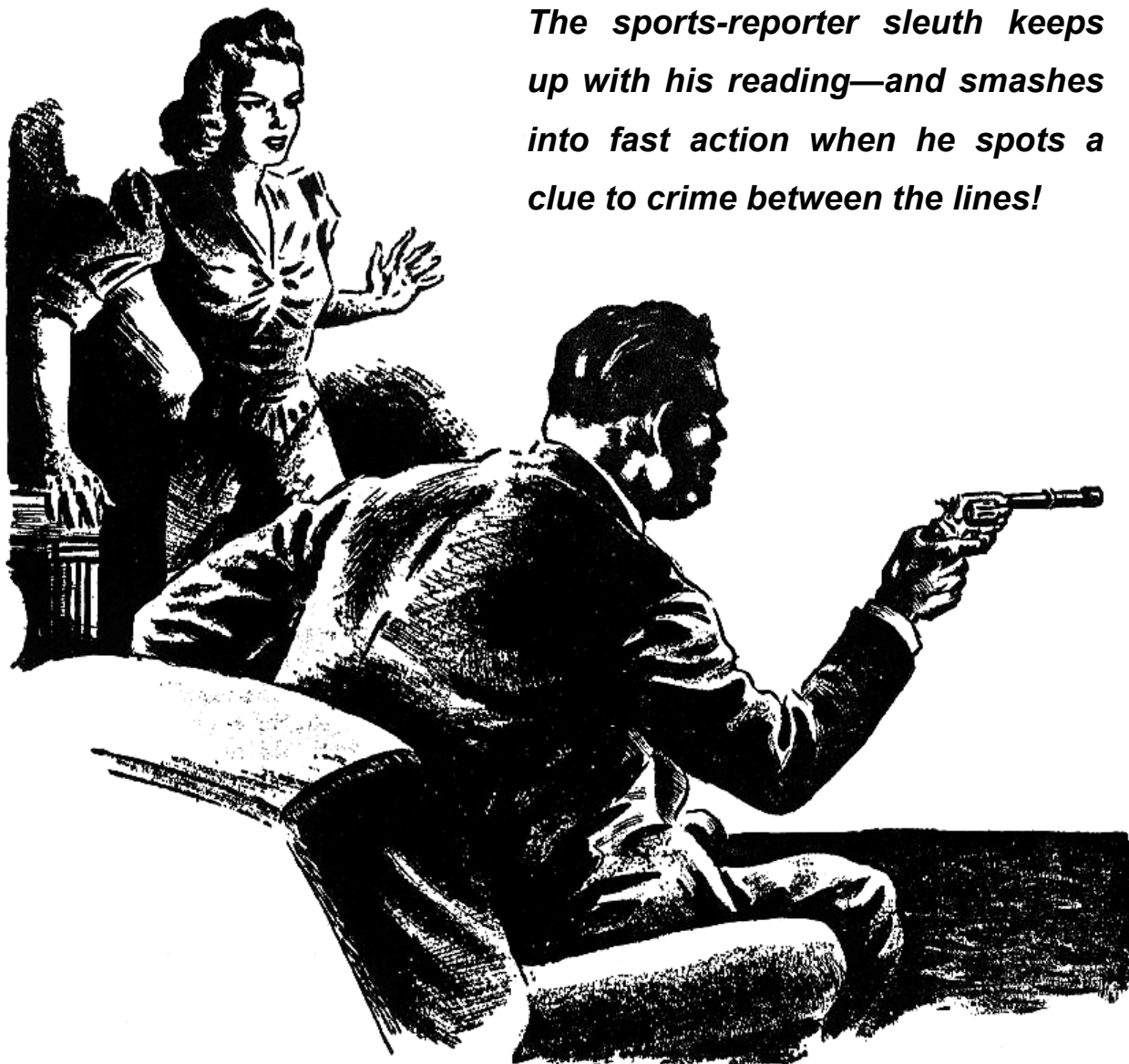


# **Don't Meddle With Murder**

**A Johnny Castle Novelet**

**By C. S. Montanye**

This story originally appeared in the May, 1946 issue of *Thrilling Detective*.



*The sports-reporter sleuth keeps up with his reading—and smashes into fast action when he spots a clue to crime between the lines!*

**A Johnny Castle  
Novelet**

# DON'T MEDDLE

## CHAPTER I

### COP'S CALL

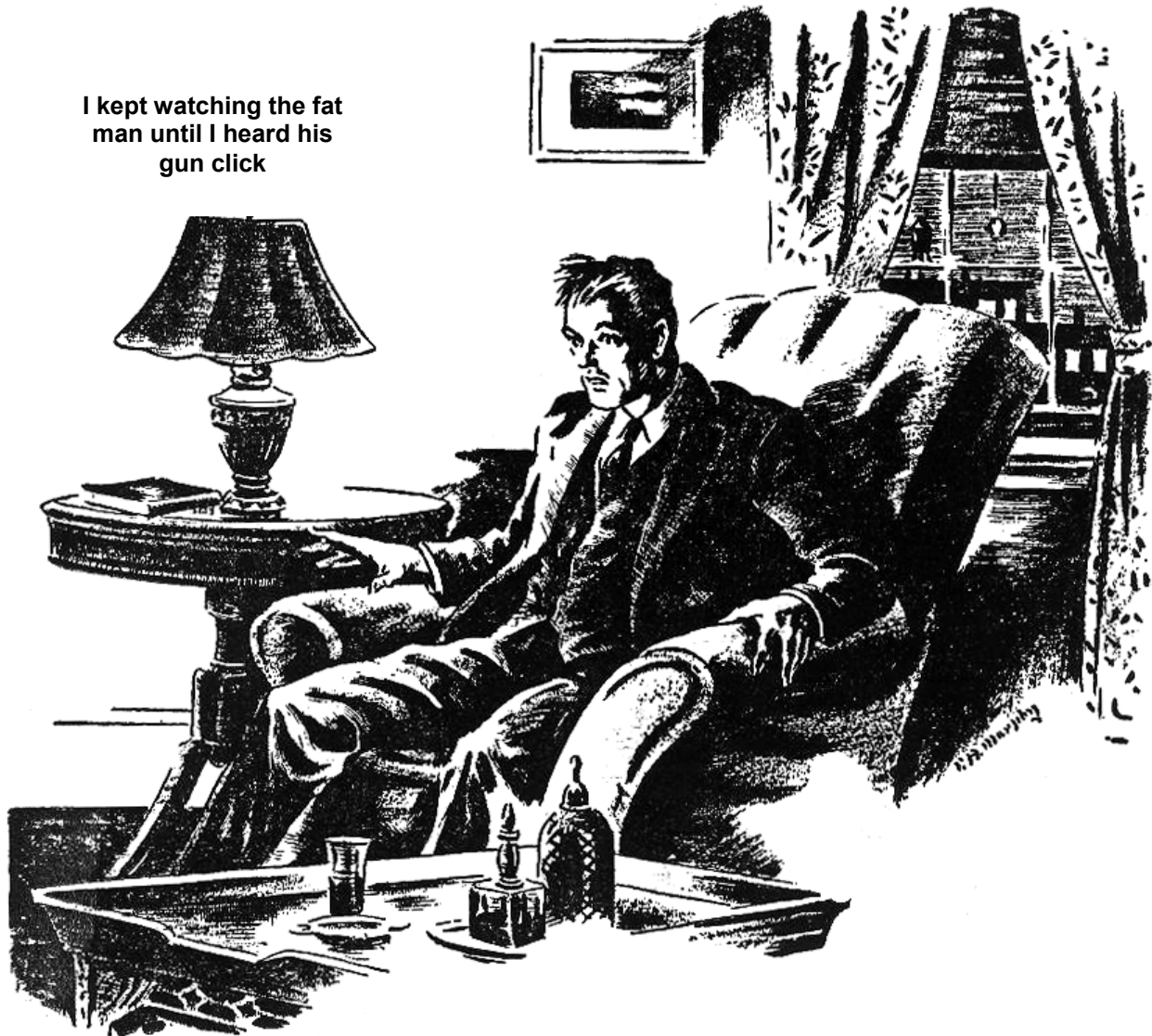
**T**HE two cauliflowers were going at it tongs and hammer. The smaller, a lippy kid with orange-colored hair, was taking a pasting. Which annoyed my host no end. Barney Koppel, fight promoter, stationery store owner and ex-paper hanger, had gone to the trouble of inviting me down to Ziggy's gym to observe what he

called "the flashiest lightweight discovery in the last sixty years—now under my exclusive management" in action.

That was the lad with the orangeade locks.

Something had slipped in the workout. A look across at Ziggy's blackavised countenance, and a big wink from the gymnasium owner's left lid, told me where the wires were crossed. Ziggy, knowing Koppel wanted to cut a hunk of publicity in the *Orbit*—the sheet for which I composed numerous sporting sonnets—had arranged to rib

I kept watching the fat  
man until I heard his  
gun click



# WITH MURDER

By C. S.  
MONTANYE

Barney for my benefit. The work horse, instead of taking the terrific slapping around Koppel had no doubt ordered, was tearing into "the greatest lightweight discovery in sixty years" like a Kansas tornado.

Barney, plucking out his few remaining hairs, one by one, broke away from my side and jumped up into the gym ring. He took a left and a right before he got between the brawlers. He pushed his groggy find onto a stool and waved both arms in frenzied agitation.

"I've been robbed! You done that, Ziggy!

You tried to make a monkey out of my boy in front of Mr. Castle! I should die like a dog in the street if I ever come back here again!"

The black-faced Ziggy, two hundred and forty pounds even, shook like a bowl of jello, all six flavors. Barney pushed his leather-swing into a bathrobe and conducted him to a dressing room, leaving the air blue behind him.

"What a character!" Ziggy wiped mirth tears from his eyes and looked at me. "He's got a punk who can't punch harder than an Erie conductor and right away he wants a page spread in your

paper, Johnny. Can I stand by and watch him get away with it?"

A pair of new future greats climbed into the ring for some exercise. I looked at my watch. Three-fifteen and a fraction. Time to get back to the *Orbit's* office and see if there were any telephone calls or mail.

Also, I remembered suddenly, the Number One gal in my life was meeting me at five at Billy Austin's place. And Miss Libby Hart liked being kept waiting the same as a chorine likes kitchen work.

**I** STARTED toward the door when Barney Koppel came out and grabbed my arm.

"Look, Mr. Castle! You seen what happened. Jobbed—by that fat no-good. A laughing-stock! The boy's really sensational in his own bracket. They ring a light heavy in on him. It's like wrestling with a kid—uneven, what I mean. Wait'll I break him at the Kris Kringle A. C. Tuesday night a week."

I nodded him off and was heading for an exit when I stopped.

A man came in. Just an ordinary, large-footed specimen of the breed, but familiar to me from the top of his dusty felt down to his well-polished, square-toed shoes.

Detective Larry Hartley of Homicide!

There was plenty of mayhem on tap at Ziggy's resort, but it wasn't like Hartley to check on it. Captain Fred Mullin's best man was usually reserved for special assignments. Hartley didn't see me as he pounded in. I made a show of lighting a cigarette and watched.

On the other side of the gym, Hartley gave Ziggy the office. He pulled a chair out and sat down beside the dark-complexioned load of blubber. I could see Ziggy shake his head and nod as Detective Hartley went into conversation. A couple of minutes passed and the squirrels of curiosity began to scamper around in the back of my mind.

Which was bad. A sports writer for a dignified Manhattan daily had no business mixing with what didn't concern him. Several times that had happened in the past—with results that narrowly kept me from being measured for a pair of wings. Meddling with murder and cracking into crime, while bringing me some local fame as an

amateur sleuth, had neither improved my blood pressure count nor softened my arteries any.

And, more to the point, Libby had laid down her own law in a few select words. They ran something like this:

"Either you stop doubling for a Centre Street character or you get your ring back. I don't mean the one that goes on the Bell System, either."

I thought of that as I stood there, watching Hartley mumble in the gym owner's private ear.

It was none of my business; no brass off my watch. Still, I had a hunch that something important was being broiled. Hartley never made visits unless they added up. All my reportorial instincts surged to the fore.

"Here we go again!" an inner voice chortled. "Hang onto your Stetson!"

The parley didn't last long. With a grunt Hartley got up and went out. I was downstairs and was around the corner when he laid his Number Twelves on the sidewalk. Further down the street was a regulation police prowler car. A cop and another man were in it. Hartley made it three and the official heap buzzed off.

As it passed the corner my suspicions were confirmed. In the front seat I gandered another familiar face. It belonged to the head of Homicide—a cold, shrewd-eyed pan with all the animation of a marble quarry and a mouth made to order for sneers and leers.

Captain Fred Mullin, in person!

I went back to Ziggy's in a rush. If Mullin had sent Hartley to the gym, and thought enough of it to ride uptown with him, nothing less than Grade A murder must be on the book.

But Ziggy, when I asked him if he'd seen my cigarette case around, shook his head and grinned.

"You should ask Hartley things like that, Johnny. He was here a minute ago. What's the answer—mebbe you want to find out what he was quizzing me about. I seen you standing over there watching."

"Not a bad idea," I drawled. "Some time I can slip in a nice write-up about your establishment. Perhaps I can even tuck in one of those photos you had taken twenty years ago—when you were young and less repulsive."

Ziggy raised a brow. Unlike morphine he was nobody's dope. But like most of the Broadway sporting gallery he had a craving for

seeing his name in print.

"No kidding, Johnny."

"Come on," I said. "What bends?"

**Z**IGGY studied the fistic action of the two sluggers in the ring before he put on a cagy look and lowered his voice.

"Poor Kenny Stangl," he said, from the left side of his mouth. "Picked up in an alley at six this morning—with more holes in him than a twenty-dollar suit hung in a closet full of moths! Tough, huh?"

I went back to the *Orbit* office, thoughtfully reflective. What Ziggy revealed was interesting. Kenny Stangl, one of the Rialto wolf pack, was a big shot along the lane. That is, as an ex-gunsel and a large drinker. Stangl had tangled with the police on several memorable occasions. That he always came out first best was due to a smart mouthpiece and a distressing lack of evidence. In fact, folks who had seen Kenny use a hot rod had become vague and forgetful in a witness chair.

So now he had been picked up in an alley, looking like a sieve.

I said a polite good afternoon to Beth Wheaton, prima donna of the plugs, as I braked at her switchboard.

"Any calls, darling—for me?"

Beth flicked a blue eye uninterestedly over the top of the board.

"One from somebody named Hart—a dame. She wants you to call her immediately, if not sooner. I wrote the number down somewhere. I'll look it up and see if I've misplaced it."

"Do that," I said, and wandered into Bill Jamison's domain.

Jamison was a star leg man for the *Orbit*. Bill's department was crime in all its vicissitudes, murder a specialty. Once he had dreamed of being a college professor, teaching English. Now he wrote a reasonable facsimile of the same language, with vernacular embellishments, and made Times Square his campus.

"Hi, Johnny," was his greeting. "Pull up a chair."

"Remember Kenny Stangl?" I led off with.

"Sure do," he said. "Bad news in blue serge. What's he been up to now?"

"Not up—down. In the gutter. Blasted. Rubbed. Perforated. Haven't you heard?"

Jamison looked at me with a frown.

"Is this straight? Because I haven't had a nudge on it from anybody. Not even Mullin the Great, and he's kept all his promises lately to give me ground floor space. Where'd you hear it?"

I explained. Bill looked serious. He thanked me and I went back to my desk where the phone was jingling.

"About that number, Mr. Castle," Beth Wheaton cooed. "I can't find it anywhere."

"You can draw your pay Saturday and don't come back Monday," I told her.

"But I'll keep trying and maybe some day it will show up." She broke off and came back with, "What a coincidence. The lady's on another wire now. Do you want to talk to her?"

A round of seconds and then the One and Only's fascinating tonal qualities drifted into the receiver:

"Johnny? Why didn't you call me?"

"Because a stupid, inefficient operator named Beth Wheaton—"

"Well, I like *that!*" Beth cut in indignantly. She clicked off before I could fire another shot.

"Date still on for five at Austin's?" I said to Libby.

"Yes, but couldn't you make it a little earlier? Something funny's happened and I want to ask your advice."

I told her I'd try to be on tap about half-past four and she rang off. Jamison came in looking troubled.

"I just called the good captain, Johnny," he said. "He says I'm crazy. That as far as he knows Stangl's in perfect health. How do you like it?"

I whistled. "Then it's front page stuff, sure!"

"My idea exactly." Jamison pulled on his hat. "Kenny always hangs out at the Jockey Club on Forty-eighth. I think I'll roll around. Want to come?"

"Date," I said, and he blew.

## CHAPTER II

## TAIL



**B**ILLY AUSTIN'S mouserie was a hole-in-the-wall where the Scotch had an accent and you could meet anyone from an exiled king to a reigning pickpocket. All I wanted to meet was Libby and for once I made a rendezvous before she did.

The tuckaway was full up. Aristocratic trapshooters rubbed elbows with not so aristocratic craps shooters. Wall Street mingled with the underworld. That delightful camaraderie that came from cracked ice, soda and fire-water glossed the dive with the shellac of equality.

I got a beer, a handful of pretzels and a table. I was down to the last crippled cracker when I saw Libby come in. She lit the place up like a four-alarm blaze. There was music in the way she walked, Saks Fifth Avenue in her smart little dress, and a whole garden of dewy flowers in the perfume that haloed her shining dark hair.

But Mrs. Hart's daughter had a troubled look. The minute I saw the starry eyes and the expression in them, I realized that while she was serene on the surface there was agitation under her cake make-up.

"You're on time, Johnny," she said. "How wonderful!"

I pulled out a chair for her and bowed her into it. She looked back over her shoulder as she sat down. Her cherry-red lips featured a smile, but it was fixed and a little mechanical.

"What's the trouble, hon?" I asked her. "Why the backward glance and the shadows under your lashes? Lovely lashes, too. They sort of sweep your chin when you close your eyes."

"I've been followed!" Libby said, a trifle breathlessly. "By a man!"

"I can't blame him. If I saw you, didn't know you, I'd try to correct that."

"Be serious, Johnny! This is what I want to talk to you about. Something very strange is going on. Do you know Dance Bowen?"

Everybody knew who "Dance" Bowen was even if they weren't lucky enough to be on speaking terms with her. The star of a brand new musical smash entitled, "Lady in Love," Dance had hit Rainbow Road with all the scintillation of

a bursting meteor. The critics loved her, the public adored her and so did Howard Gail, a retired barge owner who, through the medium of cards, horses and roulette wheels, had amassed himself a fortune.

Those in the know had the word that Gail had backed the new show, exclusively for Dance's benefit. For weeks she had been seen at all the better bistros with Gail in ardent attendance. Twice, in the past few evenings, I had lamped the lovely at a couple of spots where, if you didn't buy champagne, you were a very low and unimportant character.

All that went through my mind while I gave Lib a puzzled look.

"Enunciate," I requested.

"I've known Dance for the past month," Libby said. "She stopped in my office at Flowerland several times. I think she likes me."

"I'll lay bets on that. Go on."

"Night before last she asked me if I'd do her a favor. If I'd put a little package in the safe and keep it for her. Naturally I said I would."

"What's strange about that?"

"Nothing, except that from that moment on this man I mentioned is bobbing up all over the place. Every time I go out I see him. I sit down to have a sandwich and there he is. I get on the bus to go home and I see him."

"He's the conductor?"

The starry eyes crackled. "There he is sitting up front or in the rear." Libby leaned quickly forward. "And there he is now—the one in the brown suit who just came in, at the end of the bar!"

I looked. What I saw I didn't like. The party in the brown suit was a gaunt-faced youth with slanted eyes, a hooked, beaky nose and a mouth half normal size. His skin looked as if you could make a wallet or a belt out of it and while his brown suit was well-tailored and expensive, on him it wasn't becoming. I pegged the lad, in a second glance, as "Cracky" Morgan, a hard number around Sugar Square.

Morgan, I knew, had turned in a number of years helping the Government make auto license plates in a prison machine shop. And Morgan was one of those careless, casual lads who always wore a gun and used it as often as necessary, without a qualm.



And he had been following my dream girl!  
"I'm scared, Johnny!" Libby said, in a half-whisper.

"I'll second the emotion."

**I** FINISHED the rest of my foam, told the waiter to bring Libby a dry Martini and did a little prodding.

"You think that whatever the Bowen fluff gave you is responsible for the tail?" I asked.

"What else?" Libby said.

"What did Dance Bowen say? I mean, did she give you any hint at all as to what was in the package?"

Libby shook her dark head. "No. All she said when I took it was that now Kenny Stangl would be out of luck—whatever that meant."

Something high explosive went off inside me. Stangl again! Murder in an alley and my honey chile tangled in it! Libby Hart in the picture and Cracky Morgan at the end of the bar, watching our table with slanting eyes under the brim of a low-pulled hat!

"Look, babe." I said it fast in a private voice. "Whatever you have that belongs to Miss Bowen goes back to her, and quick! Come on, we're leaving. Maybe you don't know it, but the scythe of the well known Grim Reaper is about to take a cut at us, if we don't dodge!"

"But my Martini?"

"Dump it in your shoe," I said, "but take out the olive. It might hurt when you start running!"

"Where are you taking me?" Libby cried softly, when I got her out of Billy Austin's and into a taxi.

"Stuyvesant Theater, hackie," I told the driver, answering Libby's question at the same time.

The ark rolled off. I looked through the rear window, in time to see Morgan nose dive out of the wall-hole and toss his big frame into the next cab in line.

It didn't look good from where I sat.

Something screwy was breaking and I didn't have an angle to go on. Ziggy's confidential tip-off after Detective Hartley's visit to the gym. Jamison's phone call to my old friend and enemy, Captain Fred Mullin of the Homicide Department, and what Mullin had told him. And now Libby, with Morgan pounding along in our wake.

I didn't like that last word, either!

While I was still thinking about it our taxi slid up to the marquee of the playhouse where "Lady in Love" was strictly S.R.O. at every performance.

This was mid-week matinee day and, according to my watch, just about time for the finale and the last curtain.

I oiled the hackie and steered Libby for the stage door. Cracky's cab passed, but I didn't pay any attention to it. We went down a length of bricked-in cement and up to an open fire-proof door out of which issued voices lifted in song.

A party in suspenders, blue shirt and faded pants stopped us on the threshold.

"Miss Bowen." I gave him a glimpse of my newspaper-police pass card. "She ought to be off in a few minutes."

"She ain't working today." He said it defiantly. "Understudy. Goldielocks don't believe in no afternoon shows. Too much wear and tear on the nervous system."

"Do you know where she lives?" I asked Libby.

"I have the address she gave me, in my handbag."

"Swell. Thanks, bud," I said to the Suspenders.

There was no sign of Cracky Morgan out on the street. Still his absence didn't improve my mental agitation to any marked degree. Taxis were as plentiful at that hour as ants at a picnic. We hopped another and I let Libby speak her piece.

"The Armitage Arms," she directed. "I think it's on Fifty-sixth."

"Correct, lady," the driver said over his shoulder.

The address was that of one of those super-exclusive apartment houses. A tall sliver of a building set between sedate private houses. The kind of a dump that had a waiting list for its duplexes as long as a bartender's arm. It was hardly the type of place a Broadway star would be at home in. Still, with the housing problem—and Howard Gail rolling in dough like a baker's elbow—nothing was too good for the Bowen frail, the Armitage Arms, least of all.

"I don't want to be announced," I said to Libby, covering the street we'd just left with a glance that didn't find Cracky Morgan in its

focus.

"What's the apartment number?"

"Twelve D."

"Then right into the elevator just as if we lived here," I directed.

**W**E MADE it without being stopped for questioning by any of the gold-braided staff officers prowling around the lobby.

"Twelve," I told the operator, and the cage went away like Hoop Jr. with a Derby to win.

Beautiful black-and-white tiles echoed to our steps as we hunted for 12 D along a corridor where a parade could have been held. Libby, close beside me, began to ask questions.

"I don't get this, Johnny. What am I to tell her? What's the reason for all this rush? You know, maybe it's only imagination. I mean, that man following me ever since Dance gave me the package to keep for her."

"Tell her to put her shoes on and go down to the office at Flowerland and get her little bundle. You don't know it, but I have an idea it's loaded with dynamite. The kind that goes off by remote control."

"I don't understand," Libby said, wrinkling that smooth brow.

"Neither do I—exactly," I confessed. "But I do know this much. The Stangl she mentioned to you was swept up this morning in a public byway, all full of great big holes!"

Libby's eyes widened. She was about to say something else but checked it as I pressed the pearl circle of the bell of a door numbered 12 D.

No answer.

I rang again, and again. We could hear the bell giving out with a melodious tinkle somewhere inside, but nothing happened. Nothing, that is, until I happened to drop a hand to the large brass knob. Through force of habit I gave it a turn and the door obligingly opened.

"Well," I said, "this is hospitality. The latch string's always out and come right in!"

"You're not going in there, Johnny!"

"Try and stop me."

An arm around Libby's slender waist forced her unwillingly into a mirror-lined foyer where the waning afternoon shadows backed up in all four corners. I let the front door swing shut and stood there for a minute, listening.

There wasn't a sound except faraway-street noises and Libby's quick breathing. I couldn't explain it, but I felt a funny tingle. Like a piece of ice sliding down my spine and sending out small shivers during its journey.

"We might as well look around." I tried to make it sound cheerful. "Maybe some day we'll be renting a hive like this for ourselves. Smart idea to get a view of what kind of furniture to buy."

"I'm staying right here," Libby interrupted decidedly. "You look at the furniture. I want to be ready to leave when the police come to arrest us for housebreaking!"

I was glad she stayed in the foyer.

Because, when I went through one gorgeously appointed room and into another that connected with it, it wasn't the furniture that caught my eye. It was what was lying full length on the floor, and that wasn't any Oriental rug.

I was in a living room. One of those Hollywood movie set places. The carpet was as soft as moss and the same color. The appointments mingled periods with question marks in a decorator's nightmare.

But all that sank in later.

What started to lift my hair, and put a dryness in the back of my throat, was the grotesque appearance of the room's occupant. He was a gent with pepper-and-salt hair, not small and not large—just an average sized fellow in a better than average set of rugged tweeds. Somebody had shot him neatly in the throat and it wasn't beef gravy running down his vest in a thin, coagulated trickle!

I stood there looking. My feet seemed frozen to the floor. After a while my hair got back in place and the slight nausea left the pit of my crawling stomach.

I took another look and recognized the man's rather blunt features. Glazed eyes with pouches under them, a nose that should have been bigger for the amount of face that went with it, and lobeless ears that grew close to his head.

Howard Gail!



## CHAPTER III

## LIBBY OPENS THE SAFE



WHILE the dead man's identity penetrated, I saw something else. That was the gun that had done the trick. It lay on the other side of the room, bright and glinting against the mossy carpet. A funny kind of a gun—a Colt Woodsman, the type that used .22s for target practise.

It had taken some smart shooting to send Gail away with a single shot pumped into a principal artery in the larynx department. Whoever had triggered the lead knew just where to address it. Gail had probably folded up without a squawk.

My thoughts were all scrambled like a dozen eggs in a sizzling pan. Gail in his girl friend's apartment, cold as a handful of snow. From the looks of him he had been dead for hours. And Dance hadn't played a matinee that afternoon.

And Cracky Morgan had been tailing Libby while Homicide had been withholding the sudden demise of Kenny Stangl who, according to what Libby had transferred to me, cut some sort of a figure in the package my dream cake was keeping for the Bowen beauty in the safe at Flowerland. That was the hoferie where Libby smoked up publicity for all the dailies.

"Johnny!" I heard her call. "What are you doing? Where are you?"

"Don't come in here!" I said it with authority and, of course, it brought her right to the door. Before I could block the late Mr. Gail from her view, Libby had seen, and started to make odd noises in her throat. Even the cake make-up couldn't hide the pallor spreading in her smooth cheeks. As if fascinated, her big, dark eyes, wide and horrified, riveted on what occupied the floor.

I got an arm around her and edged her toward the other room.

Just as we reached it the foyer door banged open and in walked no less than Captain Fred Mullin with what seemed to be the entire Metropolitan Police Force at his rubber heels!

Queerly enough, Mullin, the bulldog of the department, in appearance and manner, didn't seem unduly surprised because of my presence in Dance Bowen's suite. Or the presence of the

young lady my arm was around. In fact Mullin's cast-iron countenance mirrored an expression that might have been one of knowing satisfaction.

"Where's the body, Castle?" he rasped, while I caught a glimpse of Detectives Hartley, Wheeler, Mulligan and a lot of others who were gazing around the mirror-lined compartment with interested optics.

"Body?" I must have been still shaken from what I'd seen. Even to my own ears the question sounded slightly infantile.

"Didn't you phone me half an hour ago and tell me to come up here?" Mullin barked. Color, the same shade as his winter underwear, tinted his rock-pile pan. "If this is a gag, you're going to get smacked straight in the kisser! You've been in my hair too long and too often these past months. I've been waiting for a chance at you. If this is it, I'll laugh."

"I guess you mean the late Mr. Gail," I interrupted. Mullin's remarks were all that was needed to tonic me back to normality. "Walk right in. You'll find him in the second room beyond. He's waiting for you."

"C'mon," the Captain growled to his faithful followers.

He flung me a look full of scorch and stamped through the door. Libby drew an uneven breath and began to pry my arm away.

"Why didn't you tell me you had telephoned him?" she asked, her arched brows drawn together.

"I didn't, because I didn't!"

"You mean—"

Before she could finish Wheeler cat-footed back to the foyer and pointed a finger at me.

"Inside, Castle. The Captain wants to talk to you."

"Wait here and don't move an inch, whether I'm gone two minutes or ten years!" I said to Libby, and followed Wheeler back to the room where Gail had grown his wings.

MULLIN'S men were all over the place, like a flock of bees. Hartley was going through the dead man's pockets, Mulligan was measuring off distances with a pair of feet that looked like tractors. A couple of others were wandering in and out of Dance Bowen's pink-and-gold bedroom as if it were the most natural thing in the

world. Every time they opened its door the memory of a subtle perfume crept out.

"Let's hear all about it, Castle," Mullin growled.

He planted his body solidly on its short, thick legs and twisted his mouth into a sneer. His cold, fishy eyes raked me over like a fork going through the remains of a spaghetti dinner.

I didn't like the glint in his gaze, the sneer, or the way he got his words out. Somehow I had the impression he believed I was on the hook, at last.

"What do you want to know?" I held my temper and gave him one of my best smiles. "You know me, Captain. Always cooperative. Always looking out for your interests. Always your little pal in any emergency. But you're slightly in error. I haven't telephoned you in over six weeks. Lucky me, eh?"

The sneer faded a trifle. "Yeah? Then who buzzed the tip-off to come up here, and said he was Castle of the *Orbit*?"

"That," I murmured, "is something your superior investigating ability will have to solve. The young lady who's with me," I went on, with patent-leather smoothness, "is Miss Hart, as you probably know. She happens to be a friend of Dance Bowen, the lady who usually lives here. We came up to call on her, after stopping at the theater and finding she hadn't been there this afternoon. The door was open and we walked right in—to this."

I tossed a nod at the still figure Hartley had finished with.

Mullin digested what I told him. He didn't believe me. I could see that. It was too lumpy for perfect palatability. He snorted like a horse in a bag of oats, wiped his hand across his chin and gave me a brand new leer.

"You dream by day as well as night. Okay. We'll talk to your girl friend in a minute. Get over there and pipe down." He asked Hartley, "How does it look, Larry?"

"Twenty-two. Through the jugular. Here's the gun." He handed Mullin the handkerchief-wrapped Woodsman. "The kind of shooter they use for paper targets. Oughtn't to be hard to trace. This fella's been cold seven or eight hours at least."

Mullin unloaded the usual directions. He wanted the superintendent brought up, the rear-

admirals we had seen prowling the lobby. He wanted the medical examiner in a hurry. He wanted his fingerprint expert. He wanted service with a large S.

After that he gave me his official attention again.

"Get that dame in here," he directed Wheeler.

"Just a minute," I put in. "If there's any questioning her, you'll do it outside. She's not like you—used to corpses all over the place."

Mullin flung me a look, shrugged, and went back to the foyer. I edged in behind him and put a finger over my mouth to let Libby know that she wasn't to talk. Being a bright little gal she caught quick.

"Castle tells me you're a friend of Miss Bowen," Mullin began, not quite as tough as he usually was. "What did you come up here to see her about?"

"That's a personal matter." I could have kissed Libby for the way she said it.

Captain Mullin grunted. "Yeah? Known her a long time?"

"Not so long."

"Ever hear her speak of a party named Stangl—Kenny Stangl?"

Libby glanced at me from the corner of one eye. "I—I don't believe I have. Why?"

If I'd been taking the questioning myself, I couldn't have handled it any better. Mullin shrugged a pair of shoulders made to order for piano moving and swung around on me.

"I want you and the lady for further questioning, later, Castle. Keep her on tap. You're not fooling me. You know something and you're going to try and play it yourself. You're going to try and be Johnny Smart, get a scoop for your rag and show me up as some kind of a dummy who couldn't find a horse in a kitchen. Okay. We'll see about that. Go on now, powder. The both of you!"

"You know my office phone number Captain," I murmured, and led Libby out to the elevator.

WE DIDN'T say anything until we got to the street. Mullin's array of prowl cars had put the usual crowd on the pavement in front of the apartment house. I snaked Libby through the throng and over to Central Park South.

"Who was he, Johnny?" she asked in a low,

tight voice. "The man on the floor, I mean. You said 'Mr. Gail'. Not the one Dance was going around with?" When I nodded, her mouth opened. She had teeth like pearls. "Who—"

"Mopped him up? Frankly, I wouldn't know. But I do know this. A gunny named Stangl has been after your friend for something she had. The Bowen babe got scared and gave it to you to keep for her. Stangl got himself liquidated early this morning and Cracky Morgan, the boy who's been following you around, has an active interest in the affair. So," I told her, "the intelligent thing to do is for us to get over to Flowerland and into the safe. I have a hunch that the package Dance left with you will answer a lot of questions when we open it up."

"But you wouldn't do that!" Libby exclaimed.

"With murder striking all around us? That's the first thing on the docket! And to make it as speedy as possible, here comes an empty taxi. We'll take it."

Fifteen minutes later we were in Libby's office on the second floor of Flowerland. The dance pavilion had been almost exclusively taken over by the Navy. From the regions below we could hear the deadly thump of one of the three bands that played there from noon until closing without a breakoff.

I looked around the Hart sanctum. Not a bad place to grind. Big desk with some posies in a sixteen-ounce highball glass. A lovely view of the Acropolis framed on one wall, and a scattering of comfortable-looking leather chairs. But my entire attention focused on a small safe in one corner.

"Hilda's gone home," Libby said. Hilda was her slightly moronic assistant, the dame who misspelled the letters she typed. "She's shut the safe."

"Then we can't open it?"

"Don't sound so alarmed. Of course I can open it. I'm the only one with the combination. But"—she turned and faced me—"is it the right thing to do, Johnny? Shouldn't we give Dance's package to the police and not get mixed any deeper in it? We've already lied, you know."

"Ease your conscience," I told her. "We don't pull punches when murder's on the stalk. Suppose you let me handle this. After all, I draw my laundry money from a newspaper that expects

loyalty from its slaves. So be a nice little gal and click off the numbers. I'll take the entire responsibility."

Libby drew a breath and moved her sweetly sloping shoulders,

"All right, master. If you say so. But when Olga comes back and asks for her package, what will I say?"

"Who?"

"Olga. That's Dance's real name. Olga Barron. I forgot to tell you."

Libby had pulled a chair around and seated herself in front of the safe. She began to mark off numbers from memory, talking as she twirled.

I didn't say anything. I did a lot of thinking. Olga Barron. The name stuck in my mind like a burr to a spaniel's ear. I was still chewing it mentally when the little safe's double doors swung open and Libby reached a slim, graceful hand into its interior.

I waited for it to come out with Dance Bowen's package.

It came out empty.

Libby looked up at me with a strained, blank, water-clear expression in her starry, dark eyes.

"It's gone, Johnny! I put it right here and—and it isn't here now!"

"Sit tight till you hear from me again," I said. "I'm going back to the office."

Bill Jamison had gone when I made the *Orbit's* office. His destination, I was told, was the Armitage Arms. That made it all right with me. Mullin had loosened up evidently. Or maybe Bill, with his ear to the ground, had picked up the rumble.

I went down to the newspaper morgue, the place they keep the old clippings and such. Stan Holden, who used to be in charge, was somewhere in the Pacific. A girl had taken his place. She wasn't a fireball, but she had some intelligence. Enough to get me the file of clippings I asked for.

I SAT down there and did some quick and earnest reading. I blessed my retentive memory. Because, when I finished and handed the file back, I figured I was one up on Fred Mullin. The Captain, never having been in the newspaper business, didn't know what I knew.

Which was plenty!

Back at my desk I phoned Libby at her place.

She had tried to get in touch with Hilda, to dig some kind of information on Dance Bowen's missing package, but with no luck.

"Hilda's mother told me she's gone to a party in Brooklyn," Libby said. "That's a big place, Johnny. I guess we'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"You stay in tonight," I advised. "Knit me a sports jacket, or something. But keep your doors and windows locked."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm heading home to think about it. Then I'll probably go down to Headquarters and gossip with Friend Fred. Don't worry about me. I have the faculty of taking care of myself."

She made some remark I didn't like and rang off.

I tapped out a short piece to keep the promise I had made Ziggy that morning. About his gym. Then, making sure I didn't have a shadow bobbing after me that wasn't my own, I went on home.

## CHAPTER IV

### JOHNNY RINGS A BELL



MY THREE rooms and bath were half a block from the Big Blaze, a rock's pitch from the well-known Winter Garden. A quiet place in a quiet foxhole. Once upon a time the building had been a livery stable and on damp days you didn't have to be told. But it had the virtue of being a central location, having a low rent and only one flight of stairs to scale.

The hall was anemically lighted by a low-powered bulb. The landlord was tight as a new girdle, but it didn't matter. Long experience put my key in the lock like it had eyes. I opened the door and walked in.

To find I had company!

He sat in my dime-sized living room, dumping cigarette ashes on my moth-eaten rug. He had helped himself to a couple of cold bottles of beer and was looking over my collection of Varga prints. I didn't mind those things so much. What I did object to was the snub-nosed automatic on the table beside him, and the fact that he still

had on his felt hat.

Cracky Morgan took a long pull at the beer glass, put it down and daintily dabbed the froth from his rosebud mouth with a silk handkerchief large enough to cover a circus.

"You ought to get your front door lock fixed, Castle." His voice was low, quiet, with a faint lisp in it.

"Yeah," I said. "Seems so. Comfortable? How about a chair for your feet or a cushion for your head?"

The slanted eyes took me in slowly but thoroughly. I didn't discount my danger. I knew what Morgan was capable of. Reaching for the snub-nose and using it would be part of his day's work.

He got up, helped himself to his gun and walked over to me. I stood perfectly still while he patted around my person with a thin, bony hand decorated with nicotine-stained fingers. He found I wasn't rodded and put his own shooter away.

"Sit down, Castle," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"Thanks for calling Homicide and telling Mullin to go up to Twelve D. It saved me a nickel."

His little mouth grinned crookedly. "That's okay. Think nothing of it. The doorman at the Stuyvesant overheard you asking the doll where Dance lived. I thought it might be a good idea to wind that up altogether and in one piece."

"You cut Gail down?" I suggested.

"No, Castle. No mowing in that quarter. That was somebody else. Why should I shoot that bird? He never done nothing to me. I only croak crossers and the like. I know you wouldn't do nothing like that, Castle," he added softly. "That's why you're coming clean with me."

"On what score?"

"A certain little package Dance left with your babe. I happened to be tailing the Bowen number at the time and seen her flutter into Flowerland and leave it. With me that's all right. She was trying to keep Kenny away. The only trouble is I've got to get that little package, Castle. I need it—bad."

I shook my head. "No good, Morgan. I had the same idea. But when my thrill opened the strong box the package was gone, like the wind. Funny, I'd half a notion you had it."

Under droopy lids, Cracky's eyes began to wear a shine. He fixed them on me and his hand played with the top button of his coat, an inch or two from the shoulder sling where he kept his cannon.

Finally he removed the hand, upended the beer bottle, swished the lather around in the glass and emptied it.

"Who got the little package, Castle?" he said.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Until the girl who closed the safe up tonight gets back on the job in the morning we won't know. She's at a party in Brooklyn. Who did get it? Not Stangl, because he was written off in an alley. Not Howard Gail. He finished on a moss-green carpet in a lovely living room. Not you, because you're here—looking. Not Miss Hart whom you've been trailing around all day, and not me. Who does that leave?"

He caught the idea, and cursed under his breath.

"The Bowen frail! She hears Stangl is off the list and goes back and gets them! I'm a dope. I should have figured that angle."

"The only difficulty," I couldn't help but put in, "is where Dance Bowen happens to be at the moment. Looks like she might have gone underground, until all this blows over."

MORGAN buttoned his coat. That made me feel somewhat better. His gaze turned speculative, before his hard face went into cementlike contours.

"Take a word, Castle. I ain't got nothing against you personal. I even read your stuff in the paper, but I don't like to be crowded when I'm doing a job. So why don't you mind your own business and keep out of what don't concern you?"

"I often wonder," I murmured.

"That's all."

He started for the door, stopping before he was half-way to it. His ears went up like a rabbit's. So did mine. From the street, through the half-open window, we both caught the same sound.

The eerie wail of a police car's siren, fading out as the vehicle ground to a stop at the curb below.

"How do I get out of here? Quick—name it!"

"Fire escape. This way!"

I hustled him through my bedroom and through the window.

"Thanks, pal," he said. "Be seeing you."

I shut the window and was back in the living room as knuckles beat out a knock on the door. Opened, Hartley and Wheeler marched in with all the fizz and sparkle of two pallbearers.

"The Captain wants you, Johnny." Hartley coughed. "Get your hat. We're taking you for a nice ride downtown."

Wheeler went over and peered into the beer bottles. He looked disappointed, but didn't say anything. I did some fast thinking.

"Be right with you. I'll have to change my shirt and wash up a little. Help yourself to the smokes boys. All the popular brands scattered around."

I turned the key quietly in the bedroom door and went right on, through the same window Cracky Morgan had left by, down the same fire-escape and through a wilderness of back yards that finally tossed me out near Sixth Avenue that I can't remember is the Avenue of the Americas.

I got a cab there and a few minutes later climbed out of it at the mouth of the Stuyvesant's stage door cut-through.

It was ten minutes before curtain time. The company were all in their dressing rooms, stage hands were roaming around behind the lowered asbestos. Suspenders warmed a whittled-down chair, barring all progress without his confirming nod. He gave me recognition without moving from his seat.

"You around again? Last time you showed me a pass card. What have you got now—a clacker?"

"Something better than a badge." I opened my wallet and let him get a glimpse of the green. Thumbing out a ten-spot I folded it into a small square and held it poised between thumb and forefinger. "How much wise stuff does this buy tonight?"

"Depending," he yawned.

"Miss Brown didn't show up?" Suspenders nodded. I went on, "She must have another address other than Armitage Arms. Or wouldn't you know?"

I smoothed the ten out and made like I was putting it back with the other lettuce. Suspenders

straightened, an avaricious gleam in his face.

"Not so fast, friend. Mebbe I do know. Mebbe I've taken a couple of valises up there for her, now and then. Gimme!"

He stuck out his fin. I waited until he talked and handed the dough over.

"If it's a phony number," I warned, "I'll come back with my guerrillas. We'll hammer you down so short you'll be able to hear the clocks in your socks tick."

Another cab and a trip across town.

I relaxed against the worn upholstery, trying to figure it out. I couldn't. It didn't make much sense. The rich Mr. Gail leaded in his Dance's living room. Cracky Morgan had doubtlessly taken care of the Kenny Stangl menace, but where the package Libby had taken care of fitted, and what was in it, was a puzzle you couldn't do with a pencil.

After a while the cab slowed down. We were in an uptown neighborhood, close to Harlem and not too far from the end of the Park. Not a nice neighborhood like that which Armitage Arms reared in. This was cheap and tawdry, crowded and somewhat odoriferous.

"Here's you are, Boss," the hackie informed me, pulling up before a dirty brick building whose tenants went in for lace curtains and rubber-plants.

**I** PAID the meter charge, added two bits for luck, and moved into the vestibule. Almost the first bell I gandered, above some tarnished mail-boxes, bore a significant name:

Barron

I pressed the bell.

She opened the door and stood peering at me, lamplight behind her in a golden haze. Her eyes were a warm green jade, her hair was a smooth, taffy colored miracle of the hairdressing art. Her lips were like two red, ripe cherries and if it hadn't been for a certain brittle quality in her oval face, she could have passed anywhere as an unsophisticated and charming schoolgirl.

But that look was the giveaway.

"Miss Barron?" I began. "Or should I say Bowen?"

"You can say either, handsome." The fruity mouth curved in a saucy smile. "What seems to be

the trouble?"

"Plenty. Suppose I come in and talk about it."

"I'd love you to."

She opened the door wider. I walked in. It wasn't anything like 12 D at the Armitage. The furniture was all right—substantial and old-fashioned—but the wallpaper needed a change, the fixtures were made to order for a junk dealer and the carpet, instead of being Oriental, had a Midwest accent.

She piloted me into a big room where a turned-down radio was busy with news reports. She snapped that off and smiled at me through the light of an opalescent-shaded lamp.

She was wearing a cute little draped rayon number that did things to her streamlined figure. In the light her skin was creamy satin, flawlessly perfect.

"I'm a friend of Libby Hart," I began. She didn't say anything and I kept going. "You gave Libby something to keep for you, in the safe at Flowerland."

The green eyes lost their warm look. They darted to me and I saw her mouth begin to tighten.

"What about it?"

"You didn't stop at the office there today? Pick the package up?"

"No." She shook her head. "Why?"

I let it hang there and went off on another angle.

"Would you mind telling me what was in that package? Or is it too personal to talk about?"

She drew a quick little breath. "It—it's a present Mr. Gail gave me, on my birthday. It's worth a lot of cash. I happened to hear that an ex-gunny named Stangl was going to get it away from me." She moved her shoulders casually. "If anyone thought I was going to stand by and let him grab he's crazy."

"But Stangl can't grab. Didn't you hear? The police found him this morning—shot up."

"Honest?" She made it sound surprised enough, but I had a feeling it wasn't any news flash. She kept on staring at me, before she said, "What did you come up here for?"

"Your package isn't in the safe any more," I told her.

That rang a bell. The hand she stretched for a cigarette stopped moving. Her head went back a few inches. The lids came down over her eyes and

she seemed to freeze all over. At the same moment all the simple, naive veneer melted.

"What's this—a transaction between you and your girl friend? I didn't stop at Flowerland, and if that package is missing somebody's going to be visited by a lot of grief! You might not know it, but I can manage just that!"

She stopped as the front doorbell rang. She dropped her cigarette in an ashtray and turned her back on me. A nice back, too.

Out in the hall I heard her talking to someone. Then heavy footsteps. Then a shadow across the floor.

I looked up and thought I was seeing things.

Ziggy came into the room—all two hundred and forty pounds of him—black face, quartet of chins and jellylike paunch!

"Well, Johnny!" He sounded as surprised as I must have looked. "What are you doing here?"

I could have asked him the same question. I didn't. Because the Bowen babe spoke her piece first.

"He says my package isn't in the safe! That it's gone!"

The gym owner dropped into a chair. A big chair, made to his measure. He mopped a slight dew of perspiration from his face, pushed dank hair back and scowled.

"Gone, eh? That's funny. I thought you said the dame could be trusted." He used a wrinkled handkerchief again. "Let that ride for a minute. I want to talk to Johnny. The kid's a reporter. On the *Orbit*. He likes to mess around with crime stuff. He's got teeth. Ask Mullin if you don't believe me."

## CHAPTER V

### ROUND AND BLACK



I WATCHED Ziggy. I had a lot of ideas, a lot of fancy notions. I let him do the talking. So did the star of "Lady in Love."

"How are you doing on the Stangl bump, Johnny?" he asked. "Learned the why and wherefore yet? Let's hear what you've dug. Maybe I can fill in the chinks."

He grinned at the girl. I felt uncomfortable,

suddenly nervous, and a little empty inside. It didn't add up right. Nothing about it had any appeal—the whale in the chair, the beautiful blonde, the sad wallpaper, or the room that seemed to get smaller and smaller.

"It's not hard to figure," I said mechanically.

"Gail gave Miss Bowen a present. Stangl wanted it. But he didn't get it. He got some slugs instead."

"Bright lad. Why?"

"That's one of the chinks."

Ziggy laughed. "Read it this way, Johnny. Gail gave the girl here the present because he thought she was all for him. He never dreamed she might like a big roughneck like me. When he did find out he got awful sore. He wanted the present back, on account of it being worth important coin."

"Indian-giver!" Dance Bowen said in a harsh aside.

"Naturally, she wouldn't consider that. So what does Gail do? He gets one of his old office boys and sicks him on her. Party named Stangl. But Kenny never gets to first base, no less a fingerhold on the package."

Ziggy shook with inner laughter. Dance's green eyes flashed. Oddly, I found I was perspiring, too.

"And Gail," I heard myself saying, "got killed, too! Why?"

"Maybe because he was a little het up on account of Stangl," the man in the chair chuckled. "Maybe he was threatening to crack down on Dance. You know how lugs are when they get sore and lose their tempers. They don't know what they're doing. Yeah, that's the way it must have been. Howie Gail blew his top and got himself eradicated."

"But in Miss Bowen's apartment!" I protested.

Ziggy shrugged. "One place is as good as another. That's the way it must have been." He smiled blandly. "All on account of me, a fat boy without much education who stole Dance here right out of his favorite limousine. One for Winchell, Johnny. Right?"

"You didn't pop Gail?" I told him.

"Me? Heck, no. That's out of my department." He laughed again and turned to the girl. "Look, honey. Bring me a drink and my kit."

Dance went into the kitchen. I heard the



refrigerator open and close. Then the gurgle of a bottle. Then the hiss of carbonated water.

She came back with an ice-filled glass and what looked like a shoe box. Ziggy balanced it on his knees. He had no lap. When he sat down that crawled up to his chest. He took a long cut at the glass, swallowing half of what was in it in one prodigious gulp.

After that he opened the box. He took out a .38 Smith and Wesson. He broke it at the breach, looked at the chambers, blew up the barrel. I noticed the gun had a reamed tip.

Ziggy reached in the box again. He took out a small cylinder about four and a half inches long. It was pock-marked with holes. Steel wool protruded from some of them. Ziggy fitted the cylinder over the end of the gun. He screwed it in place and looked at me.

"A silencer, Johnny. The kind used on fellas who know too much. Nosy fellas who stick their schnozzles into what don't concern them. Like you, for instance."

It was queer. I was sweating quarts, but felt as if I were packed in dry ice. I couldn't move. It was like being nailed down. My shoes were full of iron weights and I couldn't lift my arms. A sort of paralysis had crept over me.

But I could still talk, and did.

"Wait a minute, Ziggy! Why knock me? After the nice piece I wrote about you tonight! What will murdering me get you? I'm no dick or private eye. Your affairs are none of my business."

"You know too much. You're not safe!"

I LOOKED at Dance Bowen. She rested against a table. The ash on her cigarette was a gray curve. I wondered why it didn't fall—the way I was soon to drop.

"Are you going to stand there and let him blast me?" I asked, almost indignantly. Or maybe it was hysterically.

The gorgeous shoulders moved in a shrug.

"You can't stop Zig, when he makes up his mind." She didn't smile or register any emotion. It was a plain statement of a plain fact. "He's like that."

The chill left me and fever set in. The burning heat of blood that lashed through me in pounding waves of fear. There was a cushion

beside me. I kept worrying the fringe on it. I kept watching the fat man with the dark face, until I heard his gun click and saw the round O of the cylinder point in my direction.

And then the bell rang!

Ziggy ripped out a curse and spoke without turning his head.

"See who it is. Don't let anybody in!"

I pegged the cushion at him as Dance Bowen started to leave the room. It was literally a soft touch. The down sailed through the air and spoiled Ziggy's aim. The gun coughed like an asthma sufferer but its lead went wild.

I tangled the next instant.

It was like fighting with a feather bed. I buffed him in the face, missing his jaw, but reaching his cheek. My knuckles must have gone in an inch or two. No good. And he was trying to get the gun in firing level. I gave that my attention, making a frenzied grab for his pistol wrist before the hooded rod could cough a second time.

The chair went over and so did we. I landed on top. Ziggy was a dictator when upright. On his back he was only a porpoise, out of salt water and gasping for air. I almost had the gun when a foot banged against my wrist and almost broke it.

"Leave him alone, pal!" The voice was familiar. "I'll take care of this sick moose!"

I rolled off Ziggy. In the lamplight Cracky Morgan, gun in hand, was covering the man on the floor!

Dance Bowen crouched near a table. Her green eyes were wide and full of fire but she just crouched there. Morgan kicked the fat man in the ribs and picked up the .38. He grinned.

"A muffler." He looked at the silencer before he shoved the gun in his pocket. "I used 'em once—until I saw one kick back on a buddy and almost blow his fingers off. Get up, Ziggy. You know why I'm here. That was my stuff in the first place—what Gail robbed me of and sent Kenny out to gather after he'd given it to the girl! I've come for it, and I want it!"

Ziggy climbed to his feet. He was shaken, but he wasn't through. He licked his lips and pressed a finger over the place on his face where I'd knuckled him.

"Okay, Cracky," he mumbled. "Okay, boy. You don't have to kick my ribs in to get it. It's

right here. I didn't know it was yours in the first place."

He began to open a drawer in the table close to where Dance stood. It was done so smoothly I didn't have a chance to speak. I didn't have a chance to do anything but look.

The drawer came open and the gun Ziggy snatched began to belch bullets. Morgan ducked and used his own rod. There must have been at least a half-dozen shots exchanged. The room was full of whizzing lead. The girl with the green eyes dropped to the floor and crawled for the couch.

I met her behind it and we drew in there while the guns roared.

Ziggy went out first.

He screamed and grabbed for his throat. His hand moved away, red and sticky. He looked at it, amazed. Just one look, because the next second he began to buckle at the knees and go down. It was like the fall of a building in slow motion.

Fascinated, I saw the gym owner thump on the floor and almost bounce when he hit it. Then I looked in Cracky Morgan's direction. He was all through, too. He was up against the surbase, threshing around and clawing at the wallpaper.

Another spasm or two and he relaxed and rolled over on his face.

I was shaking like a line of wash when I crawled out from behind the sofa. I remember I had a hand around Dance's arm and it was like cool velvet.

JUST about then, through the confusion of police whistles screeching from open windows, the front door of the apartment was kicked open and Larry Hartley with the cop from the corner clumped in, guns drawn.

"Believe it or not," I said to Hartley, "I'm glad to see you. I've got a present for you—the party who twenty-twoed Howard Gail at the Armitage Arms. She's yours—take her and keep her!"

The funny thing was that Dance Bowen—or Olga Barron—only smiled when Hartley reached for her.

Next morning I sat in one of the comfortable chairs in Libby's office at Flowerland and thought what a swell place the world was.

"So Dance made a complete confession," Mrs. Hart's only child stated, looking up from the

*Orbit* and Bill Jamison's able handling of the fracas on the fringe of Harlem. "She killed Gail because he threatened to close her show, throw her out and show her up for what she was. 'Is', might be a better word. But, you, Johnny. How did you know?"

"I've got a memory like a money lender," I said, as I leaned back in the chair and admired the way the sun gilded her black hair. "When you said 'Olga Barron' you set off a spark. Some years past. Chicago. When I was covering the White Sox. A lady by that name had been mixed up in a shooting brawl, Let off. Not enough evidence. Same old story."

"But—"

"The morgue at the office came up with the full particulars. She was Olga Barron then. Had a night-club act. Fancy shooting. With a target, twenty-two gun. Made a specialty of clipping the spots out of cards and stuff like that. Why couldn't she pierce a jugular vein, if necessary? Catch?"

Libby smiled. It had all the sunshine of the universe in it and it did things to my heart and imagination.

"But what about the package? Johnny, I simply can't figure what became of it!"

"Good morning," said a voice from the doorway. In came Hilda, the demon typist of middle Manhattan. In addition to being dumb she was tired. She yawned a couple of times while she hung up her hat, fluffed out some near-blond hair and opened her handbag.

"You're fifteen minutes late," Libby informed her.

"Yeah. I know. Ma had to drag me off the sheets. No more parties in the middle of the week. They're turrible. . . By the way, Miss Hart. I made a mistake yesterday. I took your package out of the safe instead of mine. Mine, with the six bucks worth of costume jewelry, I was supposed to wear last night."

She handed over a small, brown paper-wrapped box.

"Give!" I said.

Libby slapped my hand and opened it herself.

In a nest of cotton twenty-six gleaming black pearls were strung together on platinum wire, with a diamond catch.

"Pearls!" Libby breathed.

“Cracky lifted them somewhere,” I said. “Gail bought them, but never paid Morgan for them. Bad business, making a purchase and forgetting to settle. Get your hat, honey. We’ll

take these down to Captain Mullin, before anybody else gets ideas.”

Libby nodded. “What a pleasure,” she said softly, “to go out with you, Johnny, unfollowed!”