would have sent him to the pen sooner only nobody caught him doing it. His father turned him in for forging and if it had been the first time, he would have gotten away with that. A Headquarters dick named Purvis and I went out to see his folks this afternoon. They have a little bungalow twenty miles out in the suburbans. Pinewood. They're nice old people. It was kind of sad."

GRACE LEWIS said: "But how did you know he did it? How did you catch him?"

Steve thought she looked a little pale. He shook his almost melted ice cubes around in his glass.

"He came back," Steve said slowly, "to the scene of his crime. Just like in the books. Audrey Brooks was an ex-showgirl. He met her and fell in love with her before he was sent up the river. It was a funny thing about Al Taffer. He always had a lot of trouble because he thought about ten minutes slower than everybody else, but when he got an idea of his own, he held on to it. And he had the idea he loved Audrey. She promised to wait for him to get out of stir. She didn't, of course, and he got out and found her playing around with Johnson, He asked her to quit him. She wouldn't. He kept asking her. She still wouldn't. Finally, he choked her to death in a jealous rage yesterday morning almost before he realized what he was doing. He was sorry. Sorry right away. So he came back last night to see her even though he knew that wouldn't bring her back and I shot him in both legs."

"You shot him!"

"I was shot first, angel."

"Oh," Grace Lewis said in a small voice. She stared at him "Did he kill Johnson, too?" she asked.

Steve shrugged. "They've ques- him as much as the doctor will allow. He's in the hospital. He admits he was there, that he went there to kill Johnson because he blamed Johnson for Audrey Brooks' death. He took the elevator to the seventh floor and walked down three flights, but he claims Johnson was already dead when he got there. He waited until five after five so that he could be sure the office was clear and Johnson would be alone. He says he loitered in the corridor and watched to see if Johnson came out with the rest of his employees."

"Then he knew Johnson?" Grace

Lewis interrupted.

"Yeah. My guess is that he had seen him coming out of Audrey's place. I think Johnson had him spotted, too. I think that's the reason Johnson wanted to hire me. Audrey had told Johnson about Al and Johnson wanted to frame him back into stir. Grayson says Johnson asked him one day at lunch if it wasn't against the law for paroled convicts to carry guns. You can see what the old boy had in mind.

"Anyway, to get back to Al, he says he suddenly got scared when he found Johnson dead. He says he just stood there looking at him for a long time. Then he sneaked out of the office and went down the stairs and bumped into me on the way out. He must have just missed Mrs. Johnson by a hair and I, of course arrived just behind her."

"Do you think he's telling the truth?" Grace Lewis asked.

Steve drained his glass. "Anymore where this came from?"

"Not now. Oh, all right. Come on out to the kitchen with me. You haven't answered my question."

STEVE got up, followed her out of the room. "About Al Taffer telling the truth? Yeah, I think he's telling the truth. Why should he lie? He's already confessed to one killing. They'll only hang him once."

He leaned against the stove and watched her mix the drinks.

"Does this clear Mrs. Johnson?" she asked.

Steve lit a cigarette. "No," he said.

She stared at him. "But you said . . ."

"Cops are funny people," Steve went on. "They figure they know a good thing when they see one and they liked it the way it was. For instance, when I arrived Mrs. Johnson was in the washroom of the office. Accordng to her story she found him, pulled the knife out of the wound, went into the washroom and fainted. The cops think she stabbed him, pulled the knife out of the wound and went into the washroom. They figure she could have been in there when Taffer was there. You see, he can't remember whether he saw a knife sticking in Johnson or not."

She handed Steve his drink. "You don't think either one of them killed Johnson, do you?"

Steve shook his head. "You live here all alone?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You go out much? With boys, that is."

She smiled faintly. "No, I don't go out much."

Steve said: "You ought to meet some nice guy and settle down and raise some kids. You're a pretty girl."

"Let's go back to the living room," she suggested.

He walked behind her, close.

"You use nice perfume," he said.

"Thank you."

"No, I mean it."

"I said thank you. Please . . ."

"I like everything about you."

"Please . . . No . . . Please!" Her voice had a high little rattle in it.

"I was only going to kiss you."

"I know . . . Oh, let me go . . . Please!"

Her glass fell to the floor, broke. Her drink spilled over the rug. His hand slipped off her hip and she backed into the wall. She was trembling. She started to cry like a little girl.

"I'm sorry," Steve said woodenly.

The telephone rang.

"I'll get it," Steve said. "It's probably for me. I was expecting a call here."

She hugged the wall with her back and watched him through wide, wet eyes as he picked up the instrument.

"Hello . . . This is Lambert . . . Yeah . . . You checked on Gohdal . . . Yeah, yeah . . . He was going broke, eh? . . . Yeah . . . Well, don't enter a guilty plea yet . . . We've still got some time . . . No, I'll call you . . . Goodbye." He hung up.

She watched him as he sat down. She watched him lift his glass to his lips. She was still trembling slightly.

"You shouldn't have done that," she said. "I didn't think you would. I didn't think you were the type, but you're just like all of them."

Steve said: "I know I shouldn't have done it. I'm sorry. Sit down. Take it easy. I'm through wolfing for the evening. I won't bite you."

She shuddered and bit her lip. Then, after a moment, she walked to a chair and sat down unsteadily. She didn't look at him.

"I didn't think you were the kind," she said. "It's almost as if you planned it, wanted it to happen."

"I did."

"You're a strange person," she said simply.

Steve said: "That was Grayson I just talked to. It was about Gohdal, Mrs. Johnson's cousin. If they hang her, the estate goes to him as the only living relative. He found out that Gohdal's business was going on the rocks. The only trouble is that they can't break his alibi. It's perfect because it's true. You're the only one left."

SHE looked at him now. "Me?" she said in a choked, distant voice.

"Yeah. You're the only really logical one anyway. There was one funny thing that I didn't figure out until last night. Mrs. Johnson said she found the phone in her husband's hand when she discovered his body. She picked it up and asked the operator to get the police. She couldn't hear the operator and she could hear an odd little buzz, but she couldn't make the operator hear or understand her. That was because it was the time-check operator, a girl who sits and recites the time of day every fifteen seconds. When you call Republic 400 for a time-check, you're plugged into her by your operator, but although you can hear her she can't hear you. Mrs. Johnson was hysterical and she didn't think to hang up first and then call the police.

"Who called that number? Not Johnson. He had an electric clock on his deck. He had only to raise his eyes to see what time it was. Whoever killed him called it and placed the phone in his hand after he was dead so that if anyone called him before the office closed, the line would be busy and Johnson would seem to be alive. The police would have no way of knowing how long the phone had been in his hand like that. They could only make an estimate as to time of death and fifteen minutes one way would give you the leeway you needed. You were the last person that saw him alive. You're the one."

Grace Lewis couldn't speak. She could only make a muffled, twisted sound in her throat.

"You don't have to tell me why," Steve said in a dead voice. "I can guess. Johnson made one pass too many, didn't he? And you picked up the letter knife and carved him. You're a cold fish, baby. You don't like men's hands, do you? Wasn't that the way it was?"

She looked at him now, suddenly, wide-eyed, shaking.

"I can't help it if I'm cold," she said. "I'm just that way." There were tears running down her cheeks.

"I know it, baby."

"Why can't you forget about me?

I'm young. She's old. Why me?"

"You can't make it sound noble, baby. As you would say."

The room was still for a long time.

"I guess I can't," she said finally.

Steve finished his drink, smoked two cigarettes, looked at his watch. It was nearly six.

When she came out of the bedroom he said: "I'm sorry it broke this way, baby. I like you. I mean that."

"Stop calling me baby."

"Okay."

In the elevator he glanced once at her face. It was hard. The prettiness was all but gone.

"City Hall," he told the taxi driver as they climbed in the cab.

BIG BOSS BY BULLETS

★ **Bootleggers, hi-jackers, and rum-runners, who live by the gun also perish by the bullet!** ★

THE bootleg industry—complete with criminal savagery, murder, racketeering and gang wars—made the 1920's a heyday for gunmen in every large city in the country. Murder, indeed, became a cold and calculated business practice during the gang wars of this period that their occurrence became ordinary copy for newspaper crime reporters.

Hi-jackers and rum runners were machine gunned; minor bootleggers became victims of firing squads hired by the "higher-ups" in the criminal hierarchy; the gun became the final judge of all disputes and "big boss" became the most ruthless killer.

Bootlegging became an excellent instrument for formation of monopolies as New York gang-leaders expanded their activities to other cities and states. National gang wars made battle-fronts from coast to coast. One of the most ruthless of gang leaders whose activities extended across the country was Frankie Uale, or Frankie Yale.

Frankie Yale was an old East Side hoodlum who rose from petty thievery and bodyguard to minor bootleggers to be known as the Beau Brummel of the underworld. Yale came by this reputation deservedly for he was widely admired by his colleagues in the underworld as an excellent fixer in the courts, and as a smart racketeer with fingers in the liquor business, the narcotics trade and industrial extortion within the powerful laundry industry. Yale knew that even as a "strong man" he needed powerful underworld allies in other cities and it wasn't long before Chicago knew Frankie Yale as well as New York.

Yale was a childhood pal of Johnny Torrio who rose to "racket king" in Chicago after he moved from the East Side streets on which he and Yale staged their petty criminal education. When Big Jim Colosimo, powerful underworld boss of Chicago, was killed by one of his henchmen, Torrio took his underworld enterprises over; however, Chicago police authorities started an investigation in this drastic change in the racketeering hierarchy which opened up things.

THE police were convinced that Yale, who was seen in the vicinity of the gruesome murder, was the killer and, consequently, they brought about his arrest in New York. A porter in Colosimo's cafe at the time of the gang leader's murder, Joe Gabreala, was the police's star witness, but when Gabreala confronted Yale, he developed a sudden case of the jitters and refused to say that he had ever seen Yale at the murder scene. The Chicago police, lacking real evidence, were forced to release Yale who then returned to New York to his gangland reign.

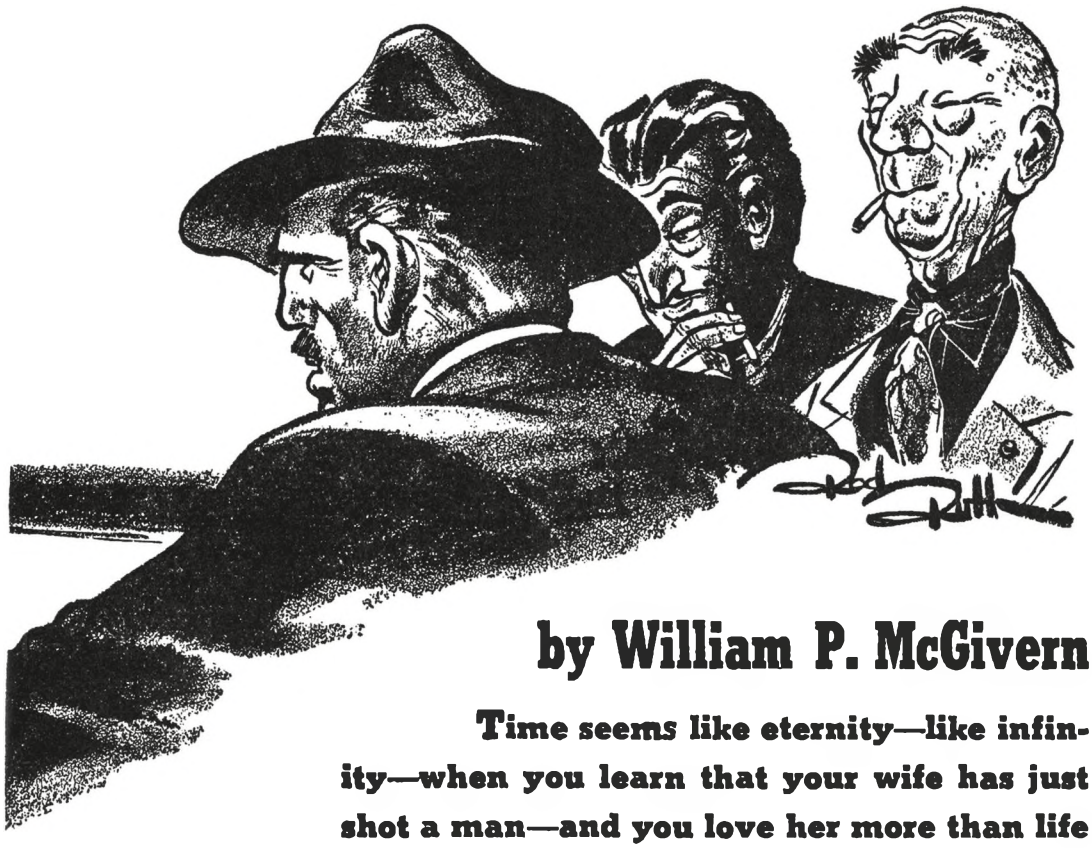
Yale ruled his criminal domain with bullets and bootleg liquor while his midwestern colleague, Torrio, whose closest bodyguard and top lieutenant, Al Capone, was beginning to make criminal history on his own, was battling some minor racketeers who were attempting to edge in on his territory.

The original Torrio-Capone gang split up into warring factions, fighting for domination of the new bootleg liquor industry. Meanwhile, Yale—brazen, smug, savage and pompous—ignored the small uprisings which occurred within his underworld kingdom and his hirelings "erased" these "obstacles" with bullets and concrete slabs. These methods, final as they were, were strangely ineffective and the seething underdogs were formulating their plots with every lethal device.

The showdown was not far away and all of the racketeering world broke loose on a pleasant Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1928. Yale was riding alone in a huge Lincoln sedan through a quiet residential street in Brooklyn. Suddenly, four men in another automobile sped up to Yale's sedan and, forcing it to swerve sharply toward the curb, pumped bullets and buckshot into Yale's head. The revengeful assassins sped away from their bloody scene. Such was the brutal end of an underworld industrialist whose lust for power brought him the common end of all criminals—Death.

—*June Lurie*

You'll Wait Forever



by William P. McGivern

Time seems like eternity—like infinity—when you learn that your wife has just shot a man—and you love her more than life

HIS wife was supposed to meet him at their regular restaurant at six o'clock but she was late. He didn't mind. He was in love with her and he enjoyed sipping his drink and thinking of how she'd look when she hurried through the door, smiling and looking about for him, a little flustered and excited. When her eyes found him she'd smile with relief and come toward him with her quick graceful walk. She was a bright shining girl with hair the color of a new penny and eyes that seemed full of tiny dancing lights; and when she'd pulled off her gloves she'd smile into his eyes and tell him a funny, exciting story of why she was late.

So he didn't mind waiting a while for her; she was worth waiting for, forever—for always and all time.

Their regular waiter, a stocky genial Austrian named Herman, smiled at him and picked up the empty Martini glass.

"Another, Mr. Halliday?"

"No, I'll wait and have one with my wife," he said.

"She's a little late, eh?"

"Yes, a little bit. I guess she stopped to do some shopping when she left the office. She'll be along pretty soon."

"Maybe she stood you up, eh?" Herman smiled.

"That's an idea," Sam Halliday smiled, too.

He passed the time by looking over the menu. He knew it by heart but he read it the way a man will read a railroad timetable when he hasn't anything else to read. There was tomato soup, onion soup and consomme. Shrimp cocktail or bluepoints. Whitefish, fillet

of sole or salmon patties. Breaded veal cutlets, roast beef, pork chops, liver and bacon, steak. Pie, Jello, cheese cake. Coffee, tea or milk.

They ate here at this restaurant on Wabash avenue in Chicago's Loop every Thursday night. Then they'd take in a show or, in the summer, walk over to Grant park to listen to the open air concerts. They always sat at the same table, they always had Herman as their waiter and they generally ordered the same food. There wasn't anything exciting about it, but it was what they liked to do and they enjoyed it.

He found himself glancing up occasionally at the door. His wife worked as a typist for an insurance company on Randolph street, about a ten-minute walk from the restaurant. She was through at five-thirty, which gave her plenty of time to make their date at six. But she usually spent a few extra minutes in the powder room on Thursday nights; and even on the short walk to the restaurant she could generally find some little thing to stop and shop for.

He smiled unconsciously and went back to the menu. His thoughts drifted around to his own work—he was a bookkeeper for a local department store—and the minutes ticked away faster and faster.

He was thinking about his assistant, a young man who had spent three years with the army in Europe and was having a tough time getting adjusted to the humdrum routine of civilian life. He liked the youngster and felt grateful to him in a strange way; because of that he wanted to help him and he was thinking of how he could do it, without seeming obvious or intrusive.

The minutes flew by in a quickening stream.

She *had* to come soon—now!

When Herman came to his table again and asked him about a drink it was seven o'clock.

Sam Halliday looked at his watch with a start.

"She *is* late," he said, feeling a slight quirk of annoyance. "Better bring me another Martini, Herman."

WHILE Herman was getting the drink he went to the phone booth which was located near the front door. He called her office and got the janitor on the phone. The janitor assured him that the office was empty. Everyone had gone home. He hung up and called their apartment. There was a chance—a bare one—that she'd forgotten it was Thursday night and had gone on home. But there was no answer at the apartment.

He went back to the table and finished his drink slowly. He sat there while the restaurant slowly emptied and another hour passed.

Now it was eight o'clock. Now, eight-thirty.

He wasn't thinking about the young assistant now. He wasn't glancing idly at the menu he knew by heart. His eyes were on the door and his hands on the empty glass were tight and strained.

Herman was a kind, tactful man. He, too, was watching the clock and the door.

"These women," he said, shaking his head with mock despair. "My wife can never be on time. She will stop to buy a pair of socks for me and it will take her hours." He smiled at Halliday uncertainly. "Your wife is the same, eh?"

"Yes, she's like that," Sam Halliday said, but he couldn't smile.

When the hands of the big old-fashioned clock on the wall touched nine o'clock he stood up and walked quickly

to the phone booth.

He didn't know who to call, so he stood with his thumb holding the hook down, trying to think. He didn't want to call the hospitals or the police because that gesture would somehow make his fears a reality. He knew, as an objective fact, that people were struck by hit-and-run drivers every day in the city. That every newspaper carried stories of abductions, kidnapings, of sex crimes. These things weren't unusual. He read such stories every morning as he sipped his coffee in their small cozy apartment. But nothing like that could happen to Ann. Those things happened to other people. They happened to middle-aged men returning from work. To drunks. To girls with names like Mary or Evelyn or Sally or Janet.

Finally he released the hook, dialed Operator and asked for the police. The words sounded strange in his ears. He was thirty-four years old, a bookkeeper, a modest average man. Slightly taller than average, perhaps, but in no other way different from thousands who worked and lived and loved in the city of Chicago. And now he was asking a strange impersonal voice to connect him with the police.

"Central," a voice said in his ear.

"I want the police," Halliday said.

"This is Central Station," the voice said. It was a laconic voice, a tired, uninterested voice.

"My name is Halliday. My wife is missing. I don't know if I'm talking to the right department, but I'd like to report—"

"Try Missing Persons," the voice cut in.

"All right. Thanks."

"Just a minute. What's your name?"

"Halliday, Sam Halliday. My wife's name is Ann Halliday. She was supposed to meet me at six o'clock for dinner, but—"

"Hang on a second," the voice said. There was interest in the voice now.

Sam Halliday loosened his collar. It was suddenly warm in the booth. He tried not to think.

"You're Sam Halliday, eh?" The voice was back.

"Yes, that's it."

"Okay, get down here right away. You know where Central Station is?"

" . . . No." His throat was dry and tight. "What do you want me for?"

"Central's at Eleventh and State. Check in on the ninth floor. Homicide."

"Wait a minute. What's all this?" His voice sounded loud and cracked in his ears. "What's this got to do with my wife?"

"Your wife was booked on a murder charge two hours ago, Halliday. Better get down here."

THE building that houses Central Station is tall and new, but it is in a neighborhood of warehouses, railroad yards and cheap bars.

Inside, the lobby is littered with cigarette butts; and fat, sloppily dressed men with wise cautious eyes can be seen at all hours, talking in lowered voices, occasionally smiling at things that are seldom humorous.

Halliday hurried through the lobby to the elevator. He had the strange feeling that his mind had snapped. None of this could be real. Ninth floor. Homicide. Ann booked on a murder charge.

None of that was true. They'd laugh at him when he asked for his wife. They wouldn't know of any phone call, because there hadn't been any. There *couldn't* have been.

He got off the elevator on the ninth floor and looked up and down the corridor uncertainly. At the end of the wide dirty hallway—on his left—were

double, glazed-glass doors with Homicide Division lettered on them in solid black letters.

He walked toward them slowly. Noises from the building were around him but he seemed to walk in a vacuum. He turned the knob of the door, feeling the metal, cold and slick against his damp palm.

He stood there unmoving. He knew he had to push open the door, but for an instant he was without strength. His breath was coming with an effort—as if the vacuum he moved in was being pumped dry of its last oxygen.

He wet his lips and pushed open the door. A uniformed policeman sitting at a desk looked up at him. He was a young man, with a square red face.

Halliday let the door swing shut behind him, then walked slowly to the desk.

"I'm Sam Halliday," he said.

"Okay," the young cop said. "Take a seat."

He went back to an involved doodle which he'd been drawing on a pad of scratch paper.

"My wife is here," Halliday said. "She's in some trouble. They told me to come down here."

"Who told you?" The young copper didn't look up.

"I don't know. Someone I talked to on the phone. I called to report that she was missing."

"Okay, okay, take a seat like I told you."

Halliday looked down at the dark bent head of the young copper; watched with something like fascination as the pencil in his hands added a few more scrolls to the senseless figure on the pad. He bit his lip sharply. He forced himself to walk to the wall and take a seat in a straight-backed chair. His hands were trembling uncontrollably.

A few moments passed. Then the young copper picked up a phone on his desk. He twirled the dial. Then said: "Halliday's here."

He put the phone back and went on with his doodling.

A door behind the desk opened and a man in a gray suit came out. He glanced at Halliday.

"You Halliday?"

"Yes." He stood up, holding his hat nervously.

"Okay, come on in here."

HE STOOD aside while Halliday walked through the door into a larger room, furnished with two cigarette-burned desks, a few chairs and dirty green window shades. A bare, two-hundred watt bulb burned from the ceiling.

The man closed the door and sat down in a chair.

"Sit down if you want to," he said.

"I came down here about my wife," Halliday said. "I phoned about ten minutes ago and somebody said—"

"Yeah, yeah," the man said.

He was short but wide, with pale skin and eyes set in pouches of fat. He wore the gray suit, a greasy gray hat shoved back from his forehead, thick black shoes. His hair was black and the veins in the backs of his hands were the thickness of lead pencils. There was a smell of tobacco smoke and sour beer about him; a stale smell. He carried a gun under his left arm.

"I'm Sergeant Norrin. I been assigned to your wife's case. Do you know anything about it?"

"I don't know a thing. Somebody told me to come here. That's all I know." He came closer to the detective. "Where is she? Is she here? I've got to see her."

"Take it easy," Norrin said. "You'll

see her. Did you know a guy named Willie Peters?"

"No. But what's that—"

"Did your wife?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe she knew somebody by that name before I met her. She never mentioned that name to me. What difference does it make?"

"Your wife shot a guy named Willie Peters," Norrin said. "People generally know the people they shoot. You can see her now for a while. I'll talk to you later."

THEY took him to his wife. She was in a small room with a policewoman. She sprang up when he came through the door. He caught her in his arms and held her close to him. She sobbed his name over and over against his shoulder.

Norrin and the policewoman went outside.

He made her sit down then and he pulled a chair close to her and held her hand tightly.

"What's happened, honey? Has everyone gone mad? Is the whole world turned upside down?"

She stopped crying and dried her eyes. Her face was pale and her eyes were swollen and red but she still looked wonderful to him. The bright coppery hair was disarranged and she needed lipstick. One of her stockings was twisted. But she never looked more wonderful to him because she needed him now as she had never needed him before. And he felt himself trembling with anger at whoever had done this to her.

"They keep saying I shot a man," she said. "A man named Willie Peters."

"What happened, honey?"

"I stopped at a cigar store to get some cigarettes." She tried to smile. "You used to say I never got the habit —of buying.

"I didn't mean that."

"I know. Anyway there were three or four men in the store. As I opened the door a shot sounded. I don't know just what happened then. I screamed and I must have fainted. When I came to the police were in the store. I was on the floor and some men said I shot a man."

"Men? What men?"

"Oh, I don't know, Sam," she said. She was crying again. "I kept telling them to get you, but they just kept asking me questions and then they brought me down here. I didn't shoot anybody, Sam. Get me out of here. Take me home, Sam."

"I'll take you home, baby," he said. "They're out of their minds. I'll talk to that Norrin. They can't do this to people."

"Please, Sam. I can't stand it here."

HE FOUND Norrin in the room with the desks and chairs.

"What's all this about?" he said, and his voice was louder now. "What kind of a cock and bull story have you guys cooked up? My wife never had a gun in her hand in her life."

Norrin looked up from his chair.

"Don't go shouting at me, goddamit," he said.

Halliday let out his breath slowly. This was the Law. This was Power. This was a fat man who smelled of sour beer who could be sensitive about the tone you used with him. He brought his voice down.

"What's it all about? It sounds like everybody down here is nuts."

"Nope. Your wife shot a guy named Willie Peters in a book joint on Wabash avenue. She walked in and blew a big hole in him. We got two witnesses who saw it. We got the pawnbroker who sold her the gun. We

got her cold, fella."

Halliday heard the words but they sounded like wild noises to him. Like Norrin was babbling.

"It's all crazy," he said, and this time he couldn't keep his voice down. He knew he was crying. "She didn't shoot anybody. You're all lying."

"It's tough, fella," Norrin said. "But we don't play practical jokes around here. Better get her a lawyer. She's going up to the grand jury as fast as we can make it."

THE lawyer that Sam Halliday retained was a young man named Nelson. He was short, with sandy red hair and short stubby fingers. After talking to Ann he investigated the evidence the State had presented to the grand jury—the evidence which had secured a true bill on a first degree murder charge. He talked to Sergeant Norrin and to the Assistant State's Attorney assigned to the prosecution of the case.

"I want it straight," Halliday said. "I want the truth. What are her chances?"

A week had passed. Somehow in that time Halliday had gotten accustomed to the realization that he wasn't living a mad nightmare. His wife was in jail, charged with murder. The grand jury had turned in an indictment. Those were facts that he had to accept.

"They don't look good," Nelson said worriedly. He drummed his fingers on his desk then shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "Maybe you ought to try somebody else, Halliday. Damn it, I'm not running out on you, but I don't know this criminal law business very well. I wouldn't mind losing a civil case, but this—"

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't have to.

"You're doing as much as you can," Halliday said.

"Okay, I'll keep at it. Now here's the State's case. They don't mind telling me about it because it's perfect. Your wife walked into a handbook at ten minutes of six, Thursday evening, March sixteenth. Here's the story of what happened according to the State's witnesses. There were three men in the place. Willie Peters, the man who was shot, and two men who operate the book. Their names are Bill Dineen and Sol Smith. These two men—Smith and Dineen—tell this story. Your wife came through the door and when she saw Willie Peters she stopped and said, 'You asked for this!' Then, according to their sworn testimony, she took the murder gun from her purse and fired one shot into his body. After that she screamed and fainted."

Halliday pressed the palms of his hands against his temples. There were times during this week that he felt like breaking into insane laughter. Ann! His Ann, with the coppery hair and bright dancing eyes acting like a movie gun moll. "You asked for this!" Words that were like lines from a bad script. Something they'd see together in the neighborhood movie house and laugh about on the way home.

Ann with a gun in her hand firing a bullet into the body of a man called Willie Peters. The whole thing was too incredible to be taken seriously.

"Hang on to yourself," Nelson said.

"I'm okay. Go on."

"All right. Now about the gun. There's a man named William Morton who claims he sold your wife the gun. Morton runs a pawn shop on South State street. He's about sixty years old, been in the business all his life. He swears that she came in one day a week or so ago and bought the gun from him. The gun, according to his story, was left with him over a year ago and

never redeemed. He has the pawn ticket and a description of the gun, everything all in order. That's his story and he's ready to go on the stand and swear to it."

"He's lying," Halliday said. His hands were twisting together spasmodically. "They're all lying. Can't you see that?"

"Maybe I can," Nelson said, "but that won't do us any good. I've talked with your wife. She certainly seems innocent to me. But against the testimony of these eye witnesses we need more than my opinion. We need something to break the stories of the witnesses. If they're lying we've got to prove it."

"What are the police doing?" Halliday almost yelled. "Do they sit on their fat behinds and believe anybody who comes in with a wild story? Aren't they checking these witnesses? Good God! Do they send people to jail or the electric chair without any investigation?"

"Take it easy," Nelson said. "The police seem satisfied with the case they have. They seem convinced they have it sewed up and they're not doing anything more about it."

"When is the trial?"

"They're working pretty fast. Probably within a month," Nelson said.

THE courtroom was crowded but quiet as the State presented its closing arguments.

Halliday sat beside his wife. On her other side was a stocky police matron. Nelson sat across from them glancing nervously at notes in his hand.

The State's attorney—a graying, cautious man of about forty—didn't bother to be dramatic. He had an airtight case based on facts. The jury of nine women and three men had those facts and he was content to remind them of their obligation.

He mentioned in his dry, precise voice what Bill Dineen and Sol Smith had testified.

Dineen, a middle-aged Irishman with reddened face and blood-shot eyes had been a good witness. So had Sol Smith, a dapper, cocky young man of about twenty-five.

They identified Ann as the girl who shot Willie Peters.

William Morton, a paunchy, silver-haired little man who looked like a kewpie doll, testified that she had bought the gun from him. Ballistics and fingerprint experts showed that Ann's fingerprints were on the gun; that it was the gun which had killed Willie Peters.

The State's attorney reminded the jury of these facts. He pointed out that the age and sex of the defendant was irrelevant. She was a murderess and the jury's responsibility was to decide her guilt on the basis of the evidence produced.

Nelson made his closing argument after the noon recess. There wasn't much he could say. Dineen and Sol Smith were bookies, race touts, Dineen had served time for forgery. Smith had been picked up for questioning many times. William Morton, the pawn broker, had done nine years of a twelve-year term for receiving stolen goods. These facts were interesting but inconclusive. The eyesight of these men was good, regardless of their backgrounds.

Nelson did a fairly good job but he didn't have a single lever with which to pry apart the structure of evidence the State had built about Ann Halliday.

The jury was out three hours.

When they returned there was an expectant stir in the courtroom. The baliff rapped for order.

The foreman of the jury rose and cleared his throat. The verdict, he an-

nounced in an almost apologetic voice, was murder in the first degree.

The bailiff had to rap for almost a minute to get order restored.

Halliday found Ann's hand under the table. He pressed it hard. She looked at him and her lips were trembling. She said his name once in a low voice.

The judge was talking. There was no need to listen. First degree murder carried a mandatory death penalty. Halliday knew that because Nelson had told him.

He hung onto Ann's hand and he felt her fingers tighten convulsively when the judge read the sentence. The words hit him with a physical shock. They were like something cold and hard driving into his stomach with rupturing force.

The police matron stood up and touched Ann's shoulder. She looked at him and he saw that she was almost ready to break. There was terror in her eyes.

"Don't let them, Sam," she said with a soft moan.

"I won't, Ann," he said. "I won't."

She was led away and he and Nelson fought their way from the courtroom, trying to get past reporters and photographers. The glare of flash bulbs was continuous.

"I'm sorry," Nelson said to him.

"You did all you could," Halliday said.

"Is there anything else—"

"No," Halliday said, almost savagely. "There's nothing else I want anyone to do."

HE WENT to his apartment alone that night. It was a pleasant place, a four-room apartment that Ann had decorated and furnished. It was a bright and cheerful, exciting and colorful, with gay green drapes and low comfortable furniture. Every week Ann bought fresh flowers for the living room.

He sat down and put a cigarette in his mouth automatically. The flowers of a month ago were on the mantel and they gave the room a musty smell. He looked at them. They were daisies, brown and dried, and he wondered if he should throw them out. Ann couldn't stand dead flowers.

He put a hand against his forehead and rubbed it slowly. There was something wrong with his mind. The flowers were dead, but what difference did it make? Ann wouldn't see them again.

He had to make himself accept that fact. Then he could do something. He had to believe that Ann was going to die in a month or so. Get that set once and for all. Make it a part of his thinking. Like the fact that bread cost twelve cents a loaf and that their milkman was named Al.

That was all. Make it just another fact about Ann. Ann has bright coppery hair. Ann can't carry a tune. Ann is going to die in a month.

One, two, three.

He laughed a little then and the sound of his own laughter in that bright room with the dead flowers made him shudder.

. . . The next morning they let him see her. He brought a small bunch of daisies. The police matron frowned but said nothing.

"They're lovely," Ann said.

"I thought the place needed cheering up," he said, trying to smile naturally.

She was pale, but she had herself under control. She smiled, too.

"Is there any news?"

"I phoned Nelson this morning. He's appealing the case. It looks pretty good. There's nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worrying very much," she said. "I still feel I'm going to wake

up any minute and find myself in the apartment with the alarm ringing."

He caught her hand hard, but there wasn't anything to say.

"I'll be back tomorrow."

"I'll be here." She almost grinned. "Thanks for the flowers, Sam. They're beautiful."

HE WENT down to the street. It was a cold windy day and the neighborhood was dirty. He found a cab and gave the driver an address on South State Street.

William Morton's pawnshop was on South State, near Harrison. The traditional gilt globes above the door were cracked and peeling, and the windows were streaked with dust. Halliday went inside the small cluttered shop and walked to the counter.

Morton was seated behind it reading the Racing Form. He recognized Halliday. He stood up and put the paper away.

"How are you Mr. Halliday," he said. He could have been a country grocer or a small town doctor. The gold chain across his vest, the spectacles that perched on the end of his nose, the air of well-scrubbed, pink-cheeked friendliness all seemed out of place in a shop cluttered with mandolins, shotguns and imitation jewelry.

"I want to talk to you," Halliday said.

"About your wife, I imagine."

"That's right."

"I was sorry about that business, Halliday. I don't like being helpful to the police. I don't like informing on anyone, but with my record they don't take no for an answer." He shrugged his plump shoulders. "They showed me the gun and asked me what I knew about it before I had any idea of what it was all about."

"You don't remember when my wife came in here?"

"That's the truth. Your lawyer made a lot of talk about that, but it doesn't mean anything."

"You remembered the gun, all right. You remembered my wife well enough to identify her," Halliday said. "But you don't remember the day."

"It was close to six o'clock," Morton said. "But the day I can't remember. It was a week or so before the murder, I know that much. But one day is pretty much like another in here." He waved a hand at the dusty stock. "I sit here and read the paper and take care of anybody who comes in. The rest of the time I look at this junk and wonder where I'll find suckers to buy it. I'm open seven days a week so there's no week-end to divide things up. Sometimes I forget it's Sunday until I hear the bell ringing for Mass at St. Peter's. Sunday, Saturday, Monday—they're all the same to me."

"Did she say what she wanted the gun for?"

Morton looked pained. "I went over that in court a dozen times. She just came in and looked around. Then she asked me if I could sell her a gun. And I did. She put it in her purse and went out."

"You can't sell a gun to a person who doesn't have apermit, can you?"

"I'm not supposed to, but Sergeant Norrin gave me a break because I testified."

"I see," Halliday said. This was a point that hadn't come up in the trial, but he didn't know what good it would do now.

"Didn't you make a sales ticket or receipt on the sale of the gun? That would have a date on it."

"I didn't because I wasn't supposed to be selling her the gun in the first place," Morton said. "Besides, I don't keep records most of the time.

I got the whole business in my head."

HALLIDAY nodded and walked out on the street. There had been a frame he knew; and that was why Morton wouldn't risk naming a date. Because it might have turned out that Ann would have an alibi for a specific day. Whoever had planned the frame didn't take chances. How to prove any of that?

He went into a restaurant and ordered a cup of coffee. When he finished it he walked to Wabash Avenue and caught a street car going north. He got off at Randolph Street and walked a few doors down to the handbook where the shooting had happened.

There were bright placards in the window advertising standard brands of pipe tobaccos and cigarettes. Most bookies used them to give their places a vaguely respectable appearance.

He opened the door and went inside. Sol Smith was standing behind a counter on which there was a green felt dice board. There was no one else in the place.

"Hello, Halliday," Smith said.

"I just want to check on—" He stopped and shrugged. "Just anything, I guess. You know how the case came out. I can't sit around and do nothing."

"I know how it is," Smith said. "A hell of a note." He was slim, small, beautifully dressed. His nails were carefully kept, polished. "But I don't know anything that will help."

"Who was Willie Peters?"

Smith shrugged his well-tailored shoulders. "Just a guy out for a buck, like all of us. Horse player, gambler, that kind of guy."

"Did you know him well?"

"You know. I'd seen him around. Not too well, I guess."

Bill Dineen came out from a back door. He wasn't wearing a coat and there were dark patches of perspiration staining the underarms of his shirt. He had a hat pushed back on his head and his skin looked blotched and red. He looked at Halliday, then at Smith, and back at Halliday.

"What the hell does he want?" he said.

"Take it easy," Smith said. "He's just looking around for some dope about this guy his wife shot."

Dineen looked at Halliday. "We don't know anything, buddy. We did our talking to the cops. You got a warrant or something?"

"I haven't got anything," Halliday said. "I'm just looking around."

"Well, there's nothing to see here."

Smith was looking at Dineen. There was color in his face. "Will you shut that flannel mouth of yours? Go sleep off that load you're carrying."

"Go to sleep yourself," Dineen said. "What's this guy bothering us for?"

"His wife is in a bad spot," Smith said softly. "He likes his wife. He wants to help her if he can. Do you understand that?"

The words meant nothing but the tone he used was something else. Dineen's mouth worked loosely and he tried to smile.

"Yeah, yeah," he said. He looked nervously at Halliday. "Sorry I was edgy. I know how you feel, fella. But we can't help you."

"Yeah," Smith said, looking away from Dineen. "We were the two most surprised guys in the world. Willie Peters was standing right there talking to us—then the door opens and your wife comes in. Bang! Willie wasn't talking anymore. That was all there was to it."

HALLIDAY heard the door behind him open. He looked around and

saw a girl standing inside the door. She was smiling and when she walked toward the counter she swayed a little.

"Hello, boys," she said.

"Hello, Ginny," Smith said.

The girl stopped in the middle of the floor and looked down at the black and white linoleum squares. She kept smiling in a vacant sort of way, and Halliday realized there was an unnatural stillness in the room. He glanced at Dineen and Smith. Smith was watching the girl and his eyes were cautious. Dineen's mouth was working loosely.

"He fell right here," the girl said. She kept smiling, speaking in a singsong voice. "Little Willie fell right here. I wonder how much it hurt him? He used to moan like a baby if he cut himself shaving. I'll bet he didn't like it when that bullet went into him. One of the docs told me he didn't bleed much. Did all of his bleeding inside where it didn't show."

She looked up at Halliday. "You're her husband. I saw you in court. I saw her, too. She's a nice-looking girl. Real sweet." She kept looking at Halliday and her eyes started to burn and the smile slid off her face. "Yeah," she said quietly, "a real sweet kid. Do you think she looked sweet when she blew that hole in Willie? Oh, I watched her in court. White-faced little tramp. Twisting her hands together, looking at you with big sad eyes. Did she look at Willie that way?"

"Was Willie Peters your husband?" Halliday asked.

Smith said, "They were friends. She's been on the booze since it happened." His voice was low but the girl heard.

She looked at him, weaving a little. "I guess I have," she said. "When they burn her I'm going to have a little drink for Willie. I'll say, 'Willie, they just burned that sweet-faced little tramp that shot you. Does that make it any better, honey?' "

"This is her husband," Smith said.

"I'll drink to him, too, then. I'll drink to all of you bums." She started to cry and Halliday saw that Dineen was looking sick. Smith had nothing in his face.

"Need any dough?" he said.

"I'm all right."

Halliday nodded to Smith and walked out of the place. He went down half a block and crossed the street. He came back on the opposite side of the street and stepped into a doorway where he could watch the front of the handbook.

He was going to know more about this Ginny. She might be a link to something else. No one had mentioned her in the trial. She hadn't come forward herself. It was only luck that he'd come in contact with her.

HE WAITED for an hour. Finally she came out and walked south on Wabash. He crossed the street and followed her, keeping a half block behind. She was easy to follow. She walked slowly, almost aimlessly.

She had once been an attractive girl. Now she was about thirty, hardened and cheap. The blonde hair was streaked from peroxide and the tan polo coat she wore needed cleaning. Her figure was still slim and her legs were those of a dancer—shapely, slender, muscular.

She passed Madison and turned in at a small bar. Halliday waited outside a moment then went in. The place was dark and there were brown wooden booths along the left wall. On the right a bar ran the length of the room. Two or three men were sitting at the bar drinking beer. The bartender was watching the traffic on Wabash.

Halliday saw the blonde. She was

sitting in the last booth staring down at the table. He walked down and slid into the opposite seat of the booth. She looked up at him without recognition.

"I'm Halliday," he said. "I talked with you a while ago at the bookie."

Her eyes focused. "Yeah. What do you want?"

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"No."

A sloppy waitress came over to their booth. Halliday ordered two bourbons with water. The waitress brought them back and looked at the blonde with the contempt that women who work feel for women who drink bourbon at eleven in the morning.

"I said I didn't want a drink."

"It might make you feel better."

She drank the drink and shuddered. She fumbled for the water and drank some from the glass. Some of it went down her chin and she wiped it away with the back of her hand.

"I'm sorry about Willie Peters," Halliday said.

"Did you know him?"

"No, I didn't."

"Why the hell are you sorry then?"

"You cared a lot for him. There must be something pretty good about a man a woman loves that much."

"That's bull. You want to know about Willie Peters? He was a little guy and he was fat. He wasn't very clean, either. He'd wear a shirt for a week unless I took it off him. He wore white felt hats and his vest used to pull up about three inches at the waist and show his dirty shirt. He smoked cigars and let them go out. Then he'd chew on the cigar like a cow with her cud. That was Willie Peters. The big horse player. God, he thought he was hot. Always going to take the track for a ride. Always had a winner. He'd sit around our place with a dope sheet and come up with six winners. The funny thing was, none of his horses ever won. That would make a smart guy mad. Maybe a smart guy would have gone to work and said to hell with the horses. But not Willie. He never got mad. He'd laugh and keep trying. Never got mad at anybody."

"You loved him, didn't you?"

"How do you know?"

"You just told me you did."

"Yeah, I loved him," she said. "Now what do you want?"

"My wife didn't kill him," Halliday said.

"The jury thought she did."

"The whole thing was a frame. I don't know why, but that's the God's truth. Did your Willie ever mention her? Did he know her?"

FROM under layers of alcoholic fog her mind seemed to be turning that over slowly. "No, he didn't mention her. He told me about everything. Always happy about everything."

"He never cheated on you, did he?"

"Who else would have that fat little guy?" she said scornfully.

"Then he didn't know her. And she didn't know him. Yet Dineen and Smith claim she said, 'You asked for this,' and then shot him. That's a lie. Someone else shot Willie Peters. Who would want him out of the way? That's the person we've got to find."

"I don't know," she said helplessly.

"Who didn't like Willie Peters?"

Her face was hardening. "So then you'll run to the cops. You want me to rat so you can save that wife of yours. Maybe she killed Willie. Maybe you're just talking too fast for me."

"I want to save my wife," he said. "I also want the man who shot Willie Peters to get what's coming to him. You want that too, don't you?"

"I'm no squealer. I'll take care

of the guy myself if he did it. Now let me alone."

"All right, Ginny, I'll leave. But could I see you again sometime?"

She shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

He got her address and then he went out and hailed a cab. He went to the Criminal Courts building at Twenty-sixth and California. After asking questions and waiting for half an hour, he walked into the office of the State's attorney who had prosecuted his wife's case.

His name was Granville. He was graying, cautious, about forty. He sat behind a neat desk with his back to a window.

"What is it, Halliday?" he asked.

"I've been trying to find out something to break this frame-up against my wife," Halliday said. "You and the police are through but I'm still working."

"Now just a minute," Granville said. "Believe me, I know how you must feel. But be reasonable. We haven't 'quit.' We've closed the case. There's a difference. The evidence was irrefutable and the decision was left to the jury. They made the decision and that's where we step out."

"Okay, put it that way. But I've found something. Willie Peters had a girl. I talked to her a half hour ago. She claims Willie Peters didn't know my wife."

"How would she know?"

"She knew all about him. She wouldn't tell me everything because she doesn't like the police. But she knows of someone who wanted to get rid of Willie Peters."

"She wouldn't say who?"

"No, she said she'd take care of him, herself. She was pretty drunk—"

"Oh," Granville said.

"She knew what she was saying, though."

Granville shrugged and lit a cigarette. "What do you expect me to do?"

"Do?" Halliday swallowed hard. "Well, that's up to you, I don't know how you work."

"The case is closed," Granville said. "I'm not just interested in convictions, Halliday. I like to see a little justice done, simply for variety's sake. But what you've told me isn't enough for me to suggest re-opening the case. You've talked to a drunken woman who thinks maybe somebody shot her boy friend. Tomorrow morning she'll have forgotten she ever talked to you. Halliday, take my advice. Put your hope in an appeal and a better deal from the next jury. Don't waste your energy chasing around these drunken hopheads. They'll tell you anything if you're buying the liquor."

"Okay," Halliday said.

"You think I'm not cooperative."

"What I think of you would get me ten years," Halliday said.

HE TRIED to see Ginny the next day and the day after, but it was a week before he contacted her. They went to a bar in her neighborhood, a small cheap place that smelled of gin and unwashed human beings. They sat on stools at the end of the bar and he ordered drinks.

"How's everything?" he asked tonelessly.

"Okay," she said. She wasn't drunk. She'd been drinking but she was in fair shape.

"What kind of trouble was Willie in?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Somebody shot him."

"Yeah, he was in trouble. Little fool. If your wife didn't kill him I know who did."

"Won't you tell me?"

She looked at him bitterly. "I'm no squealer. I'll get the guy who did it, but the cops won't get him."

"All right," he said. "Have a drink."

He saw her again three days later in the same place. She wasn't drunk this time. Her eyes were clear.

"You look like hell," she said. "Been sleeping?"

"I've stopped trying. It's no use."

"You're crazy about this wife of yours, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said. "She's not very big, you know. Built like you, but not as tall. That's what really sticks in my mind. Doing that to someone so small. She's holding up pretty well. She tries to smile when I'm there."

"You been married long?"

"About three years. I'm older than she is. She was just out of business school when I met her. She was just twenty. I was thirty-one."

"She likes you, doesn't she?"

"Yes, I think she does."

"You're getting me mixed up," she said irritably. She was quiet for a long while, staring moodily at her drink. "When does it happen?"

Halliday swallowed. It was a question he couldn't ask himself. But he knew the answer. "Ten days," he said.

"See me tomorrow night in here," she said. "I've got to think."

"You'll tell me who it was tomorrow night?"

"I'm not sure I know. But Willie was trying to start a book. I told him he had to be in with the syndicate, but he just laughed. Said he was too small for them to worry about. He didn't have a place, took bets on a street corner. They told him to lay off, but he laughed. He told me they were kidding."

"And somebody in the syndicate killed him?"

"I don't know. Let me think about it until tomorrow night. I'm not trying to make you sweat. But I got to think."

"All right, Ginny."

SERGEANT NORRIN was still wearing the gray suit and the greasy gray hat. He still smelled of tobacco smoke and sour beer. He listened to Halliday's story, grunting occasionally.

"Maybe you got something," he said. "But this babe—this Ginny—what proof has she got?"

"I don't know. But if she knows the man—or thinks she does—we can work on him, can't we?"

"Yeah, we can do that," Norrin said.

They were in Norrin's office with the dirty blinds and the cigarette-littered floor. Norrin was slumped in his chair, feet propped on the desk. He worked a tooth pick from one side of his mouth to the other.

"You're seeing her tomorrow night, eh?"

"That's it."

"And she's going to tell you who she thinks killed Willie Peters? Okay, you keep that date. Then get in touch with me and let me know how it goes."

"YOU know the one I mean," Halliday said to the bartender. "I've been in here with her a couple of times. A blonde."

"Yeah, I know her, the bartender said. "You sat down at the last two stools. Drank bourbon."

"Yeah, that's here. Well are you sure you haven't seen her tonight?"

"I'm pretty sure she wasn't in. Yeah, I know she wasn't. Any message if she shows up."

Halliday looked at his watch. Nine-thirty. He'd been waiting since seven. "Just tell her to wait," he said.

He went outside and walked down the block quickly. Ginny lived just

a few blocks away and he knew he had been foolish to wait so long at the bar. Maybe she was sick . . .

. . . Her landlady wasn't very interested.

"She owes me four dollars," she said. "She'd better come back."

"When did she leave?" Halliday asked.

"Sometime this afternoon. Two guys came and got her. They were from the State whisky commission. They said she was drinking too much."

The landlady was an elderly woman, with dirty gray hair and a breath that reeked of gin. She looked half drunk.

"Did she go willingly?" Halliday asked.

"Did she what? Oh, I get you. No, God no. She put up a fight. They gave her a shot or something to quiet her down. Then they put her in a big car and drove away."

"NORRIN? This is Halliday. Look, I've got something definite now."

Norrin's voice was interested. "Let's have it."

"Okay. I'm phoning from a place about a block from where this Ginny lived. Her landlady said a couple of guys picked her up today. They gave her a phony story about being from some alcoholic league."

"Let's have that again," Norrin said.

Halliday gave him the whole story. "What do you think?" he said, when he finished.

"I think you've scared up something," Norrin said. "Where are you now?"

Halliday told him and Norrin said, "Okay, hang on. I'll get a squad and some and get you."

. . . Norrin picked him up in a squad at ten fifteen. He was alone in the car. Halliday climbed in beside him and Norrin let out the clutch.

"I've got an idea," Norrin said. "I think I got an idea about who this babe Ginny was talking about. Now this ain't official. I mean I'm working on my own time. Do you want to take a run out to a joint on the South Side where we may be able to contact this guy."

"Of course," Halliday said.

They drove to sixty-six hundred south and twenty-four hundred west. The neighborhood had once been a residential section, but it had slipped gradually. For a few years it had maintained an aura of respectability as a genteel boarding-house district. Then the big homes had been bought by speculators who broke them down into two and three-room apartments. The neighborhood went down another notch when the railroad put a spur through the center of the community, and after that the disintegration was rapid. Gamblers took over big houses and hung neon signs in front in front advertising beer and dancing. Madames from the North Side, where a religious crusade was going on, came in with coteries of young girls.

Soon the area was one of the hot spots of Chicago; then vice moved further south and the neighborhood was left to transients and gangsters. With this element came disease, vermin and peddlers, until the once aristocratic section had decayed into an area of crumbling mansions, cheap beer joints and Salvation Army tent meetings.

Norrin stopped the car across the street from a dark home which was surrounded by rusted iron fencing. He turned off the ignition and glanced at Halliday.

"Let's go," he said.

They walked across the street, through crazily leaning iron gates and up the creaking steps to the front door.

Norrin loosened the gun in his holster and pounded on the door with the flat of his hand.

There was a long wait; then footsteps and the door opened. A young man stood in the doorway. He was dark and slim and even in the dim light it was obvious that he was carefully dressed.

He was Sol Smith.

"Well?" he said.

HALLIDAY glanced uncertainly at Norrin. Norrin took the gun from his shoulder holster and put it deliberately against Halliday's ribs.

"Okay, Halliday. Inside," Norrin said.

Halliday looked at him in confusion. "Wait a minute," he said. "What kind of a deal is this?"

"Get inside," Norrin said.

The gun dug into his back, shoving him ahead. Sol Smith stepped aside with a little smile as Halliday stumbled into the darkened vestibule.

The door slammed behind him. Norrin said, "Up those steps. Take it nice and easy."

Sol Smith went ahead. Norrin followed him. They took him to a lighted room on the second floor. There was a big man in a chesterfield overcoat sitting on a chair in the corner. The room was cold.

On a bed against the wall the blonde was lying. There was a smear of blood on her cheek and she was breathing heavily. She was unconscious.

The big man said to Norrin, "This the guy?"

"He's the guy."

The big man scowled and got to his feet. He had large fleshy features, hard black eyes. He looked important. There was a glittering diamond ring on the little finger of his left hand, and a diamond stickpin in his tie. He looked at Halliday and shook his head.

"Damn," he said.

He sat down again and took out cigarettes. Norrin held a light for him, which was accepted without comment. He looked at his big hands and shook his head again.

"Damn it, why don't I use my head?"

Halliday said to Norrin, "What's this all about?"

"Just keep your mouth shut," Norrin said. "Will you do me that little favor?"

The big man said, "It's been screwed up since the start."

Norrin said, "I did all right."

Sol Smith grinned a little and said, "I did what I was told."

"I don't feel like any jokes," the big man said. He scowled and dropped his cigarette on the floor. He looked at Halliday with a pained expression.

"What do you do?"

"I'm a bookkeeper."

"A bookkeeper. That's fine." He made a gesture of resignation and looked at Norrin. "You hear that? He's a bookkeeper. Probably makes fifty lousy bucks a week. A real big wheel." He spat on the floor and looked gloomily at his hands.

"I'll tell you something Mr. Bookkeeper. I'm a gambler. I got gamblers working for me. I make fifty thousand dollars a year. And you're causing me trouble." He seemed to be talking to himself and he c o n t i n u e d to stare gloomily at his hands. "That's hot, ain't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Halliday said.

"Listen c l o s e , Mr. Bookkeeper. About a month ago I killed a guy named Willie Peters." He nodded slowly. "That's right. I killed him. You'd think a guy making fifty thousand a year could kill a punk without causing himself any trouble. I shot him about

six o'clock at night in a loop bookie. He was stepping on our toes and he gave me a little lip. So I got mad and shot him. Wouldn't you think a guy with my dough would have better sense? I got guys on the payroll to handle jobs like that. But I lose my head and shoot him."

HE LIT another cigarette. "Right after I shoot him a babe walks in. A nice looking babe. You got good taste, Mr. Bookkeeper, 'cause this babe is your wife. She takes a look and falls over on the floor. So I tell Smith and Dineen to tell the cops she done it. I get a pawn-broker to make out he sold her the gun. It goes okay. The babe don't know from nothin' and the jury says she done it."

He shrugged impatiently. "Then you find this dumb broad, Ginny, and she knows about me. And you start agitating. Start calling the cops. You're going to raise hell. That's how you, a fifty-dollar-a-week bookkeeper, get in my hair. Hell of a note, ain't it?"

"You're the guy who framed my wife," Halliday said.

"That's what I been telling you," the big man said. "Ain't you got ears?"

Norrin said, "So what do we do?"

"I think we get rid of the broad," the big man said thoughtfully. "I don't know about this guy. He's pretty hot. The papers will be after him when his wife goes to the chair. They'll want stories from him. Maybe if he ain't around they'll start agitating. Maybe we just better hold him for a while."

He nodded to Sol Smith. "Go down and get Dineen. We better go to work."

Smith went out of the room. The blonde was starting to come around. She rolled her head weakly, then began to moan.

The big man smiled and walked over to the side of the bed. "Ain't this nice," he said. "Little Ginny's coming around. Little Ginny with the big mouth."

He shook her shoulder gently. "Ginny? It's me. Nicky. Say hello to Papa."

The blonde opened her eyes and began cursing weakly.

"You ain't strong enough to talk, little Ginny," the big man grinned. "You better take another nap."

He drew his hand back and slapped her viciously across the mouth. She groaned and turned her face away. He hit her again and she lay still.

The big man looked at Halliday. "See how nice she goes to sleep?"

Halliday said, "Do what you like to me, but stop hitting her."

The big man grinned. "A real gentleman, ain't he, Norrin?"

Halliday looked at Norrin and the bitterness in him was coming to the surface. "What kind of a man are you?" he said, almost wonderingly. "You'll stand by and frame my wife for a murder this man committed. You stand here while he slaps a helpless woman around. Why? Does the money he pays you make up for the way you must feel about yourself?"

"Shut up," Norrin said casually.

The big man sat down again and lit a cigarette.

"Where's Smith?"

Norrin shrugged.

"Go get him. Don't stand there and shrug your shoulders."

"Okay."

HE WALKED out of the shoulders and they heard him going down the dark stairs. The house was quiet except for the thudding of his footsteps.

The big man frowned at Halliday.

"Mr. Bookkeeper, you certainly made a mess for me."

"I'm thinking about my wife. You made a mess for her."

"Better her than me, Mr. Bookkeeper."

Halliday twisted his hands together. He felt he was caught in something it was useless to fight. The police, the syndicate, the big men with diamonds —all were all linked tightly together. They could send his wife to the chair, they could slap a helpless drunken blonde around and laugh about it, they could do what they wanted to him.

They heard footsteps coming up the stairs. The big man got to his feet and grinned. "You're not going to worry me anymore, Mr. Bookkeeper."

The door opened and Granville, the cautious, g r a y i n g State's attorney walked into the room. There were two men behind him, with guns in their hands.

"Okay, Nicky," Granville said, in his dry, careful voice.

The big man's mouth dropped open foolishly.

"What's this?"

"Don't waste my time," Granville said. "We got Smith and Dineen downstairs. Morton, the pawnbroker, is down at Central singing so loud you can hear him in Rogers Park. We got the whole thing, Nicky. Let's see you beat this one."

The big man looked down at his hands and began to swear eloquently. Finally he glared at Granville and said, "Mr. State's Attorney." His voice was bitter. "And how much do you make a year, you crum?"

"Let's go," Granville said.

"I STARTED working on it after you talked to me, Halliday," Granville said. "Just curious at first. We checked on this girl Ginny and kept a tail on her. We found out about his trouble with Nicky. Tonight we picked up Martin and told him we were arresting Dineen and Sol Smith. Martin sang sweet and loud. The tail followed you and Norrin out here. We got in the house and got Dineen. When Smith came down we got him. Next was Norrin. They're all talking a mile a minute right now."

"Thank God," Halliday said.

"Take a little credit yourself," Granville said drily.

. . . They brought Ann out of her cell when he got to the Criminal Courts building. A matron took him to the waiting room.

"She'll be right in," she smiled. "She's packing her things now."

He lit a cigarette nervously. He couldn't believe the nightmare was over. It would take him time to get used to the idea that Ann was going to live. He'd have to work at it. Ann has coppery hair. Ann can't carry a tune. Ann is going to live.

The door opened then and he jumped to his feet. Ann came in and they walked toward each other, smiling.

THE END

MURDER IN THE LABORATORY

By ALEXANDER BLADE

Laboratories are not only used for crime-detection. Sometimes they make wonderful murder-spots!

THERE is a kind of chilling horror in the thought of a murder taking place in such a respected institution as Harvard University. There, shielded by the cloak of academic dignity, stood a man with a mind which could, at one and the same time, reason on the problems involving geologic strata and then fashion diabolically the plot to commit murder. The lips

that lectured so logically on the chemical formulae of the day's lesson shaped themselves to blurt incredible falsehoods in hysteric denial of tragic truth. The arm that delicately handled test tubes for chemical experiments was able to turn and brutally crush and mangle a man's body.

Professor John W. Webster's capacity for murder lay hidden from public view. He was a highly respected and renowned chemist working quietly in one of the most credited educational institutions of the country in its most Puritanical town, Boston.

The year this startling crime occurred was 1849, a memorable one in American history. Harvard was newly built then; the Medical College was its latest addition. It was a three story structure facing North Grove Avenue. The sides and rear of the building jutted out into the swirling waters of the Charles River. It was built on ground donated by one of the city's wealthiest and most honored citizens, Dr. George Parkman.

Dr. Parkman, like many old philanthropists, was a tight-fisted, hard-hitting bargain driver when it came to matters of business. His physical appearance matched his personality perfectly. His face was long and angular with a sharp protruding chin he was thin and tall—and remarkably active for his sixty years.

Dr. Parkman had loaned a sizeable sum of money to his colleague, Professor of Chemistry and Mineralogy, John W. Webster. He had good reason to believe that a certain mineral collection of Dr. Webster's on which he had foolishly taken a mortgage for $1200, had just been sold by Webster to a third party. Parkman's wrath knew no bounds, and on the night of November 19, 1849, the irate man put his pent-up fury into words, called Webster every name he could think of, and threatened to fire him from the staff if he would not settle his debt immediately.

Professor Webster had been living far beyond his means. His annual salary of $1200 did not go far enough to cover his needs and the needs of his wife and two daughters. He had borrowed from Parkman and others to make up for the lack. Now that Parkman demanded payment and there was no more collateral to put up, Webster began to realize the seriousness of his predicament. His home and reputation were at stake.

What action the harassed professor decided to take can best be understood by the simple though cold statement of the events which took place, in their proper chronological order. The same day that Parkman lost his temper, Littlefield, the janitor of the Medical College, remembered indulging in a strange conversation with Webster. The professor had shown him an elaborate jack-knife he had lately acquired. During their talk, he had made inquiries regarding the vault the anatomy classes used to dispose of cadaver remains, no longer of use in the dissecting room. Webster attempted to explain away his curiosity by saying that he wished to get some gas from the vault for an experiment. Littlefield became suspicious, and from that day on, secretly watched the professor's movements.

WEDNESDAY morning, Dr. Webster composed a note to Parkman, asking him to call at the chemistry rooms on Friday noon, November 23rd. He handed the unsealed envelope to Littlefield for delivery. Thursday, Dr. Webster sent Mr. Littlefield to the Massachusetts General Hospital for a pint of blood. He dropped by Parkman's House Friday morning to remind him of the appointment.

Friday at 1 p.m. Dr. Parkman was already on his way to the Chemistry laboratory. He stopped to pass the time of day with Mr. Holland and made some purchases in his grocery store, and then proceeded toward the school. After Elias Fuller nodded to him in the street at 1:40 p.m. Dr. Parkman was never again seen alive by anyone outside the Medical College. What transpired after he entered the chemistry laboratory can only be surmised. It is assumed that Parkman again asked that the debt be settled and that Webster answered him with an appeal for more time. Dr. Parkman unleashed his tongue and heaped bitter taunts and insults upon Webster whereupon the chemist flew into a rage. In wild frenzy he reached out and seized a grapevine stump that was used for experiments in testing dyes. This he swung with all the force he could give it, taking Parkman completely by surprise. The club caught him squarely on the side of the head. Dr. Parkman dropped to the stone floor without a sound.

Now frightened, flustered and excited, Webster dashed from one door to the other hastily bolting them closed while Parkman lay dying. Dr. Webster's course of action seemed to be grimly outlined in his mind. After starting a blazing fire in the assay furnace, he dragged Parkman to a sink in the back room. Then he began to systematically dismember the body with one instrument, his jack-knife. How this man of the classroom could force himself to carry through this ghastly business defies all logical thought. There could only have been one motive urging him on—self preservation. By destroying the corpse he hoped to save his own life. dissecting a corpse with a jack-knife is feat that the most experienced surgeon might back away from. But Webster, filled with a sort of superhuman energy fostered by an uncanny combination of hate and fear, was able to complete the grim task. Methodically he stuffed bit by bit of his victim into the furnace.

TOWARD evening he decided to leave the building as his presence there at such an unusual hour was bound to excite curiosity. The arms, legs, and pelvis he carried out into the lecture room and dumped into a zinc-lined well under the lid of a lecture table. He let water run through the tub. The rest of the body was thrown into a similar well, and potash was thrown over it. At 6 o'clock he was finished cleaning up the laboratory, and after locking all the doors, Professor

Webster made his way down the back stairway to the basement leaving the college by the East entrance. On his way across the bridge spanning the Charles River, he pulled Dr. Parkman's watch from his pocket and dropped it into the water below.

By that time of the same day, a search was being made for the missing philanthropist. Mr. Tukey, the City Marshal, had been informed of Dr. Parkman's failure to return home for lunch and supper. The wealthy doctor was traced as far as the Holland grocery store, and then Elias Fuller mentioned having seen him a few minutes late. There the trail ended.

Littlefield caught a glimpse of Dr. Webster leaving the building and thought it quite strange that he used the East exit. The fact that all the laboratory doors were locked and water could be heard running within, puzzled him and increased his curiosity.

By Saturday the newspapers were full of Dr. Parkman's strange disappearance. A reward of $3000 was offered for any information which might lead to his discovery.

In an effort to establish his innocence and lead the police away, Professor Webster appeared at the home of Rev. Francis Parkman, the doctor's brother. The entire family was congregated there. Without the customary salutations, Webster bluntly informed them that he had seen Parkman at 1:30 Friday. He claimed to have paid all he owed to Parkman.

Dr. Webster also took the trouble to tell Littlefield that before Dr. Parkman disappeared he had been paid the sum of four hundred eighty-three dollars and sixty-four cents. All this little act managed to do was cause the fire of suspicion to burn even more brightly in the janitor's mind. Rumors began to fly about Boston that the body could be found somewhere in Brooklyn Heights or in East Cambridge. A search was made of the Medical College by police officials. They didn't do much poking around in the Chemistry Laboratory, and seemed to be satisfied with a glance into the open doorway.

Tuesday the search through the college was repeated with Littlefield leading the way. The basement was inspected, and again the men made an attempt to investigate Dr. Webster's laboratory. Though more thorough the second time, Webster managed to withdraw their attention from his private back room, and the officers themselves decided to ignore the privy. Once more the grim secret was safe from prying eyes.

As soon as the officers left, Webster hurried to dispose of the rest of the body. One leg and the pelvis was dropped into the vault below the privy. The remainder of the afternoon was spent at the furnace burning the arms and parts of the left leg.

Littlefield, having good reason to be suspicious of Webster, and realizing that the police had not thoroughly searched the chemistry laboratory, pointed out the lower vaults to them. They ignored his remarks and left the building. But Littlefield's suspicions were not abated. When Webster casually offered to buy the janitor a turkey, out of the goodness of his heart, Littlefield knew that something was definitely out of order. This was the most obvious mistake John Webster ever made, for he was known as the kind of man who had never given anything away in his life. The janitor gladly accepted the gift, but firmly made up his mind to keep a close watch on the Professor's movements.

On Friday, Dr. Webster did some unusual shopping for a chemistry professor. He bought twenty fathoms of two threaded marline, made of Russia hemp, and several unusually large fish hooks. He also ordered a thick tin box eighteen inches square and thirteen inches deep with a strong handle on top that could carry great weight.

IN THE laboratory, though the doors were locked, there was not much that escaped Littlefield's eye. Through the keyhole and the slit under the door, the inquisitive janitor was able to ascertain that Webster was busy carrying heavy things from one end of the laboratory to the stove. The wall against which the assay furnace stood was very, very hot and remained so constantly during the day when Webster was at work. On his own hook, Littlefield undertook to dig a hole through the walls under Dr. Webster's privy. Before the task was completed, he hinted to Dr. Bigelow and Dr. Jackson about what he was doing. They encouraged him and decided to lend him aid, having suspicions of their own about Webster. When the men finally broke an opening through the wall, the secret was out. With the Marshal to confirm their findings, they entered the laboratory and examined the furnace only to find parts of Parkman's bones.

Three officers were sent to pick up the wily Dr. Webster at his home on the ruse that his laboratory was to be searched once again. He seemed to sense that something was wrong. The coach had not driven more than three blocks when the officers told the real reason for their mission.

At the laboratory, Webster was confronted by the evidence. The parts of the missing doctor's body found in the privy were laid out on a table in the room and appeared to be bound with the same marline that Dr. Webster had purchased. Cold sweat streamed down the face of the accused. On Saturday morning before the inquest the metal chest was found and when opened revealed a human thorax packed within. In the furnace a set of false teeth were found; these were sent to Parkman's dentist for identification. The bones were turned over to Dr. Wyman, one of the medical professors. Dr. Wyman labored for days reconstructing them to their proper positions. With the aid of three other doctors a complete skeleton was reconstructed revealing that the corpse belonged to a figure seventy and one-half inches in height, and that the victim was probably a man between fifty and sixty years of age as nearly as could be judged.

ALL of this tied up with the general build of Dr. Parkman. In the meantime, officers went out to Webster's home in search of the notes he claimed Parkman had canceled. They were not found, but several other items were. In the professor's bedroom closet were a pair of bloodstained slippers, and a pair of pantaloons, also bearing stains, with Webster's name plainly marked on the lining. In a bundle which had been left in Mrs. Webster's hands, the police found all the financial papers belonging to the deeply indebted professor. Only the formality of a trial was necessary. Professor Webster's doom was sealed.

The people of Boston were greatly shocked to hear that a horrible murder had been committed in that educational sanctum of sanctums, Harvard University, then under the auspicious direction of Dean Oliver Wendell Holmes. Most of them knew Dr. Webster by sight and had thought well of him. That was Webster's only means of defending himself at the trial. One character witness after another was brought in; but the incriminating evidence could not be refuted. The doctors of the college, Parkman's dentist, Littlefield, all had seen the ghastly remains of Parkman in Webster's laboratory. The motive was clear; words from Webster's own mouth had incriminated him.

In due time he was pronounced guilty by the court and sentenced to hang. A short time before the execution he broke down and made a full confession. He claimed that he had not the "remotest idea of injuring Dr. Parkman until the blow was struck." The note concerning the Friday appointment, his request for blood, all seemed to refute his claim for an unpremeditated murder. This frightened, selfish man, driven to crime by his own foolish actions met his death on the scaffold on August 30, 1850.

THE KIDNAPPED CORPSE

By JUNE LURIE

Kidnapping is not an unusual crime, but when it's a dead man's body, then . . .

ONE of the wierdest crimes on record was perpetrated in 1878 in a graveyard in New York. It was the work of robbers; the loot was a body. The events leading up to this strange kidnaping cannot be divulged for the criminals were never apprehended and their identity remains a mystery even to this day.

It was the body of the prosperous merchant, Alexander T. Stewart which was removed from its coffin one cold November night. The thin little man was reputed to be worth thirty million dollars at the time of his death. He had worked hard and long, starting out in his youth as a salesman, porter, and errand boy, and ending up as the owner of a flourishing business.

Stewart's body had scarcely been lowered into its last resting place in the churchyard of St. Mark's in-the-Bouwerie, at Second Avenue and Tenth Street, when very disturbing rumors began to circulate. It was whispered that some ruffians planned to steal the corpse and hold it for ransom. Several notorious criminals were found loitering near the churchyard during the next few weeks. But those weeks passed and nothing happened.

On the morning of October 8th, Sexton Hamill was shocked to discover that Stewart's grave had been disturbed. The nameslab had been lifted from the grass and clumsily replaced. Fearing that the hoodlums had gone into the vault, it was carefully examined. But the investigators found that nothing but the name slab had been tampered with.

Stewart's widow was greatly upset by this news and she directed her attorney to take every precaution possible to protect her late husband's grave. New locks were put on the churchyard gates. The identifying slab was moved to another point at least ten feet away from Stewart's burying place, and the old location was carefully covered with sod to disguise its whereabouts. A neighboring watchman was hired to look in on the place each night—and all was quiet and serene for a few days. But these precautions led to nothing for on the morning of November 7th, the assistant sexton was dumbfounded by the sight of a huge mound of earth at the mouth of the Stewart vault. The body was gone!

The police were put on the case within the hour. The trained and watchful eye of Superintendent George W. Walling went over all of the details at the scene of the crime. With cunning the grave robbers had ignored the decoy name slab. After removing the protective layer of earth, they had unscrewed the cover of the great cedar chest and cut through a lead coffin, and then forced open the casket containing the body. Most puzzling were the probable reasons that prompted the thieves to carry away the knobs and nameplate on the casket as well as a piece of the velvet lining which they had cut in the shape of an irregular triangle. Carelessly they had left behind a new coal shovel and a lantern.

These two bits of evidence could have been the decisive factors in the apprehension and conviction of the guilty men; but, unfortunately for the people of that period in history, the value of the fingerprint as a positive means of identification was as yet not realized. The shovel and lantern could not reveal their ownership.

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The Stewart family resorted to every means possible to retrieve the body of their departed Alexander. A reward of $25,000 was offered for the return of the corpse and the arrest and conviction of the abductors. The hunt was on.

THROUGHOUT the country amateur sleuths, with their eye on the reward money, searched deserted buildings and the interiors of suspicious-looking carts and wagons. The police opened a score of new graves in the belief that they might contain the missing body. Hundreds of professional criminals were brought in for questioning . . . but not one scrap of information came in.

Months passed and still no headway was made. In January a man who identified himself as Patrick H. Jones came to Inspector Walling with a curious story. If he did not have the missing parts of the Stewart casket, no one would have believed him. It seems that all these articles had come to him by express from Canada to prove authenticity. There were letters signed with the name "Romaine" asking Jones to act as intermediary in arranging for the return of the corpse—providing the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand in ransom could exchange hands. Communication was to be made through the personal column in the New York Herald.

After due deliberation, the lawyer for the Stewart family and Walling decided to play the kidnaper's game. Jones was instructed to publish a personal in the Herald on February 5th offering to begin negotiations. There was some dickering over the amount of ransom and negotiations ran on through the newspaper for almost a year. Finally in 1880, Mrs. Stewart decided to seek the return of her husband's body by her own efforts. She sent a new offer of $100,000 to the kidnapers through Jones. But Jones, taking matters into his own hands, thought that an offer of $20,000 would now be accepted. And it was.

Romaine laid down specific conditions under which the money was to be exchanged for the body. He directed that the funds, in currency, be placed in a canvas bag, and that a messenger leave New York at ten o'clock of a designated evening in a one horse wagon, and drive into Westchester County along a lonely road which he indicated on a map of the district. There further instructions would be given.

These directions were complied with in every detail by a Stewart relative. Taken from the deserted road down a country lane, he met two armed masked men. A triangular strip of velvet was offered as proof of identity and the men exchanged sacks—currency for bones.

The remains of the kidnaped corpse was once more given proper burial, this time at Garden City, Long Island. There it reposes today in a specially devised resting place beneath the dome of the Garden City Cathedral, protected by a hidden spring which, if touched, would have

shaken a cluster of bells in the church tower and sent an alarm out through the entire town.

The man who signed himself "Romaine" was never found.

MASTERS OF MOULAGE

IN THE process of tracking down their man, every criminologist keeps in mind that all things leave traces, all or any single one of which will lead to the careless criminal. The police laboratories translate the most minute traces left at the scene of the crime into factual evidence. One of the many processes of scientific crime detection is known as "moulage."

Moulage literally means "molding"—the making of intricate casts of even the most minute materiel which would be destroyed unless immediately detected and thus preserved. This copying and preservation covers every type of evidence—body wounds, teethmarks, footprints, perishable food and other substances which decompose quickly.

The art and use of moulage is not new; however, great progress has been made in the methods and materials used to preserve the precious and convicting evidences left behind by a criminal. Crude impressions of footprints, etc. were made in wax or clay. "Lifting prints" in such a manner convicted many ancients as well as more contemporary criminals.

Dr. Alphonse Poller, a Viennese scientist and amateur criminologist, was one of the greatest pioneers in revolutionizing new methods of the art of moulage. Since his interests were primarily along medical lines, Poller concentrated his study and use of the art in its relationship to the anatomy. He soon realized that when making large casts of the human head and body, a special molding material was needed. Clay was found to be too soft; tin foil, rubber and wax were too hard to obtain exact results. With these findings, Poller set about to devise two new materials. The results of his many experiments were a secret formula which included hominit and negocoll.

Negocoll was invaluable in making a life-mask. First warmed and spread lightly over the face in a thin even layer, negocoll coagulated quickly into a semi-plastic material of great strength and durability. So exact and microscopically correct were the impressions made with negocoll that not only were the sweat-gland outlets and the unseen ridges on a human finger able to be seen, but also, the tiniest pores on the entire body were thus unveiled.

The hominit compound was poured into the cast made from negocoll. Hominit was the stiffening agent, although it was a semi-liquid substance. The cast, now completed, could be colored

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or painted to highlight the location, direction and depth of all wounds or identifying marks.

Since the great Poller method was devised (after World War I), moulage has become one of the greatest tools of the crime-scientist. Formerly stopped cold in cases in which there was extreme decomposition of a body, scientists in the police laboratories are now able to count the papillary ridges on lacerated and decomposed fingers by making moulage casts. With the lifelike moulage cast of a mutilated corpse, a jury now is able to understand and judge the extent of the crime far better than relying on lengthy descriptions and medical testimonies which are usually too technical to be entirely understood.

THE Poller method of moulage made drastic changes in criminological instruction as well as in identification. In many of the nation's larger laboratories and police academies, there is a collection of moulage reproductions of characteristic, identifying calluses, scars, wounds and diseased parts of the body. All of these are used to illustrate to the young detective occupational diseases and mutilated markings which criminals have used to falsify their identifications. Such markings are even more valuable in the identification of the unknown body, for the occupation of the deceased can be detected by the moulage cast. This saves valuable time in tracking down many false leads.

While Poller's method of moulage was concerned with the impression of the human flesh, it took Dr. Hans Mullner to devise a method of copying imprints found in the softest and most fragile materiels—dust, sand, specs and flour. The transferring of a print in these materiels by using the Mullner moulage is detailed yet definite and exact.

Mullner encircled the bit of evidence in question with a strong cardboard cylinder, high and wide enough to cover the print completely. He then takes an atomizer filled with the finest and freshest plaster which he sprays at the inner walls of the cylinder and not directly onto the print. The sprayed plaster falls even in a layer upon the print itself.

A fine cloud of alcohol is then sprayed into the air above the imprint. The layer of plaster, now encompassing the print, soon absorbs the alcohol spray and the chemical reaction which results hardens the plaster over the imprint. The entire process is repeated three or four times until a durable cast is secured. This is finally lifted out and reinforced with several coats of plaster. With such a method, impressions of tire-tracks, heelmarks, etc. are easily obtainable to be later used as conclusive evidence at a criminal trial. Even the minutest particles in mud, sand or dirt can be easily "transferred" onto a moulage cast with the Mullner method.

And so it is that these masters of moulage

join forces with their fellow crime-scientists and criminologists to act as a constant menace to the criminal mind. Once the traces of crime are revealed, the last mile is quickly reached by those who plot against society. *by Peter Boggs*

ROBBERY FOR RANSOM

IF THE Duchess of Windsor's jewels had been stolen three hundred years ago, instead of in 1946, it would have been an extremely simple task to recover them. In those days the wealthy who were constantly beset by thieves and pickpockets always sought the return of their valuables through the services of the infamous Fence of Old Bailey, Johnathan Wild. A visit to Wild, the suggestion of a heavy reward, and in no time at all the stolen goods reappeared. It was like magic—almost.

The magic, of course, was in the figure of Johnathan Wild. He was born of a respectable family. At fifteen, having completed an abbreviated education, he was apprenticed to a buckle-maker at Birmingham. That trade was not for him; and neither was the responsibility of husband and provider, for at twenty-two Wild abandoned his work and a wife and child and made his way to London.

A few unfortunate extravagances landed Wild in prison and it was there that his life work began. He met and became well acquainted with the thieves and cutthroats there, and on his release he set himself up as a receiver of stolen goods. Business was excellent and profits were lucrative in handling the loot of his many acquaintances especially since there was no law for the punishment for the receivers of stolen goods.

SUCH a law was finally passed, however, and threatened Wild's profession as well as the livelihood of his thieving friends. Few if any "fences" would handle stolen items with the threat of a fifteen year prison sentence hanging over them without demanding for their task a lion's share of the value of the swag. The most industrious thieves were scarcely able to obtain a livelihood. They had the choice of living half-starved or risking selling the goods in the open and chancing the greater danger of getting caught.

Wild met this threat to his profession with a new plan. He called together his motley friends and, after sympathizing with their plight, made this proposal. Since disposing of stolen property was so dangerous to thief and fence alike, all items so acquired were to be delivered to him. His job would be to contact the thief's victim and to "arrange" for the return of the stolen goods—for a slight reward to be split between himself and the man who did the job. In this manner both parties would be out of danger

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and a living wage assured.

The plan was perfectly successful. With the loot securely hidden, Wild would visit the thief's victim pretending to be greatly concerned at his misfortune and explain that a broker friend of his had stopped some goods which might possibly be the missing articles. He would also drop the hint that the broker deserved some reward for his disinterested conduct and his trouble. The victim generally coughed up and invariably promised to overlook the "broker's" negligence in stopping the thief as well as the goods.

Wild's scheme was so successful that it was soon possible for him to wait for the victim to come to him. That is, his name became so notorious that he set up an office to receive those who wanted his help. He became quite fancy and even charged his victims an entrance fee simply to get his advice. It was generally necessary for them to call back several times before he could trace their goods and after extracting the greatest possible reward, the goods would be returned.

The goods which Wild could not, for some reason or other, return under his scheme, he exported to France and Holland. His own ship carried the merchandise, and we may be sure that no custom duties were ever paid. It was a most lucrative enterprise and seemed destined to make Johnathan Wild a millionaire—when the sad end came.

It happened because Wild was too trusting. The fellow in whose warehouse the stolen goods were hidden demanded a greater share for his services. Wild refused and threatened the fellow with his sword. Though his opponent backed down, it was not long afterward that Wild was arrested by the constabulary on the evidence of this informer.

In prison, while awaiting trial, Wild attempted suicide. Two of his fellow inmates restrained him, however, and he went to the block cursing them. His head fell three hundred years ago, but in Scotland Yard the name of Johnathan Wild is not forgotten. *by Charles Recour*

OUT ON A LOST LIMB

IMAGINE the surprise and the shock experienced by a group of boys in June of 1943 when they discovered a human leg in the sand on Long Island beach! It had been torn off a little above the knee, and was still ludicrously garbed in a white sock and a black shoe. Frightened by the sight, the boys called park policemen to the scene. Hurriedly the mysterious limb was taken to the Meadowbrook Hospital where surgeons made a thorough examination.

When the surgeons and detectives finished their study, they hazarded a guess as to the probable

owner of the lost limb. They concluded that it once supported a man not more than five feet tall and that it had probably been snapped by a heavy blade, possibly a blade of a powerful propeller. Other clues which might point to the identity of the corpse were carefully noted. The toes overlapped one another. There was no telltale laundry mark on the sock, and the shoe revealed no distinctive marks or features except for some white specks on the toe. These proved to be waterproof paint.

The shoe and sock were turned over to a competent detective and then the real hunt began. The fact that there were absolutely no significant clues to work with did not stop him. The detective boarded a train for Endicott, the closest shoe manufacturing center. But he received no help there. Manufacturers stated that although they did not make the shoe, perhaps some factory near Boston did. So the detective boarded the train for Boston.

What might easily have been a wild goose chase suddenly began to pay off—but the going was slow. After five days of numerous questions to various manufacturers, the detective found one who said, "Yes, that's one of ours." Here he was able to pick up the following information: the shoe had been made the year before, was a size 6-D and made to retail at $6. The manufacturers laughed at the detective. They claimed he might as well not try to go any further for these shoes had been sold all over the country—and no records were kept of customers' names.

Unwilling to give up so soon, the detective set out with a list of jobbers and headed straight for the jobber listed in the New York area. The jobber supplied him with a retailer list, and then it was a matter of contacting every store that had sold that make of shoe during the last year.

Then began a series of very discouraging interviews with the owners and managers of small shoe stores. Most of the answers they gave were, "I don't remember who bought them" or "I'm not sure." More than a dozen shops were visited before one manager furnished the detective with some information that might prove useful. He recognized the shoe as a type commonly used by tugboat men and sent the investigator to the shop which catered to tugboat employees. It was owned by Jose Fernandez.

FERNANDEZ recognized the shoe immediately. He was startled. The shoe belonged to his brother-in-law, Francisco Lopez, who had disappeared a month before after an accident. In a few moments the mystery of the lost limb had been solved.

Lopez (who had overlapping toes) worked as an oiler on the tugboat Port Jervis. The vessel had collided with an outgoing freighter in the East River off the Manhattan shore a month before. When the noise and confusion had sub-

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sided it was found that three men were missing. The bodies of two had been found, but the body of Francisco Lopez had not been recovered. The detective followed up the case with an interview with members of the Port Jervis crew who had survived the crash. They told him Lopez was in the engine room painting at the time of the crash. He had been using white waterproof paint.

That was the final proof that the inquiring detective had been searching for. The case was now closed. No further doubt remained. The leg which made its appearance so suddenly on the Long Island beach belonged to an unfortunate tugboat employee who was now probably resting on the floor of the East River. *by Arn Rick*

MASSACRE AND MAN-HUNT

By JIM MARSHALL

Man-hunts usually finish up in massacres!

DURING its many years of development, the West became notoriously known as the "Wild West"—the stamping grounds of train robbers, fugitives from Justice in the North, East, and South, sly gamblers and shifty, get-rich-quick characters who judged life with the flip of the roulette wheel. These made the West wild and their activities made an Indian scalping party look like a mere social get-together.

Criminologists all agree, however, that despite the bursting volumes of these western badmen, few surpass the crime career of Pretty Boy Floyd, one of the toughest killers of all times, whose crimes made him a Public Enemy No. 1 and the object of a nation-wide manhunt.

A day in June, 1933 became a memorable one in the minds and burning wrath of the Federal Bureau of Investigation agents throughout the nation. One of the most daring massacres took place in the plaza of the Kansas City Union Station. There, Verne Miller, Pretty Boy Floyd and Adam Richetti, in cold blood, mowed down a group of Special Agents and local officers who were bringing "Jelly" Nash to justice. After the terrible massacre, four officers and the prisoner, for whose rescue the bloody battle was staged, were dead. This massacre established the reputation of Floyd as a cold-blooded killer and instigator of the crime. With Verne Miller and Adam Richetti considered minor characters in this bloody stage, Floyd became the main subject of one of the biggest man hunts in the history of crime. Every FBI agent was out to get Floyd, dead or alive and the general public showed their intense revenge by aiding the agents in rounding up the petty crooks associated with Floyd. The hunt was on.

Nash, the reason for the massacre, was an arch criminal himself, who was apprehended in Hot Springs, Arkansas, on June 16, 1933. Nash had a record of murders, bank robberies and lesser crimes and was sentenced to Leavenworth where he staged an escape, shooting and wounding the Warden in the process. Here, the FBI agents took over the case. When he was finally apprehended, the federal men took no chances with their dangerous prisoner and, during their trip to Kansas City, disguised Nash with a wig before getting off their train. Meanwhile, Miller, Nash's friend, along with Floyd and Richetti who volunteered their aid in the plan, rehearsed their roles and finally pulled their job on that bloody day in 1933.

Despite all precautions by the federal agents, the three killers approached the group and, before any had a chance to call for help, sprayed the group wildly with machine gun fire, even cutting down their friend, Nash, whose wig fooled his rescuers. Before the milling crowd could recover from the shock of the explosive scene, the three killers made good their escape and the heat was on. Action was quick in coming. After thorough concentration of federal men in the vicinity, Miller was soon captured, but Floyd was the FBI mens' bait.

PRETTY BOY FLOYD was an Oklahoma small-time crook until he graduated into the big-time jobs through the teachings of Tom Bradley, a bank-robber, whom he befriended while both were serving prison terms in a St. Louis penitentiary. Floyd executed a daring escape and his name became sensational news on the front pages of every newspaper. He continued his career of crime by robbing bigger banks and kidnapping personnel to use as shields. Richetti soon joined Floyd as a crime partner.

After FBI agents cleaned up Miller's gang and other underworld associates, Miller, himself, was found dead in a ditch near Detroit. In October, 1934, G-men followed a hot lead and learned that Floyd and Richetti were in Wellsville, Ohio. They closed in on the pair and while they did capture Richetti and finally sent him to the electric chair, Floyd, cunning and cold-blooded, managed to escape again. His freedom was short-lived, however, when the agents heard that a farmer reported a stranger in the vicinity. Floyd was haggling over the price of a car which the farmer offered to sell to him. The farmer made a checkup of his customer and from his description, the federal men nearby deduced that at last, their rat was in the trap.

With machine guns drawn and ready to spurt the same fire Floyd unmercifully used to cut down Kansas City agents, they surrounded his car but he started running across the field. Ignoring his captor's calls to stop, the G-men finally riddled his body with a dozen bullets. The slate was clean. Justice and the G-men had avenged society.

MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING-

(OR IS IT?)

BY GROUCHO MARX

WHAT do you want to save up a lot of money for? You'll never need the stuff.

Why, just think of all the wonderful, wonderful things you can do *without* money. Things like—well, things like—

On second thought, you'd better keep on saving, chum. Otherwise you're licked.

For instance, how are you ever going to build

that Little Dream House, without a trunk full of moolah? You think the carpenters are going to work free? Or the plumbers? Or the architects? Not those lads. They've been around. They're no dopes.

And how are you going to send that kid of yours to college, without the folding stuff?

Maybe you think he can work his way through by playing the flute.

If so, you're crazy. (Only three students have ever worked their way through college by playing the flute. And they had to stop eating for four years.)

And how are you going to do that world-traveling you've always wanted to do? Maybe you think you can stoke your way across, or scrub decks. Well, that's no good. I've tried it. It interferes with shipboard romances.

So—all seriousness aside—you'd better keep on saving, pal.

Obviously the best way is by continuing to buy U. S. Savings Bonds—through the Payroll Plan.

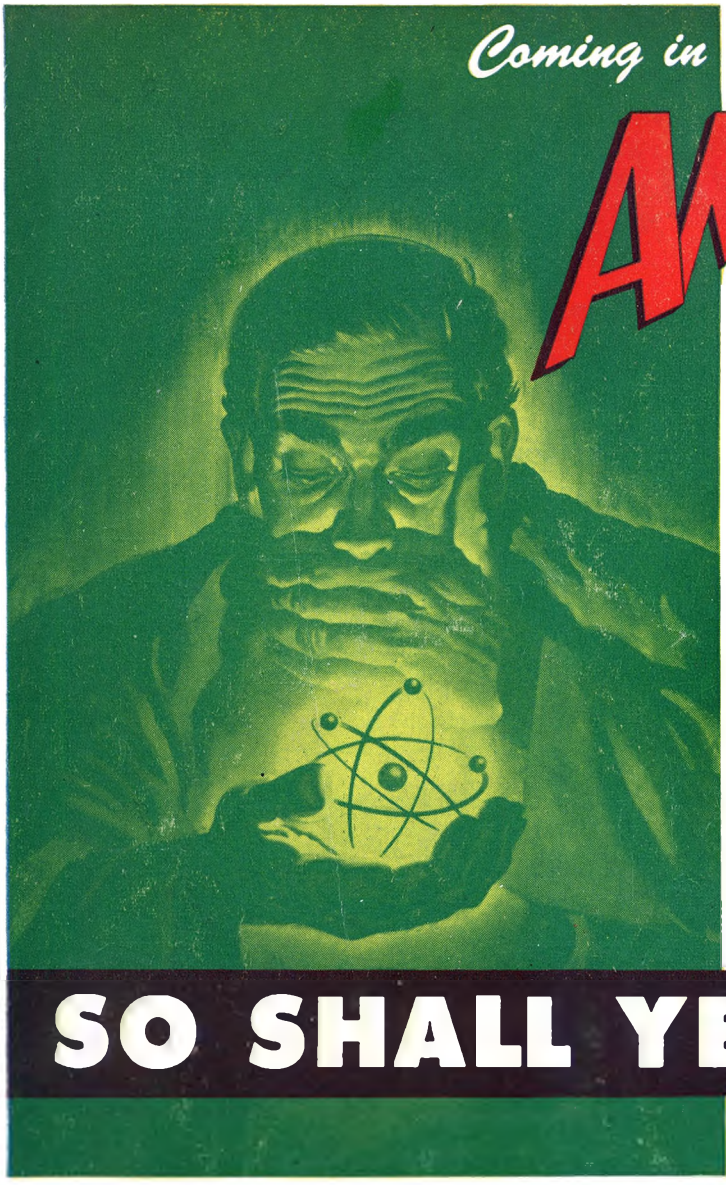
They're safe and sound. Old Uncle Sam *personally* guarantees your investment. And he never fobbed off a bum I.O.U. on *anybody*.

You get four bucks back for every three you put in. And that ain't hay, alfalfa, or any other field-grown product.

Millions of Americans—smart cookies all—have found the Payroll Plan the easiest and best way to save.

So stick with the Payroll Plan, son—and you can't lose.

SAVE THE EASY WAY... BUY YOUR BONDS THROUGH PAYROLL SAVINGS



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