



The Case of The Squealing Duck

by George B. Anderson

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...

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," the little man said. "I guess I don't hafta 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 card were 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 been 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, jealousy and greed, to discover their basic origins.' Your bein' a showman was one reason I came to you."

FLAMOND 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 spoiling 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, bedraggleddest-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 pick 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 playing 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 how.

"You gonna 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 word 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 champagne—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 Dole’s 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 stared 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 shirtfront, 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 smiled. "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 head-waiter 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 it's 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 hide 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 prove 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 beginning 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 ain’t got the nerve, Josef.” He took a couple of quick, short steps toward the headwaiter.

“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 a 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 man's 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 couple 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

processes 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.”