



Homicide Johnny

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1

AN EXQUISITE morbid strain ran through him like the too-high note of a violin, so that while its music was shivering cold, there was also something wickedly haunting in it. Yet the morbidness was fragile and could be dismissed; while the other thing that tormented his conscience was the raucous horror of a shouting voice, and this it was impossible to forget. Harry Waters' words came back to him again and again:

“Get out of here, Doctor Hale. You dirty up my office. Get out and don't come back!”

Hale walked on the narrow tar road, now remembering that, and gazed ahead at his sanitarium. He wanted very much for its sight to stir him and take away the ache and sickness that was in his heart. Yet it didn't and he walked slowly in the extravagant leisure of solitude, but to try and lift enthusiasm into his heart was a silly and futile job which only wearied him.

He thought of another day eight years ago when he had walked down this same road and had seen the sanitarium there though it had not actually been there then. There had been only the desolated wreckage of a real estate project gone sour and flat: unfinished stone

houses, the jagged slope of their architecture blocked in silhouette against the blue of the sky; elegant and rusted gates, with a gateman's house, and beyond them patchy fields of weeds. He had not then identified that as someone else's dream ruined and dead, he had seen in the space only the fine structure of the sanitarium, and how it would look standing there with its vast screen porches facing the Long Island Sound, secluded and quiet; and on the inside, the pleasant routine, white clad nurses, and the dignity of a select New York clientele.

It was there now, just as he had pictured it. It had been there for seven years and five months and it still seemed bright and new. But through the windows the first and second floors shone vacantly with the glistening emptiness of rooms which had once been filled. Only on the third and top floor could one see the flicker that was activity. Last year there had been cars streaming in through the driveway one after the other, but now the sanitarium stood silently, and there seemed to be about it something bleak and cold; the wind that whipped across from the Sound was whiny, and the gleaming windows of the hospital were not unlike tragic and morbid eyes. You had the uncanny feeling that it did not want to be there; that it wished for an Aladdin's lamp to take it scurrying all the way across Orienta Point, and over to the other side of the Boston Post Road, so that it could settle in between the buildings on Mamaroneck Avenue, and shiver there, until the warmth of town places quieted it.

The unfinished structures that were to have been stone houses had never been removed, and though Hale hadn't before considered them in this light, it was as though they were tombs, waiting with cool and exasperating patience until the day when the sanitarium would take its place with them, broken and useless, in a graveyard where man had once planted dreams.

Hale kept walking and he could not quite diagnose the variety of emotions that surged within him; he wondered whether it was futile to go on hoping and fighting. Was it the end when you could see nothing ahead of you? When you looked back and remembered the past with a fleeting sadness because you could not catch time in your two bare hands and hold it?

There was his laboratory, and endless hours of experiment; he remembered old songs, and laughter, and the first day that Arline Carter came to be his patient; and the way they had said that his chemotherapy would save lives, but also it would make them a million dollars; and he would be rich and famous, and she would say: "See? I was his guinea pig. He married his guinea pig"; and life would be gladness and fun, and he would work a little, and love a little, and—

"Get out of my office," Harry Waters had said, "you and your sniveling and your whining. What do I care if the creditors gave you thirty days or thirty minutes...."

He could not get the harsh voice of the old man out of his mind. Harry Waters wrote in his paper, *The Mamaroneck Star*, with a poison pen; and even the words that came from

his throat were dipped with venom.

Hale rubbed his hand down across his face. He was sweating, and he thought that was funny, because he did not know why he should sweat on a cool afternoon. He kept walking, a little faster now; it was better when you acted, and did what you knew you had to do, and did not think.

He was tall, and he had dark, wavy hair; but there were little sprouts of gray on his temples to remind him that calendars were still being printed. He was thirty. He had fine brown hands with delicate and skilled fingers; his eyes were gray, and his nose was classic Grecian; his jaw line was a sharp, strong cleft; his arms and legs were long and lithe. He walked in an easy stride and you would not have guessed that he was troubled.

He came up the empty driveway to the sanitarium at last, and he opened the heavy oak door, and came into the bleak marble foyer. The elevator stood open, but Lord Carlin, the hospital's caretaker, was nowhere in sight. Doctor Hale stepped into the lift and operated it himself. He tried not to wince as he passed the second empty floor. He had congregated what few patients he had left on the third because his laboratory was on this floor, and it was closer for him.

When the elevator stopped he pushed back the door and got off. Sandra Stevens was standing in the hallway. The nurse was a tall, excellently shaped blonde. Her face was as smooth and as white as marble, and her blue eyes were bright, though there seemed to be a professional chill in them. The luster of her yellow hair shone; it was whipped back, and was done in curls on her neck. When Sandra had had a staff under her, she had been all there was in efficiency, but now she was the sole nurse day and night.

“Anybody call?” Hale asked.

“No, no one.”

“I'm expecting the Armin Chemical Company to telephone.”

“I know.”

Doctor Hale started toward his office, then he paused and looked back. “Sandra,” he said, “why don't you smile once in a while?”

“Smile?” she said dully.

He felt something cold go through him. “I know.” He moved on to his office, closing the door behind him. He sat down at the desk and for a moment he just put his hands in his lap. Then he shook off the lethargy, and he opened a drawer and brought out the patients' charts. It was time for the afternoon checkup, but he usually consulted the charts in advance so that he'd know what to expect.

He was doing this when the door opened and Arline Carter slipped into the room.

“Busy?”

He looked up. "Hello, darling." He turned back to the charts then, because he did not like to meet her eyes; he pretended that he was very busy, but he was conscious of her watching him.

Her hair was ebony in color, soft and rich; and her face was pale, lit up with dark, shiny eyes; the crimson of her lips shone in contrast to her very pale skin, so that her beauty was a clear emphasis of features. She wore a lavender frock with a red and blue sash, and a tight bodice which outlined the fullness of her breasts. She stood there now, watching him. "Well, Jim?"

"They gave me thirty days," Hale said, and he did not look up. "Thirty days to prove I'm going to have money coming to me, or the creditors in town are going to take over the place."

"It's unfair!"

He smiled. "Oh, it'll be all right. You can't blame them. They've given me time."

"Yes. But what good will the sanitarium do them?"

"None; they'll just close it up, and try and sell it. Maybe somebody will turn it into a yacht club."

"And make the operating room a bar; turn your laboratory into a sitting room for—No, Jim. They can't!"

He got up with the charts in his hand. His face was hard now. "I know they can't. And they won't. It was Harry Waters on the Mamaroneck Star who started that publicity about patients I had treated dying; New York papers picked it up, and we're practically wiped out. The patients couldn't get out of the place fast enough. And what did it? Facts? Tests? Investigation? No. Rumor. Rumor started by a small town male gossip!"

"It's insidious how people will believe in a thing like that," Arline said. "Harry Waters has started so many false rumors I don't think there's a person in town that doesn't hate him. But—"

"From today on," Hale cut in, "it's going to be different."

She looked up at him searchingly.

"Of course patients died," he went on. "Most of my cases I don't get until they're so far gone nobody else will touch them. Some were bound to go; but I've proven by the very things I've done here that I'm right."

She knew that he was right. She knew it perhaps more than anyone else in the world. She had come here with a serious infection resulting from a mastoid; meningitis had set in and she had been given up. But that had been months ago, and she was still living; she was nearly cured. Hers had been one of the worst cases.

Arline's father was a lawyer, but both of her parents, secure in the knowledge that she

was beyond danger, had gone to Florida to live; she had remained at the sanitarium to receive treatments, and to be near Jim Hale.

“From now on,” Jim was saying, “they'll have to change their tune. I gave samples of my antistrep solution to the Armin Chemical Company. It's perfect now, and if it passes their tests, they'll buy it. Their name on it will be the best guarantee of purity there is in the country.”

“When did you give it to them?”

“Yesterday. I wanted to hold out for a better price than they offered. Provided their approval was forthcoming, of course. But I had to save this place.” He opened the office door. “Come on, let's make the rounds.”

They moved down the hall toward the first room, and Hale tried to forget Harry Waters' rasping voice. He had told Arline nothing about it. Everything was going to work out six two and even. He had not given in vain all of the years he had put in on the study of syro and chemotherapy. Nor the time he had spent in perfecting a new azo-sulphon-amide solution. Harry Waters through his newspaper had set up doubt; he cracked his business in two and had made bystanders laugh at Hale's expense.

But now, because the move had been forced, he had offered the compound to the Armin Chemical Company. He had not given them his formula for making it, only already prepared samples. If they were enthusiastic they would buy the formula.

Sandra was waiting for them in the hall. Her sleek and beautiful face seemed cold, and her eyes were bleak and stern. It was only Hale who saw the face when it was not so stern: when there was both fright and misery in Sandra's eyes, and pain on her face. Once she had taken his hand in such a way that he had been electrified by her dynamic force, and he had guessed the throb and the ache that beat in her heart. But if she loved him she had never spoken of it aloud. There was almost nobility in her silence; she was faithful, she worked hard; but there were times when he looked up and saw her blue eyes upon him, and her cheeks flushed pink, and in moments like those he knew of her anguish, and fever.

She had been in to Mamaroneck today to buy provisions. He had seen her in the delivery truck just before he himself had returned on foot.

Sandra asked now: “Is Miss Carter going to accompany us?”

Sandra was making a point of it. There were only five patients left, and Arline was friendly with all of them; yet Sandra, looking at Arline, could not keep the acid out of her voice.

“Yes, Arline will come along,” Hale said.

Arline's eyes were hot. “I don't see why you should mind.”

“I don't, my dear,” Sandra said smoothly, “I simply asked a question.” She turned.

But just then the telephone rang. Hale stood very still. It rang for a second time.

“I—I’ll get it,” he said shakily.

He strode down the hall to the office, and he didn’t know why, but he was scared and sick. He picked up the receiver. He saw Arline moving toward him, and Sandra still standing there; they both knew from whom the call was likely to be.

“Hale?” asked the telephone voice. “This is Armin Chemical.”

“Yes.”

“We have a report.”

“Yes?”

“This unnamed anti-streptococcic compound you’ve been using in the sanitarium, that you wish to sell us—”

“Yes, what about it?”

“It’s utterly valueless.”

“*What?*”

“It’s even worse than that, I’m afraid. We’ve analyzed it carefully, and it’s our opinion that in certain types of systems it is a deadly poison. And over a long period it will kill any or all patients who have been treated with it.”

Doctor Hale could not catch his breath to protest; he sank down in a chair, and he could scarcely hold the phone. The voice went on:

“And since you’ve been using it, we felt it necessary to report our analysis to the government. A man from the American Medical Association is en route from New York to see you about it now.”

2

JOHNNY WEST felt funny. Emotions sprang up through him, sleek and wet, as though they had been born in the salt of tears. His radio was playing, and he half listened. But because he himself was empty, the echo of music seemed to be within him. It was as though shafts of beauty shivered up through his human sordidness; and when his heart wanted to laugh a blanket of sadness smothered it. He was sick and confused. He could not be sure of his breathing or his actions. He knew only that he was here, sweating, putting away clothes, and that the little hotel room was just a vacuum against which played the jagged symphony of his thoughts. His cheeks were hot, and his eyes burned; he stuffed shirts into a suitcase, and then suddenly there was a flash of metal, something tumbled out of the clothing and fell to the floor.

He stooped and picked it up. It was his badge. But he read the words across it as though he had never seen them before. Words like “Mamaroneck” and “Homicide”; and then his

fingers were pressing into the badge. He bent it double and dropped it into the wastebasket. His young face was grim.

He was saying, though not aloud: "I won't need you any more. I'm off to San Francisco where a private detective agency will pay me more in a week than you paid in two months. Graduation, people call it; well deserved success." He looked up bleakly, and the words which had not been words at all became numb and frozen inside him. What *had* contributed to his glorified status as a cop? Ability? Or was it luck; and maybe a girl named Penny Lane?

He turned around, and her picture was there in front of the mirror: glowing and alive, because even in a picture you had to feel the magic quality in her personality which characterized her. It was almost a haunting beauty, though Johnny had not always considered it in this light; dark eyes, and soft, wavy hair like mahogany; skin so clear and flawless you wondered if it could be real. Even the picture was a contrast of light and shadow, so that the shading of the film conspired in the artistry which makes loveliness. She was a girl whose very actions you remembered long after she had left you. The faint fragrance of the perfume she used; the way she laughed, that catching laughter which was deep in her throat and seemed to come from her very heart; the things she said, and the sparkle that came to her eyes, and made those spoken sentences more than words.

Johnny glanced from the picture to the mirror and saw himself. Black hair, an angular jaw, a tan face. Jaunty, they said. Jaunty Johnny. Tricky guy. Gadgets and puzzles. Maybe he hadn't grown up.

But if he hadn't, it was better that way because when he was a kid he had always wanted to be a cop. He had studied criminology; and he had learned to shoot; he had taken courses in Jiu Jitsu, in law, in science; he had read countless volumes on the history of crime. He had spent his 'teens doing that, and Penny had helped him. And here he was twenty-six, a cop, and still wanting nothing more than to be a cop.

Only he was going to 'Frisco now; from a civic job to a private one. And he was going alone.

He kept gazing at himself, and then back at Penny's picture, and he thought that his own face looked quite a lot like putty and jaundice; he smiled, but the smile was lopsided. He was standing here, but something was wrong; the pistons inside his body weren't hitting regularly, and he felt as though he were two minutes ahead of total mechanical collapse. He leaned forward, as though he wished to bawl hell out of the young man he saw in the glass, and then all at once those words began going through his mind again, and though his lips and throat were silent, he was holding a conversation. He was saying:

"Let's get everything straight... Penny's through. She doesn't want you hot or cold or baked in an oven. That's clear, isn't it? She wouldn't touch you with a fork. You went to school with her. She was your girl at every prom you can remember. She's the librarian

now, and you were a cop in town (for the entire county, finally) and you and she worked together. That was something new for the Westchester boys. Penny was a mine of information, because in a town like this everyone sooner or later comes into the library; and women in particular have a lot to say. Penny has a photographic memory. She's the local biography girl and she never forgets even the tiniest detail. Besides she's booked on the geographical data for the entire state; she knows the history of the town from its inception, all of its successes and failures (the village files gave her that; they were dull reading, but she spent a year poring over them so she could help you). Now you're going to be without her....”

He regarded himself for another moment to consider that, and then he went on: “You're going to be a detective on your own, in a strange town where you won't know anything about a case except what you see before you; and Penny will stay here working with older and steadier clucks who'll handle the town's homicides. Penny won't go with you, no matter when you go. She's crazy—for everything that is lovely must in some way be perverse—and she loves this town. But even so, she doesn't want part or parcel of you. When you leave here you're closing a book behind you and you'll never be able to open it again....”

He stopped talking because he discovered that he was not looking at himself, but at the picture of Penny; then suddenly he turned on his heel and paced the room. It was a small room and there was very little space. It was in a hotel over Huber's Bar and Grill, and he could look out the window and see Mamaroneck Avenue, very broad and black, and lined with trees whose branches were green with leaves; the afternoon sun was in the sky, and he could feel the serenity in the quiet of the village; if he looked up the street he could see Oscar, on his motorcycle, laying for a speeder; and just below some of the Wop kids were going by with fishing poles.

There was very little in Mamaroneck to excite his sentiment, except that combined it was everything he had ever loved, and now he was chucking it into the wastebasket after the tin badge.

Memories crowded up around him, like flowers still fragrant but too distant to reach, and no matter which way he turned there was no freedom from them. There were songs, one of which was “You're Getting to Be a Habit With Me,” that he could not forget, because when they had played that, so long ago now, he had told Penny that was the way it was, she was his habit, and they had laughed about it. That was the year she had started wearing knit sweaters to high school and he had observed for the first time that she had a shapely figure.

Johnny remembered picnics, and little sail boat cruises, and times when he had taken Penny in to New York for a night club or a show, and how late at night they had walked along the thickly trafficked streets, with taxis and busses and trolleys going by, talking about how desperately they loved each other, and the little house they were going to buy (Johnny stayed in this cheap room so he could save) and the kind of furniture they would

have.

But then Johnny had gone on the Rhea Davis case and because Penny was sick with a cold she had been unable to accompany him. The whole affair had lasted only three days, though it seemed like that many years. There were glamorous people and some pretty tense hours, and Johnny had lost his head. The girl was Dorothy Noel. Johnny had been honest enough to tell Penny about her. Then Dorothy Noel had gone away, and here was Johnny, wide awake now, with no excuse for the infatuation into which he had fallen with all of his heart. He was ashamed. It was as though he had drunk champagne and for three days had been high on it. He did not know why or how he had fallen in love; and out again so quickly. It could have been the tenseness of a murder case; or glamor and beauty which dazzled him. It could have been any number of things; but he had not found just the right one, so he could not name it.

He had wounded Penny deeply. She was bitter, and crushed; she had lost her belief in everything. It had never occurred to her that there was any other man in the world, and now there was no way to amend what he had done.

Johnny turned back to his bag and finished packing. He closed it up, and locked it. He adjusted the straps; then he lifted the bag off onto the floor.

He heard a sound in the hall. Someone knocked. Johnny opened the door. Jimmie Means, a uniformed policeman, stood there.

“Come in,” said Johnny.

Jimmie Means came in and shut the door. He was an older man, with gray sideburns and brown, dullish eyes. He leaned back against the wall, as though he had come for a social visit.

“You came to pay me off,” said Johnny. “I’ll take the dough. Where is it?”

“I didn’t bring it.”

“*What?*”

“There’s been a murder in town,” Means went on.

Johnny felt the twinge of his heart, and the flush that crept into his cheeks. His dark eyes came up and searched the officer’s face critically for the trace of a smile to belie the statement. There was none. Johnny asked:

“Who was killed?”

“Harry Waters.”

“You mean Waters—the editor of the Mamaroneck Star?”

“That’s right,” the cop replied. “So you see, it’s about the most important homicide we’ve had around here.”

Johnny turned away. “It isn’t my concern, though; you’ve got a police force. If I looked

into this New Rochelle would be on my tail with new orders.”

“I know,” Means said drily, “they treat you like you're the only cop in the state outside the city of New York; but suit yourself. I ain't asking you, the chief is.”

“I'm sorry. I'm shoving off for 'Frisco, you know. I wouldn't have time for a thing like this. It might get involved.”

“That's right. It might. I heard about your new job. It sounds okay. Only—” Jimmie Means was gazing at the picture of Penny.

“Only what?”

“Do you think you'll be any good without her?”

“What makes you think I won't?”

The uniformed Jimmie Means shrugged. “I was just thinking out loud. But I don't know why you ever quit a babe that's got all that she has.”

“I didn't quit her! That is—”

“I know. You quit for awhile, and when you came back she wasn't there. Isn't that it? She was there, but she was blind because she couldn't see you, and deaf because she couldn't hear you talk; and you were like Eliza in the snow, holding a contract from a San Francisco agency in your arms, but shivering like hell with it nevertheless.” The cop paused. “There was once a song called 'Get Out of Town', all about a guy who loved a girl but because he couldn't have her, he couldn't stand seeing her all the time; it made him go kind of crazy.”

Johnny was shaking. “Will you shut up?”

“Sure. I just came over to—”

“Well, you can get out. I'm not interested in the murder. And I'm sick of small town analysis of other people's emotions. Maybe I won't get that in 'Frisco.” He sucked in his breath, and stood with his legs spread, defiant. “Go on, Jimmie. The door's right behind you.”

The policeman opened the door; his face was contrite. “Okay, hot shot. Only the chief told me to tell you that Penny would be on the case. I guess that don't interest you none, though. Bill Hammers can work with her just as well.”

The door slammed.

Johnny stood there for a moment. Then he went to the wastebasket and picked out the badge which he had bent double. He straightened it out, and put it in his pocket. He grabbed a felt hat and slapped it on his head. In another moment he was out the door, and taking the steps two at a time. Jimmie Means was waiting for him downstairs, as though there had never been any doubt but what Johnny would come.

“I'll drive you to where the body is,” he said.

PENNY LANE was standing in front of Connie's Bar when the car drove up. Johnny, seeing her, got that old ache because, although he had always appreciated her beauty, now that she no longer belonged to him there was something in seeing her that paralyzed his heart. She stood very straight, wearing a pert hat, and she noticed him as he got out of the car, but displayed no emotion.

She had a well rounded figure and she knew how to wear clothes: such as the yellow and black dress she wore now; it was tight at the hips and broke just at her knees; her brown hair was well groomed, and her eyes were dark and bright; her lips seemed to him to glisten lusciously red. There wasn't anyone in Mamaroneck who was quite so breathtaking. Johnny walked toward her; he slipped his fingers under the brim of his hat in a friendly salute, but her face was cold and set, and she didn't look at him, but through him.

"We're working together," Johnny said.

"I thought you were going away?"

"I was."

"I'm sorry you changed your mind," she said. She meant that. It was neither hysteria nor pride which had spoken. She hated him.

"You don't mind working with me this once?"

"I take police pay," she said. "I haven't much choice."

He looked at her; she was splendidly cool and beautiful, but he longed to see just once more the old Penny who laughed and was warm. He jammed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He tried to be hard-boiled, but all the hardness in him had melted.

"I guess we'd better go inside," he said.

She gazed at him then, and he thought he saw a flicker of a light that had burned once before, but it vanished, it had gone away in the soft air of a lazy afternoon. He held open the door to Connie's Bar, and she walked in. He followed.

There was already a crowd, and he saw familiar heads come up and eyes staring at him, then at Penny, asking the question their being together suggested: Homicide Johnny and Penny Lane were a local tradition. Some of the people who had thought Johnny was going away seemed to be glad. They kept looking at him, and he pushed back his felt hat, and dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. He nodded to everybody. Penny Lane already had a notebook out and was jotting down shorthand.

The corpse was lying at the other end of the bar and no one had been allowed near it. Lance Brown of homicide, who was already here, had seen to that; there were also present a couple of uniformed flatties who kept order. The coroner had made his examination, and was waiting.

Johnny looked back at the corpse, and he had a funny, sickly feeling, which he knew whenever he saw murder; there was something nauseating about it which stirred in him hatred and a bewildered helplessness; it was always this way at first, and all of his experience could not change that. He was as surprised and shocked at murder as the butcher or the milkman, although he was a professional case breaker.

Harry Waters' corpse seemed to lie there very naturally, though you knew he was dead; there was something waxy about the set, unmoving features which took away all realism; you could not believe that he had even been a human being: he was a thing of bones and a few layers of flesh sans personality.

The trouble with wax museums was the impersonal coldness that had to be substituted for life; and Harry Waters was like that; there was no more man, and to believe that there ever had been one, Johnny had to remember back to when he had last seen Harry and spoken to him. He could remember these things, then look at the corpse, but he still could not quite believe that the two identities were the same.

Waters had been a gray-haired man, with a narrow, tight-lipped face; there was meanness in his eyes, and a shrewdness, too. The Mamaroneck Star was run solely on the fact that he bluffed local advertisers into buying space. If they refused he sooner or later dug up something out of their past, or found a flaw in their business dealings, and then he spread it all over his front page. In a small town like this, the result had a tremendous effect. So Waters had lived on canny wit, and had subsisted exceedingly well. He was ruthless, with courageous daring, and men feared him. His sentences were bristling and barbed; he wrote bitter insinuations in overtones which made clear his point but defied libel.

Somehow Johnny got the idea that Harry Waters felt himself infinitely superior to his surroundings and that he played with the citizens, tortured them, and watched them squirm, not to make money, but only for his own inverted amusement. He must have gone home hundreds of nights chuckling at what he considered the weakness of man: the stupidity and the veiled cowardice which permitted his success. If he had no friends, so much the better; it did not sting your conscience to turn your enemies inside out and watch their writhing. He was neither miserable nor a miser. He did the work he liked, drank what he wanted, slept as late as he pleased, took vacations whenever the notion seized him, and the hatred of others only gave him satisfaction. Harry Waters had been a very happy man.

Johnny looked at the coroner. "Well, what about it?"

"He only had one drink in here," said the coroner, "so he wasn't intoxicated. When he turned to go he stumbled and lacerated his skull."

"That killed him?"

"That was the original verdict," the coroner replied, putting slow emphasis on his words. "But it was a mistake. Actually, he was dead before he ever hit the floor."

Johnny's eyes flickered. "What was it, then?"

The coroner took himself very seriously. This was his moment and he intended to make the most of it. "My verdict," he said, "is poison."

"*Poison?*" Johnny's face was set.

The coroner nodded. "Of course the diagnosis is incomplete until I am able to perform an autopsy. But there is a slight discoloration of the skin which indicates unnatural heart reaction."

"I thought Waters had heart disease?"

"He did. But death of coronary thrombosis would have produced different symptoms. Offhand I would say that he had been poisoned approximately an hour before he came here."

"What kind of poison?"

"I can't say until I examine his stomach. But it seems to me the idea was for Waters to simply drop dead from apparently natural causes, and the type of poison, therefore, would have to be carefully chosen. I'm not sure that an ordinary layman could lawfully obtain such a drug."

Johnny put a cigarette in his mouth. "Okay, Doc. Thanks."

The coroner departed before any of his prominence could be overshadowed by other interests. Johnny turned toward Lance Brown, who stood beside Penny.

"What have you got, Lance?"

"Some stuff that was in Waters' pockets."

"Let's see it."

Lance handed over a bankbook which was perforated with big letters: CANCELLED. It hadn't belonged to Waters, and Johnny couldn't understand what it had been doing in his pocket. The money columns in the book showed that everything had been drawn out. Among the other effects from the pockets were: a wallet in which there were two twenty-dollar bills, a gold-plated watch, an ivory toothpick in a case, a chain with three keys on it, and a tiny fragment of paper a quarter of an inch long and much less than that in width. On top of this was printed in small numerals: 832.

"Punchboard," Lance Brown said. "I guess he won, and thought it was lucky; so he saved it to keep the luck."

"Did you check on Waters' actions before he came here?" Johnny asked. He picked up a newspaper and spread it over the face of the corpse.

"I didn't find out much," Lance said. "People saw him walking toward the bank. Whether he went in or not I don't know. Ned Borden here says no. After that Waters went over to the offices of the Mamaroneck Post, and had a talk with his competitor,

Bob Smith—who's standing practically beside you. Smith says they talked about advertising. Following that Waters went over to Hank Morrow's store and got cigarettes. Then he came across the street and into this place.”

“So you were giving them the old Q and A,” said Johnny. “Look, Lance, you'd better phone and have them take Waters away. Penny, you mark down some of the things Lance said, and we can check on these people after a while.”

“You can check on us now,” said Ned Borden.

Johnny looked up with mock surprise, as though he hadn't known Borden was there. Borden nervously bit the end off a cigar, and assumed the stance of an executive.

“What I mean is, if there's anything *I* can tell you, I'll be only too glad to—” He didn't quite know how to finish, so instead he lit the cigar.

Ned Borden was tall and distinguished looking; he was both a lawyer and a banker and one of the more prominent citizens. He had part control of the Westchester Savings on Mamaroneck Avenue. But if he possessed wealth he was not gaudy with it. He came to work each morning just like anyone else. He had iron-gray hair, and sharp brown eyes, and he was a widower of two years. His interest in the town was acute, but outside of it war could break in Europe, Dewey could clean up New York, California could vote down Ham-and-Eggs, and he never bothered beyond a perusal of headline captions. Mamaroneck was his world and in it he was a big man; it only upset him to gaze upon a broader horizon and discover that his reflection was infinitesimal.

He prided himself that he was the friendly, jovial sort who could laugh and joke with the merchants, and that he had not lost the common touch. But actually he had never had the common touch; he had been born with money and he had increased it; through the years his fortune had gone up and down, but he had always lived well, and he had been an executive so long as he could remember. The men with whom he thought he was being friendly politely laughed at his stale wit, but they were always aware of the line which separated him from them, and more than one sighed with relief once he was out of Borden's presence.

Borden felt he was envied; but the only feeling the town had for him was one of sympathy. He lived alone; he unconsciously built a wall between himself and any possible close friends; it seemed to Mamaroneck that in spite of his occasional bursts of energy and his hearty laughter he must be a very lonely middle-aged man.

“No, that's all right,” Johnny said. “There's lots of time, Mr. Borden. Only—did you say Harry Waters wasn't in the bank today?”

“What I said was, I didn't see him come in, and I don't believe that he did.”

Johnny suddenly tingled with an awareness that the young editor of the Weekly Post was staring at Ned Borden.

The editor's name was Robert Smith. He was a large young man whom Johnny had

always, for some inane reason, considered a little stupid. Perhaps Smith was not stupid, but you just assumed so because of his colossal ego. Smith had started the Weekly Post two years ago in spite of Harry Waters' thriving daily. His clothes were loose, and his hat was punched out of shape. He tried at all times to look exactly like what he thought a big city reporter resembled. He pulled a notebook out of his pocket now. He cocked his head, and when he spoke there was the slight tinge of a sneer in his voice.

“But Mr. Borden, sir, I *saw* Harry Waters go into your bank today.”

Borden turned. “Why—ah—you did?” The older man's mouth closed. He laughed, but it was not healthy laughter. “That's a horse on me,” he said. “I thought—”

Robert Smith began writing, and Johnny looked over his shoulder. The young newspaper man quickly scribbled what was apparently a headline caption: “That's a horse on me, says executive in the opening questions concerning the murder of—”

Johnny grabbed the book out of Smith's hands, closed it, and put it in Smith's side pocket. He took the pencil and put it behind Smith's ear.

“You be a good boy now,” he said, “and hustle your oversized carcass out of here.”

“You mean to say the press doesn't get to—”

“*What* press?” asked Johnny.

He watched Robert Smith go out. Ned Borden followed, and the others filed through the door one by one. Johnny's mind was deluged with details which he was not sure he would remember long enough to make useful; then he looked up at Penny, and saw her closing her notebook. She had everything down in black and white.

“Honey,” he said, “I'll tell you what—”

He stared at her cold face: it was hard to keep remembering. His hands dropped to his sides, and he started over again.

“I think you'd better come with me, Miss Lane,” he said. He couldn't help a trace of bitterness. “That is, if you haven't anything better to do.”

“Where are we going, career boy?” she snapped.

She was throwing the 'Frisco job at him, and he ignored it. “We're going over and have a look in at Doctor Jim Hale,” he told her. Then, slowly: “I think the result may be interesting.”

4

THE ARMIN Chemical Company had given Doctor Hale their message, and now the line went dead. Jim Hale hung up the telephone, and for a moment he sat there. He decided he wouldn't make the rounds of his patients. He rose, a little dazed, wondering why his legs were so shaky; he walked across the corridor to his laboratory and went in.

The way he closed the door did not invite intrusion, and for a moment when he was in the laboratory he stood with his back against the wall, listening to the confused shuffle of Arline's and Sandra's feet; he knew that they wanted to talk, and perhaps console him, because no matter what happened they would always both believe in his ability. He listened to them, and at last he heard Sandra's sharp heels clicking down the hall; there was the sound of a door opening, and he knew that she was going to make the rounds for him, the way she did sometimes. Arline must have gone into his office, because he did not hear her. There was something fetid and rotten pulsing through him, and he was altogether limp with it.

He looked around at the laboratory, at the tables on which stood his test tubes; the various instruments which had cost him so much money, and with which he had worked so hard and long; he saw the cages of white rats and guinea pigs, and there was Billy-the-Monk, in his cage, holding onto the bars, his head lopsided, because there was a mastoid in his right ear, which Doctor Hale had infected and intended to cure. The bleak curtained windows looked out on the Sound, and Hale went to them and stood for a moment. Then he came back to the white porcelain table, above which the glass experimental tubes hung in neat racks, all labelled and orderly, and he sat down here in front of them, too dazed yet to comprehend all that he had heard in those few words on the telephone.

He put his elbows on the table, and he meant to close his eyes, but they remained open somehow; they were glazed and stunned. Billy-the-Monk squealed at him for something, not because he was hungry, but because he always enjoyed eating; the pink-eyed rats had all come to the front of their cages and were standing on their hind legs, wiggling their whiskers, because they knew that he was in the room, and they were quaint and tame creatures who became lonely for human attention even when they were surrounded by their own rodent brothers and sisters. The guinea pigs were unintelligent and simply continued eating on their alfalfa, looking blank and dumb. You didn't mind experimenting on guinea pigs because there was nothing to them. They had no animal soul.

Doctor Hale sat there thinking these things, unimportant, inane observations that he had made a hundred times before; insignificant facts which hobbled through his mind and temporarily took away the pain upon which ultimately he would have to concentrate. He tried to think of all kinds of things, and his mind went back to that which had been his beginning. His father had been a well-known New York surgeon with a Park Avenue practice, and when he died he had left Jim all of his money on condition that he erect with it a sanitarium. Jim had been a year out of Bellevue, where he had finished his internship. He'd had no other experience, for he had spent his time in the study of chemotherapy, a subject which to numerous other doctors was only a fascinating hobby, but upon which Doctor Hale had decided to build his medical career. You could not give only spare time to a phase of medicine and make any great discoveries. He knew that there was much yet to be achieved in chemicals. The recent discovery of azo-dyes had

been of tremendous importance; it saved the lives of people who without it would have died, but Jim felt that the discovery of this chemical, which heretofore had merely changed the color of clothes, and now was a potent healing drug, was only an enlightened beginning that proved what might be possible along these lines, and he had worked tirelessly to achieve new effects.

He thought he had achieved a new effect. This sanitarium was based on the use of his own antistrep compound. He had guarded the formula jealously from professional eyes; he wrote of his discovery, but he did not describe the ingredients he had added, nor the new measure of old quantities he stirred into the solution. He had believed that the formula was his bid to fortune and to fame. And now he could not at once adjust himself to think differently.

There was no use of employing childish objections to the Armin Chemical Company reports; the company had been credited and respected down through the years, and their tests were above reproach. And yet it could not be true that Jim's compound was both deadly and—

He got up from the little table and paced the room for a moment; Billy-the-Monk began to scream very loudly to be played with, but Jim Hale paid no attention to him. At last he returned to the table and picked up a test tube. His hands were sticky with sweat, and they trembled. Rapidly he began putting together a new mixture of his formula. He turned on a little blue flame and roasted a test tube over it.

He could not lose the sanitarium, for every penny his father had left him was tied up in it; with it gone he would have nothing, not even a practice. If Armin's report was true he would be both discredited and disgraced. There would be no fortune, no career, no—

A knock sounded on the door.

“Who is it?”

Sandra said: “A man from the Medical Association is here to see you.”

Doctor Hale strode across and opened the door. He waited there, tense, his face flushed. The man who came down the hall was of medium height; he had gray hair, and a rather stern face. He looked up and said gruffly:

“Doctor Hale? I'm Doctor Butler. Harold Butler.”

“I'm glad to know you, doctor.”

“I want to talk with you,” Butler went on.

“Please come into my laboratory.”

Butler entered, and Hale closed the door. He stood there for a moment watching the official, and hysteria and panic crept through him; his lips drew down and became bitter.

“I suppose Armin Chemicals—”

“Yes. You know what I'm here for, then.”

Jim nodded, then he leaned back against the door. “Listen, Doctor Butler,” he said, “it may sound funny to you, but Armin's wrong this time. Something went wrong with their experiment. Do you hear me? They erred.”

“They made three separate tests,” said Butler coldly.

“All right. They made three tests. Maybe they made a hundred. I'm saying that they're wrong. For a few brief hours they put my samples through a routine. A few brief hours. Do you know how long I spent perfecting that antistreptococcic compound? Do you know? Years. For all the years that I've been a doctor, and that's about nine. Not only that. I've seen it work.” He waved his hand toward the white rats. “I've given them overdoses and seen them die; I've infected them with what were supposed to be deadly germs, and I've saved their lives.” He pointed a shaky finger toward Billy-the-Monk. “I've given him meningitis when there was a mastoid in his ear. Meningitis which practitioners will tell you in case of that kind go to the brain in a few short days. Other doctors have declared that the only result of that kind of meningitis is inevitable death. You see him there, he's still alive. But more than that, I've had patients. Here, and in town. I've—”

“There is much that is good in your compound,” Doctor Butler cut in. “No doubt a staff of chemists might in time iron the flaws from it. That you have had a measure of success may be based on the fact that you used the true grains of azosulfonamide originated by other scientists; but your own additions to this chemical structure are what is perhaps injurious, even deadly.”

“I tell you it is not deadly!”

“You have never had patients die?”

“I have, yes. But who—”

“Please, Doctor Hale. We are not interested in a technical argument; you naturally must have faith in your discovery. And we are not accepting the analysis made by the Armin Chemical Company. We wish only to make up samples of your compound with our own basic ingredients and give it the test ourselves. We will base whatever future action we take on our own tests, not on those that have already been made by Armin.”

Jim crossed to the white table. He jerked a tube off the flame, and poured its bubbling substance into another tube. He turned around. “All right. I'll give you the formula. It's the most valuable thing I have. It is the only thing I have. I've kept it a secret. It's been my life and my future, but—well, look. First, I want to tell you how much I—”

“I haven't much time.”

Doctor Hale laughed harshly. “You haven't much time. My life blood is flowing out of me; and my soul is shriveled to dust inside my belly, but you haven't much time. You listen and let me tell you. You cannot but see the logic of my principles. It was Domagk

in 1935 who first demonstrated the therapeutic activity of the original compound, the hydrochloride of 2':4'-diaminoazo-benzene-4'-sulfonamide. He proved that the compound had little or no effect on the growth of hemolytic streptococci in vitro, but—now listen, when he administered it orally and parenterally to mice infected with many times the lethal dose of virulent culture, almost all of the rest of the animals survived and recovered; whereas the controls all died within twenty-four to forty-eight hours. Levaditi, Vaisman, Nitti and Bovet all obtained similar results. We have, thanks to them, the pure action of the azo-dyes compounded and reduced in potency for our purposes. But that was only a beginning. Not the ending. I don't know why so many learned physicians are content to leave well enough alone, when further experimenting will result with effects which a few years ago were, like the radio and airplane, considered impossible. What I did was—”

“Really, doctor!”

Jim Hale looked up through feverish eyes. He was still furiously mixing chemicals, talking as he worked. “The work in benzene sulfonamide in cases of fulminating meningitis following ear mastoid infection has been going on right here. Spinal fluid injections, then dosage by mouth. Why, with the effects of my compound, I've seen cerebrospinal fluid pressure drop from four-hundred-and-forty to two-hundred-and-forty in twenty-four hours and—” He was trembling as he mixed the last of the compound in the tube, then he turned to show it to Doctor Butler. His shaking arm jarred against the table. The bottom of the glass tube hit the hard surface, and shattered; the white substance spilled across the floor with the tiny fragments of glass.

Jim Hale just stared down at it, and it was like his life which was broken. He stared down at what he had spilled on the floor and did not speak again. He sponged sweat from his cheeks and looked up with burning eyes. He looked up into Butler's cold face, then he nodded, shaking his head, as though he understood at last why Doctor Butler was here. He went to a shelf in the corner of the room, and he opened a little safe and brought out several sheets of paper. He looked at them in his own hand and the papers rattled and shook with his trembling. He walked across the room with them and gave them to Doctor Butler.

“That's it,” he said, “that's the formula.”

Butler put it inside the pocket of his coat. “We will get in touch with you....” He walked to the door, and turned, and his face was still unsympathetic, but he said: “I do hope, doctor, that you are right. But in case you aren't—”

“I am, though! I am!”

Doctor Butler nodded and went out. The door closed. Doctor Jim Hale stood there looking at it blankly; he felt fever in his throat and the hot churn of blood through his arms and legs. He thought of Arline, with her soft black hair and her pale face. If they're right, I've been murdering her! I've been murdering all of them. Slowly and insidiously

I've been giving them a daily dosage of poison. He wanted to shriek with the hysteria of laughter. But his throat was numb and there was no laughter in it. Everything about him was vague and unreal with incredible horror. He turned and looked at the tubes, and he walked past them, blindly, to the cages of white rats, where he paused, watching them, their pink eyes shining at him and their whiskers moving up and down. Billy-the-Monk was screaming for his attention; and outside, the wind that came across the Sound whined against the windows.

5

JOHNNY AND Penny were in a roadster. They turned right off Mamaroneck Avenue and drove down the Boston Post Road about a quarter of a mile, where they made a left turn that took them onto the broad peninsula which is Orienta Point. They did not speak. To the left lay scores of yachts moored on the blue of the inlet; a few sail boats were coming in, full with breeze; others were dropping their sails. The sun was going down and it had dyed the ground and the green leaves on the trees a hazy golden orange; the wind was sharp and crisp. They kept driving, past houses that were set back from the road, past private schools and an estate or two.

At last Johnny said: "You're more beautiful since you broke up with me, Penny; or maybe it's the difference of perspective."

"Well, I'm healthier," she said. "I get more sleep."

"It agrees with you then?"

"Quite."

"Maybe if I—"

"We're on a murder case, I think, Mr. West," she cut in. "You might give me an inkling as to why we're going to see Doctor Hale."

"You can't guess?"

"I'd prefer not to. I know that Harry Waters ruined the doctor, though, if that's what you're driving at; and I'm aware that Jim Hale was particularly bitter about the way Waters kept riding him in the Star."

"You probably know a lot of other little facts that would contribute to a sound motive for Doctor Hale," Johnny said. "That's why I have you along. But it happens I picked up a clue I think I may lay in Jim's lap."

"What is it?"

"We'll come to it," Johnny said. "Are you impatient?"

"Well, if I'm to help you—"

"Give me moral support," said Johnny. "That would be better."

“Yes. I notice you need it on a case. And if I'm not around to lend it to you, you get it from some other woman.”

“Listen, can't you forget—”

“I'd rather not talk about it,” Penny said.

They reached the point where the Sound lay directly ahead, and turned right. The car jogged over a bumpy dirt road, and they drove in through two stone pillars which held up a rusted and open gate. Beyond the ruins of the real estate dream, and the brown weeds which grew over it, stood the three-story sanitarium. There was presently another turn, and the hospital's own gravel road. Johnny brought the roadster to a stop and helped Penny out.

They got into the empty elevator and went up to the third floor. Johnny pushed the door open and Sandra Stevens stood there, as though she had been waiting for them.

“Penny, maybe you'd better wait out here.” Johnny looked up then. “I'd like to see the doctor.”

The nurse moved down the hall and Johnny seated himself in a leather chair. Penny sat opposite him and picked up a magazine. Everything was deathly quiet. But presently a door opened and there was the sound of a monkey squealing. Jim Hale called:

“Come this way, please.”

Johnny got up with his hat in his hand and moved down to the laboratory. Hale held the door open for him and he went in. He looked at the trays of test tubes, the white rats, and at Billy-the-Monk. Through the window he saw a yacht going by on the Sound. Jim Hale was standing before him then. Hale's young face was lined with worry, and his eyes were bloodshot; he looked as though he had not slept for several days.

“What is it you want, West?”

Johnny was running his finger along the white rat cage and he did not look up. “A friend of yours has been murdered.”

“A *what?*”

“Harry Waters,” Johnny said, and his eyes came up then.

Hale looked incredulous. “Waters—killed?”

“Yeah,” said Johnny, “I thought maybe we could talk about it.”

Hale nodded. “Yes, of course. But—but, well, it's rather preposterous to think that I'd—”

Johnny took the cancelled bankbook out of his pocket. “This yours?”

Jim Hale stared at the little perforated book and the blood drained from his face. “Yes,” he whispered. “It—it's mine, where did you—”

“It was on the corpse.”

“On the—” He made a laughing face but no sound came; he straightened up a little. “You found it on the corpse. Well, I can explain that. I can tell you—”

There was a knock on the door. Jim Hale turned around slowly; he was sweating, and he brushed back a lock of his dark hair.

The knock sounded again, and he said: “Yes?”

The door opened, and Sandra stood there. Her lovely, immobile face had broken in emotion. There was a look in her eyes that was a mixture of misery and terror. “Doctor —”

“What is it?”

“Something—something really awful has happened.”

“Well?”

“There's a man here,” she went on, “from the Medical Association. A *different* man. He showed me his credentials, and he said they didn't send anyone else!”

“But—but that fellow I gave my formula to—”

Sandra Stevens said: “He must have been an impostor.”

She choked. “Oh, *Jim!*”

6

“IT CAN'T be true!”

“It is,” Sandra said. “The man who took your anti-strep formula a few minutes ago was a fraud!”

“But he—”

“Did he *show* you his card?”

“No,” Hale answered miserably, “but I—well, I assumed that—” He looked up, his face was ashen and lined; it no longer seemed young. His bloodshot eyes were filled with fever. “Show the American Medical Association man in. And Sandra—” The slim blonde turned. “Get Armin Chemical Company on the wire. We've got to find out what this is about. That formula is the only thing I've got in the world and—” He waved her out.

Doctor Hale turned toward Johnny West. “I'm sorry to hear Harry Waters has been killed. But can you give me a few minutes? You must understand that what has just happened is far more important to me than murder.”

“Sure,” Johnny said, and his eyes were a little bitter; he gazed at Hale, as though he were trying to judge him. The doctor was nervous and high-strung, and Johnny would have liked to know in what channels his mind ran: his opinion, for instance, of homicide. The

deaths of other people held no terror for medical men; but Johnny would like to have learned the value Jim Hale placed on human existence. A tall, broad man from the Medical Association entered, and Johnny walked out. He moved down the marble hall to where Penny sat.

She glanced up. Pretty Penny, he thought; I love you so much, and you hate me so beautifully. Her brown hair was stunning, and he liked the black and yellow dress which flowed so smoothly over her full breasts and the mold of her shapely hips. But it was the magic of her clear complexion, and the glow in her face, which captivated him.

“What's up?” she asked.

“Plenty.” He slumped down beside her, and brought out a cigarette; he jammed it into his mouth with deliberate laziness. His white face was bleak and drawn. He half wished he had never taken the case. “Somebody's copped Hale's formula,” he went on. “A chemical company told him it was no good, and the Medical Association was to investigate. A guy pops up, says he's from the Association, gets the formula and beats it. Just now the real Association guy came in. There's something like hell brewing.”

“I should imagine.”

Johnny lit the cigarette and gazed at the opposite wall. “Maybe it'll give us a lead on Harry Waters' murder; God knows we need one.”

“You suspect Hale, of course?”

“More than a little. But he's going to be a squirmy individual to pin anything on. Listen to what I say. Somewhere between that formula of his, and the hatred he had for Waters, we're going to find the real reason for the murder. It's going to tie right in with this sanitarium.”

“You think so?” Penny's voice had almost lost its coolness.

“Yes,” Johnny said. “There's more going on here than meets the eye.”

She looked up. “You mean possibly more than murder?”

“I mean probably something besides murder.”

She searched his face, and he used her interest to gain favor for himself. He grabbed her hand. “Listen, Penny—”

She jerked her hand away. “We're a team,” she said. “In *one* respect. There's no more going on between us than meets the eye.”

“But if you'd give me one more chance, I'd—”

Johnny looked up as the man from the Medical Association came down the hall and stepped into the elevator. Sandra Stevens had followed him, now she stood, pensive, and you could see the worry that was etched into her ivory smooth face; her golden hair was a halo of soft curls on the back of her head. The stiff white nurse's uniform was tight on

her tall, lithe body. She glanced at Johnny.

“Would you care to talk to the doctor now?”

Johnny rose, and motioned Penny to follow. They walked toward the laboratory.

“Please try and not be hard on him,” Sandra said. “He's been through so very much today.”

“I understand.”

They entered the doctor's work room. Hale was still on the telephone, and Arline Carter stood beside him. She was small, and the burnt luster of the hair that dropped to her shoulders shone brilliantly. Her figure was trim and neat. She looked up as though she hadn't expected that Johnny would return; then she stared coldly at Penny. Sandra closed the laboratory door.

Beyond Doctor Hale were the windows, and through them the Sound flashed blue and white with a wind furrowing across the top of the water and chopping it up. Here in the room, Billy-the-Monk was in his cage delighted with so much company and squeakily mumbling about it; the white rats were lined up in front of their screens as though this was a show for them. But the stupid guinea pigs just nibbled alfalfa and paid no attention.

Hale at last hung up the telephone, and his face was empty so that his cheeks seemed to sag. He did not look at anyone, but rose and strode across the room to a cabinet. Without asking if the others cared to indulge, he poured himself a large portion of rye and gulped it down. It must have been strong, because he shook his head. He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, and then he leaned lightly against the cabinet, as though he were unsure of his footing and wanted support; the fear had fled from his face, and it was only a bitter and hopeless mask now: white flesh creased with lines made from a tightly drawn underlip.

“Well,” he said,—“what are you all staring at?”

“Oh, darling,” Arline said, “I—”

“Stay away from me,” Hale's words were thick and scarcely coherent. “I don't want anybody near me. After what I've lived through—”

Johnny watched him curiously, his fingers itching; he glanced once at Penny, then gazed back at the doctor.

“Armin Company knew nothing about an impostor coming here,” Hale volunteered bitterly, “nothing whatsoever.”

“Is it so bad?” Johnny asked.

“Bad. Is dying bad? If you climb up on a pinnacle, then somebody jerks the props from under you, and you go crashing down so that everything you've ever done smashes and

breaks, is that bad?"

Johnny leaped after his lead: "You worked years on the compound, Hale. I understand that. You were pretty sure it was a valuable discovery. Worth lots of money. But didn't the Armin Company analyze it and tell you that it *wasn't* a cure for anything, but that it was a *deadly poison*?"

Jim Hale was staring, his eyes just a little glazed. "Yes, that's true. Just this afternoon—" "How good is Armin Company's word?"

"Oh, it's good all right; they're one of the foremost companies. It's not that—" He fumbled for another drink. Johnny came over and took the bottle out of his hand.

"Now listen to me, Hale. If they *are* right wouldn't it be bad luck more than anything else for the impostor who stole it?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"But what?"

"I cling to the idea that Armin's men erred in their judgment of my samples," Hale said desperately. "That can be the only answer."

"Then you still believe in the compound?"

"Definitely."

"All right," said Johnny, "that changes things. We'll assume the Armin report is correct. In that case someone must have diluted your samples before they were sent out. Would this have been possible?"

"Quite. Only I—I hadn't thought of that. A grain of either poison or morphine could have been added to the powders; and the liquid sample could have been sabotaged with but a single drop of alcohol." He looked around, as though he were frightened, but the blood was pumping back up through his dead face. "Of course, that would mean—"

"That would mean the Armin Company could be right; and that your compound could still be flawless. Such an assumption narrows things down to our own perspective. It means that someone connected with the sanitarium, or who had access to the sanitarium, diluted your samples."

Sandra's pretty blonde head bobbed up; Arline Carter grew pale. The two women exchanged glances.

"The person responsible for diluting the samples," Johnny continued, "realized that the first reaction of the Armin Company would be to send a man from the Medical Association here to check up on you. Therefore, this unknown person paid a Doctor Butler to arrive first and obtain the formula under false pretenses. In that event Butler is no more than a pawn working for someone else."

Jim Hale was nodding. "Yes, yes, I see." Some of the bitter lines seemed to drop away

from his face. "I guarded the formula. No one had ever seen it." His voice slowed, so that he could assure himself of the credibility of his own words. "The thief could manufacture it under some different name and cash in on my work; not only that, but credit himself with *my* discovery."

"Exactly," said Johnny West, "and the whole affair may tie up with the murder of Harry Waters. I don't know how. There doesn't seem to be any connecting link. But once in a while murder goes that way."

He went back to the white table on which the test tubes stood and looked up at Hale. He had a cigarette in his hand and was pushing it in and out between his fingers, like an imaginary injection. He watched Hale for a moment, then said: "Now that we've got that settled, what about your cancelled bankbook?"

Hale was startled. "Oh, yes, I—" He sucked in breath. "Well, to tell you the truth I drew the last of my money this afternoon. I had just heard from a meeting of my creditors that the bank would take the sanitarium unless I produced evidence within thirty days that I could make it pay. I was upset. I had been quite successful, but Waters started a rumor that I killed patients instead of curing them."

"Go on," Johnny said.

"I had always been polite to Waters in spite of that I had a funny feeling about him. When I was a boy in school there was a bully who constantly tormented me and the rest of us. But it happened that he picked particularly on me. It wasn't that I did anything wrong. It was just that it gave him sadistic pleasure to make me and the others suffer. Don't mistake me. Waters wasn't the same fellow by any means. But the things he did corresponded, in comparison with the years, to what Waters did. At least I know that their motive was the same. An insane pleasure."

"Wait a minute," Johnny said, "tell me first, whatever happened to the bully in school? What I want to know is whether you ever got up enough courage to sock him before school was over?"

Hale's teeth clicked shut. "I did. I remember it very well. I sat up two whole nights planning to catch him and give him the thrashing of his life. I was terribly afraid of him; but I finally did it. I was surprised how easy it was once I got the courage."

Johnny's eyes flickered. "Now go on about Harry Waters."

"Well, I went from the bank over to his office to see him. I blew up and told him exactly what I thought. I told him that he had ruined my entire life by his insinuations. Then I ended by throwing the cancelled bankbook in his face and stomping out."

Johnny's cheeks had stiffened, and he was tense. "Did you lay awake two night *planning* to do that?"

"What do you mean?"

“I think you know.”

“If you're trying to ask me if I killed him—”

“He was past the years when you'd use fists, Hale, but—”

“You're being preposterous, Mr. West!”

“You're better off with Waters dead, aren't you?”

“Yes.”

“All right,” snapped Johnny, and he put the cancelled bankbook back in his pocket. “You threw the book in Waters' face. I'm supposed to believe that he decided then to carry it along with him when he went out. It doesn't even make two and two. I thought maybe you'd like to know.”

He turned to Sandra Stevens. “Were you in Mamaroneck this afternoon?”

“Yes,” replied the nurse.

“Did you know Mr. Waters?”

“Just to speak to.”

He glanced at Arline Carter. “How about you?”

“I was at the hospital all afternoon.”

“You knew Waters, of course?”

“Yes.”

Penny Lane came forward. “Miss Carter, isn't it true your father owns stock in the Armin Chemical Company?”

Hale turned toward her, and Arline flushed. “Yes, it's true. But how did you—”

“We had a long talk one day at the library, and you mentioned it.”

“Penny never forgets,” said Johnny.

Hale was staring at Arline, and she said quickly: “It's all right, only I was keeping it as a surprise for Jim. I was sure with my father's influence they would give him a big price for his formula; and I didn't want him to know why the price should be so large. He couldn't have been so proud. Of course, as it turned out—”

Johnny said: “Anything else, Penny?”

Penny Lane was looking at the floor. “Yes. Her father was a criminal lawyer; but I think he's retired now. That is, from law. He has several enterprises in and around New York.”

Arline Carter's face had changed color.

“Come, come,” said Johnny, “what else have you, Penny?”

This was the part of the job Penny didn't like; she had trained her memory to photograph

every word she heard in clear detail so that, through one source or another, she had a partial biography of most of the people in town; but though she never forgot anything, she disliked digging the facts up and throwing them in a victim's face. Johnny, however, delighted in the uncanny ability.

“That's almost all,” Penny said slowly, “except that once or twice she met a gasoline station owner by the name of Sock Drury on the library steps; and others used to tell me that Sock Drury was very much in love with her.”

“I haven't seen him since—”

Johnny silenced her with his hand. “Your father was a criminal lawyer. Now he mixes into business deals of one kind and another. You're supposed to be engaged to Doctor Hale, but you've been seen with another man in Mamaroneck.” He sucked in his breath. “Now a formula has been stolen; possibly samples of a compound have been diluted. It looks like an inside job. We've got plenty of motive, but maybe if we investigate you we'll find more.”

“I tell you, this is utterly—”

Suddenly Arline began to cry, and Doctor Hale went to her; he held the sobbing girl in his arms, but his strained face came up, and he saw, as Johnny did, Sandra Stevens, who stood at the door. There was on the blonde's face an almost unholy light of pleasure. Her blue eyes were alive and frightening. Billy-the-Monk, in his cage, screamed shrilly, for no reason at all.

7

JOHNNY OPENED the laboratory door too quickly on his way out. Someone in the hall jumped away, and meant to escape; but it seemed futile, and the eavesdropper turned back. It was a woman. She gazed at Johnny defiantly.

“Did I upset you?” asked Johnny.

“Quite a little,” the woman admitted.

“I'm very sorry,” Johnny said. “I'll go back and try it over.”

“Never mind.”

She stood there watching and studying him. She wore a long blue satin robe. Her beauty was fragile and exotic. She had a slim, statuesque figure which she held rigidly. But he suddenly realized that she was older than you thought at first glance. Even so, her splendid warmth made something tingle within you. She possessed a rich and arrogant pride. She seemed to him a pretty little ingenue who, like a flower, had been preserved in the pages of a book; and now that the book was opened she was still fresh and lovely and you could not tell where youth left off and age began. Johnny had once heard that the only genuine test of a woman's beauty was whether or not she inspired you with the

desire to make love to her. This woman was a subtle and almost insidious magnet of inspiration.

“You're a patient here?” Johnny asked.

“Yes.”

“Name?”

“Jean Daniels,” she said.

“Ever in the show business, Miss Daniels?”

“Yes.”

“You're very pretty.”

Red spots touched her cheek tips; the unexpected flattery had shattered her cool reserve. She searched his face, as though she considered telling him something of great importance; she must have at last decided against it, for she turned and walked off down the hall. She went as far as her room, then turned and went in. The door slammed.

“Know anything about her, Penny?”

“No,” said Penny coldly, “but you seem to be doing all right.”

“I'm like Ziegfeld used to be,” Johnny said. “I'm always getting melodies mixed up in my head.”

They got into the elevator and Johnny operated it himself. He stopped on the second floor. It was dark except for one light which shone far down the corridor.

“What's this?” Penny asked. “There are no patients here.”

“I just want to look around. Coming with me?”

He stepped out, and she followed. Their footsteps echoed on the cement floor; and the wind howled around the building. Johnny put a cigarette in his mouth, but he neglected to light it. It was very dark. He wondered what Penny was thinking about. He reached out to touch her arm, but she moved away. He felt frigid after that.

They looked into each empty room, turning on the lights. Then at last they were at the end of the hall where a room door stood shut; but light trickled through the transom. Johnny knocked. A gruff voice from within called out immediately.

“Who's there?”

“Never mind, just open the door.”

“Don't know if I should,” answered the voice.

Johnny tried the knob. The door was unlocked, and he walked in. A burly, mustached man stood there in long winter flannels. He saw Penny and leaped back behind his bed, wrestling with a tattered brown robe, which he finally got wrapped around his heavy

body.

“I say, sir, isn't this quite unusual; if you know what I mean?”

The man was very nearly a giant; he had sandy hair, what there was left of it, and he seemed about fifty years of age. His mustache was yellowish and walrus in style; it drooped terribly. But the jaw was heavy, and determined, so that the mustache did not seem to fit with the face.

“You're the caretaker here, aren't you?” Johnny asked.

“Yes. My name is Carlin, sir. Lord Carlin. But I *do* say, is it quite customary to break into a man's a—a—” He fumbled for the right words, but at last changed the whole text of his speech, for something spectacular had just occurred to him. “What are *you* doing here? Who are *you*?”

Johnny showed him the badge.

“Looks kind of bent,” Lord Carlin said surlily. He glanced at Penny.

“Know why I'm here?” Johnny asked.

“I know there was a murder in town.”

“Anything else, Carlin?”

“No.”

Johnny gazed at him for a moment. “You come from England?”

“No. New England. Vermont. Now you know my presidential views. If I may say so, sir, you've practically got my whole biography.”

Penny jotted the conversation down in short hand.

“What are some of your duties as caretaker?”

“I keep the place shipshape; get supplies sometimes; I take care of medical shipments, and the food commissary, though I will say, sir, there ain't so much work as there was once.”

Johnny looked Lord Carlin over, then turned around and walked out. The big New Englander timidly closed his room door.

“Well?” asked Penny.

“Nothing,” Johnny said, “nothing yet.”

They rode the elevator to the first floor and carefully inspected it; and then they found a stairway to the basement where the delivery room was located. It was dark, and Johnny groped about for lights. Penny Lane was right behind him. He had just reached the bottom step when from across the room came the crash of falling boxes. Johnny's hand snaked back for a gun holster which wasn't there. He seldom went armed; but the reflex of his hand reaching for the weapon was natural. There was the sound of footsteps

running across the floor of the basement. Penny froze and was silent. Johnny started across the room.

A door slammed. Johnny turned toward the sound, and made his way for it, but he stumbled and fell over a box. He picked himself up and reached the door. He rushed outside, but he was in time only to see the tail light of a vehicle moving off down the road. By the time he could run around and get his own car it would be too late to chase. He cursed softly, and returned to the door of the delivery room.

The lights in the basement were on now, and Penny, who had found the switch, stood at the bottom of the steps; whiteness etched her pretty features. "Who was it?"

"I don't know."

"Your gun's in the car," Penny said, "*I* thought of bringing it. You'd better carry it from now on."

"You think so?"

"Yes," she said. "The case is shaping up."

"Do you really care if I carry the gun?"

She snapped: "Will you *quit* trying to make love to me? I care, naturally; I want to see Harry Waters' murder solved, that's all. I never saw any detective who could combine love and murder quite so deftly."

"I'm a very remarkable fellow."

"One sees that."

"Didn't I say there was more going on here than meets the eye? Shake the sanitarium's foundation and rats run out of it." He picked up his hat which he had dropped when he fell over the box. He put it on. It was smashed out of shape and it looked pretty sloppy.

Johnny walked around the basement, glancing into boxes, pulling open cardboard cartons; he saw nothing that seemed unusual. But he stooped and picked up from the floor a strip of garlic. There was a smear of black on it. He started to take a bite of the garlic, then he looked at Penny's glistening and pretty red lips, and changed his mind. He put it in his pocket.

"Getting tired, Penny?"

"Yes," she said acidly, "I usually turn in just before nine o'clock."

"How very healthy," he said. "I think I'll go home and sleep too."

"You mean you're not going to work on the case any more tonight?"

"Why should I?"

"Johnny, you aren't telling me everything—"

He put a cigarette between his lips. "Well, if you really want to know, I've got a date

with blonde Sandra upstairs. You don't mind, do you?"

She knew that he was teasing and it infuriated her that he would make light of what had happened between them. "No," she said, "I don't mind. You can take me home."

He drove her home. She was so angry when she got out of the car that she refused to say goodnight.

"See you bright and early," Johnny called out.

He watched her disappear within the house. He knew that she would not go to bed. It was customary for them to line up what they considered the leading suspects, then Penny conducted as much personal research as possible on everyone; if there were an outstanding motive she traced it as far as she could. She would likely be up most of the night doing the work for him that was neither spectacular nor exciting: but terribly essential. The only difference on this case was that Penny no longer trusted him and she consequently did not know what to expect, though common sense should have told her.

When she had closed the door of the house, Johnny drove off. He steered the car down a little hill and turned left on Mamaroneck Avenue; just before the railroad tracks he turned right and drove up Halstead. The gas meter wavered between zero and less than zero. Johnny drove the car into a station that was on the corner of two streets of minor importance.

A stocky young man came out of the office. He was smiling. His red hair was kinky on his head; he wore greasy coveralls, and had a wrench in his hand with which he must have been repairing a motor.

"Hi ya, Johnny, keed," he said.

"Hello, Sock."

"I hear you got murder brewing all over the place," Sock Drury went on. He leaned against the open window of the car with his foot up on the running board. "Boy, I always told you: sooner or later some guy was going to get up and take a whack at old Harry Waters. He was the meanest son of a gun that ever lived."

"That's what a lot of people tell me," Johnny said.

"What's on your mind? Need gas?"

"Yeah, but—"

"What?" Sock was still smiling; his greasy face was frank and good-natured. He had been a football player during his college days, and a pretty good one. He was the ideal quarterback, newspapers had said. But you only remembered this because the sport still so interested Sock. He started talking about next season in June and you seldom heard anything else until February.

"I was talking to a girl named Arline Carter," Johnny went on.

Sock Drury's face turned beet-red. He could not mask his emotion. "What about her?" His voice had lost the ring of confidence and enthusiasm.

"I hear you used to go for her?"

"Some. I met her once at a local football game down by the Sound. I saw her a few times after that. I fell like a ton of bricks. Geez, I couldn't eat for a week, honest, Johnny. Why?"

"Have you seen her lately?"

"Not for six weeks or more."

"Ever get in touch with her?"

"I wrote her one note, that's all. I heard she was engaged to Doctor Hale, so I laid off."

"Ever go around the sanitarium?"

"Hell, no."

Johnny looked into Sock Drury's sober face. "You're sure about that?"

"Of course I'm sure!"

"Then what were you doing there tonight?"

"*What?*"

"You were in the basement, and you ran out when you heard me."

"I...."

"Don't try to fool me, Sock. Because you can't. It was dark, and you got away before I could get to you."

"But—" Sock's face was white now, and he lowered his eyes. His voice dropped to a thick whisper. "Yeah. I was there. That was me, all right."

8

"HOW DID YOU know, Johnny? Tell me how you knew."

"Well, as the ads say; halitosis is a nasty word, or is that how it goes?"

"You mean the garlic?"

"Yeah. I guess you can't stop eating it, can you? When you heard me you must have dropped a piece of it in your excitement. It was greasy as though some mechanic had been holding it; and remembering it in connection with you, and having just learned of the Arline Carter tie-up, I thought I'd come over and make talk."

"I see—" Sock Drury was staring a little incredulously, as though chagrined that he had been tricked into confession on such flimsy evidence. "Well, I can tell you why I was there, although I thought on account of a murder going on, it would have been better if I

hadn't mentioned it.”

“How you tied the murder up with the sanitarium is something else that interests me,” said Johnny.

Sock ignored this, and went on: “I often go over there to play cards with Lord Carlin. I breezed over tonight, then I heard someone coming down, so figured I'd better beat it.”

“You wouldn't have figured that if your conscience had been clear.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your being there had no connection with Arline Carter?”

“None at all!”

“Well, I know damn well,” said Johnny, “that it wasn't to play cards. You'd better think of a better one than that.”

When Sock got mad he shouted. “Why don't you arrest me?” he yelled. “Why don't you drag me in, you law-enforcing rat? You're such a hot shot, too good for this town, but—”

“The red herring bellow won't get you anything,” Johnny snapped. “Come back to the subject.”

“I have nothing more to say.”

“All right then. Give me gasoline.”

“Go to hell!”

But Sock thought it over and angrily went around and unscrewed the gas cap. He filled the tank up. When Johnny handed him a five dollar bill, Sock held it to the light and carefully scrutinized it. “We've got to be careful of phonies these days,” he said, and his eyes rose above the rim of the bill. Johnny was shocked. There was no more laughter or friendliness in Sock Drury's eyes: they were small and red, and they burned intensely; his face was set and tight. In the electric light from the office the expression was hard and horrible. Johnny could only hope that he would never have occasion to fight a man like that. He was small, and heavy set, but he was all muscle. The Red Devil they had called him when he smashed through two hundred pound football lines; but the meaning seemed singularly different now. Sock folded the five dollar bill up and jammed it in his pocket. “I guess it's all right. You can be on your way now, wise guy.”

Johnny stared at him. He had lost a friend; and for the first time in his life he had seen Drury as someone other than the cheerful gasoline attendant who rattled all day long about what Notre Dame would do to U.S.C. He saw a man who submerged his emotion and hid it away, until it must have grown and festered inside him. All of this shone on his tightly drawn face, and in the small, glittering red eyes.

It was hot, and Penny Lane had taken off her dress and slip and wore only a light pongee

coolie coat so that she could work in comfort. She sat bent over a large dining room table, searching through official village real estate proposals which had to do with the property at Orienta Point; there were mimeographed copies telling those who had made which suggestions and those who had objected. This was only a small part of the work before her, but she was well into it. She was making some further notes in her shorthand book (the "*Case Bible*" which she would have to decipher and type before morning) when the telephone rang.

The phone was in the hall and to answer she had to get up and leave the room. She tapped a pencil under her lip, and put her knee on the telephone table as she lifted the instrument. Her mind was still occupied with the work.

"Hello."

"Hello, Miss Lane?"

"Yes."

"This is the coroner. I tried to get in touch with Johnny West, but he hasn't reported at headquarters. Would you relay a message to him?"

"Of course."

"It's about Harry Waters," the coroner went on. "I performed an autopsy. I presume you were aware of Mr. Waters' habit of eating a considerable amount of candy almost any time he got his hands on it?"

"Yes, I was."

"That and whiskey; the combination alone in such large quantities should have killed him. But back to point. What killed Waters was poisoned chocolates."

"You mean someone gave him chocolates?"

"Exactly. One was enough, however. It was loaded with sufficient poison to kill him within the hour. It is needless for me to elaborate by saying that is precisely what happened."

"I'll tell Johnny."

"Rather interesting, isn't it?" said the coroner.

"Quite."

"Ah—how are you and Johnny faring? That is—"

"Very well," she said. "Thank you for your information." She hung up. She wondered for a moment which interested the town most: the personal lives of other people, or murder?

It was at this moment that she saw a man move across the dining room. She was paralyzed; and wanted to scream. Somehow she didn't. Against her own frightened will,

she moved forward. She saw a hand reach down toward the papers and quickened her steps. The man turned and fled. A door slammed shut. She reached the dining room and looked around. A window was open, and apparently the intruder had entered through it. She glanced at two doors on the opposite side of the room. The one which led outside was a screen door and it was still hooked. The other belonged only to a closet.

Penny quietly opened a table drawer, picked up a small black automatic and held it gripped in her hand.

“In your haste,” she said in a steady voice, “you got the wrong door.” She paused. “Please come out of the closet. With your hands up.”

She was trembling, and her face was damp with sweat.

There was no movement, and she asked at last: “Are you going to come out, or shall I lock the door and call the police?”

The closet opened at once. Robert Smith stepped out. The papers he had stolen from the table were still bunched in his hand. His face was red and sweaty.

He just looked at her.

“Put the papers on the table,” she said coldly.

He obeyed, then turned around, watching her curiously.

“What was the idea?” she asked.

“I just wanted a little copy,” he paused. “News hawks sometimes have to take awful risks. This was once when I was caught.”

“Oh, you've broken into houses before?”

“I didn't mean that.”

He was big, unhandsome and conceited. He had started the Mamaroneck Post originally intending to compete with Harry Waters' daily, The Star. However, Smith's paper never developed beyond the weekly stage, nor grew bigger than four printed sheets; whereas the Star published an edition of sixteen pages every noon.

Smith's partner was a poor printer who was not quite bright, and the two of them had shared the same tiny, run down office. The presses occupied the small space with them, and in spite of the fact that the Post was a business bust, it appeared regularly each week. There was no longer any pretense of paid circulation. Boys delivered it from door to door to every resident in town the day it came out. This was the only method by which its owner could guarantee advertising coverage; but for such a medium the merchants would pay no more than handbill rates and the revenue scarcely covered the price of printer's ink.

Harry Waters had handled his journal on different scales; you paid five cents a copy for it or you didn't get it. Its brittle and cutting style, augmented with syndicate wire service

(which Smith could not afford) sold The Star not only locally but through the surrounding villages. Whereas there were issues of the Post so dull that even its editor could not read them. Smith specialized in news entirely local which was the only kind he could get free, and one of his favorite stunts was when his printer got an order to make up official village amendments for the town files (ten thousand legally constructed words of fine print) to borrow the same mat and form and publish it on his front page. This, he thought, was exceedingly clever; he would dress it up with a few captions proclaiming it local news of great importance.

Everyone in Mamaroneck but Robert Smith knew him to be a failure. He clung to the notion that he was a great newspaperman. Penny looked at him now and wondered what was in his fantastic mind.

“You could be arrested for this. You know that, don't you?”

“Yes, but they couldn't hold me,” Smith replied, and there was an insulting half-smile on his face. “I'm an important citizen in these parts now.”

“By what virtue?”

“The Post is going daily,” he said quietly. He waited for the announcement to sink in. “There's no one to carry on for Waters. I'm getting all of his advertising.”

Penny looked into his dark eyes, and she seemed to understand things now which had never before been clear.

“What else?”

“Nothing,” said Smith, “except that things have changed. From now on the Post is going to be as wide awake as the New York Mirror. We're going to get scoops and spread them over the front page. At present this murder is the most important thing that's happened in the town for years, and I intend to give it full coverage.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” he said, “I do. And I don't care how I get my news. So long as I get it.”

“Harry Waters' death was quite profitable to you, wasn't it?”

“It was,” Smith replied, ignoring the innuendo. “It's the thing that's going to make me. I came here originally because the coroner refused to give me any information. He said he was going to call you unless Johnny showed up, and that if I wanted any news I could get it from you. I knew you wouldn't give it to me, so I hung around waiting for the call. I was just outside the window. But when the phone rang I couldn't hear very well, so I crawled in.”

“I hope my voice carried.”

“It did. Chocolates and all.” His sweaty face was grim. “I thank you with all my heart. And I'll tell you something else.”

“Please do.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’ve picked up a couple of angles on this case myself; and I can warn you it’s like nothing you’ve ever touched before. Murder’s only the start. You might be safer if you stayed out of it. You and Johnny are washed up. Well, tell him to go to ‘Frisco. It might be better if he does.”

“You’re not threatening me?”

“Call it what you want, baby.”

He moved suddenly forward. She lifted her arm, and he grabbed it. He wrenched the gun out of her hand. For a moment his face was next to hers. He held the gun away. His arm swept around her and he kissed her on the lips, but she fought free of him.

“Now maybe you know the way I feel about you.... It’s the way I’ve always felt, only I never told you before.” He sucked in breath and dropped the gun into a side pocket. “So you can tell Johnny to get out of town any time.”

He backed to the window, still watching her; then he turned and leaped out, and onto the ground. He ran away through the night with heavy, pounding steps. Penny tried to catch her breath. She braced herself on the table and looked down. Then she gasped.

The shorthand book was gone.

9

JEAN DANIELS, the patient in Room 3-C on the third floor in Doctor Hale’s sanitarium, stood with her face pressed against her window. In the soft glow of the lamp she seemed very young again. She was conscious of her own slim form shadowed from the mirror. There seemed to be in the atmosphere, in the very night, but mostly in her own mind, because it was in her mind where a decision was to take place, a great and teeming magic; so that the years that had piled up, slipped away, and life was a great exciting adventure. There were night clubs and 1929 prosperity, and big, sleek cars, and laughter, and champagne corks popping. There were paper hats, and there was bootleg liquor. There were still companies playing Show Boat, and she was in one of them, singing Make Believe. There were other songs, too, like Tea for Two, and Side by Side (that was what Jimmie sang to her; and Jimmie had wanted to marry her).

Make Believe, that was it. The incredible magic of yesterday. She was a fool to remain here getting older every day. The gladness of life lay beyond this sanitarium. Why, you could spend a hundred years planning and waiting for the *right* time to act, but you might die before it came. She wasn’t going to stay any longer. What if she wasn’t cured? What if she died in six months? Then to die gloriously. One last wild fling along Broadway; she’d get drunk and stay drunk for a week if she chose. She and Walter Spaulding would be together and nothing would part them. What if Walter was no more than a down and out bookie who was gray around the temples, and had a wife and three

kids, and worry lines all over his face? He had known the life; he'd seen his heyday when he was on Wall Street, taking in the money faster than he could handle it. She'd had an apartment on Park Avenue, and his wife never had that. She'd had ermine and mink and a town car; and now if Walter Spaulding peddled two-dollar bets, what of it? At least he had found enough money for her to come here. And now she had some money coming to her from Mamaroneck. She wasn't going to stay. She was going to get it and get out. It was for her and Walter Spaulding.

What if the cure weren't entirely completed so that her throat was raw and swollen in the mornings, and what if it pained her at night (streptococcus infection, was that what the doctors called it). Of course Hale's solution had relieved the pain, but if it came back later when she missed his treatments then her joy would more than pay for the suffering she might endure; there was really nothing that mattered now.

Yet even as these thoughts intoxicated and gladdened her, there seemed (though it was not close; it could not be close) something fetid and sordid underlying even her memories; something which was in the room with her, breathing with her, watching her; some terrible intangible menace whose presence made an aching against her temples, though she found no name for the horror. In the nobility of what she wished to do she tried to rise above it, to soar on the wings of rapid pulse beat, so that whatever it was, whatever black reality prodded her with physical fear, would be left behind, would be left here in this room, to rock emptily like a crazy old woman in a chair.

She thought of Walter Spaulding and the years that had done nothing to that love of theirs. She remembered the last time he had visited her. He was heavier; he said he wheezed when he climbed subway stairs; his cheeks were fleshy and colorless, and there were pouches under his eyes. He smoked too many cigars, and his gray suit was baggy and unpressed. He wasn't the lithe, handsome, devil-may-care sport he was when she met him. She could still get them younger and flashier and wealthier than Walter, but she didn't want them. She wanted him with all his pattering and fuss and worry; kids already grown, and a gray-haired nagging wife. It was a crazy and true fact that he treated his wife kinder when he was with Jean than when Jean was away; so Jean was robbing Mrs. Spaulding of nothing, and she had long ago stopped resenting her.

Jean could go back to him tonight and to the devil with consequences. She resolved to never see the inside of another hospital or sanitarium until the day she died (and pray God be that a day before my first actual wrinkle); she would live high and recklessly for awhile on the money she was going to collect tonight.

What she had done to earn this money had been as desperate and foolish as the plan she now conceived to leave the sanitarium for once and all.

Jean had been mysteriously approached (she laughed at all the precautions, the pussy-footing, the whispering). Her job had simply been to dilute the formula samples of Doctor Hale. The instructions on how she was to do it were incredibly simple. There had

been one or two other small items commissioned to her, and she had despatched them with ease. There was only this one insidious hitch: she had not known there was going to be a murder. She would never have considered a bargain at any price if she had possessed this knowledge. She had learned of the crime just tonight when she overheard Johnny West talking in the laboratory. It had been a shock. For a moment she had thought of confiding to the detective her part in sabotaging the formula. But she realized that would mean arrest, and she wanted nothing more now than to get to New York, and to leave this little town far behind. She had not given much thought to the actual murder because it frightened her; but she shuddered at the possibility that if things were ever brought to light she might even be linked in it as an accomplice. Not that she had known anything about the crime, or had taken any part in it. It was simply that she had negotiated other business which might or might not have a great deal to do with the murder's motive.

It was unpleasant to think along these lines, and Jean Daniels turned now and occupied herself with packing two small bags. The wind rattled against the panes of her window, and boat horns blasted up from the Sound. She shivered. Then suddenly she stopped in the midst of the packing. That terrible feeling which she had somehow kept submerged with her crazy dreams and poignant memories rose within her like a sleeping giant. It rang a shrill bell of panic all through her. She was trembling when a moment ago she had been perfectly (well, almost) calm. She got to her feet. Her hands quivered as if with palsy. She was damp with a cold sweat.

She was a superstitious actress and she felt a morbid premonition suddenly, as though crepe had been hung over her heart.

She tried to laugh it off but the fever grew. She tried to think of songs, of Make Believe, and to bring back all of the magic that had been in the room, but the blaring crescendo of terror drove it all away, and the room was appallingly empty. Bleak and drab reality closed in on her. She turned around and around, as though to run to someone for help. The wind kept hammering against the window. The bare white walls were gleaming with ugly monotony.

It occurred to her that possibly she alone knew the identity of the killer and that person might not (like the police) consider her a confidant and an accomplice. The murderer perhaps had originally possessed no intention to kill, but had been forced into it, and now would go to any extreme. Even if Jean were to go to jail for her part of it, it was better to be safe, to—

Jean reached the telephone. But she thought she heard a sound. With cold hands, she put the instrument down and stared around her. There was only the harsh gasp of the wind outside. Jean's heart beat furiously. She looked at the telephone again, then she knelt and quietly took off the receiver. She jiggled the cradle. There was no sound. She wanted to scream. She called in a loud voice: "Hello... hello... hello..."

The line was dead.

She remembered now that she had heard talk in the hall about the switchboard having been shorted; but she had presumed it was already fixed. She had not guessed, she had not dreamed (oh, how stupid it was to mix into such a thing) that the fuse had been blown so she couldn't call. She gazed glassily through the half light. She got up and turned the switch and flooded the room with electricity. It did no good. The blinding whiteness was no comfort. Her throat was thick. (Oh, God, I don't want to die! I don't want do die!)

Jean had to get out of here. She had to leave at once. It didn't matter about the money. To escape alive was the only important thing left. She stiffened. She heard footsteps in the hall. She ran to the door and put her ear to it; she turned the lock. The footsteps went by. Jean returned and hastily finished packing her bags. Now and again she shivered at the distant and mournful wail of a boat. The bag was packed, and she slipped on her coat. She went to the mirror and with trembling fingers adjusted her hat. It was pert and dipped over her eye; and there was a black net veil on it. But suddenly she stood paralyzed and gazed into the mirror.

The lock had turned in the door behind her. The knob moved now, and the door slowly began to open. Jean Daniels whirled around. She braced her back against the mirror. She heard the loud thumping of her own heart.

The door swung fully open.

10

YOU DO not hear the striking of the town clock after seven in the morning for by that time the sun is already on its way across the sky, and the birds are singing, kids come running from their houses in the freedom of vacation, to go off swimming or fishing; the merchants on the avenue are already busy, cleaning up for the day's business, and the sleepy houses on the knoll begin to stir; trucks rumble through the streets, and trains begin to arrive with more frequency, their echo blending into the din of morning noise. New York commuters are hurrying through their breakfast and the Joe Jones and Sock Drurys are opening their gasoline stations; while the town's mongrel dogs are already running in twos and threes, off for some frolic in a mysterious paradise.

Stores like the one owned by Jake Morrow are familiar in both cities and towns. They start originally by selling cigars. A few years later they have expanded and include toys, stationery, magazines, candy, mechanical games, a circulating library, and are secretly trying to find room for a soda counter. Shops like these are stealing away all the old time thunder from the drug stores, and unless something is done, the pharmacists may be doomed to the limited sale of hot water bottles and drugs.

You can usually tell stores like Jake's by the big red glass sign which stretches across the top. These signs read: UBETCHA CIGARS or USMOKA. But after you get in Jake's

store you have to look around for a long time before you find any cigars. You'll see punchboards, and stacks of candy boxes and bob sleds and fountain pens and tin G-Man badges and even boxes of cigarettes, but very few cigars.

Jake's store was on Mamaroneck Avenue and did not open as early as the groceries, so Johnny West was standing in front of it now, leaning back against the pane glass. He did not look as though there were much on his mind.

Presently Jake Morrow drove up in his new car and parked it at the curb. Jake was a little man, with a heavy torso, and short legs; he had black hair mingled with gray, and a very round and dark-skinned face. His eyes were bright, and merry; and he had an affable disposition. He was well booked on town politics and had recently been voted one of the village fathers. He spent only a few hours a day in the shop, for he had two or three clerks who were always ready to relieve him. He looked up now.

“Good morning, Johnny.”

“Hello, Jake.”

The swarthy little man moved forward and unlocked the front door of his shop. He raised the curtain, and held the door open so Johnny could come in. Jake walked around behind the counter, taking off his coat, and putting on a slate-gray jacket.

“What's on your mind?”

“Just want a pack of cigarettes,” Johnny said.

“Sure.” Jake-unlocked the trap door to the shelves, and straightened around some of the merchandise which had been put away for the night. He slid a pack of cigarettes over to Johnny, and Johnny flipped him a quarter. Jake turned to the cash register, unlocked it, then rang up the sale. He reached down in the tile for the dime change. There was a battered little mirror just over the cash register and Johnny saw Jake glance up into it at him. Then Jake turned around.

Johnny had laid out a very small strip of paper on which were the numerals: 832.

“Ever see that, Jake?”

Jake flushed.

“Harry Waters was here,” Johnny went on, “just before he went across the street to the bar where he died.”

Jake nodded. “Sure. Harry won a box of candy on my punchboard. If that's what you mean.”

“He won with that slip of paper?”

“That's right.”

“Look again,” said Johnny.

“Why should I?” Jake Morrow snapped.

“Because eight-three-two isn't a winning number! Let's see that punchboard.”

Jake stared incredulously, then trembling, he handed up the punchboard.

“I've played this myself enough to know what number wins,” Johnny went on. He glanced down at the board. Several printed numbers had been crossed out as the winners were punched; at the bottom of the list there was in ink the numerals: 832. They were also crossed out. Johnny looked up. “You put the numbers on the board yourself!”

Jake nodded.

“In other words, you were anxious to *give* Harry Waters a box of chocolates without him knowing that it was a gift.”

“What of it?”

“A poisoned chocolate killed him,” Johnny said.

Jake Morrow gasped. “But I—I—go on, you're kidding me.”

“I'd be happier about it if I was. You don't make a practice of giving away boxes of candy, Jake. How come you did it this time?”

Jake was rubbing his hands. “I can tell you, and you've got to believe me. Harry was in here raving like he did every once in awhile; he said he was going to blast every game of chance right out of town. He claimed nobody ever won on the punchboards I have. He called me a crook and a gyp.” Jake sucked in his breath. “Well, I didn't mind that; but I could see words in that same tone being printed in *The Star*, and I was scared to death about it, honest I was.” He paused. “You see, I'm a city father now, and Harry Waters was capable of doing some pretty nasty writing and—”

“So he bluffed you into letting him win on the board?”

“That's right. The first number he pulled, I told him he'd won, then I quickly marked it down, and showed it to him.”

“What did he do?”

“He began to laugh. He opened the chocolates and ate a couple; the rest he told me to keep here for him. I've got the box over on the other counter.”

“Don't you know he was deliberately trying to make you give him the chocolates free?”

“I did, sure,” said Jake, “but I was too scared of him not to.”

Johnny lit a cigarette and regarded the merchant coldly for a minute.

“Business is pretty good, isn't it?”

“It's all right,” said Jake.

“How much you got in the bank?”

“Why I—”—

“How much?”

“Thirty-five thousand.”

“And you drive a big car. Did that come from selling toys and cigars?”

“I—I—”

“Or have you got some other business? Some business people don't know about?”

“Now listen, Johnny—”

“You listen. You don't hang around the store much; but you're always busy. I know personally that you have no other legitimate income, and that ten years ago when you opened this store you were stony broke. If you're in some racket, and Harry Waters found out about it, and was going to expose you in *The Star*, that *would* be something to be scared about, wouldn't it? That would be something to try and keep him from printing. And if he came here to taunt you, and fooled around with your punchboard—”

“Johnny, you're all wrong,” Jake cut in angrily, “if you knew me, you'd know I was a pretty good poker player, have been for years, and I don't play for pennies. I tell you—”

The door opened then and Penny Lane came in.

Johnny turned around. Penny was out of breath, and her face was very white.

“I've been looking all over for you, you lug,” she said.

“What's up?”

“Murder.”

“Who?”

“Jean Daniels. They found her on the driveway in front of the sanitarium. Her head was bashed in.”

11

A FLOWER which has been pressed between the pages of a book may seem to be fresh and lovely; yet it is brittle, and if you crush it, crumbles to dust in your hands.

Jean Daniels lay as she had fallen, headlong, with one arm outstretched, as though she had raised it to defend herself; her skull was split almost in half, and the pretty hair was thick with dry and matted blood; the blood had hardened on her neck, and in a pool on the ground. Her hat (which had been pert and dipped over one eye) lay at the side of the road, and two small bags were in a ditch, one opened and spewing clothes; the other closed.

Johnny, who was usually last to arrive at a murder and the last to leave it, walked up with Penny Lane. The coroner had just come and was stiffly kneeling beside the body.

Lance Brown, the details man from homicide, was already on the spot. Doctor Hale and his pretty blonde nurse Sandra were there, and likewise two male patients from the sanitarium. The coroner was a man who took himself very seriously, and he made quite a ceremony over the body for his little audience. He cleared his throat.

“Hmm,” he began, “been dead for hours.”

“You don't say?” asked Johnny. “Next you'll be telling me that she was killed by a whack on the head with a blunt instrument, administered by person or persons unknown.”

The coroner scowled. “Precisely,” he said. He glanced around at the spectators. “Is there anyone we should notify? Has she any—ah—relatives?”

“So far as I know,” said Hale, “only a friend in New York. A Walter Spaulding, I believe.”

“You see,” Penny explained, “our coroner is an undertaker on the side.”

The coroner rose angrily and glared at Johnny and Penny. “It is easy to see that you two are feeling quite—quite disagreeable this morning.” He made the pronouncement as he would a verdict of homicide.

Johnny was looking down at the corpse of Jean Daniels. He spoke rapidly. “Lance, I don't see much here that will help us. Take both of the bags for inventory; get a complete report from the coroner: as nearly as possible the hour of death; have her clothing carefully examined by the police laboratory in New Rochelle. There might be some little shred of evidence that will help us. Check fingerprints wherever you can, and particularly in her room. Try and ascertain whether or not she recently received a sum of money from anyone.”

“Okay,” Lance Brown said.

“This is a rotten thing to have happen,” Johnny went on. “It's too bad murder couldn't be confined among our own citizens; Miss Daniels was practically a stranger, and I can see New York papers eating this up. Don't give out any information. Hold off from the journals as much as possible.”

“Sure. Only what are you going to do about Robert Smith?”

Johnny looked up. “What about him?”

Lance handed him a copy of the Mamaroneck Post. “Believe it or not, this stink sheet is daily now. And Smith seems to have gotten on the front page every question and answer, move or decision, that you made yesterday, I don't know how. I wasn't aware that you loved him particularly.”

Johnny stared at the paper. Smith must have been up all night. He had outdone himself translating the shorthand notes. The entire front page contained various stories on the murder.

“What is this!”

“I can explain it,” said Penny. “The sap broke into my house last night and stole my shorthand book. He took my gun and—”

“Why, that two-bit snake.”

“He also mentioned that you might get out of town because *he* was in love with me,” Penny went on.

Johnny felt his heart getting hard like a hammer; blood pounded in his temples. “I’ll kill that guy with my own two hands.”

“You wouldn’t make me feel bad,” Penny said.

Johnny was shaking. He jammed a cigarette in his mouth, and lit it. He looked up at Jim Hale and the nurse.

“What about Jean Daniels? Know how she got out here?”

Hale said: “All I know is that Sandra told me she was checking out. Miss Daniels didn’t wait to tell me goodbye or say why she was going.”

The cold and classic beauty of Sandra Stevens seemed to take on color, so that her clear cut features were tinted with pink, and her blue eyes burned with a strange light; yet withal you could not see emotion in her countenance, nor did her expression betray any inkling of her thoughts. Standing there on the road, Johnny noticed that her figure was very good; full, yet trim, in the white uniform; her shiny golden hair was done in a simple coiffure.

“I went into Miss Daniels’ room last night to see how she was,” Sandra said slowly, “and I found that she was packed and ready to go.”

“Was she surprised to see you?”

“I think so. I had assumed she was asleep, and when I tried the door and found it locked, I used my key to gain entrance. She was standing back at the mirror staring at me. Her face was twisted with terror. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone who looked quite so frightened.”

“What did you say to her?”

“I asked her what was the matter. For a moment she didn’t answer, then when she did she seemed a little hysterical. She told me it was none of my business. She shouted: ‘I’m going to get out of here, and nobody is going to stop me.’”

“Then what?”

Sandra shrugged her slim shoulders. “She went on in that vein. She asked: ‘Do you hear me, Miss Stevens: do you hear what I say?’ I told her I did, and she said: ‘Then get out of my way. Don’t try and stop me.’”

“What did you do?”

“I tried to block her. I asked if anything were wrong. She said: 'Plenty. More than you'll ever know.' She fought her way past me; she didn't take the elevator, she went down the stairs. I know it was useless to try and do anything else. When I looked out the window I saw her on the road, and I assumed she was going to walk into Mamaroneck. When she was a few feet away from the building it was so dark that I could no longer see her, so I went to Doctor Hale and told him what had happened.”

Penny was writing rapidly in a new shorthand book, and had marked all this down.

Johnny dropped his cigarette.

Jim Hale's handsome white face was marked with worry; he was wearing a white jacket, and stood close to Sandra. He spoke now.

“Mr. West, about my formula. As you know, a Doctor Butler took it; and he was a fraud. You told me to wait and you'd get it back for me. But several hours have passed now, and don't you think I'd better do something on my own?”

“You're more concerned about that than you are about the murder of one of your patients, aren't you!”

“No; of course not. But I had to mention it. The loss of that formula is the murder of me. In simple language, that's exactly what it is.”

“I see. You are rather a desperate man, then?”

“Rather.”

“I presume that death of one kind or another is an every day occurrence in the life of a doctor?”

“Not quite,” Hale said sharply.

“Well, you sit tight,” Johnny snapped. “Because this murder, and the murder of Harry Waters both tie in with the sanitarium. The corpse of Jean Daniels here is proof of that; and I have a very good idea that in the untangling of the case your formula will pop up, like a jack-in-the-box.”

“But isn't that stretching a point a little beyond credibility?”

“That's for me to say,” Johnny clipped. “I'm not convinced that you didn't arrange the Doctor Butler hoax yourself to throw us off your doormat; you're not an unintelligent man, Hale, and the fact that your formula has been stolen by an impostor is the only thing which seems to keep guilt from falling like a necklace around your throat. It might have been a neat stunt on your part.”

Hale laughed nastily. “I would like to see you prove murder against *me*,” he said, and there was the ghost of a smile on his lips. “In fact I would very much enjoy seeing how you would go about getting such proof.” The smile did not leave his weary young face;

it seemed to be planted there, like the challenge of one who knows his is the superior mind.

Johnny gazed into that face for a full minute, and he had a queer, sickly feeling pulse through him, as though an icy wind chilled his body.

At last he turned to Penny. "Come on, child; we're going to see this bright boy, Robert Smith."

12

JOHNNY DROVE the roadster along the winding road that led out of Orienta Point. The yacht basin lay at their left, and it seemed that a hundred small sail boats were floating through it, into the open Sound.

Johnny glanced over at Penny. She was wearing a thin white linen suit.

"Love me, honey?" he asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"You're fickle."

"Won't you ever forget that?"

"No. You've got a heart like a banjo. It plays for the occasion whenever it is sounded."

"But you've always been my girl!"

"Sure. And I got tired of having you look over my shoulder at every pretty face that passed."

"I'll never do it again."

"You talk like a song," she said.

"What about this Bob Smith having a crush on you?"

She nodded, looking straight ahead. "He even kissed me."

"He did? Why didn't you tell me—"

"I didn't think it was important."

Johnny's mouth closed tight; he stepped down on the gas, and the roadster shot ahead. They turned into the Post Road, swept past a dozen cars, and swung left through a red light and up Mamaroneck Avenue. Johnny guided the car to the curb and slammed on the brakes in front of the office of the Mamaroneck Post. Smith had suddenly become an employer under his new status of a daily-issue edition, for several of the town's more indolent loafers were hanging around outside. The building was wooden, and it did not look as though it would stand through another hard rain. Originally it had been a real

estate office, and there was very little to deny that it was that now.

Johnny climbed out of the car, strode across the sidewalk and into the “press room” of the Mamaroneck Post. The printer was working with neither shirt nor undershirt, and his bare back gleamed with a sheen of sweat. The six by six printing machine was vomiting page after page of a new edition. Robert Smith sat at the extreme end of the place in a small office. He was in his shirt sleeves, his collar was open, his face was red and sweaty. He had a pencil behind each ear, and one in his hand. He was bellowing like a city editor at a sixteen-year-old boy who stood listening to him with open mouth.

“If you're going to be a cub reporter on this thriving sheet, young man—” Smith was saying. He looked up and saw Johnny. His mouth closed. He got shakily to his feet. He looked past the detective and saw Penny Lane. His cheeks turned a bright scarlet. He chewed at the end of his pencil, then all at once began talking:

“We're getting out a second edition today. No paper in Mamaroneck ever got out two editions. But this is an extra. The coroner just gave me the details on Jean Daniels. Is that something!”

“So the coroner gave you the details, did he?”

“Well, I'm giving his funeral parlor a free ad,” Smith admitted, “but that's all. Say, I'll get out six editions if news like this keeps breaking. Nobody'll be able to say I don't give full coverage. Harry Waters' sheet is closed down, you know, and I've got all the ads, and his syndicate news service as well. Though I won't need the news service at once. Our policy is going to be to concentrate on local affairs. Of course, there won't be a murder every week, but—”

Johnny West's legs were spread; he pushed back his felt hat. The words rambled on out of Smith's open mouth, but Johnny cut in.

“Did you, by any chance, suggest that *I* should get out of town?”

“I was just kidding.”

“Oh,” Johnny said with a deadly calm, “were you?”

“Yeah, I—”

“You broke into Miss Lane's house, you stole her shorthand book. That's official police property. You know what this means?”

“Why I—”

“It means I could slap you in the jug for the next ten years.”

“But—”

“You also stole her automatic; that's larceny. One more count against you. Then you kissed her. A good prosecutor could trump that up to attempted attack.”

Something seemed to penetrate Bob Smith's skull. “Say, you can't bluff me!”

“Can't I?”

“You're just a copper in this town; and you know who I am? I'm the city editor. Like Harry Waters had before he was murdered—I've got this town right in the palm of my hand.” He held out his cupped hand.

Johnny slapped it away. “The *village* has a *city* editor. Well, I'm going to close this shop up so fast you won't know what hit it; if you think that's bluff, wait'll the sheriff gets here.”

“God, Johnny, you can't do that!”

“Where's that shorthand book; and the gun?”

“Right here!” He handed them over.

“Of course everything is transcribed,” said Johnny. “You saved Penny that work. Everything is transcribed and printed.”

“Yeah—” Smith tried to laugh.

Johnny caught the bulky editor by the front of his shirt; his right fist flew up and smashed into Smith's face. Bob Smith stumbled back, and Johnny followed him; his left raised a welt under Smith's eye. His right shattered his lips and started blood spurting from between Smith's teeth. Johnny kept hitting out with all the fury that was in him. When the editor wanted to fall Johnny held him up and kept hitting. He didn't stop until the beefy face was a pulp of black and blue skin and rivers of warm, streaming blood.

Then he let Bob Smith fall in a heap on the floor and backed away; he brushed his hands together, straightened his own neat, unrumpled coat. His felt hat had fallen off and he picked it up and slapped it on his head. He turned. Penny was at the door, her face bloodless.

“I suppose you didn't like it?”

“You didn't have to be quite so hard on him.”

“What's the matter? Couldn't he fight?”

“What? And have you charge him with assaulting an officer of the law?”

Johnny glanced back at the wreck on the floor. “You don't really *like* that punk?”

“That's something you'll probably never know,” said Penny.

“I hope I don't. You see what he gains by Harry Waters being dead, don't you? The Star is defunct. This guy branches out and capitalizes. He may be stupid, but even stupid people have been known to be cunning.”

He moved out through the roaring press room, and Penny followed him, her notebook and gun intact.

Jim Hale stood on the first floor of the sanitarium, brooding, and staring moodily out at

the Sound, so blue and calm, and unlike his own stormy worries. He was tall, and against the light from the window his back was straight and fine. He kept watching the Sound, and the sails which skimmed quietly by, and he tried to gather his thoughts to him. But quite suddenly he heard a faint sound beside him, and he looked up. Sandra Stevens stood there.

Her face was so beautiful that there was something tragic about it: as smooth and immobile as carved marble, with restless and troubled eyes that followed Hale's gaze to the water. She did not speak, and he did not encourage her, but somehow, for the first time, he felt warmth and comfort because she was beside him. His conscience was miserable with the security she had brought, for he owed his heart to Arline Carter. Sandra had always been here, like the very pillars, and the operating table, and the laboratory; all of the things he loved which were a part of his dream sanitarium. But she had been cold like these things too. Cold at least in his careless consideration of her; though he had long been aware that she watched him with that in her eyes which was very nearly pain; and she must have loved him. He had realized this fact, but he had dismissed it, too, callously, the way a man can sometimes.

They stood there together and several minutes must have passed, he was not aware of time. He tried not to think of Jean Daniels whom he had just seen dead; he tried not to think that in thirty days he would lose the sanitarium unless he could do something to save it. Everything he had attempted so far had crumbled away from him, so that he was almost convinced that he was a miserable bungler: a failure. Yet there was nothing he wouldn't do to save this hospital, and his own career; not for himself, but for what he had visualized he could accomplish for medicine and humanity in general.

He had been through so many emotions in the past few hours that he had thought they were all drained out of him, and he was surprised that the presence of Sandra could arouse a new and strange one.

He gazed at her. She had never spoken to him of her feelings, but he felt she would now; there had grown in the last few minutes an understanding between them which had never before existed. She did not look at him, and in profile, staring out at the Sound, there seemed to be that about her which was almost nobility. There was, at least a quiet and breathtaking beauty.

"I hate to see you so upset," she said.

"It'll pass," he murmured. "Remember the ancient wisdom: 'And this, too, shall pass away'." He smiled grimly.

"Life goes so very quickly," Sandra said, "and sometimes we wait forever and never get what we most desire."

"You've been awfully good, Sandra."

She turned toward him, and he touched her hand. "You've stood by me," he said. "I

haven't paid you a salary for almost two months.”

There was a hurt in her eyes. “Do you think I want salary? Do you think that is why I've stayed here?”

He dropped his eyes. “I know.”

She searched his face, and pressed his fingers. “I'm sorry Jim; I'm sorry I spoke out.”

“I shouldn't ever want to have a sanitarium if you were in it,” he said. “I couldn't do without you, I know that.”

“Couldn't you?”

“No,” he said, “I—” He turned miserably. “But what's the use? I'm engaged to Arline, and I'm in love with her. I have no right to ask you to stay.”

Silence dropped between them; but it was tense and electric, and Hale was conscious of each passing second as it ticked by. At last he turned to speak to Sandra again, but at this moment someone fumbled with the knob of the door. He looked around. Arline Carter came in. She slammed the door behind her.

She was slim and neat, wearing a brown dress; but her face was not normal. It was flushed, as though her heart were beating fast. Her eyes were glazed and sick. She leaned back against the wall and brushed her hand over her face. Her whole body trembled, and her voice was a husky whisper which projected words that were slow and deliberate.

“Jim Hale—”

“Yes, Arline?”

She made a bitter laughing face; and then it vanished. She moved forward, but she swayed.

“You've been killing me, haven't you? Your formula is a fake; your cure is a phoney. It's poison. The Armin Company said that. Harry Waters said it. You've been slowly murdering your patients and me with them—”

“Arline—”

“Never mind! Don't come near me. I've been silent about it as long as I could, but—” she faltered, “I thought you should know that I—”

Her eyelids fluttered and she crumpled to the floor. She did not move.

13

SANDRA REACHED her first. She knelt at Arline's side, and Doctor Hale was opposite her. He felt Arline's pulse and looked up. “Heart action. A complete breakdown of her nerves. The mental and physical strain has been too much. First Armin's report; and this morning Jean Daniels' murder.”

“That must be it.”

“It is. Arline's still far from well. I noticed yesterday that she was upset. The poor kid didn't realize what she was saying. It was just the combination of everything preying on her mind.”

Sandra was grim and silent.

Hale worked over Arline for several minutes, massaging her heart, cooling her off. His eyes were feverishly hot. He picked the limp girl up in his arms and carried her to the elevator. Sandra followed.

They took Arline to her room on the third floor and put her on the bed. Hale stared down into her pretty face. “It's too bad she's had to go through this. She's not so strong as you and I, Sandra, she—” He looked up, as though he hadn't realized what he was saying. He flushed.

“Of course,” Sandra said, “if she secretly believed you were trying to hurt her, it would come out like that under strain.”

“Not at all,” he snapped. “Her words were entirely incoherent.”

“And she might be under greater duress than we think,” Sandra went on.

“Don't,” Hale said acidly, “don't say anything like that.” But he was remembering Johnny West, and Penny Lane who said: “Her father owns part interest in the Armin Chemical Company.... She used to see a man named Sock Drury in Mamaroneck... he was in love with her...” Hale shook these thoughts from his mind. “Sandra,” he said, “Arline won't be herself for hours. You'd better undress her and get her into bed before she regains consciousness. She's liable to be hysterical and raving. I'll go in and mix a solution that will quiet her...”

He walked out then, without looking back.

Sandra's cool fingers deftly stripped the clothes from Arline, and she kept quietly watching the girl's breathing. She slipped a thin silk nightgown over her, and arranged Arline under the covers.

Trembling, she turned to a wash basin and poured out a tumbler of water; she brought it back to the bed and kept stroking Arline's cheeks with the cool water. All the time she was gazing down, curiously and strangely; her long white fingers massaged the water along Arline's slim throat. Gently, Sandra's wet fingers kept massaging the pretty throat; she did not once take her eyes from Arline, and her strong fingers were a rhythm of movement.

Johnny entered the large bank with Penny at his side.

“Lamb,” he said, “this is one interview where I may need you for odd facts; ancient or

otherwise. So be on your toes.”

“I'm right with you, Romeo.”

They walked past the tellers' cages, and up a flight of stairs to the office of the manager. There was a girl seated outside, and Johnny said: “Tell Ned Borden I'd like to see him.”

A moment later the door had opened and Johnny and Penny were going into Borden's office. The tall, distinguished banker-lawyer was on his feet. He held pince-nez glasses in his hand, and seemed to be playing up to every bit of the self-imposed opinion that he was an important executive whom everybody admired.

“Please sit down, Miss Lane,” he said. He nodded that Johnny should also seat himself, then he rested back in a swivel chair and crossed his legs. He tapped the pince-nez glasses on his knee, quite as though he were prepared for a pleasant conversation of local importance.

Johnny said: “I'm here about Harry Waters' murder: it's not that I suspect *you*, but you're in a position to know quite a lot about people in this town. Particularly their financial status.”

“Quite so,” the gray-haired banker replied, not without pride.

“And,” Johnny continued, “I see by the Mamaroneck Post that in my conversation with you yesterday you mentioned you had not seen Harry Waters come into the bank prior to his death; and Robert Smith remarked that *he* had seen Waters come in here. In other words, Smith contradicted you.”

“Yes, I remember that,” Borden said. He did not look so happy about it.

“Have you anything to say?”

“Simply that I didn't *see* Waters enter the bank. He may have, I don't know.”

“Did your secretary see him?”

“No.”

“Of course,” said Johnny, “Waters might have come in during her lunch hour.”

Ned Borden appeared to be a little irritated. “Is there any point in whether he did or did not come here?”

Johnny jammed a cigarette between his lips. “I think there is. I have just learned from calling up one of the tellers I know that Waters drew five thousand dollars from his account yesterday.”

Borden's chair fell forward. “He did?”

Johnny nodded. “I've got the withdrawal slip in my pocket. Why Waters should have drawn this money all at once is a mystery. But what is a greater one is that no trace of the money was found on him, nor in his home or office.”

Borden tapped the pince-nez against his lower lip. "That's quite serious."

Johnny's eyes flickered. "Particularly, if it looks as though *you* didn't want us to know Waters was even in the bank."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Waters might have given you the withdrawal slip to get the money so you could invest it for him. That's done all the time. Then when Waters was killed, you could quite easily pocket the money and say nothing about it. No one would ever know what had happened to the five thousand dollars."

"Are you insinuating that a man of *my* character would commit a murder for an amount like that?"

"No. I'm merely presenting a few suppositions. But while we're on the subject, how much is your present wealth?"

"In property and—"

"In cash," Johnny said.

Borden paused. "Twenty thousand."

"And you're supposed to be a rich man. You were once worth a million, weren't you?"

"I tell you that is but a fraction of my assets. What I have is tied up in real estate."

Johnny glanced over at Penny, and she consulted some notes. "Mr. Borden, eighteen months ago in a town hall meeting you proposed a yacht club which would have for its site Orienta Point. Isn't that true?"

"Yes. Such a project would be highly profitable. It was my idea that the leading merchants in town should pool their resources and have it built; a few were for it, but the others wouldn't come in. Some were of the opinion it would clutter up Mamaroneck with out-of-towners and turn the village into a resort, which is definitely not a thing to be desired."

"But you still think there'd be money in a yacht club?"

"True."

Penny glanced back at her notes. "One more question. Didn't you and your wife have a child?"

Borden winced a little. "Where did you hear that?"

"Library gossip," Penny said simply. "I understand that the child was a girl; and that she was sixteen when she died."

Ned Borden's face was strained, and his eyes were very nearly wet; he was embarrassed, and he dropped his head. "Yes," he said. "Jane died in an automobile accident in New York."

Penny was reading from her notes. "She was taken to Bellevue Hospital immediately after the crash, wasn't she? She was given an emergency operation. Haven't you always been of the opinion that that operation was bungled?"

"No, not exactly," he looked up, and smiled grimly. "That part, I'm afraid, *is* gossip."

Johnny pinched out his cigarette. "What we're driving at, Mr. Borden, is this: Doctor Jim Hale was on the staff at Bellevue at the time this happened, wasn't he?"

"Why—why, I really don't know." He paused. "Anyway, Doctor Hale hasn't been murdered."

"I know," said Johnny, and he rose. "We just like to have lots of biography and facts, that's all. Sorry if we've been a bother."

"Not at all. I'm glad to be a help in any civic matter of such importance."

The sun was still high in the sky, but it was nearer the horizon now and it slanted across the roof tops, throwing long, grotesque shadows across Mamaroneck Avenue. The traffic was thick up and down the street; coatless women and children carried market bags to parked cars; one of the town movies was just letting out, disgorging wild, shouting kids.

Johnny had to drive the roadster slowly through the crowds, avoiding cars which had parked double waiting for a space to empty so that they might move into it. Penny sat quietly.

"Going to cook me supper tonight?" Johnny asked.

"What's the matter with the beanery?"

"Listen, ever since I got mixed up with Dorothy Noel on that Davis case you've been like this; honey, I'm famished for some of your cooking."

"If you put it like that, Johnny, how can I resist?"

He was elated. He reached over and grabbed her hand. But she jerked it away. "Cooking and hand holding," she said, "are diversions widely divided."

"Penny, don't you think this thing's gone far enough?"

Her face was cold. "I'm sincere," she said. "I believed in you, Johnny; ever since I was nine years old I had believed in you. Then in three short days you took my heart out and crumpled it up like it was waste paper and threw it aside. I can't get over that, and if I ever let myself in for it again I think I'd die."

He was gloomily silent.

He drove another block, until he was abreast of Jake Morrow's store; there was an open parking space here, and he turned the car into it, and cut off the motor.

"You can shop for groceries across the street. I'm going in to talk to Jake."

She nodded, and climbed out. As she walked across Mamaroneck Avenue to a store,

Johnny crossed the sidewalk to Jake's place. The stocky little merchant stood behind the counter; he grinned when he saw Johnny.

"I'm taking your advice and staying in the store longer hours," he said.

"I didn't advise that."

"But you criticized me, which is worse."

"I think," said Johnny, leaning on the counter, "we were discussing how it was you had been able to save thirty-five thousand dollars in the past seven or eight years."

"Better than telling you again," Jake suggested, "get me into a game of poker."

Johnny shoved back his hat and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. "You're a sleek customer, Jake; I don't wonder you have a good poker face. But if it's true that you have got some shady deal on, and Harry Waters found it out and was going to break it wide open in The Star, I don't doubt but what you'd kill him in a minute."

"I don't doubt it, either," said Jake. "It's funny about me; I can hate people and keep smiling at them, and they never know what I think. That's why I'm such a popular guy, and a successful merchant." He kept smiling now, but his eyes came up and met Johnny's.

The screen door of the shop opened and slammed shut. Johnny turned around. Robert Smith had entered. He was wearing dark glasses to cover up his swollen eyes; there was a strip of adhesive at the corner of one lip, and another on his cheek. When he saw Johnny, he said: "Hello, butcher boy. Playing the punchboards?"

"Maybe," said Johnny.

Smith came over and leaned on the counter; he tried to smile. It was as though he knew some tremendous joke, and wished to taunt Johnny with it.

"How's the murder business?"

"I read by the Post," said Johnny, "that it's pretty good."

"That's nothing. I'm getting out a *third* edition today. It's being printed now. Wait 'til you see it."

"I'm practically breathless," Johnny said.

Smith grinned until his bruised lip split. "I thought you would be. I've been talking to the coroner again, and I've scooped you."

"*What?*"

"Oh, it's nothing," said Smith. "It's just that there's been another murder. That's all."

Johnny went for the door in a run.

THE POLICE station was only a block away, so Johnny walked rather than to try and maneuver the roadster out of its parking space; he did not see Penny and he had no time to look for her. He walked into headquarters, slamming the door behind him. The desk sergeant sat staring at him.

“Hey, where have you been?”

“Sleeping off a hangover,” said Johnny. “Tell me what goes on here.”

“It's not here. It's there in the next room. I think the coroner just brought him in.”

“Who?”

“Search me. A dead guy. They found him in the weeds somewhere.”

“Is it a fresh corpse?”

“Practically oven warm,” said the sergeant.

Johnny strode into the other room. Lance Brown, the coroner, and two or three policemen were standing around staring at a nude male corpse. The dead man had been middle-aged; with grayish hair, and a stern, unpleasant face. The back of his head was a mat of hard blood where somebody had hit him with what seemed to have been a baseball bat. Johnny did not remember ever having seen the face before. The coroner looked very disturbed and he was rubbing his hands together.

Lance Brown looked up: “Boy, somebody certainly did a swell job of removing identification. Look at him!”

“Where was he found?”

“Harbor Heights. Halfway between the hill and a stream. A collie dog was barking, and some kid went down to see what was the matter. The kid almost went crazy. His old man called us up, and naturally we went on the run. The coroner picked up Robert Smith on the way and took him along. Smith just took one look, then beat it. We hung around, hoping they'd send you; but so many curious people gathered, we decided to bring the stiff in.”

Johnny gazed from the corpse up at the coroner. “Too bad we're going to have to get a new police coroner,” he said.

“What are you insinuating?” demanded the lean undertaker.

“I'm not insinuating anything. I'm just telling you you lost your job. You heard what I said to Lance this morning about giving out information. Did this cute boy Smith *buy* you? I've never known you to be so big-hearted before.”

“He's a nice fellow,” the coroner answered. “Besides, you can't fire me. I have a village contract that's good until next election.”

“The contract is full of nice clauses, and it won't be worth the paper it's written on unless you stop handing out tips to people. Do you understand me, Mr. Miller?”

“Perfectly,” the coroner-undertaker said. His face had turned a curious color that was between a pink flush and a gray.

Johnny studied the face of the corpse. Lance Brown had already picked up a file of “Missing Persons” pictures. One of the cops was going through a basket of late dispatches. The cop stopped at one and read it over several times, glancing now and then at the corpse. At last he handed the typewritten description to Johnny.

“Fits him exactly.”

Johnny read it. “Yeah.”

“Who is it?” Lance asked.

“A guy,” said Johnny slowly, so that he himself could have full benefit of the words, “who called himself 'Doctor Butler.' He posed as a Medical Association representative, and copped an antistrep formula from Jim Hale. That was yesterday; it must have been taking place about the same time Harry Waters was dying of poison.”

“You mean this is the fellow Hale wanted to find?”

Johnny's eyes were thoughtful. He nodded. “That's him. Things are shaping up rather well now. Butler was an agent for whoever has been committing the murders. We tie the sanitarium right in with the killings. My guess is that Butler—I doubt that was his name—was commissioned to get Hale's formula but didn't know there was going to be a murder. When he found out, he either squawked about it, or tried to blackmail the killer. Both moves being fatal to him.”

“Who do you think Butler was?”

“Some chemist, probably, out of a job. He had to know something about medicine to fool Hale. I doubt very much if he was a doctor. Check up on all the drug stores in Mamaroneck and towns close by; see if they knew anybody of his description: I'd like to learn his identity. Not that it'll do us any good, though. The murderer by this time undoubtedly has the formula.”

Lance Brown was writing down the orders.

Johnny leaned back, and for a moment he was sober and reflective. “God, we're running into a mess here. This is the third one now. And it may go on. We're up against more than a killer; we're fighting a brain. I've never had a case where the murderer could keep himself so well covered up. He's a dozen moves ahead of us.” He paused. “But we know this. We know he's in this town. And I'm pretty sure it's one of the suspects I've already lined up. It's a matter of sifting now till we catch him; and it's like juggling dynamite. One miss and the whole thing'll blow up in your face and kill you as dead as the rest of the victims.”

“Such a peaceful little town,” said Lance, “you wouldn't think a thing like this could be happening, would you?”

“It isn't the town,” said Johnny. “It's one festering little germ, and it's spreading its rottenness; slowly and insidiously; the germ has strangled three, and it's growing in the atmosphere like cancer.”

He stamped out.

There was a wind rustling the leaves in the trees, and everything had turned purple with sunset; lights gleamed a block away on Mamaroneck Avenue. Newsboys were running up and down yelling “Extra” and selling copies of the Mamaroneck Post. Smith would sell out Westchester County with the three editions he had printed today. Johnny walked swiftly, the cries of the newsboys in his ears.

He crossed the street and arrived back at the roadster. Penny was seated in it with a bag of groceries, and Robert Smith stood with his foot on the running board talking to her.

“If I'm upsetting you two,” Johnny said, “I'll go on by.”

“Not at all,” Smith replied.

“I suppose you've told Penny all about the murder?”

“That's right. I've given her a copy of my edition with the scoop. There's something *else* in it you might like to see; whenever you get time you'll find it somewhere on the front page. It's about you.”

“Oh, thanks for the publicity,” Johnny snapped acidly. “I don't know how I'll ever repay you.”

“Oh, that's all right.”

“By the way, Smith. Did you know *who* the corpse was?”

“No, who?”

Johnny looked around. “Of course it's confidential.”

“Yeah?” Smith was breathless.

“Yeah. It was the mayor of our neighboring town.”

“But I thought he was off on a fishing trip.”

“He must have come back.”

“No fooling. Mayor Bronson?”

Johnny nodded. “Of course I told the boys at headquarters not to say anything; so don't pay attention to what (*hey* tell you. But it's an absolute fact.”

“Gee, *thanks*, Johnny!”

Robert Smith went hurrying away.

Johnny climbed wearily into the car. Penny said: "That was one dirty trick. That boy's as gullible as kids who believe in Santa Claus. Why, he'll rush down and print that story. He never bothers to check facts, you know. He hasn't learned that much about journalism."

"Well, it serves him right," said Johnny. "But how do *you* know who the corpse was?"

"It stands to reason," Penny said, "that it must be one of two people. The first is Doctor Hale; but he would have been recognized. So it must be this impostor 'Doctor Butler' who took Hale's formula."

"How did you know?"

"You said Butler was in the killer's employ; and he apparently had nothing to do with actual murder. It's just cause and effect. A natural reaction. *Was* it Butler?"

Johnny nodded. He was backing the car out; now he turned into the avenue and shifted gears. But suddenly he grinned. "Nevertheless, I'd like to see Mayor Bronson's face when he reads that he's been murdered. I'll personally deny I told Smith anything."

He chuckled about that driving to Penny's house. He pulled the emergency brake in front of her place, and they went in. Penny dumped the groceries in the sink and laid the Mamaroneck Star on the table. She went out to start peeling potatoes. Johnny picked up the paper and glanced at it. It was filled with printing errors and had been hurriedly put together, but it bristled with energy and information.

Suddenly, in the center of the front page he saw a box embroidered with the deepest black possible to be printed. The caption within the death engraving was:

Goodbye, Johnny

The bold, black letters, read:

This office has received a mysterious telephone call telling us that Detective John West, in charge of the Waters Murder Case, and known locally in Mamaroneck and Westchester County as "Homicide Johnny," will be murdered before morning.

This office, naturally, takes no responsibility in regard to what truth there may be in this threat. Most murder cases are plagued with cranks, and it is probably a crank who called in the news; or possibly one of popular Johnny West's friends are ribbing him. We publish the item only for what passing value it may have coming as it does in the thick of one of the most hideous murder cases ever to happen in Westchester County.

However, in view of the telephone call's dire prediction, in the event that the unexpected should happen, we wish to be the first to say to our dear and loving friend: "Goodbye,

Johnny.”

“Penny, have you seen this?”

She looked up from the potato peels. “Yes.”

“What does Smith think he is, funny?”

“I wouldn't know.”

“Did he mention anything to you about this item?”

“Yes. He said he *did* get a phone call saying you were going to die.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Yes,” she said. “He isn't brilliant enough to make up such a clever editorial gag. But as he himself says, it was probably a crank.”

“He had no business to publish it.”

“Well,” she said, “you *would* punch his nose.”

Johnny strode into the kitchen. He was flushed with fury. “Do you know what I think? I think Smith is the killer. I think that punk is taking us for a ride.”

She shrugged.

“Well, don't you care? Don't you care if I die?”

“Who said you were going to?”

“It says so here.”

She turned around and looked up at him. “You aren't letting a thing like that scare you?”

“Who's scared?” he shouted.

“Why, Johnny!”

“I'm not scared; I'm just sore. Why, I'll close up that paper of his. What does he think he can do, make a monkey out of me?”

“You'd better call up and ask him before he prints that headline about the mayor.”

“Let him print it!”

Johnny walked into the other room. He put his hands in his pockets and stared out the window. Then he realized he was in full view from the outside, and moved a little to the right. He sank down in a chair; but the window was behind his hands, and something crawly itched inside him. He got up and found another chair. He slumped down in it, his hands still in his pockets. He kicked out at the rug. He felt his blood churning hot. It was ridiculous to think he'd let a thing like an advance obituary get him. But he remembered the corpse of Doctor Butler, cold and naked, with blood matted in the hair of it, and eyes

that were like glass staring at the ceiling. A shiver went all through Johnny's body. He was like ice. He closed his eyes and saw himself on a slab with his arms folded in repose and Coroner Miller clucking over him. He opened his eyes; he wanted to shudder, but he held himself rigid. He glanced through the kitchen door at Penny who calmly went on preparing dinner. He drew his hands out of his pockets and reached for a cigarette, but the hands were sick with shaking palsy and he held them in front of him and looked at them. He felt stupid; but he couldn't help it. Smith had crawled under his skin like a poison. Johnny got to his feet. He paced up and down; up and down.

15

THEY HAD dinner in the dinette, and Johnny sat across the table looking at Penny Lane. She ate heartily; he nibbled at corn and potatoes, hardly eating.

“That thing is absolutely silly, isn't it?”

“What thing?” she asked.

“That Goodbye Johnny death notice.”

“Are you still thinking about it?”

He looked down at the food. “No. It just happened to occur to me, that's all.” He paused.

“Can't I bring up a subject without you saying I'm obsessed with it?”

“Johnny, you're upset.”

“I'm not. I feel fine. When I see Smith I'll laugh in his face.”

She ate in silence.

He calmed down a little, watching her, and there was an ache in his heart because she was a determined girl and he did not know if she would ever actually come back to him; he wondered what it would be like to have supper with her every night. When he worked she'd be working with him, and when they had a few free hours they'd make them crazy and hilarious. He took a bite of round steak and chewed it; he chewed it on the right side of his mouth because he had a weak tooth on the left. He kept watching Penny, and the tooth gave him an idea. He put down his fork, grinning.

“When are you going to take me back?”

She looked at him, and her eyes were not warm.

He picked up the fork. “I'll tell you why you should. Guys on my order are like teeth. Hard to get; and a lot of trouble to take care of.”

“Yes?”

“But when they're gone they leave an awful blank.”

She didn't smile; it didn't get over at all.

“Well, I was just suggesting it,” he said. He went on eating.

“I got another sales talk tonight,” she told him.

“Is that right?”

“From Bob Smith. He apologized for breaking in. But not for kissing me.”

“Maybe that's the guy you should go for,” Johnny said angrily, “some big stupid lug like that.”

She got up and poured the coffee, and she had just been seated again when the telephone rang. Johnny wiped his mouth with a napkin and rose to answer it. He came from the hall looking glum. Penny's eyes met his.

“Doctor Hale,” Johnny said. “He claims something screwy is going on at the sanitarium. He wants us to come right over.” He picked his coffee from the table and gulped it down.

They coasted the roadster down the hill and turned right on Mamaroneck Avenue. Johnny swung into the Post Road at a good speed; headlights shone in his eyes on the opposite side. He drove to Orienta Point Road and went left. Penny moved over closer to him, and of her own free will she took his hand and held it between both of hers, then she kissed it. The warmth of that kiss intoxicated him; but he did not know whether it was motivated by sympathy or love, and lie was too miserable with doubt to ask. He had forgotten the death notice, but he thought of it again. She released his hand and he put it on the wheel with the other. Dark shapes loomed up from the side of the road, and the branches of trees drooped and scraped the car. The dock lights shone bleakly in the distance, and the white moon rode high over the Sound, and Johnny felt somehow that the whole atmosphere breathed murder, so that the growing intensity of the case pumped hot blood into his pulse, and there was fever in his eyes.

They swung into the little road that led to the sanitarium.

As they did so, the headlamps of a small truck shot out from the delivery entrance; it came weaving down the road, its spinning wheels throwing gravel behind it. Johnny swerved his car off the driveway, but the truck turned slightly, so that it was slanted directly at the roadster. It came roaring toward them head-on.

Johnny snapped open the door.

“Jump, Penny!” he yelled.

16

PENNY MADE a wild leap out of the car, and Johnny was right behind her; he took a headlong dive, and the moment he hit the ground grabbed Penny's arm and began crawling away. They had gained scarcely five feet when the crash came, and they had to

duck to keep from being hit by flying glass. The truck had sideswiped and the roadster shuddered under the impact; then suddenly flame streaked up in a jagged light. Johnny and Penny kept crawling backward, away from the spurting gasoline flames, and the thunder of the crash still rang in their ears.

“Smith said somebody'd get me,” Johnny yelled, but he scarcely knew what he was saying.

He sat down finally, and Penny sat beside him. They gasped for breath; mechanically Johnny wiped the dirt and muck from his trousers, and Penny inspected a silk stocking she had ripped. She lifted one shapely leg and peeled the stocking away from the bruised skin; she took the other one off also, then she replaced her shoes.

“They should have been faster or thought of a neater way to kill us,” Johnny said.

“Do you really think it was deliberate?”

“There's no doubt in my mind.”

“Look!” cried Penny. “The driver of the truck.”

A figure was swaying against the light from the flaming wreckage; he moved toward them, then flopped.

“Let me at the guy!” Johnny got up and went to the driver. He was a young man of no more than twenty; he tried to sit up, but one arm hung limp and was bloody. He seemed to be sobbing, though there were no tears in his eyes.

“What was the idea?” Johnny demanded.

“What idea—road hog?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your headlights,” said the lad. “They blinded me. And you were in the middle of the driveway. I was only trying to get you over.”

“Don't give me that,” Johnny snapped. “You didn't start out until you saw me coming in.”

The youth held his bloody arm. “All right. Keep talking. I tell you, I was already started before you made that turn down there, and those lights blinded me.”

“They don't blind drivers on the Post Road.”

“To hell with the Post Road. They're too bright and any test will prove it!”

Penny came limping up. “You two sound like any two-bit traffic snarl. Cut it, will you?”

“This guy'll answer in court for what he tried to do,” Johnny snapped. “It was as deliberate an accident as any that's ever been staged.”

The wreckage of the combined machines made a vivid torch through the night, lighting the figures of Johnny and Penny. The blond man sat there nursing his arm; he kept

wincing as though the pain were unbearable.

Jim Hale came out of the sanitarium on the run, but he paused a moment to look at the burning wreck. Sandra cut across the road.

“You two all right?” she asked.

“We're practically winning the local health show,” Johnny said.

Hale walked over; his eyes were incredulous; he knelt professionally and looked at the driver's arm.

“You're from the general hospital delivery service, aren't you?”

“That's right.”

“What's your name?”

“Wilson. Bill Wilson.”

“How's the arm?”

“I'm all right; just leave me alone.”

“Feels as though the bone is fractured; and the skin's been torn like rubber off your elbow.”

“I'm all right, I tell you!”

“Fix the punk up,” Johnny said, “and after a while I'll send Lance Brown over to get him. I want him booked.”

“For what?” demanded Bill Wilson.

“I think it's obvious.”

Wilson's young face was bitter. “Why don't you lay off me? You too, doctor. Why don't you just all go away!”

He kept holding his arm, wincing every few seconds.

Sandra was still kneeling, and she took his hand. “Don't you think you'd better come along upstairs with me?”

“Why?”

“Be reasonable,” she said. “Please be reasonable.”

Wilson stared at her, and at last got to his feet. He went limping off, with Sandra holding his arm.

Johnny gazed at Doctor Hale. “If I remember correctly, it was *you* who telephoned me to come over here. We of the cops may be slow, but we get there eventually. What did you and that kid cook up?”

“Cook up?”

“You know what I'm talking about!”

“I don't think I do.”

“Then why did you tell me to come here?”

“To tell you about Arline Carter.”

“What about her?”

“She collapsed this morning with a nervous breakdown; or something that is very close to it. And it's worse than I had at first suspected.”

“You couldn't have told me that on the phone?” Johnny asked.

“There were other aspects of the case I wanted to discuss. I thought it better to see you in person.”

“What other aspects?”

“About Doctor Butler; I understand you found him.”

“Who told you that?”

“I phoned police headquarters and they informed me.”

“I see. Well, what about it? Jean Daniels was probably killed because she diluted your formula and might have talked about it. And now Butler, who undoubtedly was working with the killer, has also gotten it. Murderers have a habit of shaking off their associates. It's safer.”

“But did Butler have the formula?” Hale asked. “That's what I'm interested in.”

“No. He didn't have anything. Not even clothes.”

The flames of the wreckage were dying down. Hale shifted uneasily. “In that case—”

“It's this,” Johnny said. “I told you that the stolen formula and the murder were one and the same. We won't find the answer of one without the other. And I'm going as fast as I can. So take it easy.”

The skeleton steel work of the two cars was visible through the glowing embers of what had been the fire. Johnny gazed at it a second.

“Any supplies that were in that truck have been burned by now. The whole thing came off like a marine band on the 4th of July. I don't like it.” He shoved back his hat and put a cigarette in his mouth. He lit up. Penny was beside him now, and he squeezed her arm and felt warm about it. “My mind works with terrific brilliance,” Johnny went on. “Maybe Arline is only faking that sickness, and she and this Bill Wilson—”

“I tell you she's really sick!” Hale insisted.

Johnny shrugged. “All right, throw the brilliance away. I don't care. Only it seems to me that Wilson was probably conferring with someone right there in the driveway of the

sanitarium; and that whoever this person is, he's still around.”

“I doubt it,” Hale said. “Once he heard the crash—presuming such a figure exists and plotted the wreck with Wilson—he would have run off. There's a hundred places close by where he might hide.”

Johnny looked up. “Where were you when the crash occurred?”

“Downstairs, I—”

“Isn't that floor empty?”

“Yes. But—” he groped for an explanation. “I've been rather upset and I came down alone to think things out. Sometimes, if one does that—”

“What took you so long in getting out here?”

“I was at the other end of the building.”

“I see.” Johnny turned to Penny. “Call up Lance Brown. Have a flattie take Wilson down and book him. I doubt the guy'll talk, though. He's got that accident story pat already. You'd better phone Sock Drury and have him tow these wrecks away. When you want me I'll be down in the delivery room seeing what I can find.”

“Okay.”

Johnny walked up to the door of the sanitarium, then changed his mind and went around the back way. Bushes and weeds blocked the path here, but he broke through them and reaching the delivery door at last, went in. Lights were burning, but things did not seem much different than when he had been here before. He looked into all the closets and behind boxes, then he holstered his gun. He sat down and went through inventory orders. These netted him nothing, and he at last set upon the cardboard cartons themselves, tearing them open and inspecting the contents. He did not know how long he worked; the minutes fled past, but the silence grew and oppressed him.

A door slammed and he turned, expecting to see Penny.

Lord Carlin stood there.

The huge New Englander gaped at Johnny. He seemed forbidding in spite of the yellow walrus mustache, and the bleak, dumb expression of his face; he was a giant with a broad chest, and long arms, and his eyes were narrow, squinty ones you could not read.

“What you doing here?” he grumbled.

“Looking around,” said Johnny. “Where have *you* been?”

“I just came in from the village.”

Johnny's eyes were fast on the caretaker. “Can you tell me exactly where you were in the village?”

“Sure, I was in Connie's Bar.”

“That's where Harry Waters was killed.”

“I don't hold that against it,” Lord Carlin said, “as long as it wasn't the whiskey that killed him.” He wiped his mouth on the back of his baggy sleeve and sniggered. Johnny saw now that his legs were spread, and that he was weaving; Carlin's slightly tainted breath reached out and disgusted Johnny's nostrils.

“How long ago did you leave the bar?”

“Oh, 'bout forty minutes or an hour.”

“*That* long? Did you go anywhere else?”

“I say, sir; I hadn't thought to keep a record. But I'll try and remember; you're a stout fellow and I'm only too glad to oblige you.” Lord Carlin sniggered again, and weaved back. Then he said: “No, I didn't go anywhere else. I came directly here. I walked.”

“And it took you almost an hour?”

“Well,” said the caretaker, “I might have paused along the way to rest.” He moved up to Johnny and jabbed his fingers into his stomach. “But *I* wouldn't remember, get it?” He laughed outright.

“I'm sorry, I don't get it.”

“I had a wee bit too much,” Carlin explained with patience, but after he had explained it he laughed again. The man was filthy drunk.

“Did you see the wreckage on the road?”

“Is that what it was?” Carlin asked. “I knew it weren't familiar. A man gets to know what's familiar and what ain't.”

“Quite so.”

“Quite so; and so it 'tis, sir.... You're a chappie after my own heart.” He chuckled, then belched.

Johnny said: “Maybe you'd better sit down.”

The huge man found a box and squatted on it. He held the ends of his yellow mustache and looked up with gloomy eyes. He let go of the walrus mustache once to say: “I can never keep it down.”

Johnny moved toward the stairway, but he remembered Sock Drury had said he had been in the hospital to play a game of cards with Lord Carlin, and on inspiration, Johnny turned.

“I understand you and Sock Drury have some pretty interesting card games?”

Lord Carlin shook his head. “I know Drury, but I'm a funny man, chappie. I never learned how to play cards.”

JOHNNY FOUND Penny Lane in Doctor Hale's laboratory on the third floor. She was seated before a desk going through a batch of supply invoices similar to those of later origin which Johnny had inspected down in the delivery room. Hale was pacing the floor.

Johnny said: "Penny, you can go through those if you want, but they'll get you nothing."

"You take care of the small details, Adonis," she said. "I'll solve the murder my own way. I think I'm really getting something here." She looked up. "Ever go over these, Doctor Hale?"

"Oh, now and then. But I have people to take care of my books. I'm afraid Mr. West is right. You won't find anything important in those files." He glanced at Johnny. "I've been thinking of what you said concerning Doctor Butler. That is, that the solution of the murders will also uncover the person who arranged to have my formula stolen."

"What about it?"

Hale walked over to the cabinet and poured himself a drink. "I feel a little better, that's all. At least I know that you certainly don't suspect *me* any longer. You couldn't under those circumstances."

"I'm afraid that I do," said Johnny. "As I explained before, it might have been you who hired Butler."

"What? And steal my own formula? Ridiculous!"

"In one sense, yes. In another, it would cover you in a show-down."

Hale smiled cynically. "And I presume that I put on a boggy mask and frightened Miss Carter into a nervous breakdown! Why not add that?"

"It's not impossible."

"You twist things around. But I'm afraid you're wasting your time." He gulped down the drink. His face was taut and glistened with sweat; and there was a queer smile playing about his lips. But his eyes did not smile, they burned with a hard, bright light. "Tell me, West; did you ever go wading in water, then discover suddenly that you were in over your head?"

Penny looked up and said dryly: "He has, but when that happened he began to swim. And he's a beautiful swimmer."

The little smile dropped from Hale's lips and he stared down at Penny curiously. "Quite well put."

Johnny jammed a cigarette between his lips. "Shall we go in and see Arline Carter?"

"She's still pretty sick; but you might look at her and have the full facts."

"I should have had them hours ago," Johnny said, "but this is just another instance where I'm unable to understand some of the things you do. Why didn't you call me earlier?"

"Well—I—to tell you the truth, it didn't occur to me."

He opened the door. Penny stuffed several invoices in her purse, and got up. She was first to leave the laboratory, and Johnny followed. He said over his shoulder:

"Did the Medical Association call to make a report on *their* findings of your formula, Hale?"

"Not yet."

Sandra, who was in the hall, opened Arline's door for them, and when they had entered the room, followed quietly. She stood there, her slim arms crossed.

Dark-haired Arline was deathly pale, and she lay strapped in the white bed. Her eyes were closed, and she tried to move, restlessly, from side to side; her arms were thrown out, and now and again they jerked convulsively, as though she were being shocked over and over; her breathing still seemed short and unnatural, and there was very little of her beauty left. Hale said: "Once in a while she mutters something, but it's usually incoherent."

"Were you ever able to make out anything?"

Hale glanced at Sandra for the reply.

Her eyes dropped. "I—I'm afraid not."

"Come, girl, speak up," Hale urged.

Sandra flushed. "As you say, it was incoherent."

"But did you pick up any single word; any little thing that might give us a clue?"

"There was a name," Sandra admitted, "but of course I couldn't be at all sure. I can just tell you what it sounded like."

"What?"

"Drury," Sandra said, and she seemed miserable. "I didn't want to say anything, doctor, because I know how you feel about her and—"

Johnny turned excitedly. "Penny, was Sock Drury at the gas station when you phoned to have him take the wreck away?"

"No. I talked to one of his helpers. He said Sock was at home, but that he'd get in touch with him. Their truck must already be downstairs."

"The fact that he wasn't at the station means that he *could have* been here; it could have been him who talked to Wilson."

The door pushed open. Sock Drury stood there.

“Talking about me?” His voice was low and husky.

The stocky ex-football player was wearing greasy brown clothes; he was pulling off a pair of mechanic's gloves and jamming them in his pocket. His face was tight and hard, and his eyes were bloodshot; they seemed small, and their intensity drilled into Johnny. Drury was hatless so that his kinky red hair was knotted in curls on his head.

“What are you doing up here, Sock?”

“I came on that job Penny called me for. Then I heard Arline was sick, and I wanted to see her.”

“Why?”

“Because I love her,” Sock said tensely, and he did not take his eyes from Johnny. “That's the same reason I was here last night, although she wasn't sick then.” He paused. “Because when she dropped me, I couldn't take it. I was a big baby and I kept hanging around hoping to see her. I bribed Lord Carlin to let me in once in awhile. Now you know, don't you? You know all about it?”

“We have your version.”

The gasoline station owner nodded. “And you may as well have the rest. I had known Arline Carter in college, but only casually; she was rich, and I didn't have a cent. They kept me on only because they thought I could pack a football when they wanted me to, and that I'd bring the cash customers into the stadium for them. I got a scholarship. I got money. I got a room to live in. I had popularity, and I belonged to a good frat house. I twisted the muscles in my body so that they'll never be the same, for four years of that.

“Then when Arline met me in Mamaroneck and she hadn't seen me for a while, she was temporarily taken, I might say intrigued, with me; because in her memory I was still some half-baked idol they had called The Red Devil. I wasn't just Sock who had a gas station and a thousand dollars or so saved up, I was the Ail-American player whose name she'd heard through her college days.

“So you see, Johnny, I got a break.” Sock Drury wiped his hand down across his face, and sucked breath into his lungs. “Arline let me see her a few times. And I was a whacky guy, see? I didn't have any sense at all. I didn't think about her father having a million bucks, and that I was just a dope who pumped gas into tin Lizzies. I didn't have brains enough to think of that. I fell in love with her.”

“Yes, but—”

“I asked her to marry me, see? That's how dopey I was. I really thought she would. But she didn't; she told me she would think it over, then she didn't come back any more. She must have realized that a few years had passed and that I was just a muscle-bound grease monkey still a little punchy from being kicked in the head with cleats; and that a guy like that'd never do as a husband. So I was supposed to shrug it off and forget it. But I didn't. I went home and threw my self on top of my bed and bawled like a little kid. But

that didn't do any good, either, and though I managed to stay away for awhile, it got the best of me, so I started coming here to try and see her. I knew she was engaged to Hale, but I thought maybe that was something she thought she *should* do, rather than the thing she really wanted. Women are funny sometimes, and I was clinging to a little straw of hope like that—”

He stopped talking, and his face was flushed. He moved forward and stared down at the pale girl on the bed. His voice dropped to a whisper, though he did not look up.

“That's the story, Johnny. If you'd asked enough questions—and you would have—you'd have gotten all that. I wouldn't have told it for love or money or death or anything else, but when I heard you saying what you did, I figured it was about time you knew. And if you think I'd hurt this girl, then you're crazy, that's all; you're crazier than you look—”

The husky whisper died away, and he dropped to his knees beside the bed and took Arline's hand. He kissed it, then he got up. He looked into Johnny's face, and Johnny saw with amazement that Sock Drury's leathery cheeks were wet. Sock backed up, the greasy gloves in his hands now. He tried to sound hardboiled when he spoke next.

“When she comes to, tell her I was here. Tell her Sock was here, but he didn't have any flowers with him, so he couldn't leave any. Tell her—” He turned suddenly and moved out through the door. His footsteps echoed in the corridor, and presently there was the sound of the elevator going down.

“Sometimes,” Johnny said quietly, “I think that murder brings out the best in people.”

18

MAMARONECK AVENUE is dead at night. The street lies big and black and empty under the few flickering lights, and the stores which have been choked with crowds all day, are dark and silent; only the lights of the movie house flicker brightly, and on different corners are drug stores and cigar concessions which have remained open for the after-theatre trade. Sometimes after the clock has struck and there are no trains coming in, the silence is so terrible and oppressing that it frightens you and you are struck with the conviction that you are a ghoulish walking through a desolate ghost town in which you do not belong.

Jake Morrow's store is three blocks from the moving picture theatre, and at night you wonder why it should remain open so long when at best it can attract but a few straggling citizens who are in a hurry to get home. You can always find Jake in the store late at night arranging the stock, or reading a paper. He wears the same slate-gray jacket day in and day out, and when you see the swarthy little man, his black hair shot with gray, and the invariable smile on his small, round face—though his eyes do not always smile with his lips—you ask yourself how such a man lives: what he asks from life and what he gets from it. For you can know Jake Morrow ten years without ever discovering what goes on in his mind. It is a brilliant and clever mind, for there is logic in every

word he utters; and because he is friendly you want to like him, but long after you have left his shop you stop suddenly and begin to think. And it is then that you realize you do not know Jake Morrow at all.

When Johnny and Penny came into the store Ned Borden was there, and he had been making a purchase. Penny nodded to him and to Jake, then she went over and sat down on the newspaper rack; she opened her purse and took out the papers she had brought from Hale's office. Johnny walked up to the counter.

“More questions?” Jake asked.

“Just cigarettes,” said Johnny. “I'd sooner try to pin down an eel than get anything out of you, Jake.”

Ned Borden laughed. “Is he so elusive?”

“Well, usually,” said Johnny,

He looked at the tall, gray-haired banker wondering what he was doing up so late, because the movie hadn't yet broken, and Borden had more than once spoken of his good health in connection with the fact that he got plenty of “regular” sleep; Johnny might have asked Borden about it, if it hadn't been for the fact that the business executive regarded himself in such high esteem that he would have been sure to take offense, and Johnny wasn't in the mood for picking quarrels.

“If you must know,” Ned Borden went on, “Jake is one of our more successful citizens.”

Jake grinned. “What Mr. Borden means is that I once took him for five thousand dollars in a card game.”

Johnny noticed something typical of Borden's attitude toward merchants; he addressed Jake by his first name; while he expected Jake to call him “Mr. Borden.” The banker's local friendships, at best, were more or less condescending in nature. Johnny remembered that Jake had thirty-five thousand dollars in cash in the bank, and that the self-regarded prominence of Ned Borden could brag no more than twenty thousand; he was a little tickled at this situation, for he was sure Jake Morrow regarded Borden as a millionaire.

“Five thousand bucks isn't hay,” Johnny said. “I've known people to commit murders for less.”

“He can't stay off that subject!” Jake said.

Ned Borden adjusted his pince-nez and gave Johnny a friendly smile. “Well, it's the business the boy's in; he can't help it.”

“Me,” Jake said, “I'll stick to selling cigars.”

“And playing poker,” Ned Borden added sharply. He picked up the newspaper he had purchased. “Well, goodnight, gentlemen.”

He made his way out of the store. Johnny turned to Jake. "What's he doing prowling around?"

"You got me," Jake said.

Johnny pushed back his felt hat. "Give me a pack of cigarettes. The usual." He paused. "Say, did you see any more editions of the Mamaroneck Post?"

Jake put the cigarettes on the counter. "No, Smith was in here going half crazy. He said you told him Major Bronson had been bumped off; and when he went to the police station Lance Brown told him it was the governor of Maine. He asked Coroner Miller, and Miller told him the man had come back to life, so they'd had to let him go."

Johnny roared. "So Bob Smith isn't sure, he says, but he suspects something fishy is going on."

Penny looked up suddenly: "Johnny! I've got the lead we want! I think I know who—" She stopped talking suddenly, staring at Jake. She stuffed the papers back in her purse and rose. Jake Morrow had closed his mouth and wasn't smiling any more.

Johnny said: "Come on, Penny. We'll go up to your place and talk it over."

The far off clock chimed midnight as Doctor Hale moved quietly around his laboratory turning down the lights; he left on only one that threw out a soft blend of luminescence and shadow. It reflected against the white table on which stood the racks of test tubes, and penetrated to Billy-the-Monk's cage, where the monkey lay curled in a corner, sound asleep; but the light did not even reach the window, and beyond its shiny glass he could see nothing but blackness. Warily he took off his coat, and dropped it across the table. He started to walk to the window, but changed his mind and slumped down in a straight chair. He stared out at the frightening darkness, and he wondered if its mysterious and incredible black depth were not very like his own sore mind in which there was nothing but chaos and confusion. He sat there limply, no longer trying to consider the things which pressed him to worry and fret. He relaxed his brain in the dangerous void of blankness, and for a moment he was not an entity, he was only a stoop-shouldered figure propped in the support of a wooden chair.

The door opened quietly, and Sandra came in. She had been preparing for bed, and her golden hair was down so that it touched her shoulders; the dim light nickered against her smooth ivory skin, so classic and so beautiful. She wore a satin robe over a thin nightgown, and it fell in soft lines about her figure. She saw Doctor Hale sitting there, and she paused, as though she would change her mind; she stood and looked at him, and then she moved forward, and kneeling, took his hand and kissed it.

Hale shook his head and stared down at her, then he touched her hand. Her face was turned up toward him.

"Sock Drury had courage enough to do that, Jim, and seeing him awakened me." She

rose, and he got up also, but his face was dumb; he did not know what to say to her. She walked to the far end of the room. With her back to him, she talked:

“What good does it do to go on pretending? There is no shred of nobility in it; you only torture yourself. I've wanted to go away a dozen times, but I haven't had the courage. Tomorrow I shall go. It is foolish to stay here and slowly die for something that is breaking your heart.”

“Sandra—you can't leave!”

Her face was in the shadow, but her lips glistened, and her eyes were bright. “I must. And in leaving I'll just shout at you the mockery small boys write on sidewalks: Sandra loves Jim.”

Hale moved forward and took her shoulders. He searched her face. “Darling, I don't know what to say. I only know you can't leave.” He turned and paced past the window. “I can't run this place without you. It wouldn't be my sanitarium any more. You're a part of it, Sandra—”

“If an operating table were destroyed,” she said, “you would buy a new one; and nurses come cheaply these days.”

“I don't mean like that!”

“Then how do you mean it?”

He was miserable. “How can I tell you? How can I put it into words?”

“Do you love Arline?”

“Yes, but—”

“Do you love her with all your heart and soul? Would you commit murder for her?”

Hale's head came up.

“Jim, I'd do anything for you; anything in the world. It's more than love. It's worship.”

“But it's not right, it—” He held her in his arms, and neither said anything more.

He held her, but he was not sure of his thoughts, and he kept hearing the words she had spoken; he kept seeing her, standing there in the shadow, words tumbling from her lips, and he was a little frightened; over and over he remembered her asking: “Would you commit murder for her?”

19

JOHNNY SAT down in Penny's living room chair. “All right, my female Sherlock, what's the big deduction?”

“Laugh,” she said, “and I'll solve the case and take the credit for it.”

He laughed deliberately.

“Okay, bright boy, but remember my threat.” She went into the kitchen and opened the ice box. When she returned she was carrying two bottles of beer, already opened. She gave one to Johnny, and he nursed it preciously.

“You might wait till I give you a glass to pour it into,” she said.

“What I can't understand,” said Johnny, “is how it gets so hot in the summer.”

Penny handed him a glass, then opened the window to its full height.

“The killer,” she said, “is someone at the sanitarium. The motive has something to do with supplies.”

He laughed.

“Will you be serious?”

“I am,” he insisted. “The killer may be someone at the sanitarium, but also may be someone here in Mamaroneck; you got yourself derailed somewhere. I haven't exactly been playing tiddlywinks myself through the past few hours. I've lined up some conclusive ideas. But ramble on anyway, you've got a pretty voice.” He sipped the beer.

She said: “It's someone at the sanitarium. I'm positive of that!”

“Well, I'm just a page boy following around a she-detective.”

“That may be, too. But look at these.” She handed him some invoices. “Hale's sanitarium has been receiving shipments every week big enough to supply half of Bellevue. He probably doesn't use any more than a fraction of this stuff. Does it occur to you, my romantic friend, that somebody might have deliberately changed the figures on these orders: that is, increased them by quite a degree?”

“I see no point.”

“Whoever was doing it had to work with Wilson, who made the deliveries from the main hospital supply company.”

“Yes, yes, go on, darling.”

“What more is there to say?”

“Well, for one, you might tell me what happens to the supplies received on these fake orders? Does Hale hoard them like gold?”

“No, sells them, you idiot!”

“To whom?”

“To perfectly legitimate drug stores. Don't you see how perfect it is? Say it is Hale, for instance. He buys heavy orders of the most demanded drugs, more than his sanitarium could possibly use, and he dilutes these by two-thirds or one-half. Bill Wilson brings him empty boxes and bottles from the supply company with the trade-name printed on them. Hale fills them up. He may mix ordinary flour with a chemical powder compound,

water with a liquid; and then he takes the whole batch out and sells it *wholesale*. The profit is a hundred percent.”

“But *how* can he sell the stuff?”

“Easy, Johnny! You keep forgetting Bill Wilson. Wilson has a regular route for the supply company. No doubt his customers pay by check directly to the company. But say Wilson stops at drug stores and drums up new trade. He tells them to never mind sending a check, he'll make the collections on the first of every month, and they can place new orders when he comes around. And on these people he pawns off the diluted drugs.”

“Seems to me—”

“Sure, cut-rate companies were caught doing that very thing a few years ago. I suppose some cheesy pharmacies still do it in their own laboratories. Which is an object lesson in buying things at half price. But don't you see how working with Bill Wilson gives somebody at the sanitarium a nice little racket?”

“That's the trouble with it.”

“What's the trouble?” she demanded.

“That it's little.”

“I don't follow you.”

“It's *too* little. It's all very plausible; it could be done with the greatest of ease if Bill Wilson is crooked—and I think he is—but there isn't enough profit to make it a worthwhile murder motive. Remember the orders for Hale's sanitarium can't be big, or the supply company would become suspicious. And remember that there must be two of them in it. I'd say offhand that would narrow the profit down to about twenty-five or thirty bucks a week apiece for them.”

“That's plenty.”

“Not enough,” said Johnny, “to launch a series of homicides.”

“I don't agree with you. They might have gotten in trouble and had to commit murder!”

“What? To escape a possible two or three year rap in jail? No, it doesn't fit into our scheme of things at all, my feminine pal. I'm sorry. Do you see?”

She turned angrily. “Johnny, I don't see. Here's a perfect arrangement, and you ride right on by it. What I said about solving the murder still goes! Johnny, if you want to solve a murder case, why don't you give it some thought?”

Johnny got up, and came around behind her; he stuck his chin over her shoulder and kissed her on the cheek.

“When are you going to forget you were jealous of me, and take me back?”

“Jealous of you? You threw me in the creek. You told me it was all over.” She paused. “I swear, I’ve never known *anyone* like you. I’m sick with a cold so you have to go on a case alone. And what do you do? You fall in love with the prettiest girl there. Then you come back and tell me you’re going to marry her. I still remember that sickly look on your face. ‘A terrible and wonderful thing has come to me, Penny,’ you said.”

“I must have been awfully funny.”

“It wasn’t funny to me; it squeezed all the faith out of my soul and made me wonder whose band wagon I was riding on.”

“Well, you can forgive me this once, can’t you?”

“I’ve got to think about it, Johnny.”

“You don’t really like this Bob Smith, do you?”

“Of course not.”

“Honey, that’s the way I like to hear you talk. It puts me right in the frame of mind to solve the murder. First, let’s consider Ned Borden.” He went back and sat down. “I’d like some more beer.” When she brought it, he closed his eyes lazily, and went on: “Ned Borden claims he has a lot of property. Maybe so. I was never one to read the fine print on real estate deeds. But the fact is he’s got only twenty thousand in the bank. Maybe he was trying to swindle Harry Waters or—” He looked up suddenly. “Say, do you know what we’ve got to get? Holy mackerel, why didn’t I think of it sooner? A copy of Harry Waters’ will!”

“I can’t get it till tomorrow.”

“Well, do it. First thing in the morning. I’ve got a good notion that the whole murder solution is going to lie in Harry Waters’ character.” Johnny threw his legs over the chair. “Waters was a queer duck. Boy, he made more people sore by writing nasty things about them than Winchell ever did. But I think he didn’t do it to be malicious. I think he just had a lot of fun fooling around with people’s tempers.”

“Next you’ll be telling me he was kind-hearted.”

“That’s what I’m coming to. I think maybe he was. I’ll bet you my shirt that the whole answer to this thing will depend on that one fact alone. Do you hear me, *cherie*? A little encouragement has given papa amazing insight.”

“Well, go on,” she said, “you do sound good at that.”

“Robert Smith had the best motive. Let’s concede that. With Waters dead, The Star is no more and Smith turns the Mamaroneck Post into a daily and suddenly prospers. But more than the money end of it, it’s always been his dream to be a big newspaperman. Right now he’s at the peak of his idea of success. Smith is a little dense, but he’s been running his sheet as a weekly for two years and he might have finally figured that out, along with a good way to kill Waters. And he might have had Doc Butler swipe Hale’s

formula just to throw a monkey wrench in the works and get us balled up.

“On the other hand,” Johnny continued, “Hale himself is by no means exonerated, and Sandra Stevens is one lulu of a suspect. Emotion runs deep in that gal, and a lot goes on in her beautiful head that you'd never dream of. Arline Carter, I'm in a quandary about; and I'm such a sentimental guy that I'm almost willing to forget that Sock Drury might be mixed up in this diluted drugs business you mentioned, and that he's crossed himself up so many times talking to me. Sock might have had a motive if Waters knew he was in on something phony, and likewise Jake Morrow, who is one sweet little potato if ever I saw one.

“I'm crawling with murder angles, Penny, but Harry Waters' will is going to be the real pay-off. Because that'll tell me whether or not he was the mean cuss people thought him to be, or the kind-hearted guy who was just having fun at everybody else's expense, and didn't realize how miserable he made the lives of others. Are you listening?”

She nodded. “I like you when you're like this, Johnny. Did I really inspire all that?”

“Honest you did,” he vowed.

“Go on with the murder stuff.” Penny beamed.

“Oh, I can't do that. A man doesn't go on making deductions all night. Anyway, I'm primed to solve the case with just one or two more items. I don't have to think about it any more.”

“I may solve this by myself, anyhow,” said Penny. “It would be new, for a change, wouldn't it?”

He nodded. “It'd be so new I'm practically dying thinking about it.”

The telephone rang.

Penny went to answer it, and Johnny ambled out to the kitchen and got himself another bottle of beer. He hammered it against the sink to get the cap off. He worked with it three or four minutes, and bruised his finger. Then he saw that the bottle opener was right in front of him. He swore and grabbed it up, taking the top from the bottle. He had just started to drink the beer when Penny came in.

“It was Sock Drury.”

“Well?”

“My solution's working out,” she said, and there was a strange little smile on her face. “When Sock took the wrecked truck back to his station, he cooled the hot steel with water, then he went through it. There was a compartment in the front which didn't get burned. It was made entirely of metal. In this compartment he found a list of names and addresses.”

“He did?”

“Yes, they are Bill Wilson's own private customers.”

“So what?”

“So Sock thinks you ought to drive around with him to a couple of the places and check up. Then you'd be sure; and you'd pick up evidence galore.”

“So now I chase small details?”

“Well, it has to do with what's happening around here, doesn't it?”

Johnny finished the beer. “All right. I'll go with him. But it's a dirty shame, that's all. Just work, no play.” He walked into the other room. “I thought of another guy who might have committed the murders, though I don't know any reason.”

“Who?”

“Coroner Miller,” Johnny said.

20

SOCK DRURY drove a ten-year-old coupe, and as it rattled past the Post Office, Johnny thought it was a terrible thing to awaken the citizens with such a clatter of noise. The whole car shuddered like a load of tin cans every time they hit a bump; but Sock had the motor tuned up so that it purred, and Sock who thought along mechanical lines was not apt to consider a great deal more in a machine than its motor.

“I can see one of Arline's reasons for neglecting you,” Johnny said.

The husky red head gripped the wheel, but he glanced over. “What do you mean?”

“This chariot.”

“If people like me, they'll like my crate.”

“I never heard of a post deb who liked to ride around in a junk heap.” They went over another bump and Johnny groaned. “That's it, Sock! there's nothing essentially wrong with you, nor in the fact that you run a gas station. At least you own it. You've got a good income. It's your own opinion of your station in life. For cat's sake, this is America, and we're all alike.”

“What are you selling?”

“I'm trying to tell you that you don't have to go around like you had just got off a California fruit train. A guy like you can afford a decent car, and some spiffy clothes if he wanted. If you're in love with a woman you've got to make *some* concession to her.”

“Well, I guess you should know.”

“Never mind the cracks.”

Sock was watching through the windshield. “You know, Johnny, you may be right. I've been kind of wearing a chip on my shoulder ever since I left college. All of my friends

went back to palatial homes, or into Wall Street offices, and here I was, the bright-haired grid hero, pumping gas for fifteen dollars a week. I got bitter about it, and even when I bought my own station and started making dough, I guess I just let myself be sloppy.”

“It wasn't sloppy, you just didn't give a damn.”

“That's it.”

They drove swiftly up Halstead Avenue, the car shaking as if with palsy as they skittered on and off the no longer used street car tracks. Johnny sat rigidly waiting for the car to shudder through the next earthquake. It was almost one in the morning, and everything was closed down; there was no traffic on Halstead.

“So you think this truck driver had a personal route?”

“Well, I told Penny about the list, and she said it looked that way.”

“Will these places be open this time of night?”

Sock nodded. “The first one is a drug store up in Harrison that never closes.”

Sock Drury drove in silence. Mamaroneck fell behind them and Halstead Avenue was bleak and foreboding; the glistening rails of train tracks were at their right, and a barren thicket of trees to the left. The pale white moon rolled loftily through the sky, and the stars shone down. Johnny heard crickets, and the rattle of the car.

“How come your sudden interest in helping out?” Johnny asked.

“Oh, I don't know.”

“You were kind of sore at me last night.”

“Maybe I'm still sore. Maybe I brought you out here to kill you.”

Johnny looked quickly at Sock's intensely sober face. He laughed hollowly.

“Maybe I don't like you butting into my affairs,” Sock went on.

“Maybe that's my business,” Johnny countered.

“Then it's a tough business, isn't it?”

“This is a fine background for murder,” Johnny said, “you can stop anywhere along here that you want.”

“I always thought detectives put up a fight.”

“They do,” Johnny said quickly.

“You let yourself in for this, of course,” Sock continued, “why'd you come along with me?”

“Because I'd more or less exonerated you from suspicion. I'm not infallible, though.”

Sock grinned. “That's what I wanted to find out. If you still thought I was a murderer.

I'm sorry about last night, Johnny. I lost my temper.”

Johnny let out his breath, and the car crashed over a hole in the road. Johnny glanced at Sock curiously and wondered why he'd played the little game he had just concluded; he saw no expression on the red head's tight, leathery face, nor did he know now, in this darkness, whether he trusted those burning eyes. He changed the subject.

“Penny's kind of hepped on this business she thinks people are engaged in: that is, diluting legitimate drugs.”

“There's no doubt but what something like that's going on, is there?” Sock asked.

“No, no doubt; and whoever is in it besides Bill Wilson must be desperate by now.”

They were coming into Harrison, and there were signal lights on the main corner. The huge railroad station stood at the left, and the town hall to the right. Sock drove down another block and stopped in front of a drug store, the window of which was misty with steam. Johnny climbed out.

“I won't be a minute.”

He walked in, and back to the pharmacy department. A young man in a blue smock came out presently. Johnny opened his hand and showed him the badge.

“Yes, sir? What is it?”

“You been getting supplies from a fellow by the name of Bill Wilson?”

“Not that I know of. We get all our stuff from the general hospital supply service. The truck comes around about twice a month.”

“Is the fellow who drives it a kid about twenty, with blonde hair?”

The pharmacist nodded.

“How do you pay for the stuff?”

“Why, this fellow collects it himself. He—”

“Thanks,” said Johnny, and he turned on his heel and walked out. The pharmacist stood back with gaping jaw.

Johnny climbed into the car, and Sock started up.

“Penny hit the nail on the head,” he said, “maybe we'd better go back to the sanitarium. I've changed my mind about letting this angle slide any longer. I've got to get the other person who is involved in it.” He stuck a cigarette in his mouth, and added: “It may be somewhat of a job. To get him shackled, I mean.”

“You mean it may be *dangerous*?”

“Plenty!”

Sock sucked in his breath. “Lord. I—”

“What's the matter?”

“Why—when I called Penny about finding the list, she told me to keep you out for about an hour. I swear I thought it was all right. She said she was going to the sanitarium!”

“She *what?*”

“She said she'd promised to beat you to the draw, and that she was going to make the arrest herself!”

21

IT WAS two o'clock in the morning, and Penny did not know if she had allowed enthusiasm to override good sense. When she had borrowed a car and started for the sanitarium it had seemed to be a very good idea, for she had wanted, in one way or another, to get back at Johnny. And she had told herself that if the worst came she could always use a gun. A gun was an equalizer, and strength made no difference.

She wondered now.

She had stopped the car on the road and was moving toward the sanitarium on foot. She had brought only the small automatic which she held, barrel down, at her side; the single light showing from the sanitarium was a bleak one far up in the third floor hall; the rest was darkness, ugly and disturbing. Wind drifted in across the Sound, shaking the windows and the leaves on the trees; and somewhere a lone cricket scraped its legs together; the concert of the solitary insect was like the trebling undertone of terror, and somehow it seemed to grow louder and louder in her ears. Her heartbeat was a pendulum of fear; once she thought she heard a sound behind her, and she whirled, to see a rabbit scamper away; but the rabbit paused and its eyes glistened through the darkness. A gust of wind rustled in the weeds, and she glanced toward it, for it sounded as though someone was crawling there, moving toward her. She was shivering now. She walked forward once more.

She felt she knew the identity of the murderer, but there was a question in her mind if she hadn't been a fool to try and beat Johnny to the draw.

Suddenly she stopped; the section of the road on which she stood seemed to be familiar, though she could not bring the full memory of it back. Then with a shudder, she remembered: Jean Daniels, lying sprawled here, her arms outstretched, and her head split open. Penny hurried toward the hospital. She took a path around the building, for she intended to come in through the delivery entrance. She did not know why, but it seemed safer to do this.

She broke through weeds which scraped against her bare legs, and the sound of her movements seemed intensified, so that she thought everyone in the sanitarium must have heard by now. She shivered against the building, waiting for a noise inside that would indicate clumsy footsteps had betrayed the secrecy of her entrance. But there was no

sound. She started again.

She reached the back door and quietly opened it. She knew where the switch was located and she went to it, groping through the darkness; but she did not turn it up; she just stood there, so that if there should be any sign of another being here in the basement she could flood the room with light. But there was no noise. Empty and electric silence. It closed in upon her. She left the switch and moved toward the stairway. Here she stopped dead still. She listened. She was sure she heard the heavy breathing of a man.

She stood petrified. She heard the sound very audibly now, but she did not know from which direction it came. She walked back toward the light switch, but her foot caught in a box, and she crashed downward. The echo resounded like thunder against the four cement walls.

Tremblingly, she climbed to her feet, and turned to face the stairway, though she could not be sure the sound had come from here. She held the gun tightly. She didn't dare go back and try to make the switch now. She was too unsure of her footing. She stood there, very still; there was only the breathing, and then, a low, horrible whine floated toward her. She wanted to scream. It was like no sound she had ever heard.

It came again, but this time the whine rose in volume; it scaled upward, higher and higher, and there seemed to be no end to it; it kept going upward, that whine, until it broke into a terrible shrill crescendo that was the most awful scream she had ever heard. The scream broke suddenly into laughter. There was a clatter on the stairs.

Penny leaped back. She groped along the wall for the lights, then she turned them up.

Lord Carlin stood at the bottom of the steps; his legs were spread for balance, and he was weaving. His eyes were bloodshot-red, and his yellow walrus mustache drooped. He was a giant standing there, a big dumb giant, his face blank, and his jaw gaping. He was staring directly at her. Yet he kept weaving. He breathed heavily. He was drunk. He just stood there staring. She held the gun on him. Her tongue struggled within her mouth to find words.

“Stand where you are; you're under arrest.” But she was not sure if she spoke aloud.

Lord Carlin whined; that terrible, throaty whine, which scaled up and up until Penny thought it would burst in her ear drums. He was like a beast. And there seemed to be no more sanity in his eyes than in the eyes of a madman. He broke the scream into laughter. He wiped his mustached mouth. He stumbled off the bottom step and moved toward her.

“Stay back.”

He kept moving forward, his eyes never once leaving her face; there was still nothing but a complete blankness on his countenance. He was like a machine which has been made of flesh and bones and built on giant dimensions.

Penny put her back to the wall.

“Don't come any closer.”

Lord Carlin kept coming toward her. Penny fired. The shot rang out. Carlin's shoulder spurted blood, and the blood welled and dripped down across his chest. He stopped and touched it with his fingers. He stared at it, like a little child, and then he tasted it. He touched the blood and tasted it for a second time. Penny stood with her back pressed to the wall watching him.

Presently he looked up at her, smiling like a big dumb dog; and then the smile dropped away, and the corners of his mouth turned down, as though his feelings were hurt; he glanced at his wound, then quickly once more to Penny.

This time he did not walk toward her. He rushed headlong, his face twisted with sudden rage. Penny screamed and fired the gun. She fired a third time.

The impact of the bullets straightened Lord Carlin and pushed him back. Blood poured from his hip, and a spot of blood grew in the vicinity of his stomach. He held his stomach.

Then all at once he collapsed.

Penny's eyes followed the fall of his body, and remained on it; Carlin no longer moved; he did not even twitch. He lay there, warm and bleeding. Penny's gun hand slumped; the weapon dropped to her side. She could not take her eyes off the man. Penny thought she had been clever, but she talked a better capture than any she could demonstrate. She wanted to turn the gun on herself. She was sick with nausea and horror. She did not want to hurt anyone, no matter what he had done to others. Her eyes were feverish and hot and they were wet, watching the blood that came out of Lord Carlin, and then all at once she dropped to her knees, and she said aloud:

“Our Father, Who Art in Heaven....”

She choked with a dry sobbing, and crawled to the body. She held her hand over one of the wounds, and sat there, dazed and sick. The door opened and Doctor Hale rushed down, followed by Sandra.

Penny sat outside the operating room on the third floor. Her face was very pale, and there was on it a sheen of sweat; her hair was disheveled, and her white linen dress was spotted with blood. She sat limply, and you would not have thought she was alive. There was the sound of the elevator coming up, then the door opened and Johnny and Sock Drury stepped out. Johnny had a gun in his hand, and Sock held a big monkey wrench. Penny's sick eyes came up and no expression flickered in them.

“Penny, are you hurt?”

“No,” she said. Her voice was bleak and cold.

“But the blood? What happened?”

“Lord Carlin.”

“He was running the little supplies racket with Bill Wilson the truck driver, but—”

“He was the murderer, wasn't he?”

“No, Penny. He had nothing to do with the murders.”

A dry cough racked her throat. “I thought you didn't even know he was behind the supplies racket. I thought—”

“It couldn't have been anyone but him. That was perfectly obvious. As caretaker, as the man who received deliveries, and took care of the order slips and invoices, who else could it have been? But I had intended to hold out for the bigger game.”

“I thought I was—a detective,” she smiled emptily. “Now look what I've done.”

“What?”

The door opened and Hale came out. He was garbed entirely in white, with a mask of gauze over his nose and mouth. He removed it, letting it dangle.

“Hell live,” he said. “I removed two bullets; the one that scratched his hip did not remain in him. I don't think there'll be any danger of gangrene. The wounds, fortunately, were not in vital spots.”

Penny was looking up. “Was he—intoxicated?”

“Yes, but more, he must have been under a terrible strain which abnormally stimulated his system.”

Johnny's voice was quiet; he shoved the gun back in the holster. “Can I talk to him?”

Hale shifted his eyes to Johnny. “I think so. Ordinarily I wouldn't permit it, but I realize you are working against time to bring a murderer to light, and if Lord Carlin can help you in any way—” He paused. “I have just given him a little morphine. He'll be conscious for several minutes. Do you want to come in?”

“I'll stay here,” Penny said, and slumped back in the chair.

Johnny followed Hale into the operating room. The doctor handed him a white apron which he slipped on. Sandra was standing across the room entirely in white, wearing rubber gloves. Hale pushed back a tray of instruments which hung in a rack over the prostrate form of Carlin and Johnny moved up beside the New Englander. Lord Carlin's eyes had just begun to flutter. They opened then, and they seemed to clear.

“Can you see me?” Johnny asked softly.

“Yes.”

“Do you know what happened to you?”

“Not quite,” Carlin whispered.

“You were arrested.”

Lord Carlin's eyes flickered. “It is a relief more than anything else. It is a relief.”

“You were running a minor racket with Bill Wilson, the truck driver, weren't you?”

“Yes.”

“We're acquainted with the details. It won't be necessary to use up your strength explaining them. But tell me this. Did you and Wilson deliberately plan to wreck my car?”

The big man's eyes fluttered. “Oh, we were desperate, chappie. Desperate.... Everything was going all right; I'm pretty well booked on chemistry, and I diluted the stuff without trouble, and Bill sold it. Then this murder business came along and butted into what we were doing. I was crazy with fear. Bill didn't know anything about it, and he came with the regular load of stuff, the empty bottles and all, and delivered it while I was upstairs. When I came down he had it all unloaded. It was perfect evidence against us. I told him that an investigation was going on around here and that he'd have to get rid of the stuff. But just then we saw you coming. We figured it was too late to—”

“Then what?”

“Bill said: 'I'll sideswipe his bumper or fender or something and get him into an argument; you cart the stuff out and throw it into the Sound....' He didn't mean it to be such a bad wreck. I guess maybe your headlights *did* throw him off a little. He just wanted to get your fender and to stall you in argument till I could get rid of the stuff—”

“I think we'd better leave him now,” Hale said, looking down into Carlin's white face.

“Sure.”

“Chappie,” Carlin gasped, “you've got to believe me, I ain't a man that's got a bad streak in him; and Bill Wilson's only a kid who wanted to pick up a few dollars. We didn't hurt anybody, not very much at least; only after that wreck the whole thing got on my nerves and I kept drinking.... I guess I was nearly crazy, I was so desperate and scared, I—”

“You don't know anything about the murders?”

“Nothing, chappie. Nothing at all.” Lord Carlin choked, and his eyes closed.

“It's better that he sleep now,” Hale said to Sandra.

“Yes, doctor.” Sandra was efficiency again; she was a machine primed to obey his least command; there wasn't a flicker of emotion in her voice or on her face.

Johnny took off the white smock and returned to the hall. Penny had not moved, but Sock Drury was missing.

“Where'd Drury go?”

“Where do you suppose?”

“Arline Carter's room?”

“Yes.... Arline is conscious now.”

Doctor Hale seemed surprised, and strode down to Arline's room. He entered, but a moment later came backing out, as though he were stunned. He stood with his back to Johnny, still looking into the room through the open door. Johnny didn't know what it was Hale saw.

Presently Sock came out. His face was greasy, and he still held the wrench in his hand. He looked up at Doctor Hale, then he went on.

“Got a cigarette, Johnny, keed?” he asked.

Johnny handed him a cigarette, and lit one too.

Just then Sandra appeared at the door of the operating room.

“Mr. West, come here quickly!”

Johnny followed her into the room. She went at once to the closed window. “I just happened to be standing here,” she explained, “waiting for Lord Carlin's respiration to —” She paused. “Look!” She pointed toward the road.

“Turn off the light,” Johnny said.

She turned it off, and he had a clear view of the road. He had seen movement, but there was only pale moonlight, and now he could make out nothing. He watched another moment. Gradually, his eyes focused on the shape of a man crouching near the fender of Sock Drury's car. The man stood up and began to move quickly forward. His body was silhouetted for a brief moment, and in that second Johnny saw a hand, and the shadow of a gun.

“Lights, Sandra,” he ordered.

He moved quickly out of the operating room, and for the stairway.

He spoke to no one.

22

THE BRIEF excitement which had fluttered up through him upon hearing Lord Carlin's confession shattered now in the light of the greater thing which lay ahead. Lord Carlin had been a small, separate pawn caught in the whirling momentum of murder; the supplies racket was simply a minor offshoot in the roaring vortex that dropped behind in a killer's wake, and the real danger, perpetrated by the genuine intelligence with which Johnny had to cope, lay like a curtain before him. He had yet to pull it back to come upon the greater horror which had caused the murders of two men and one woman.

He hurried down the steps thinking of this, and forgetting poor dishonest Carlin and the trouble a little crime had brought him. Johnny's hand slipped back and drew out the gun

once more. He had not taken the elevator because he did not want the man who had just now entered the sanitarium to know that he was coming. He wondered grimly if by chance (so few things happen by chance on a case) he was about to intercept the killer on his way to commit another murder.

On the second floor Johnny paused and caught his breath, then he sat down on the steps and quickly removed both of his shoes. He rose, gripping the police .38. His feet made no sound on the cement floor. He started down the stairway to the main floor. He came slowly, hugging the bannister all the way, trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness, and listening for sound.

The first noise he heard was that of shoes. The man was moving toward the stairway on tiptoes, and being as quiet as he could possibly be; but he might as well have played a bass drum. Johnny stood with his back to the wall, breathing softly. He was at the bottom of the stairs now, and he stood in the protection the wall here gave him. He spoke out sharply.

“All right, mister. Drop the gun!”

There was silence.

Johnny could not distinguish the other at all, and now there was no longer the sound of shoes. “I can see you clearly,” Johnny said. “I’ll give you three seconds to drop the gun. Then I start shooting.”

There was a clatter of metal hitting the cement.

“Now walk forward. Don’t try to pick the gun up. I’m watching you.”

The sound of the shoes moved forward. They kept walking, as far as the stairway, and Johnny could make out the form of a man; he crept an inch or two closer to see if the intruder had retrieved his gun. But there was no weapon.

Johnny said: “Put your wrists behind you.”

He stepped up to the man, grasped the trembling wrists and snapped on handcuffs. He jabbed the police .38 into the small of the man’s back.

“Turn around and walk up those stairs.”

The man was shaking terribly, but he obeyed. They went up both flights of stairs like this, and Johnny retrieved his shoes on the way. At last he opened the doorway onto the lighted third floor hall.

Sock Drury stared, and Penny was gazing intently. Sandra stood at a room door and watched.

Johnny hauled the man around and looked up at him.

It was Robert Smith.

“Gosh, I’m glad that it was you, Johnny,” he said.

Johnny holstered his gun. "Exactly what goes on, Smith?"

Smith smiled emptily. "I—I heard another murder had taken place up here, and I came to investigate. You see—I've got the office open all night, and my printer has the press waiting for the next edition. I thought I could get out an early morning scoop."

"On what?"

"Well, I—I heard there had been a car accident up here."

"Oh, you finally found out. That happened hours ago." Johnny looked the bulky news editor up and down. "You're lying like hell, Smith; you must have known about the accident long before this. They towed the wreck right through town, and all the cops knew what had happened."

"Well, I didn't have any details, and no news to print at all, I—" He was sweating; he looked very uncomfortable with his arms cuffed behind him. "A newspaperman has to take chances," he went on. "Everything so far has revolved around this sanitarium, so I thought I'd come up and see what else I could find out. Coroner Miller won't give me information any more, and everybody in town knows what's happening except me. *Me*, the editor!"

"What about the gun?"

Smith was white. "You don't think I wanted to take a chance of running into a killer *unarmed*, do you?"

Johnny said: "You play the Little Bo Peep act pretty well; you actually sound as dumb as you look. But your alibis are like last Friday's fish. They're putrid with odor."

"Honest to God, Johnny—"

"I remember you broke into Penny's house the same way. You get around, I'll give you that."

"I just wanted to get news. I was doing pretty good with my new daily, getting scoops and selling out the whole of Westchester; a couple of New York sheets were paying me for advance coverage on the latest events. I was going like a house on fire, then you closed up all my sources, and had me running in circles. That's why I came up here. I had to find out what was going on."

"You can ask the turnkey from now on," Johnny said.

"The who?"

"Your cell keeper."

"You can't put me in jail!"

"That's what the boys in Sing Sing keep saying." Johnny turned. "Sock, think you can take this guy down to headquarters for me?"

“It'll be a pleasure,” Sock said.

Johnny was ready to break the case; it was something he felt in his bones. You get enough facts, you observe the character of people, because it was character which was important, nothing else; and then suddenly little things which have been before you from the beginning fit together and tell you what you want to know. It is like an intricate pattern on china which has been broken in small pieces, and suddenly you have it all put together again. The pieces have always been there to fit, and it is but a job matching them.

There were many things: a cancelled bank book found in the pocket of the corpse; a punchboard slip; a withdrawal of money; a queer quirk of character; an ability to win at poker; old real estate projects; and the mystery of a stolen formula. There were hatreds, old and new; desires, great and small; there was greed and lust. It all came under murder's spotlight, and you had but to sort it.

But before he broke the case there were a few things Johnny had to settle here at the sanitarium, so there would be no hitches later: you did not only bring in a murderer; you brought in the proof that sent him to the electric chair.

He wanted to get right to work, so that things could be done quickly, but he saw Penny, dejected and ashamed, though what she had done any cop might have been proud to do. Johnny went over and sat down beside her.

“Come on, honey; don't take it so hard.”

“I didn't know what it was like, Johnny.”

“I know you didn't.”

“I don't want to be smart at the price of someone's misery.”

“Well, he had to be apprehended. He was in an awful state, poor fellow. He doesn't even remember what happened. He doesn't know it was you; that it was a woman who shot him. And he doesn't care much. Lord Carlin's glad he's arrested, and it's all over.”

“But—it was so horrible.”

He took her in his arms, and she shuddered.

“All I want to do,” she went on, “is go home and take a bath, so that I'll be clean of this. I can't think, or be human, until I've done that.”

“All right. In just a little while I'll take you home.”

“What time is it, Johnny?”

“Three in the morning.”

“I'll sit here and wait for you,” she said.

Johnny left her. He went into the laboratory and had a long talk with Doctor Hale. He kept watching the medical man, and Hale seemed at ease, as though he were now more amused with Johnny than anything else. But Hale drank heavily. He showed no effects from the alcohol, although he downed pony after pony of whiskey. Once he strode down to Billy-the-Monk's cage and pounded on the screen. Billy awoke with a jump, then set up a delighted squeal; he held the ear with the mastoid to one side and blinked. Hale left the monkey and strode around to his chemical table. He was a changed man. Something had come over him. Johnny didn't know what it was.

"I expect the Medical Association will call and report on my formula in the morning," he said.

"You aren't afraid of their verdict?"

Hale shook his head. "Since we know the samples the Armin Company inspected were diluted, I am confident that the compound the Association makes up will prove to be all I have claimed it to be."

"On the other hand," Johnny said slowly, "your anti-strep cure may be no more than poison."

Hale whirled, and his voice was harsh. "Don't talk like that!"

Johnny regarded him curiously. He had spent more than half an hour in the laboratory, but when he came out Penny was still seated. She got to her feet.

"I guess I haven't been much of a help this past hour," she said. "Did you get everything you wanted, Johnny?"

He nodded. "And I've got news."

Her eyes seemed brighter. "What?"

"I'm going to complete the evidence in another few hours; and we'll break the case before noon." He dropped his voice as they got into the elevator and closed the door. "I'm already fairly sure of the killer's identity; the only thing I'm waiting to see is Waters' will. Then we go to town."

The elevator stopped on the main floor, and Johnny pushed back the door.

Sock Drury stood there propped against the wall. He looked groggy.

"What's this?"

"That damned Smith," Sock said thickly. "He asked me to fix his shoe laces. I told him I wouldn't, and on the way to the car what does he do but fall flat on his face. When he got up he asked me again if I wouldn't tie his laces for him. He was cuffed, so he couldn't do it himself."

"So?"

"So sap Drury reached down to tie them, and the next thing I knew there was a knee

under my chin. Right on the button. I don't know how long I was lying out there on the road.”

“What about Smith?”

“That's what I want to know,” Sock Drury said. “What about him?”

23

JOHNNY HAD been seated at Penny's dining room table for several hours, and now when the sun came up and shone through the window, the papers spread out before him rattled dryly, and the half empty cup of coffee was cold at his elbow; he was still writing very rapidly, his eyes on the work. His good-looking young face was intent, and because he was absorbed in what he was doing, fatigue hadn't yet broken on his countenance. The tenseness of a close finish had preserved him.

The front door opened and closed, and Lance Brown came in lugging a typewriter.

“This is the decrepit Underwood which Waters used, Johnny,” he said. “Where do you want it?”

“Just set it there on the table.”

Brown put the heavy machine down. “Anything else?”

“You checked with the post office?”

“Yes; they'll have a man here within a few minutes.”

“I guess that does it then. Stand by at headquarters.”

Lance Brown started out.

Johnny looked up. “By the way...”

Brown paused.

“Seen anything of Robert Smith yet?”

“No. But he got instructions to his office somehow. There's a morning edition of the paper out.”

“The pay-off this morning will bring him from his hole,” Johnny said.

Lance Brown looked curious. “Do you suspect him?”

“Why not?”

Brown departed, and Johnny stretched back in the chair; he reached over and snapped on the radio. Then he returned to his work. He kept concentrating on the page, but there was a rhythmic monotony slowing him down; there was a timed drone beating against him, disrupting his very existence. At last he threw down the pencil and looked around. Then suddenly he stared at the radio.

“All right now. Bend down. One, two; one, two; one, two; arms out now... that's it... One, two; one...”

Johnny muttered softly, and turned it off.

The front door opened and closed again, and Penny came in.

She looked fresh and lovely, garbed in a blue silk dress.

“I had an awful time,” she said, “and I didn't get the will!”

“You didn't!”

“No. But I read it, which is just as good.”

“Well?”

“The money was left mostly to charity. And good charities, at that; there were several personal bequests to merchants in town, one of them being Jake Morrow. Harry Waters had about forty thousand dollars, and all of his *enemies* seemed to come in for a little share of it.”

Johnny's eyes were bright. “Swell. That's the way I figured. Go on.”

“There was one name prominently missing, though. Robert Smith.”

“Waters was a very sane man,” Johnny said.

“And human,” Penny agreed. “There was an added amount not covered in the will which he left to his lawyer to dispose to 'worthy charity' as he saw fit.”

Johnny was on his feet, shaking a pencil at Penny. “All right. And if Waters had been as mean as people thought him, he could have tied the dough up in some project like a perpetual fund for starving cats; or the erection of a monument to himself. Mean men the world around have left their fortunes to build memories to the hatred they stirred up. But Waters, in the showdown, reacted just the opposite. Do you follow me?”

“Well, I see that underneath all of his barbed cynicism he had a kind heart, if that's what you mean.”

“Exactly. He rode the townspeople in *The Star* only because it gave him enjoyment. If he hurt them, he always meant some day to tell them that it was just a joke.”

“It was a rather sour sense of humor, I think,” Penny said.

“That may be true. But for the purpose of solving his murder it gives us a perfect picture. Look at it yourself, remembering the one thing we didn't know at the time: what his reaction was apt to be. Doctor Hale, ruined through Waters' publicity, crushed and embittered, drew the last of his money from the bank, then went to Waters' office and for the first time spoke out the feelings that were in his heart. He ranted against Waters, and threw the cancelled bankbook into his face.” Johnny paused. “The book was found in Waters' pocket. Combine these facts with the desires and character of one of the persons

involved in this case, and the answer must be obvious.”

She nodded.

Johnny sat down at the typewriter which had been taken from Waters' office. “I'm writing a letter on this, which will seem to have been written by Waters himself prior to death. You'll have to forge his signature at the bottom of it. The post office will cancel the envelope and mark it 'Unintentionally delayed'; then immediately have it delivered to Doctor Hale.”

“And the letter's purpose?”

“To bring the murderer out into the open,” he said.

He began to type, and Penny stood at his shoulder and watched.

It was ten minutes to nine, and Robert Smith, his face unshaven, and dark lines under his eyes, crept up to the back door of his newspaper office; he shot a quick glance up and down, then opened the door and went in. His head came up, and he stared. A uniformed cop had been waiting there for him....

Sock Drury sat in the gasoline station office, but he heard the sound of a car's horn, and got to his feet. He glanced through the window to see who it was, then he moved through the door and approached the car....

Jake Morrow pulled up in front of his store in his big car. He climbed out and quickly crossed the sidewalk. He was late in arriving, but one of the clerks had already opened up. Jake entered the store, said a brief “Good morning,” and slipped on his gray smock....

Ned Borden sat in his richly appointed office talking on the telephone; just outside there was the clatter of his busy typist. The banker hung up the phone, carefully took his pince-nez off his nose and let it dangle by the black ribbon. Presently he got to his feet....

Arline Carter climbed out of her bed, white and trembling still, but feeling much better. She walked barefoot to the mirror and stared into it. She must hurry and get dressed. She didn't want anyone to see her looking quite so badly....

Sandra Stevens, garbed in her stiffly starched white uniform, stood at the window in her own small room; her arms were folded, and she stared out over the Sound. Her beautiful face was without expression, yet there was a light in her eyes which glowed with intensity....

Coroner Miller sat in the small undertaking parlor he ran on the side, basking quite comfortably in the sunshine that streamed through his darkly curtained windows. But he stirred now. The postman was at the door, dumping in the usual morning mail. “Advertisements from cemeteries,” he muttered, “nothing but cemeteries. Is that what the farmers are doing with their land?” He walked to the door and picked up the mail....

The minutes sped with incredible swiftness.

Doctor Jim Hale moved up and down in his laboratory with a letter clutched tightly in his hand. The telephone rang, and he hurried to answer it.

“Thank you very much,” he said, “thank you, doctor. Something very urgent is about to happen here and I haven't the opportunity to talk, but I shall call you back.”

He hung up and looked around.

The laboratory door was opening. A man stepped inside. He was an older, well dressed man, who wore a pearl gray hat that he now took from his head. “So sorry if I've intruded,” he said. “But I got your call and hurried right over to discuss that letter with you. There has been, I am sure, some grievous mistake.” He moved closer. “Would you care to let me see the letter?” He stood just opposite the white table on which were racks of test tubes, and small blue flames which burned brightly. He smiled, and Doctor Hale took a step forward, with the letter extended.

But Hale stopped, and withdrew his hand. “I'm sorry, Mr. Borden. I think I'd rather hold on to the letter myself.”

“But, young man, that's preposterous. You say it contains information of vital importance?”

“Yes.”

“And it is from Harry Waters, but was late in arriving here?”

“That is right.”

Ned Borden smiled tolerantly. “How can I be sure the letter is really from Mr. Waters unless I see it? I would, of course, know Waters' signature in an instant.”

“It's from him all right,” Hale said, and he opened the already torn envelope. “I'll read it to you. It says in effect that Waters had not realized the grave thing he had done to my career, and the blow he had delivered against medicine in general by hurting me so that I couldn't continue my experiments. He had meant it all in the manner of a sardonic joke, and he had not guessed that my patients and my business had left me simply because of his newspaper attacks.”

“Ah, yes, but the point?”

“It says,” Hale continued, “that he has arranged with you to give me a loan of five thousand dollars out of his personal account to re-establish my credit and to help put the sanitarium on a sound basis once more. And that also, he would retract the statements he had made in *The Star*.”

“That would have been a quite generous bestowal,” Ned Borden said, “if it were not that the letter is a fraud.”

“I don't think that it is. Isn't it true that five thousand dollars was drawn from Waters' account the day this letter was written?”

“Why—”

“Five thousand which was never accounted for?”

“Are you presuming I would commit a murder to gain five thousand dollars?”

“Not at all. Motives aren't for me to deal with. That's up to Johnny West.”

“You're going to give the letter to him?”

“Of course.”

Borden's hand slipped into his pocket and reappeared holding a gun. “I think not,” he said quietly. “I think I'll take the letter now if you don't mind. Just put it on the edge of the table, then step backward.”

Hale stared into the older man's grim face. The gun pointed unwaveringly.

“Why, I—sure, if you—”

“Put it down, please.”

Hale placed the letter on the edge of the table, and nervously backed up; but in moving, his hand had not cleared the surface of the table and it clumsily crashed against one of the test tubes. Hale leaped back then, and a cloud of white smoke rose.

Ned Borden coughed. He was blinded. He put his hands to his face, as though his skin were burning; the gun crashed to the floor. Ned Borden stumbled backward, clawing at his face.

But the fumes evaporated in an instant.

Borden's vision was restored, his throat was cleared; the burning of his skin went away. He stared.

Hale had picked up the gun.

The door behind Borden was opening, and Johnny West moved into the room. Penny Lane and Lance Brown were with him. Johnny gracefully extended a shiny pair of handcuffs.

“Mr. Borden?”

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BOTH LANCE Brown and Doctor Hale stood armed; Penny Lane had ready a shorthand book and pencil. But Borden backed away from the handcuffs; he crashed into the white rat cage. Billy-the-Monk began to scream, and the old man stared toward the cage as though he thought something unearthly had come to life. His gaze slowly returned to Johnny. Borden had begun to sweat. The light in his eyes was desperate.

“You're not going to arrest me?” he asked, with almost incredulous innocence.

The door opened and Sandra entered.

“I think so,” said Johnny. “I think it'll be best that way.”

“But why?”

“Must we go all through it?” asked Johnny.

“If you think I committed murder—if you think a man of my prestige would perpetrate a crime of such a nature for a trifling sum like five thousand dollars—” His heart must have been laboring very hard, for he could scarcely get his breath. “Or that I would have poisoned chocolates sitting on my desk waiting to feed to people, when such candy could only be made by a man with medical knowledge—”

“All right,” said Johnny, “let's review the facts. Your one flimsy protest is that five thousand dollars, the withdrawal slip for which you meant to get back in your possession the moment it had gone through regular channels. Of course you didn't commit murder for five thousand dollars—”

“Well—well, then.”

“It was for a great deal more,” Johnny continued. “All of the factors which contributed to murder, and which in the beginning you could not have possibly foreseen, go back to ancient history. Each year projects added momentum to your scheme, and all of the motives combined at last into one great ball that exploded in the terrible climax which began with Harry Waters' death.”

“When we investigate murder, Penny and I try to go beyond the surface,” Johnny went on. “Now, several years ago your daughter was badly hurt in an automobile accident. She was taken to Bellevue and given an emergency operation. You have contended the operation done by the staff doctor who happened to be on duty, was bungled. There was nothing you could do about it at the time. Later, as it happened, Doctor Hale, that same doctor, came to Mamaroneck. You saw what you believed was a chance to ruin him, and at the same time to gain from it a great personal fortune.”

“How utterly—”

“In the plan to gain the fortune, I imagine that your original motive of hatred for a bungled operation must have been nearly forgotten, so that if there were any question as to whether it *was* Hale who operated on your daughter at the time, it no longer mattered to you. You were out to ruin him professionally, and to drive him from this sanitarium.”

“And in what manner did I attempt that?”

Johnny shoved back his felt hat, and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. “Harry Waters was your very good friend. He was a man whose prestige was the only one in town most nearly like yours. You knew Waters loved to tear people apart in his paper. You kept driving at Waters that Doctor Hale was killing people with his anti-strep compound. You dug out Hale's records, and pointed only to those cases where the patient had died. In no

instance had it been Hale's fault, nor the fault of his compound; but Harry Waters who cared more for the rhythm of words than he did actual fact, didn't bother to check. You convinced him at last that Hale was an unintentional murderer, and Waters leaped upon Hale in issue after issue of *The Star* in all the eloquence of his believed justified wrath.

“Waters did the work that you could have never done. He emptied Hale's sanitarium, he disturbed his reputation; he cast doubt upon his integrity. Meanwhile, Mr. Borden, you undermined and sabotaged Hale as much as you possibly could in your way, which was the matter of credit. You held creditors meetings; once Hale's account was wiped out, you got the board of creditors to vote that he had thirty days in which to either pay his bills, or sacrifice the sanitarium.”

“Just what do you presume my motive was for doing this?” Borden asked angrily.

“You told me yourself,” Johnny replied. “You wanted to build a yacht club on this site. You believed there would be a fortune in it. But the town committee wouldn't appropriate money. So you had another idea; a greater one, and because as yet it did not include murder, in fact it included nothing at all illegal, it seemed to you to be a tremendous project, perhaps the biggest in your life.

“If you could drive Hale out of the sanitarium, then you could buy the place yourself with your own money to liquidate his debts around town. You might buy it from your own bank for as low as ten thousand dollars. Immediately it was in your possession, you would float a loan for yourself and turn the hospital into a yacht club, on which you were aware you could clean up millions. It was one of the greatest financial opportunities of your life. You could launch this club with practically no capital, and you would own the sanitarium and all the surrounding property.”

“What you say sounds reasonable,” Borden admitted, “but it was all perfectly legitimate and above board. I daresay there was more than one who knew my plans ran in that direction.”

Hale glared at him, and Sandra watched with eyes that burned. Penny was writing in the notebook. Lance Brown stood at the door, holding a gun.

“Yes, it's reasonable,” Johnny said, “and it would seem to almost anyone that with so much to gain you would be satisfied. Everything was going exactly as you had planned it. But that was the trouble. It was going so smoothly you decided to finish your job of completely wrecking Doctor Hale, and to cash in on whatever he had.

“You were aware that his anti-strep formula was good, but if you could convince him that it was *not*, that it was possibly deadly; and at the same time get a copy of the formula for yourself and manufacture it privately, with the help of chemists, there would be no limit to the money you could amass. It was a dream born of greed. And because you had done so splendidly so far, you took the step.”

“How?” Borden demanded.

“You met Jean Daniels here in the sanitarium on one of your many visits to see Hale about the money he owed; you became acquainted with her and eventually learned that she was in more or less desperate financial straits. When the time came you employed her to dilute the chemical samples that were to go to the Armin Company, and you knew what that company's report would be. Besides wanting to obtain the formula, you had added motive for doing this in view of the fact that *if* Armin *had* purchased the formula from Hale, he would have been able to pay off his debts and retain the sanitarium. Therefore, you made sure the samples would be proven not only worthless, but deadly. Aware from the information Miss Daniels gave you that the American Medical Association was going to investigate, you made use of a plan which you had already formulated.

“You had contacted this man who called himself Doctor Butler and intended to use him later when you manufactured Hale's compound as your own. You sent Butler over to pose as an Association man and get the formula, which he did expertly.

“Afterwards, even if the Association pronounced Hale's product a hundred percent good, you knew that because of the Armin set-back he would not be able to dispose of it quickly enough to beat the thirty day deadline set by his creditors on the sanitarium. And meanwhile your, man Butler would have submitted copies of the formula for copyright under his own name, thereby putting the cure Hale had spent years to perfect, directly in your own hands.”

Ned Borden leaned back against the white rat cage. He seemed to breathe easier.

“Nothing said so far begins to prove murder.”

“No. It simply lays a concrete foundation for what was your motive; a motive which gathered impact throughout the years. As I have said, ruining Hale depended largely on Waters. But during the past few weeks you had a great deal of trouble with Harry Waters. He was beginning to see what he had done to Hale and he was more or less sorry for it. He hadn't meant to be quite so journalistically poetic, nor so appallingly cruel. He must have talked with you about lending Hale money to help him out. You naturally opposed the move and told him Hale didn't deserve it. As long as you could, you prevented Harry Waters from changing his attitude toward Hale.

“But you foresaw the trouble which would completely block your plans to gain the sanitarium, if Waters should decide to relent in spite of what you could say. You were very nearly desperate because by this time you were in deeply, and the millions you planned to make had so long been a part of your mind that you could not bear the thought of losing them. So you had this man Butler make you up a few poison chocolates. What excuse you gave him so that he wouldn't suspect murder, I don't know; he may have even sympathized with your murder plans. That's immaterial. Anyway, you had the chocolates. You knew of Waters' love for candy and for whiskey, and you had planned that if the worst ever came it would be a simple matter to give him one of these

chocolates. As a layman you assumed the coroner would pronounce Waters' death due to heart ailment, a disease from which Waters suffered.”

Johnny drew in his breath. “Well, the worst came just as your plans were reaching a head. Doctor Hale drew out his money, and being bitter about the fact that Waters had broken him, he went to Waters' office and engaged in the scene which decided Waters that he had gone far enough, and that it was time to help Hale.

“Waters took the cancelled bankbook Hale had thrown at him, over to you, perhaps thinking you might sympathize with the doctor. He signed a withdrawal slip for five thousand dollars and instructed you to make out a new bankbook for Hale with that amount placed in it, and to send it along with a note telling him the money was a loan until he could become re-established.

“This, of course, was the end of everything for you; and in your terrible panic I presume you were entirely cool. You simply offered Waters a chocolate. You watched him eat it. If you had not been so greedy you might have had the presence of mind to tear up the withdrawal slip. But instead you sent it down and collected the money, which you pocketed.” Johnny paused. “Or Waters might have insisted the slip be sent down while he was still in the office. Either way, you kept the money yourself, Borden. You possibly regretted that Waters was to die, but death is a natural end to life, and just as in the case of normal death, there was very little you could do about it. It was your only natural move, and you probably tried to accept it as such, so that you would not clutter up your conscience, nor spoil the fun you intended to have while making millions of dollars. But at that time you'd had no idea Waters' death would be pronounced murder.

“From the moment of that pronouncement, life must have been a hell for you. But you are an intelligent man, and you tried to steer through the storm calmly, using your best judgment at every turn. I will say, I've never been on a case in which the murderer worked with such a deft and sure touch. You were canny during this great emergency in your life; canny to the point of genius.

“When you realized that Jean Daniels having diluted the formula—you hadn't planned murder when you instructed her to do this—was possibly a person who could point out your identity, you took the course a banker would take. That is, you risked nothing. You killed her. It was the same with Butler. He was the only other person who knew what you had done.

“Checking these facts, along with the material clues I have mentioned, will make your case a very bad one in the courts, and I am afraid—”

“Oh, for God's sake, stop it!”

Johnny held out the handcuffs again. Borden's eyes were red and feverish. He stared down at them. His face was gray, but there seemed to be no fear on it; his agony was that of lost pride, for he had always considered himself the executive whose dignity and character was beyond reproach, and now that this was gone, there was no more left in

him. His entire personality had been drained out, and he was but skin and bones composed into the frail and tired body of an old man; the dream of his ego was shattered to dust which filtered emptily through his soul.

“I—I wish you could arrange to have the trial in another town,” he whispered.

Johnny West finished up his business at headquarters and came wearily down the corridor. He passed Borden's cell, but did not glance into it. When he was in the receiving room he stopped to light a cigarette.

“How does it go, Johnny?” said the sergeant.

“It goes all right.”

“I hear there's been a crime in Scarsdale. The New Rochelle Bureau is going to send for you.”

“The crime can fry,” said Johnny.

The sergeant grinned. “Well, I'll tell 'em our homicide expert just left for a vacation.” The red-faced policeman paused. “Say, is that right about the American Medical Association reporting that Jim Hale's anti—anti—well, whatever it was, is the best thing that's been discovered for years?”

“Yeah. They called this morning. It broke in the papers. The sanitarium's already had about fifty calls from prospective patients in New York.”

“That's swell,” the sergeant said, “he'll be able to hire the local nurses again. You know, I've been hearing funny rumors about Hale. Damned funny rumors. About him and that Sandra Stevens.”

Johnny thought: this is the trouble with a small town; everybody wants to know what's going on.

“Yes,” he replied, “Hale and Sandra are thick.”

“That's exactly what I heard,” the cop said triumphantly. “So what's going to happen to poor Arline Carter?”

“I don't know. The last anybody saw of her, Sock Drury was going out to buy a new car and she was going with him.”

“Oh.”

“Is there anything else troubling you?” Johnny asked.

“No, nothing.”

“You don't mind then,” Johnny went on, “if I go home?”

“Nope, it's okay with me. By the way, I let Bob Smith out of jail.”

Johnny turned. “You did?”

“Yeah. Penny said you didn't really want to hold him.”

“She said that?”

“Yeah. So I—”

“So you let him go!” Johnny snapped.

He threw down the cigarette and walked out. His head came up with surprise. Penny stood in the middle of the sidewalk and Smith was there. He was saying something about how glad he was to get out, and suddenly he reached over and kissed her on the cheek. Johnny turned and strode in the other direction. Penny came on the run, and caught up. She had to keep skipping steps to maintain the pace.

“Hey, where you going?”

“To pack my bags, and leave for 'Frisco.”

“But you can't do that!”

“Can't I?”

“Bob was just excited,” she said, “that's all. Bob Smith—”

“He was thanking you for letting him out of jail. But I don't remember telling you that you should.”

“Well—”

“Sure, I know all about it.”

She ran to keep abreast of him. “Johnny, you aren't going to let a little thing like that come between us?”

“Not for the world,” he snapped.

“But—but, don't you see, you big ape?”

“See what?”

She began to cry. “That I love you. That I want to be your girl!”

Homicide Johnny stopped and kissed her.

THE END