

A NEW
JOHNNY LIDDELL
THRILLER

**BARELY
SEEN**

“Be nice to me,
Johnny,” the redhead
said to Liddell.

“I’ve got something
you want.”

FRANK KANE

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“All set?” Liddell asked. . . .

She smiled, reached up to loosen her hair, and peeled the peignoir away from her nude body.

“Won’t you be more comfortable with your coat off?” she wanted to know. . . .

Barely Seen
by FRANK KANE

A DELL BOOK an original mystery

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Barely Seen

1.

Johnny Liddell checked his watch against the big four-sided clock over the information booth, found he was four minutes slow. Grand Central Terminal was clogged with commuters from Westchester and Connecticut on their way to their midtown offices and shops.

Liddell bucked the crowd, elbowed his way toward Track 36 where, if it was on time, the Twentieth Century Limited should already have arrived. By the time he got there, a stream of passengers was flowing up the familiar red carpet, heading for the subway and the taxi stand. He dropped his cigarette to the floor, crushed it out. Then he took up a position where he could peer down the dimness of the ramp for a sight of Muggsy Kiely.

The redheaded ex-reporter turned screen writer had called him from Chicago the night before to tell him that she had had her fill of the glamor of Hollywood and was on her way back to the *Dispatch*. He made the gesture of volunteering to meet her at the train as if he had a choice.

His eyes were hopscotching over the pale blobs of faces coming up the ramp when the girl bumped into him. He had a fleeting glimpse of a small, pert face, a shock of copper-colored hair, a pair of wide, blue eyes.

He caught her as she seemed about to fall.

“Quick. Stand in front of me. Put your arms around me and kiss me.” Her voice was almost inaudible. “Please,” she begged.

Liddell looked into her face for some sign of a gag. “What is this?”

“Don’t ask questions. Just kiss me,” she begged.

“I’ve registered before. But never this quick,” he muttered. He slid his arm around her waist, kissed her. Her mouth trembled against his for a moment. Then she placed her hands against his chest, pushed him away.

“That’s enough,” she told him.

“Speak for yourself.” Liddell grinned. “You started this, you know.” He started to draw her to him.

“Please don’t,” the girl pleaded.

Liddell dropped his arm from her waist. “Okay. So the gag’s over. Mind telling me what the hell it was all about?”

The redhead looked over her shoulder, then swung her eyes from side to side, as if she expected to see some fearsome thing. “It was a man. He was following me.” Her eyes came to rest on Liddell’s face. “I was trying to lose him. That’s why I asked you to kiss me. I figured he’d be looking for a girl alone and would lose me.”

Liddell grinned ruefully. “Me and my fatal charm.” He looked around. “See him anyplace?”

The girl shook her head. “But I’d better be going before he circles back. Thanks a lot, mister.” She brushed past him, melted into the crowd heading for the Hotel Roosevelt.

Liddell watched her until she disappeared. He felt a tug on his sleeve, turned to face Muggsy Kiely. He grabbed her, held her out at arm’s length.

“Muggs!” He ran his eyes over her from the fluffy poodle cut to the smart sandals, with appropriate stops on the way. “You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

The redhead sniffed. “And the one that just left?” She nodded in the direction the girl had gone. “What was she? The night shift going off so the day shift could come on?”

“I never saw the girl before in my life,” Liddell protested. “No kidding.”

Muggsy’s lips formed an unbelieving “No?” She brought out a wisp of linen, rubbed it across Liddell’s lips, held up a red stain with a moue of distaste. “In that case, you’d better see your dentist.”

“She kissed me. I’m not denying that but—”

“But you never saw her before in your life. She was just passing by and she was so overwhelmed by your manly beauty that she just had to have a sample. Something like that?”

“Something like that.”

Muggsy sniffed again. “Still got your watch?”

Liddell shook his head sadly. “There you go. Not home even an hour and already you’re putting me down. You think the girls just love me for my money?”

Muggsy considered with pursed lips. “It could be.”

“Well, for your information—” Liddell patted his other pockets, looked at the redhead with stricken eyes. “I’ll be damned. She got my wallet!”

An hour later, Johnny Liddell sat on the couch in Muggsy Kiely's apartment on Central Park West watching appreciatively while she shook up some cocktails.

She poured two drinks from the shaker, brought one over to Liddell.

"I'd rather have Scotch and water," he told her.

She frowned at him. "You told me you wanted a daiquiri."

He shook his head. "Scotch and water. If I wanted fruit juice I'd have some pineapple."

"Then why did you ask for a daiquiri?"

"If you've never seen the effect shaking up a cocktail has on that blouse, you couldn't understand," he grinned.

"I ought to pour it over your head," she grinned back. She took the cocktail back to the small bar, spilled some Scotch over ice and brought it back to him. "You haven't changed a bit. Got worse, if possible. Is that all you do? Think about sex?"

Liddell considered. "I do a little drinking too. And from what happened at the station you might not think so, but there have been occasions when I've done more than think about it."

Muggsy managed to look stricken. "You mean you haven't been true to me while I was out in Hollywood?"

"As true as you were to me," he countered.

She grinned, stuck her tongue out at him. "I claim the Fifth Amendment." She dropped down alongside him on the couch. "You going to report losing your wallet?"

Liddell shook his head. "That's all I have to do. Walk into a police station and say 'I'm Johnny Liddell, a private eye. This morning a female dip took me for my wallet.' Can't you just imagine the look on Inspector Herlehy's face when he heard about it?" He shook his head. "I only had about twenty dollars in it. But if I had a thousand I still couldn't stand the razzing I'd take if I reported it."

The redhead took a swallow from her daiquiri. "But they'll know about it anyway. If they can read."

Liddell stopped with his glass halfway to his lips, frowned at her. “I hope that doesn’t mean what I think it does.”

She grinned at him. “I am a reporter, you know.”

“You wouldn’t do that to me, Muggs. Besides, you’re not a reporter yet. You don’t know that they’ll take you back.”

“With a yarn like that tucked under my arm, they’ll welcome me back. This one might even rate a by-line. I can see the headline now—”

Liddell set his glass down, caught her by the arms. “Now look—”

She rolled her eyes up to his face, her lips were moist, half-parted. His nostrils were filled with the scent of her perfume. “Yes?” she asked.

He slid his arms around her, pulled her against him. “I forgot what I was going to say.” He cut off her answer by covering her mouth with his.

After a moment, they broke. “We were talking about that story I was going to write about what happened at the station,” she told him.

Liddell groaned. “I thought we just settled that.”

Muggsy looked at him disapprovingly. “Do you think I could be bought off with a kiss?”

“Couldn’t you?” Liddell wanted to know.

The redhead considered. “Well, maybe as a down payment.” She emptied her glass, got up, and walked to the bar. Her hips worked smoothly against the tight skirt; she gave them an extra fillip for his benefit. “Deadline is about four hours away. If I didn’t make it, the story would be old news. And the *Dispatch* never prints old news.” She refilled her glass, turned around.

Liddell fought a losing battle to keep his eyes on her face, surrendered happily. “You’ll never make it. We have a lot of time to make up.”

“But four hours. Isn’t that an awfully long time to be talking about old times?”

“Who said anything about talking?”

She didn’t make the deadline.

2.

The worn travelling clock on the night table said 2:15; the darkness of the room testified to it being A.M. The pounding on the door got louder, more insistent. Johnny Liddell estimated the chances of whoever was pounding on his door going away, lost the decision. He swung his feet from under the covers, got into his bathrobe and slippers.

“Keep your shirt on,” he called out. “I’m coming.”

The pounding stopped. Liddell shuffled from the bedroom, through the living room, opened the door.

The man who stood in the hallway was a few inches shorter than Liddell, made up in breadth what he lacked in height. He wore a shiny blue suit; the grey fedora was pulled low on his forehead. He handled the .38 like he knew what he was doing.

Liddell’s eyes dropped from the man’s face to the gun that was aimed at a spot roughly an inch above his navel, came back up to the man’s face. He couldn’t decide which looked more forbidding, the muzzle of the .38 or the face.

The man in the hallway jabbed the muzzle into Liddell’s midsection, followed him into the room. He closed the door behind him with his foot.

“What is this?” Liddell wanted to know.

The grim look on the man’s face got grimmer. “What the hell do you think it is? Did you think you were going to get away with it?”

“Look, I don’t like people who wake me up in the middle of the night. But I especially don’t like people who wake me up and start waving guns in my direction.”

“If I had my way, I’d feed it to you here. But orders are orders.” He waved the gun toward the bedroom. “Get dressed.”

“And if I insist on knowing what this is all about?”

The man in the blue suit permitted the ends of his thin lips to tilt upwards in what passed for a smile. “Then it wouldn’t be the first time I disobeyed orders.” His knuckle whitened on the trigger. “You want to call my bluff?”

Liddell considered, recognized the menace in the other man's slate-colored eyes, shook his head. "There's nothing I relish more than a nice ride in the night air." He turned, shuffled back toward the bedroom. The other man walked behind him, far enough to make it impossible for Liddell to swing on him.

At the door to the bedroom, the man with the gun stopped. "That's far enough. Get over against the wall." He waited until Liddell crossed to the wall, then he walked over to where Johnny's coat was draped over the back of a chair. Still covering Liddell with his gun, he checked the pockets of the jacket for a weapon. Finding none, he tossed the jacket across to Liddell. He repeated the procedure with his pants. "Okay. Get dressed."

Liddell shucked the bathrobe and slippers, stuck his legs into his pants. "I don't suppose it would do any good to ask who you are and what you're supposed to be doing."

The man in the blue suit peered at him. "It wouldn't do any good," he confirmed.

"Figures." Liddell shrugged into his shirt. "Do I need a tie? Or is this a come as you are party?"

"Never mind the tie. Let's get going. The boss gets real narrow-minded when anybody keeps him waiting." He waited until Liddell put on his jacket. "We're going to walk out of here like we're old buddies going out for a cup of coffee. Don't get any ideas on the way out. I got old Betsy here loaded with dumdums. If you ever saw what they do at close range, you know it's a good idea to play it straight."

"I've seen what they do at close range," Liddell told him.

"Good. So you know the real smart thing to do is walk right out of the building and get in the back seat of the car parked out front."

Liddell nodded, turned, and headed for the hall door. At the door, he stopped with his hand on the knob, waited until the man with the gun told him to open it.

The self-service elevator was empty and the only person in the lobby was the elderly clerk behind the desk. He glanced up incuriously from the paper he was studying, sniffled, then went back to his study of the form charts on the racing page. Liddell crossed the lobby, pushed through the door to the street. The man with the gun followed.

A black sedan stood at the curb, its motor idling. Liddell could make out the figure of another man behind the wheel. For a moment, he estimated his chances of making a fight for it, glanced back at the muzzle of the .38, then up at the face of the man holding it.

“You’d never make it,” the man in the blue suit read his thoughts.

“That’s what I decided,” Liddell told him.

The man inside the car leaned over, opened the back door. “I’ll cover him while he gets in, Lew,” the driver said. He slid back behind the wheel, covered Liddell with a snub-nosed .38. As Johnny got into the back seat and slid into the far corner, he was looking directly into the unwavering muzzle of the driver’s gun.

The man in the blue suit followed him into the back seat, settled back, held the .38 so that it covered Liddell’s midsection.

The driver eyed Liddell with no sign of enthusiasm. He wore no hat. His hair was black and thick, rolled back in oily waves from a low hairline. He affected a three-quarters part that revealed the startling whiteness of his scalp. His eyes squinted from either side of a huge nose.

“Any trouble, Lew?” he wanted to know.

The man with the gun shrugged. “What kind of trouble? All he wants to know is where we’re going and who he’s going to see.”

The man with the big nose grunted. “What’s he take you for? A stool pigeon?” He replaced the snub-nosed revolver in its shoulder holster, swung around on the front seat. He eased the car into gear, slid away from the curb.

Liddell squirmed into a more comfortable position in his corner, stared out the window at the deserted streets and the blank faces of the closed shops. The car was heading east, crossing avenues that stretched interminably, with traffic lights clicking on and off dyeing the corners alternately red and green. At Second Avenue, the driver turned south.

“On Long Island, huh?” Liddell grunted.

“There you go again, trying to spoil the surprise,” the man with the gun chided. “You’ll know all about it real soon. Too soon for your health.”

Liddell lapsed back into silence.

The entrance to the Midtown Tunnel was an oasis of bright lights and activity in an otherwise deserted town. The driver joined the line of cars

heading down into the tunnel, the man with the gun removed his hat and dropped it over his gun hand.

The car came out at the entrance to the Long Island Expressway. No one talked as the driver started making time by swinging around the slower moving cars. The man in the back seat replaced his hat on his head; the muzzle of the .38 still glared malevolently at Liddell's midsection.

The character of the neighborhood changed from the densely populated areas of Queens to the densely populated cemeteries that line either side of the expressway.

"A lot of fruit in that marble orchard," the man with the gun commented. "A lot of guys half-smart like you didn't know where to draw the line."

Liddell ignored the remark, watched while the heavily populated areas gave way to the suburban stretches of Nassau. Bigger and bigger stretches of unpopulated areas started showing up. About forty minutes from the Queens end of the tunnel, the driver swung off the Expressway, rode a mile on the service road, then turned onto a macadam road that meandered past stucco houses with tile roofs, past modern ranch-type homes.

Finally, they arrived at a driveway flanked by two stone pillars, each of which was topped by an ornate glass-and-wrought-iron lantern. They turned in, followed a winding driveway bordered by huge trees. The house was a sprawling white stone building huddling in the gloom. Most of the windows were dark; only a double French door, opening onto a patio, spilled yellow light in a geometrical pattern onto the darkened lawn.

The man in the back seat motioned with the gun. "Outside. This is the end of the line."

"You talked me into it," Liddell grunted.

He reached over, opened the door, and stepped out onto the apron of the driveway. As the man with the gun rose to follow, Liddell decided on a long shot.

Lew was up off the back seat, bent over, coming out the door. With all the speed he could muster, Liddell caught the heavy door, slammed it shut with all his strength. He heard the yowl of pain as the door slammed into the gunman's head, bounced open.

Before Lew could straighten up or bring his gun into position, Liddell chopped at his neck with the side of his hand. The gunman grunted, tumbled head first out of the car, landed on his face, didn't move.

Liddell got a momentary impression of the driver struggling to get his gun out of its holster. In almost a single motion, he bent over, grabbed the gun from the unconscious man's hand and stuck its muzzle against the driver's neck.

"It's loaded with dumdums, friend," Liddell told him.

The driver froze with the snub-nose half-clear of its holster. His eyes were wide with fear; a fine sheen of perspiration was already starting to glisten on his forehead and upper lip.

"Okay, okay. I'm not going to try anything," he whined. "Just don't get nervous, that's all. I'm dropping the gun." He brought his hand away from his lapel empty.

Liddell reached over, tugged the snub-nose from its holster, threw it out into the darkness of the lawn. He backed out of the car, kept the .38 trained on the driver's head.

"Get out of the car. We're going inside."

He waited until the driver was out onto the apron. The thin man was having trouble controlling his knees, which were shaking badly. There was a faint twitching under his left eye, he licked at his lips nervously. "What about him?" he looked down to where his partner lay sprawled on the concrete, snoring sonorously.

"We take him along," Liddell grunted. "That is, you take him."

The driver reached down, caught his companion under the arms and wrestled him into what approximated an upright position.

"Now let's go see who was so anxious to see me." Liddell pointed to the entrance of the building with his gun. "You first."

The driver half-carried, half-dragged the man in the blue suit up the walk to the entrance. At the door, he propped Lew against the wall, pushed the bell. The perspiration was running down the side of his face, dripping off his jowls. He was breathing heavily.

After a moment, the big door swung open. A tall heavy-set man in a smoking jacket, his carefully combed white hair shining in the semi-gloom, stood in the doorway.

His eyes hopscotched from the thin man struggling to hold the man in the blue suit on his feet to Liddell, dropped to the gun in the private

detective's hand. Wordlessly, he stepped aside while the driver dragged the unconscious man in, followed by Liddell.

"In the den, Martin," the white-haired man spoke for the first time.

The driver headed down the hall to a half-open door that showed light. The man with the white hair followed with Liddell bringing up the rear, gun in hand.

The den was a large, comfortable room with one wall given over almost entirely to a picture window that overlooked the patio and the carefully manicured lawn beyond. It was furnished with big upholstered leather chairs, deep pile green carpeting, and the walls were paneled in cypress. The light was provided by oversize lamps set on the leather-topped tables on the sides of the room. A large desk, piled high with papers was set so that its occupant could look out over the grounds.

The thin man was breathing heavily as he tugged his companion into the den. He looked to the white-haired man, who indicated the couch. "Put him over there." Then, he turned to Liddell, looked him over from head to foot. "This is a surprising development. As long as you had the drop, why didn't you get out of here as fast as you could?"

"I was invited to a party. It wouldn't be polite not to come without extending my regrets to the host," Liddell told him. He motioned for the white-haired man to stay put, walked around the desk, satisfied himself there was no gun in the drawers. "Besides, I got real curious as to why you'd decide to rout me out of bed in the middle of the night to go riding in the country." He walked around the desk, hoisted one hip on the corner of it. "Now that I know who you are, I'm twice as curious." He turned to the thin man, who had produced a balled handkerchief from his hip pocket, was making a circuit of his streaming face. "Sit down alongside your buddy, Martin," Liddell told him. "And the first sound out of you or the first movement I don't like, you get a chance to see how it feels to field a big one."

Obediently, the thin man dropped onto the edge of the couch where his companion lay snoring.

The man in the smoking jacket walked over to one of the big armchairs, sat down. "What do you mean, now that you know who I am? You had to know from the beginning." He rested his elbows on the arms of the chair, made a church steeple with the tips of his fingers. "I see where I made my mistake. I wanted to see what the guy looked like who would try to pull

something like that on Joe Palone.” He pursed his lips, nodded. “I should have let Lew take care of you right away.”

Liddell studied the man in the chair. Joe Palone had managed to stay out of the newspapers for the past few years. But it wasn't so long ago that every unsolved gang murder, every theatre that had been bombed during labor trouble, every racket running unchecked in the city had been attributed to him. Then had come the Senate Investigating Committee and the hearings that exposed the fact that Joe Palone's right to citizenship was open to question. Since the deportation proceedings had been instituted, Joe Palone had withdrawn from the spotlight.

Liddell's last brush with the gang leader had been many years before when Joe Palone was riding high, when the newly formed Organization, of which he had been the chief architect, had made him the most powerful, as well as ruthless, gangster in the country.

The years had made a change in Joe Palone, Liddell noticed. The lean wolfishness of the days of his climb to the head of the pack was blurred by a soft overlay of fat. There were soft discolored pouches under his eyes, but the eyes themselves were still dark, expressionless discs.

“What's this gimmick I'm supposed to have pulled?” Liddell wanted to know.

The white-haired man snarled at him. He reached over to the table, helped himself to a fat panatela from the humidor. He rolled it between thumb and forefinger. “You picked the wrong man to try to shake,” he told Liddell in a cold, harsh voice. “So, all right. You got the gun and you're sitting there holding it on me. You think you can sit there forever? So you don't get it tonight, it could be tomorrow or the next day. Or next week. Maybe even next year.” He used the cigar as a pointer to emphasize the point. “The only thing you can be sure of is that you're going to get it. What you won't know is how or when.”

“Either you're on nose candy or your messenger boys had the wrong address,” Liddell told him. “I never tried to shake you. I wouldn't touch a dollar of yours unless it was disinfected.”

The man in the chair glared at him. “Keep making it harder on yourself. Joe Palone don't forget cracks like that.” He peered up at Liddell, as if impressing his features on his memory. “Maybe it happens you'll wish Lew did do the job tonight like he wanted.” He stuck the cigar between his teeth,

chewed on the unlighted end. "If you're smart, you'll start running right now. Like that you get to live a few hours longer."

"Suppose I don't feel like running? Suppose I fix it so there's nobody running after me." He lifted the gun, sighted down the barrel at a point between the white-headed man's eyes.

Palone's jaw sagged slightly, the cigar fell from between his teeth. He recovered it from his lap, worked on a smile that didn't come off. "You think you can bluff Joe Palone?" He hit himself in the chest with the side of his hand. "Bigger men than a punk like you tried this. You know where they are?" He leaned forward with hands clasped as though in prayer as he visibly controlled his fury. "They're all in Hell. Nobody scares Joe Palone." He settled back against the cushions, stuck the cigar between his teeth, "Nobody."

"You could fool me," Liddell told him. "From the looks of you right now, you're going to shake yourself to pieces." He got down off the corner of the desk, walked over to the chair where Palone sat. He swung the barrel of the .38 in a short arc, hit the cigar and tore it from the teeth of the white-haired man. "That was just a practice swing," Liddell told him. "A few inches lower and it would have left you as toothless as the day you were born."

The man in the chair stared up at him, the whites showing around the pupils of his eyes. "You're not going to kill me," he snarled.

"I'm glad you're that sure of it," Liddell told him. "I wish I were." He glanced over to where the thin man sat swabbing at his face on the couch. "It all depends on how many straight answers I get. And how fast."

3.

Joe Palone studied Liddell's face, found nothing there to reassure him. "Okay. So maybe we can talk things over," he grunted. He glanced over to the men on the couch. "Private. I don't like anybody knowing Joe Palone's business."

Liddell considered, nodded. He looked around the den, pointed to a closed door. "What's in there?"

"Lavatory," the white-haired man told him.

Liddell turned to the thin man on the couch. "Both of you. In there." He punctuated the order with a wave of the .38.

The thin man hopped to his feet with alacrity. He caught the man in the blue suit under the arms, dragged him across the den into the lavatory. Liddell followed him across the room.

"Either of you stick your nose out that door and I'll blast it off. We understand each other?"

The thin man bobbed his head. Liddell slammed the door in his face. He walked back to where the white-haired man sat watching him apprehensively.

"Let's talk," Liddell suggested.

Palone glanced at the humidor. "Okay if I smoke?" he made a stab at sarcasm, didn't quite bring it off.

"Be my guest." Liddell waited until the white-haired man had snagged a cigar, bitten the end off, and spat it into an ash tray. "But let's not try to stall, Palone. If you've got any ideas that you can hold me here until reinforcements show up, forget it. You'd never know how it came out." He held the .38 up negligently. "The minute either of those doors open, you get it first. So you better start praying that we're finished with our little talk before the maid or somebody walks in here to clean things up."

Palone stuck the cigar between his teeth, lit it with a gold lighter. "Okay, we talk." He sucked a mouth full of smoke, blew it out in a feathery white stream. "You want a hundred grand. That's too much."

Liddell peered at him. "I want a hundred grand? For what?"

The man in the chair scowled. “Look. Let’s not play games. You want to talk business or you don’t want to talk business?”

“I just asked you. What do I want a hundred grand for?”

Palone squinted at him from the depths of the armchair. “You’re Johnny Liddell. Right?”

Liddell nodded.

“You’re a private detective. Right?”

Liddell nodded again. “So?”

The white-haired man stuck the cigar between his teeth, proceeded to macerate it. “So this afternoon I get this message from you. You want a hundred grand or you turn over what you got that belongs to me to certain people.” He rolled the cigar between his thumb and forefinger, continued to chew on it. “It makes me mad you try to shake Joe Palone, so maybe I made a mistake sending the boys after you—”

“You know something?” Liddell broke in. “I don’t have the faintest idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

Palone stared at him. He pulled himself up from the chair, walked over to the desk. He fumbled under a pile of papers, brought out a large manila envelope. Wordlessly, he handed it to Liddell.

The private detective opened the envelope, spilled two photostats onto the top of the desk. One was apparently a page from a ledger with numerous transactions entered with astronomical figures involved. The other was a photostatic copy of Johnny Liddell’s private detective license.

He stared at the license for a moment, looked up.

“I never sent you this,” he told Palone. “A dip got my wallet early this morning in Grand Central Station. That’s how they were able to get the photostat. Want to fill me in?”

Disbelief was clearly marked on the face of the white-haired man. Slowly it drained away, leaving a slightly puzzled look. “You’re leveling with me?”

Liddell bobbed his head. He tucked the .38 in his waistband. “I’m leveling. Let’s hear your side first.”

Palone paced nervously back and forth, puffing at his cigar, clasping and unclasping his hands behind him as he talked. “Today, around noon, I get a

call. The guy says he's a private detective and that he has something to sell he thinks I'll be interested in." He stopped pacing for a moment. "You read about these creeps in Washington, trying to kick me out of the country?" When Liddell nodded, he continued. "This guy on the phone says that what he's got, if he gives it to the Feds, I'm as good as sitting it out in Naples right now." He resumed pacing, puffing on the cigar. "Tonight, a messenger brings this envelope. That page from the ledger, that could do the job just like he says. After the messenger leaves, I get this second call. It's him. Liddell—" He shrugged, broke off. "He calls himself Liddell. He tells me the price of the ledger is a hundred grand. He says to show he can turn me in and still walk away from it he sent a copy of his license."

"This ledger. It's missing?"

Palone stopped pacing, nodded. "First thing I do when I get this first call, I go in town, check through my files from the old days." He shrugged. "It's gone." He walked over to the desk, picked up the photostat of the ledger page, stared at it. "How you figure it? Why does he ring you in?"

Liddell grunted. "He's copping his bet. He remembers you from the old days, so he can't be sure you won't get violent. He gives you me to work out on. If you're real docile and show signs of being willing to pay, he'll set up a payoff. But if you blow your stack and try to pay off in lead, better me than him."

The white-haired man tossed the page onto the desk top. "Now what?"

Liddell shrugged. "He hasn't given up. He'll make another stab. But this time he'll be harder to deal with."

Palone walked over to his chair, sank into it. "This dip that got your wallet. He must have been a real slick operator. I don't suppose you got a look at him?"

"Her," Liddell corrected.

Palone raised his eyebrows. "Her?"

"A little reddish blonde. Big baby blue eyes, all the standard equipment in de luxe packaging."

The man in the chair looked thoughtful. "Couldn't fit more than a couple of thousand broads in this town," he commented. He leaned back, smoked. "So where do you stand now?"

"When I figured the dip was interested in my money, that was one thing. But now that I find out she wanted my identification to set me up for a

beating at the very least—” He grinned humorlessly. “I think maybe I’d like to have a little talk with that chick and see who put her up to it.”

“So would I,” Palone grunted. He pulled the cigar from between his teeth, tapped off a collar of ash, scowled at the macerated end. “You’re a private detective. Suppose I hire you to find her?”

Liddell shook his head. “Not me, Palone. I never yet took a job bird-dogging anybody for a hit.”

The white-haired man rolled his eyes up from the cigar to Liddell’s face. “Not even if they set you up for a hit first?” He leaned forward, squinted at Liddell. “Things didn’t go the way I had them planned tonight. If they had, you wouldn’t be walking away from it.” He settled back. “That make a difference?”

“The only contract I’ll take is to get the ledger back for you.”

Palone considered. “Fair enough. Let’s put it on a contingency basis. A thousand for a retainer, ten thousand if you get back the book.” He returned the soggy end of the cigar to his mouth, chewed on it. “And the name of the guy who took it?”

“Since it’s the same guy who tried to set me up in this pretty picture with a frame to match, he belongs to me. I don’t think you’d be particularly interested in what’s left.”

“There’s another five in it for you if you deliver him in one piece,” the white-haired man told him.

“I’ll think about it,” Liddell promised. “Now, if there’s nothing else on the agenda, I’d like to get home and get a little sleep.”

Palone nodded. “Okay.” He got up, walked to the lavatory door, tugged it open.

The man in the blue suit was sitting on the floor, his back to the wall. He was rubbing the back of his neck, grunting as his hand massaged the sore spot. He looked up with bloodshot eyes as Palone appeared in the doorway.

“Well, welcome to the world, Sleeping Beauty,” Palone growled at him.

The big man tried to get to his feet, slumped back into a sitting position. There was an egg-shaped swelling in the center of his forehead. “He hit me when I wasn’t looking,” he complained. “Next time—”

“There won’t be any next time,” Palone told him. “Liddell’s working for us now.”

The man in the blue suit looked incredulous, swore under his breath.

“You’ll drive Liddell back to his apartment, Martin,” Palone told the driver. He turned, walked back to where Liddell stood emptying the shells from the .38.

“Your boy likes to play rough.” Liddell held up one of the soft-nosed slugs, the tip cut into an X. “Not too many of the boys these days use a dum dum.”

“Lew’s an old timer.”

Liddell tossed the empty .38 on the desk, pocketed the bullets. “He won’t get to be much older if he comes at me again. Tell him that.”

Palone shrugged. “Why should he be coming at you again? We’re working the same side of the street now, right?”

Liddell considered. “Let’s just say we’re both interested in the same guy.”

Martin walked from the lavatory to the den door. “I’ll be in the car whenever you’re ready,” he told Liddell.

Johnny nodded, waited until the thin man had gone out and closed the door behind him. “I’ll expect the thousand in my office in the morning.”

Palone smiled knowingly. “My money isn’t so dirty, after all, huh?”

“I said I wouldn’t touch a dollar of yours unless it was disinfected. The same goes for a thousand. I’ll disinfect it.” He turned his back on the white-haired man, walked to the door, followed the driver out to the car.

Palone scowled at the closed door for a moment, then walked to the lavatory. He glared down at the man in the blue suit, who still was massaging his neck.

“You must be getting careless in your old age. You got a gun, he’s got no gun, still he takes you. Two of you!”

“You think I like it?” Lew complained. “It’s my neck he almost broke, not yours.”

“That’s what you get paid for, that it should be your neck and not mine. Next time, do the job right.”

Lew stopped massaging his neck, looked up at the white-haired man. “Next time? You said—”

“I said he’s working with us now. But that don’t last forever. Then there’ll be a next time. He held a gun on Joe Palone. Nobody holds a gun on Joe Palone and walks away from it. You know?”

The man on the floor smiled knowingly. “I know.”

“And Lew—your friend Liddell, he likes to collect dumdums. We’ll see to it that he gets his belly full of them as soon as he finishes the job I hired him for.”

4.

The following morning, Johnny Liddell walked into the city room of the New York *Dispatch*. At this hour, most of the desks were empty. Here and there, a man in his shirtsleeves, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, sat pounding out time copy and fillers. It was hard to visualize the change a few hours would make when copy started piling in from legmen and district men, when reporters came rushing back from assignments to pound them into stories.

Two copyreaders were sitting at the rim of the horseshoe-shaped desk at the end of the room catching a leisurely smoke before the action started. The city editor sat in the slot checking over his log, which listed the assignments handed the various reporters and estimating the amount of copy he could count on from them. Each morning, he works up this assignment sheet from the future file, a tickler of each day's scheduled events or future events that warrant an advance story. The story is assigned to a reporter and he is given an approximate length for which to shoot.

Although deadline was still hours away, the city editor was already at war with his sworn enemy, the clock. He frowned at the number of future stories listed in the log, crossed out two. The city desk isn't interested in tomorrow. Its only interest is that nothing that happens today is missed.

Liddell crossed to the far corner of the room, knocked on a door that bore the legend "Managing Editor." He opened the door and walked in.

Jim Kiely, managing editor of the *Dispatch*, was sitting at his cluttered, oversized desk clipping items from the rival morning papers for follow ups for his afternoon edition. He leaned back, pushed his green eyeshade to the back of his head. He had the thin, inquisitive face of a real newshound. His eyes were penetrating, lively; his nose long and thin. There were laugh lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"Well, well. If it isn't Johnny Liddell, the demon detective. What's the occasion? Come to see the triumphant return of our girl?" He wanted to know.

"I didn't see any floral wreaths or champagne being poured." Liddell told him.

"There won't be. Matter of fact, we've got her out on the street handling half a dozen run of the mill assignments for the early edition. Just to get any

highfalutin Hollywood notions she may have out of her head.” He picked a battered briar out of an oversized ashtray on his desk, knocked out the dottle. “Just the same, even though I’d hate to admit it to her, I’m glad she’s home.” He dug the pipe bowl into his tobacco pouch, started filling it with his thumb.

“So am I,” Liddell conceded. “But it was you I wanted to see right now, not Muggs.”

Jim Kiely raised his eyebrows, stuck the stem of the pipe between his teeth, rattled the juice in it. “I didn’t know I was your type.” He scratched a wooden match on the under part of the desk, held it to the pipe bowl. “What’s on your mind?”

“I want to make a deal with you. I need some help on something I’m working on. If you give me the help I need with no questions asked, I’ll lay a real story in your lap as soon as I wrap it up.”

The managing editor sighed, sucked on the pipe stem. He blew a blue-white stream of smoke across the desk. “That’s all I get to know? You’re working on a case and I get a story if and when you wrap it up?” He waited for Liddell’s nod. “And what do I have to commit the paper for this?”

“I want you to feature a two column blind item on the front page of tonight’s paper. Big and prominent.”

“Saying what?”

Liddell grinned ruefully. “I want it to say that it’s addressed to a young lady who lifted a man’s wallet in Grand Central Station yesterday morning.” He drew a deep breath. “Tell her that the wallet is being used in a shakedown attempt and that if she wants to get out from under, she should call the man whose wallet she lifted.”

Kiely smoked silently for a moment. He pulled some copy paper and lifted a copy pencil from the glass full of pencils on his desk. “Let me get this straight. A girl lifted a man’s wallet in Grand Central yesterday. You’re sure it was a girl?”

Liddell nodded unhappily. “Sure.”

Kiely eyed him curiously, scribbled some words on the copy paper, looked up. “And something in this wallet gave her the hook to blackmail him with it?”

Liddell shook his head. “No. He’s not the one being blackmailed. The wallet is being used by the blackmailer—” He sighed, pulled up a chair, sat

down. “Oh, hell, I might as well give you the whole story. Yesterday morning while I was waiting to meet Muggs, a carrot-topped babe hit me for my wallet. Last night I find out that there’s a shake being tried and the guy pulling it claims to be me. He even sent a photostat of my license as a convincer.”

Kiely was busy scribbling the information. “And you want the girl to contact you. That it?”

“Yeah. So I can find out who she lifted the wallet for. But I don’t want my name to appear.”

Kiely straightened up, leaned back in the chair. “Can’t say I blame you.” He sucked noisily on the pipe stem. “But where does the big story come in?”

“When I tell you who’s being blackmailed and why.”

The managing editor took the pipe from between his teeth, tamped down the tobacco with the tip of his forefinger, burned it and swore softly. “And I have to take your word for it that he’s a big enough name to go to all this trouble?” He reached over, picked up the copy paper with the scribbled notes. “You know something? This is a pretty good story as it is. We could have a lot of fun with this.”

“And you could let one of the biggest stories of the year slip through your fingers while you were laughing yourself sick.”

Kiely tapped the pipe stem against his teeth thoughtfully. “Suppose she doesn’t call?”

“Then I’ll have to find her the hard way. Right now, my best guess is that she doesn’t know how big this thing she was getting herself involved in really is. When she finds out it’s not just a simple job of pickpocketing, I think she’ll want out from under.”

“How soon do you think we can count on a payoff if we string along?”

“If she tells me what I need to know, I should be able to wrap it up in a couple of days. It all depends on how willing she is to cooperate.”

Kiely reread the scribbled notes, nodded. “Okay. I’ll string along. But it better be good.” He picked up the telephone on the corner of his desk. “Al, you want to come into my office for a minute?” He dropped the receiver back on its hook, picked up his pencil and wrote the copy on a fresh piece of paper.

He was just finishing when the door to the office opened and the city editor walked in.

“Put this in twelve-point in a two column box on page one in all editions, Al.” He handed the piece of copy paper across the desk.

The city editor read the scribbled lines, frowned. He looked up across the desk. “Do I get to ask any questions?”

Kiely shrugged. “I asked. It didn’t do me any good. You can try if you like.”

The city editor looked to Johnny Liddell, sighed. “Not with him.” He waved the sheet of paper. “You don’t say anything in here about not prosecuting. You want to go that far?”

Kiely looked to Liddell, who nodded. “Okay, add anything to it you think it needs, Al. But make sure to slot it where nobody can miss it.”

The city editor grunted, turned, and walked out of the office, talking to himself.

Kiely glanced at Liddell. “I suppose you know the police department might conceivably get curious about the item when it appears. What do I tell them?”

“Tell them to talk to me. By the time they get around to it, I should have the answers.”

“It’s your head if you like to wear it with bumps on it,” Kiely told him.

The telephone on the corner of the desk jangled. Kiely picked it up, held it to his ear. “Yeah?” He listened to the operator for a minute, grinned. “Yeah, put her on.” He covered the mouthpiece with his hand. “It’s Muggsy. She’s just dictating a short piece to one of the rewrite men on a holdup on the East Side last night.” He uncovered the mouthpiece. “Yeah, Muggs?” From the aggrieved tone of her voice, Liddell could tell the call was a complaint. “Well, you said you didn’t care where you were assigned.” The torrent of complaint came through the mouthpiece again. “Wait a minute, I’ll make you a deal. Liddell just came in here with a blind item he wants us to run. He claims it’ll blossom into a front page story. Just to show you my heart’s in the right place, I’m going to assign you to work with him.” He held the receiver out to Liddell. “Tell her, Johnny.”

Liddell took the phone, put it to his ear. “Well, news-hawk, how does it feel to be back in harness?”

“Don’t give me that harness bit,” the redhead groaned. “It’s more like a straightjacket. You know what they got me doing? Let me read you my sheet. I got a follow-up on a fire on the waterfront. They’ve got it slugged for half a column. Then this old guy, a grocer, on the East Side, fights off a couple of punk kids and—”

“Okay, okay. You heard what Jim said. I’ve got a real live one for you.”

“When?”

Liddell grinned. “I don’t know. But as soon as it breaks, you get it exclusive.”

“What is this, something new? You didn’t have it yesterday.”

“I did, but I didn’t know it. You remember what happened to my wallet?”

“That’s the only thing that keeps me going, remembering your wallet. And I still hate myself for not writing the story.”

“You still might,” Liddell told her. “Whoever lifted my wallet wasn’t just an ordinary pickpocket out for just anybody’s wallet. It was my wallet they wanted. They used my private detective license to try to pull a \$100,000 shakedown.” He paused for a moment. “And when you get the names involved it’ll make up for the little schnook of a grocer and—”

“Never mind telling me now. Tell me tonight. I’ll be expecting you around nine. At my place.” She broke the connection from her end.

Liddell handed the receiver back to Kiely. “I thought you were going to knock all the Hollywood notions out of her head. You think you can do that by handing her a front page by-line on a platter?”

Kiely dropped the receiver on its hook, grinned. “No. But you might have some ideas about crossing me. You’re too smart to try to pull one on Muggsy. This way, that story better develop. Or else!”

5.

Pinky, Johnny Liddell's Girl Friday, was sitting at her desk behind the railing that cut the outer office in two when Johnny Liddell walked in. She stopped typing for a moment, favored him with a broad smile as he pushed through the gate in the railing.

"What's with the display of ivory?" he wanted to know. "Something happen?"

"As if you didn't know." She got up from her chair, preceded him to the door of the private office, pushed it open. "Did anything happen? You forgot to tell me that you've become an art collector. Engravings yet." She circled the desk, pulled open the bottom drawer and brought out a thick envelope. From it, she spilled a stack of bills on the desk top. "Green etchings with lovely pictures of presidents on them." She fanned them out. "A thousand dollars worth." She looked up. "For what?"

"We've got a new client."

"We can sure use one," she told him fervently. "But you might have warned me. I almost got a heart attack when I opened the envelope and this lovely, lovely money spilled out."

"It happened about three o'clock this morning. I didn't figure that you'd appreciate getting dragged out of bed to hear the news. Besides, I didn't count on him getting it over here this fast. Any message or anything with it?"

Pinky stacked the bills lovingly, shook her head. "The envelope came by uniformed messenger. He just said it was for you, so I signed for it. By the time I found out what was in it, he was gone." She replaced the bills in the envelope. "Besides, I wasn't about to ask any questions."

"What time you going out to lunch?"

"About one. Want me to deposit this?"

"No. I want to be sure I'm keeping it."

Pinky looked stricken. "You're not thinking of giving it back?"

"Depends on what I have to do to earn it," Liddell told her. "By tonight I ought to know. When you come back from lunch, bring me a copy of the *Dispatch*. The early edition ought to be out by then."

Pinky groaned. “We finally lay our hands on some loot, but he’s not sure he wants it. All he can think about is that his Rexall redhead is back in town.” She tossed the envelope of bills onto the desk top. “What’s she doing? A series based on her love life in California that you’re so anxious to see it?”

“You’re just jealous because Muggsy rates a by-line.”

“Jealous?” Pinky snorted. “Why should I be jealous? She certainly deserves one. It’s the good old story of American free enterprise. If a girl is pretty, witty, smart, hard working, clean living, and her father is the managing editor she rates a by-line.”

“Your claws are showing, Pink. And if you want to know, Muggsy doesn’t happen to have a by-line in the paper today.”

“Then what makes you so anxious to see it?”

“I want to know if Daddy Warbucks has rescued Orphan Annie again,” he snapped. “Another thing. Switch all the lines in here. Don’t pick up any calls this afternoon. I want to handle them myself.”

The redhead managed to look miffed, turned, and high-tailed it out of the office. She underscored her annoyance by slamming the door behind her.

When she returned from lunch after two o’clock, Liddell was sitting at the window, his heels hooked on the sill, staring out over Bryant Park. From the open window came the muted sounds of traffic on Forty-Second Street.

She tossed the *Dispatch* on his desk, watched while he swung the chair around and picked up the paper. The notice was in twelve point bold type in columns two and three on the first page with a dark border around it. It said:

NOTICE TO YOUNG LADY IN GRAND CENTRAL

Yesterday morning, a young lady in Grand Central Station came into possession of a wallet. The contents of the wallet are being used in an unlawful enterprise which may seriously involve the young lady. If she would like to escape involvement, she should call the man whose name and address are in the wallet. There will be no questions asked as to how the wallet came into her possession.

Liddell read through the notice twice, grunted his satisfaction. He dropped the paper on the top of the desk, looked up into Pinky’s frankly curious eyes.

“That have anything to do with our new client?” she wanted to know.

Liddell nodded.

She shook her head. “He certainly must have had dynamite in that wallet to be willing to pay you a thousand dollars to get it back.”

“Who?”

“The new client.”

Liddell grinned at her. “You’ve got it a little mixed up. The wallet was mine, not his.”

Pinky’s eyes widened, she started to ask a question. He cut it off by swinging the chair around, hooking his heels on the window sill. “If you’ve got any shopping to do or anything like that, why don’t you take the rest of the afternoon off? There’s nothing much to do around here anyway.”

“Stop being so bighearted. You think the girl who got your wallet might come up here instead of telephoning and you don’t want me to see her.”

“The thought had occurred to me,” Liddell conceded. “And it’s for your own good. It might be a lot safer for you if you don’t know what she looks like. It’s like you said. There has to be a lot of dynamite involved when a client can’t wait to pay a thousand dollars as a retainer.”

Pinky considered it, pouted slightly. “All right, if that’s what you want. I connected the lines through to your phone. I’ll be at my place if you change your mind and decide you need me.” She turned and walked out of the private office. After a minute, he could hear the door to the corridor shut.

Liddell got to his feet, walked to the cabinet in the corner, opened it with a key from his ring. From it, he selected a .45, checked to make sure the magazine was full and a shell in the chamber. He shucked off his jacket, brought a holster from the cabinet and shrugged into it, then covered it with the jacket. He snapped the .45 into place. Then he walked through the outer office, locked the hall door. When he returned to the private office, he left the connecting door open. If he was going to have visitors, he preferred to see them as soon as they saw him.

The sun had started to fade, the man-made canyons between the mountains of stone that were the streets below were already shrouded in approaching darkness. Street lights had come on and office workers were straggling toward the subway entrances in groups of two and three.

Liddell checked his watch, grunted. By now the Wall Street Edition of the *Dispatch* was on the stands. If he got no response within the next few hours, the odds were that there would be no attempt at contact tonight. He wondered if Jim Kiely could be persuaded to rerun the box in tomorrow's edition.

Once, the telephone jangled noisily and Liddell started uncontrollably. But it was only Jim Kiely wondering whether there had been any action. He didn't seem too surprised when Liddell told him there had been no contact.

The next time the phone rang, around seven, Liddell grunted. This time it was probably Muggsy Kiely, anxious to know whether or not her by-line story showed any signs of developing. He reached for the phone, lifted it off its hook.

"Yeah?"

There was a pause, the sound of an indrawn breath. "Mr. Liddell?"

It wasn't Muggsy's voice. It was the voice of the girl in Grand Central. Liddell let his feet drop from the window sill, hit the floor with a thud. "Yeah. This is Liddell."

"I saw that notice in tonight's paper. It said to call you."

"Where are you?" Liddell wanted to know. "Where can I meet you?"

The pause was back. "Did you mean what it said, that the wallet was being used to pull something?"

"I'll explain everything when I see you. Where?"

"You've got to tell me now."

Liddell sighed, "Okay. My license was photostated and sent to a man who was told that I had certain records of his. They wanted \$100,000 for the records—"

"A hundred thousand dollars?" There was a note of awe in her voice.

"That makes this more than just a wallet snatch. And you're in it over your head. I can help you clean your skirts and walk away from it, but you've got to help me. Meet me and—"

"I'll call you back at ten o'clock and tell you where to meet me," the girl promised. There was a click at the other end as she broke the connection.

"Hello, hello." Liddell banged on the cross bar.

“Can I help you, sir?” the metallic voice of the operator wanted to know.

“I was talking to a party. We were disconnected.”

“I’m sorry, sir. If you’ll give me the number, I’ll connect you.”

“I don’t have the number,” Liddell growled. He slammed his receiver down on its base and swore at it loud and fruitlessly.

His watch showed 8:15. It would be almost two hours before the girl would call back, if she called back.

He lifted the receiver off its hook, dialed Muggsy Kiely’s apartment number. She answered on the fourth ring.

“Muggs? Johnny. Look, something has come up. I won’t be able to get there tonight—”

“I didn’t come dripping wet out of a shower to stand here making puddles on the floor for you to tell me you’re not coming. You heard from the girl, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

“Look, Johnny,” Muggsy’s voice was dangerously soft. “This is my story. I’m with you all the way on it. If you’re meeting her, I’m coming along.”

“That’s just the hell of it,” Liddell growled. “I’m not meeting her. She called, all right, but then she hung up on me. She promised to call back at ten, but I’m not just going to sit around waiting.”

“What are you going to do?” the redhead wanted to know.

“What I should have done right from the start. I’m going down to Police Headquarters.”

Muggsy’s gasp came over the wire. “You’re going to tell them that a pickpocket got your wallet? You can’t cross me like that, Johnny. Every reporter assigned to headquarters will have the story and—”

“You think I’m out of my mind? Of course I’m not going to report the wallet stolen. I’m going to have a look through the mug file. That girl was an expert. This wasn’t her first lift. And maybe they’ll have a package on her.”

“And then?”

“Then I’m going to look her up and have a talk with her. By the time anybody gets curious about what I was looking for, I should have enough to satisfy them.”

“I’ll meet you at headquarters in Identification in twenty minutes.”

“Wait a minute, Muggs, you can’t—” He broke off when he realized he was talking to a dead wire. For the second time that night he expressed his opinion of women who hung up in the middle of a conversation. He debated the advisability of calling her back, ruefully decided that she wouldn’t even answer the phone, hung up.

6.

The B.C.I. (Bureau of Criminal Identification) at Police Headquarters is located on the first floor. Johnny Liddell walked in, consulted the huge chart on the wall on which are listed all sixty-two varieties of crime encountered by the department. The crimes are listed alphabetically, from arson to worthless checks. Each crime is broken down into its subdivisions and alongside each is the number of the file in which known operators in that category are listed.

Pickpockets, male and female, were listed in Files D and E. The area in which the files are located are known to the public as the Rogues' Gallery, to members of the department as the Gallery and to the experts as the MO file.

Lieutenant Samuels, in charge of the Gallery on the night shift, looked up incuriously as Johnny Liddell walked in, watched him cross to the desk. "Long time since you gave us some business, Johnny," he greeted him. "Whose yellow sheet are you after?"

Liddell frowned. "Just browsing, Sammy. Mind if I take a look through the pickpocket files?"

"If that's the way you get your jollies," the lieutenant shrugged. "Be my guest."

"Thanks." Liddell walked into the huge room filled with steel filing cabinets, whose drawers contained front and profile pictures of every criminal ever to pass through the hands of the department.

Files D and E were broken down by sex and height. Liddell visualized the little reddish blonde who'd accosted him in the station, estimated her height at five feet four inches. He pulled out the drawer devoted to female pickpockets of about five feet four inches, started flipping through the cards.

He was halfway through the drawer when Muggsy Kiely walked in. She stood for a moment talking to the lieutenant at the desk in the anteroom, then walked in to join Liddell.

"Any luck?" she greeted him.

"Not yet." He continued to flip through the cards. When he finished the five-foot-four-inch file with no make, he growled under his breath, slammed the drawer shut. On the chance that he had mistaked her height, he turned to the five-foot-five-inch drawer, patiently flipped through the pictures. He

looked at hundreds of faces and profiles of women of all sizes and colors without coming across the face he was looking for. When he had finished with the drawer, he stared glumly at Muggsy, shook his head.

“She certainly was no taller than that. Our only hope is that she was shorter and wearing spikes.” He pulled open the file on female pickpockets of five-feet-three inches. Halfway through the file, he stopped, stared at a familiar face and profile.

The card identified the woman as Lorna Vale, alias Laura Valentine, age twenty-five, height five-feet-three inches, weight 112 pounds. It listed two convictions for pickpocketing and three nolle prossed indictments for extortion.

Muggsy read the information over Liddell’s shoulder, raised her eyebrows. “Well, our little lady was a fairly ripe character. Extortion. You think maybe she’s behind the shake herself?”

Liddell closed the drawer, shook his head. “When I told her how much was involved, she really sounded shook up. No, my guess is that she was working with someone who was holding out on her.” He checked his watch. It was almost ten o’clock. “She’s supposed to call back at ten, but she’s probably too busy cutting herself into the operation or going in business for herself. We’ll check my answering service, but the way it looks, we’re going to have to go looking for her instead of having her come to us.”

“Where do you start looking?”

“In every rathole in town, from the sound of it.” He led the way back to Lieutenant Samuels’ desk. “Thanks for the use of the hall, Sammy.”

The man behind the desk nodded. “Any time.” He eyed Liddell curiously. “Quite a season on female dips, looks like.”

Liddell assumed an air of innocence. “That so?”

The lieutenant nodded. “First the *Dispatch* runs a notice to some woman who latched onto somebody’s wallet. Then Liddell comes around looking through the files on known female pickpockets. And who comes with him? Ronnie Kiely from the *Dispatch*. How do you like that for a coincidence?”

“Quite a coincidence,” Liddell conceded. “Well, we’ll be seeing you, Sammy.” He took Muggsy Kiely by the elbow, piloted her toward the outside corridor.

“He sure put two and two together to get six,” the redheaded reporter commented. “You don’t suppose the department will start asking questions

and getting in our way?”

Liddell grunted. “Maybe, but I doubt it. They’ve got plenty of work on their hands in cases where complaints have been made without trying to find work for themselves. I told Jim that if anybody comes around asking questions to refer them to me. The same goes for you.”

“And what do you tell them?”

“I’m a private detective with a client. I’m trying to recover some property belonging to my client. All of which is true. If they come to the conclusion that it’s his wallet I’m trying to recover, who am I to argue with them? In the meantime, they can’t force me to violate my client’s confidence.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Liddell grinned glumly. “I hope you get your hope.”

“Maybe I gummed things up for you, barging in here tonight. I’m sorry if I did, Johnny.”

Liddell shrugged. “Even if you didn’t show, Sammy would have connected the notice in the paper with me checking the female pickpocket file. He’s not just since yesterday and he didn’t get that bar on his shoulder as a booby prize.”

“Now what?” Mugsy wanted to know.

Liddell checked his watch. “We give Lorna Vale or Laura Valentine or whatever she calls herself exactly a half-hour to check in. If she doesn’t, then we start looking for her. Either way, I intend to have a talk with her before Lieutenant Samuels passes the word along that we dropped by tonight.”

“This is a big town. Where do we start looking?”

“We don’t. We’ll use the Dummy. He can shortcut it for us.” He checked his watch. “But first we give her a chance to reach us.”

The bar at Mike’s Deadline was filled. A thick pall of smoke swirled slowly and lazily overhead. Johnny Liddell finished his second cigarette and downed the remains of his third Scotch. He checked his watch for the fourth time since they’d entered the bar. It showed 10:35.

He signaled to the bartender. “Do it once more, Mike.” He indicated his glass and Muggsy’s. “I’ve got to make a telephone call. Be right back,” he told the redhead.

Muggsy nodded, watched while Mike made a production of selecting a bottle from the backbar. He removed the two empty glasses, replaced them with two old-fashioned glasses filled with ice, tilted the bottle over them.

“Good to see you back, Miss Kiely,” he told her. “We all missed you around here.”

“It’s good to be back, Mike. I speak the language here. Around here when they talk about fruit you know they’re talking about apples and oranges, not the leading man.”

The bartender laughed appreciatively, replaced the bottle on the backbar and shuffled down to answer a call at the other end.

Muggsy sat, making concentric circles with the wet bottom of her glass, looked down toward the telephone booth in the rear where Liddell stood talking into the mouthpiece. Finally he hung up, opened the door, dousing the booth in darkness, headed down to where she sat. As he approached, he shook his head.

“She hasn’t called.” He checked his watch. “She’s almost forty-five minutes late, so we have to figure she’s not going to.”

“Then the Dummy’s our only hope?”

Liddell reached for his glass. “He hasn’t failed me yet. No reason to think he’s going to spoil his batting average on this one.” He took a deep swallow from his glass, set it back on the bar. “I’ll meet you back at the apartment and—”

“Oh, no you don’t. Where you go, I go. I’m not letting you out of my sight until we find this kissin’ cousin of yours.”

Liddell shook his head firmly. “You’ll only louse things up with the Dummy. He’s certainly not going to open up in front of a reporter. You think he wants a feature story on how he trains beggars and keeps competition under control by assigning territories?”

“I wouldn’t do anything like that.”

Liddell bobbed his head. “I know it and you know it. But he can’t take the chance.” He indicated her drink on the bar. “Drink up and I’ll find you a cab.”

Muggsy started to argue, thought better of it. She drained her glass, set it down on the bar. “All right. But as soon as you leave the Dummy, I’m expecting you at my place.”

Liddell nodded. “It could take a couple of hours to get a lead and I never could stand solitaire.”

The redhead hopped off the stool, Liddell dropped some bills next to his glass, they headed for the door. On the sidewalk, Liddell flagged down a cruising cab, gave him Muggsy’s address.

The redhead sank sulkily onto the back cushion. When Liddell waved to her as the cab pulled away from the curb, she put her thumb to her nose and waved back.

7.

The Dummy was fat, grotesque; his many chins hung down over his collar, almost obscured the knot of his tie that was slightly off center. He sat in the huge armchair behind the desk in his untidy office in the warehouse building that housed his school for beggars. His pudgy hands were folded in front of him, dimples where the knuckles should have been. He seemed half-asleep, the colorless discs of his eyes almost obscured by discolored, heavily veined eyelids.

Johnny Liddell sat facing him across the desk. He took the cigarette from the corner of his mouth, leaned forward, crushed it out in an ashtray on the fat man's desk.

"This one is a rush order, Dummy," Liddell told the man behind the desk. "I've got to locate this girl before morning."

The Dummy pursed his lips, blew bubbles in the center of them. Finally, he shook his head, causing his multiple chins to flop liquidly. "I couldn't guarantee it, Mr. Liddell. You give me pretty short notice." With an effort and a grunt, he consulted his watch. "It is almost eleven o'clock."

"You have a new shift going on at midnight. All I want them to do is check the newsstands, the regulars, and some of the hustlers working the midtown area. She's had two falls for dipping, three nolle prosses for extortion. So she's been around."

The fat man continued to shake his head doubtfully. "You don't give us much time."

Liddell brought a roll of bills from his pocket. "Not even for double the usual price?"

The fat man stopped shaking his head. He lost the struggle to take his eyes away from the roll in Johnny's hand. "It will be pretty expensive," he said doubtfully. "I'll have to get word to all the boys." He shook his head again. "I can't promise anything."

Liddell peeled three one hundred dollar bills off the roll. "Triple. And that's as far as I go." He laid the bills on the corner of the desk.

The Dummy's piglike eyes were anxious behind their bulbous sacs. He wiped his overripe lips with the back of his hand, sighed. "As a special favor

to you I guess I could try.” He grunted at the exertion as he leaned over, snagged the bills from the corner of the desk. “Give me the details.”

“First, this girl is a real mechanic. This is no amateur.”

The fat man nodded.

“Her package downtown says she’s used the names of Lorna Vale and Laura Valentine.” He waited while the fat man repeated the names to himself by a soundless movement of his lips. The Dummy nodded for him to continue. “She’s got carrot-colored hair, a real baby stare with big blue eyes to match and the way she’s built, no man would object to her bumping into him.”

“A bumper, huh? She works with a stall?”

“What’s a stall?”

The fat man shrugged. “Most bumpers or jostlers work with a stall who stays away from the action. As soon as the mechanic lifts the wallet he passes it to the stall. In case the one who lifted it gets tagged, he’s clean.”

Liddell considered. “She might have been working with someone. She claimed there was some man following her. But I doubt it. I watched her as she walked away and she made no contact with anyone that I could see.”

“A real pro sometimes goes it alone,” the fat man conceded. “Anything else you can tell me about her?” His voice was blubbery, almost as if it was choked by the fat on his neck.

“Her package at headquarters has her height as five feet three inches.” Liddell pursed his lips, considered. Finally he shook his head. “That’s about it.”

“Not very much,” the fat man grumbled. “But we’ll do our best with what you given us.”

“When do you think you’ll have something for me?”

The Dummy sighed. “You’re an impatient man, Mr. Liddell. These things take time.”

“If it takes too much time you might as well forget about it. One thing I don’t have is time.” He stood up. “I’ve got to talk to this girl before the police get around to talking to me.”

The fat man shook his head sadly. “Like that?”

“Like that.”

“In that case, we shall do our very best. Every beggar on the street tonight will be making inquiries. If she has been around as much as what you’ve told me would indicate, there will be somebody on one of the beats covered by my men who will know her. Where shall I report?”

“I’ll be at Regent 5-2314. That’s Muggsy Kiely’s apartment.”

The fat man managed to paste a smile on his wet lips. “Ah, the lovely Miss Kiely is back? I haven’t had the pleasure of seeing her or her father for a long time.”

“You find this girl for me and they’ll be almost as grateful as I am.”

The man behind the desk wagged his head, disturbing the rolls of fat on his jowls. “An additional inducement, to be sure.” He made an abortive effort to get out of his chair, sank back with a grunt. “Would you think me too impolite if I did not show you the way out?”

Liddell grinned at him. “I know the way.” As he walked out the door, the fat man picked up the three one hundred dollar bills, flattened them out lovingly on the desk. He folded them carefully, and stuck them in his vest pocket. He reached over, pressed a button.

“Yeah?” a gravelly voice came from a hidden amplifier.

“I have some instructions for the midnight shift. I want everybody working midtown to check in before they take up their posts. Even if it means being a little late. We have a special assignment.”

“Okay,” the gravelly voice came through. “I’ll pass the word.” There was a click as the amplifier went off.

The fat man laced his pudgy fingers across his impressive midsection, closed his eyes. A smile wreathed his overripe lips. It wasn’t every night that he could get a triple fee for a job that shouldn’t take more than a few hours. With the number of eyes and ears he had in almost every part of the city in his carefully trained beggars, finding a girl with a background like Lorna Vale’s would be child’s play. He squirmed into a more comfortable position, waited for the beggars assigned the midnight shift to start checking in.

In less than two hours, a crew of “blind men” and “deaf and dumb” beggars were keeping their eyes and ears open for some hint to the carrotop’s whereabouts. Mendicants shuffling along Broadway and its side streets were mumbling her name to the members of the fight mob who hung out along Jacobs’ Beach, to the hustlers who stood in front of the flea traps along Dream Street, the queers who worked Forty-Second Street, the

musicians who stood in clotted groups outside the Brill Building, and the bookies who congregated around the newsstands to swap lies about what a bad day it had been.

Each time the mention of her name brought any kind of a response, it was transmitted to the Dummy. Each bit of information was woven to what had already been reported to form a complete fabric. By 3:30, the information was complete.

Johnny Liddell was dozing in the armchair of Muggsy Kiely's living room, his legs sprawled out in front of him. On the table at his elbow the ice was melting in a half-filled glass of Scotch. Muggsy was stretched out on the couch, her head cradled on her arm. The only light in the room was a lamp on the table near the window.

The jangle of the telephone split the silence of the room, jarred Liddell and the redhead into instant wakefulness. The private detective jumped to his feet, started across the room to the phone.

"Let me answer it, Johnny," Muggsy stopped him. "It may be for you, it may not. If it isn't my old man's likely to be wondering what you're doing around here this hour of the morning." She brushed past him, lifted the phone to her ear. "Yes?"

The voice at the other end was blubbery. "I have some information for Mr. Liddell, Miss Kiely. He told me I could reach him there."

"Yes. He's been sitting here waiting for it. Just a moment." She handed the receiver to Liddell. "Your call."

"This is Liddell, Dummy. Got something?"

"I sincerely hope so," the blubbery voice told him. "Your friend Lorna Vale is now known as Laura Valentine. She has apparently mended her ways. She is no longer known as a dip."

"What then?"

"She's now a call girl."

Liddell grinned. "Glad to know she's reformed."

"She is part of a group who use the Hotel Strellis as a headquarters during the afternoon. In the evenings she can only be reached through her answering service."

“The number?”

“Wooster 6-3250.”

Liddell scribbled down the number. “What else?”

“The best address we could get on her is Apartment B, 312 East 67th Street. However, she does not entertain in her apartment and she is not always available for a rendezvous.”

“Sounds like she’s doing a little light housekeeping on the side.”

The fat man sighed. “This I could not find out. I hope what I have given you is helpful?”

Liddell nodded. “Very helpful. Thanks a lot, Dummy.” He replaced the receiver on its hook. “Our little pigeon has retired from making her living with her fingers and now makes it on her back. She’s a call girl.”

“A call girl? So that’s why you were so interested in getting her telephone number. What are you figuring on doing, taking out the twenty dollars she lifted from you in trade?”

Liddell grinned at her. “You can see you’ve been away from this town a long time. Twenty bucks would only buy me a hand shake.”

Muggsy snorted. “You should know.”

“Temper, temper,” Liddell soothed. He turned back to the phoned, dialed the Wooster number. After a moment, a cool, professional voice came on.

“This is Wooster 6-3250, Miss Valentine’s line.”

“I’m an old friend of Laura’s. Is there anyplace you can reach her?”

The answering service’s voice was impersonal. “Miss Valentine cannot be reached tonight, sir. She called in earlier to say that she would be busy tonight. I’m sorry, sir, but I have no number at which to reach her.”

“But—”

“I’m very sorry sir.” There was a click then the line went dead.

Liddell picked up the Manhattan Directory, flipped through the pages until he came to the listing for the Strellis Hotel.

He dialed the number, waited. When the hotel operator answered, he asked to be connected to the bar.

An accented male voice identified himself as “Bar!”

“Do you know Laura Valentine?”

“Yes, but Miss Valentine has not been in tonight. Is there anyone else you would like to talk to?”

“No thanks,” Liddell told him. He hung up the phone.

“And what does all that prove?” Muggsy Kiely wanted to know.

“It proves that Laura Valentine may be at home with the guy she plays house with, and I’m going to pay them a visit.”

“We’re going to pay them a visit.”

Liddell grunted. “Not unless you put some clothes on. We’re likely to attract too much attention, you walking in the street like that.”

8.

Apartment houses had not yet invaded this part of the Sixties. East Sixty-Seventh Street consisted of a row of uniform four-story buildings that ran the length of the block. Down at the corner of Third Avenue there were some five-story buildings with stores at the street level. A few dispirited trees that had managed to survive the grime and the cinders that are part of the New York scene were protected by metal trellises.

Number 312 East Sixty-Seventh Street, like all of the other houses on the block, looked like a one-time town house that had been converted into one-, two- and three-room apartments.

Johnny Liddell had the taxi drive past the house, then deposit them on the corner of Third. After the cabby had swung north on the avenue, Liddell and Muggsy Kiely walked down East Sixty-Seventh Street, arm in arm, like a couple of natives.

At 312, they mounted the stoop, entered the half-lit vestibule. A double row of highly polished brass letter boxes gleamed on the side wall. Liddell ran his index finger along the names of the tenants, stopped at one where the card inserted above the bell read "Valentine." Beneath the name it said "2B."

The door to the hallway was closed, yielded easily to the strip of celluloid Liddell applied to it. He and the redhead stepped into the hallway, closed the door behind them. The inner hall was dimly lighted, breathing softly with the sound of its sleeping tenants.

Liddell led the way to the second floor, paused at the top of the steps, placed his finger to his lips. 2B was at the end of the hall, in the rear of the building. Muggsy followed him down the hall, watched while he put his ear to the door.

He shook his head, listened again. He reached down for the knob, it turned easily in his hand. He frowned at Muggsy, pushed the door open a few inches. The room inside was in complete darkness. He listened for some sound of occupancy, strained his eyes against the wall of darkness. Finally, he slipped inside the apartment, waited until Muggsy was inside alongside him, closed the door. Liddell fumbled along the wall until he located the light switch, flipped it on. The ceiling fixture spilled bright light into the room. It was a comfortably furnished living room, a copy of the *Dispatch* lay on the big couch against the wall.

Two doors opened off the living room, a curtained alcove served as a kitchen. Liddell tried the nearest closed door. It turned out to be a lavatory. The second door opened on a bedroom.

Liddell switched on the light, sucked his breath in through his teeth. He was too late to stop Muggsy from looking over his shoulder. The redheaded reporter gasped, tried to swallow her fist. The color drained from her face, she turned her head away from the thing in the bedroom.

Laura Valentine lay on the bed, her startling blue eyes staring at him unblinkingly. One leg dangled off the side of the couch, the other was bent up under her. The beauty of her face was destroyed by a protruding tongue and the angry, discolored bruises around her throat.

Liddell walked into the bedroom, put the back of his hand against the dead girl's cheek. It was already cold. He straightened up, looked around the room, saw no signs of anything having been disturbed. He walked over to the dresser, pulled open the top drawer, made a hasty search. He started on the second drawer when Muggsy appeared in the doorway. Her makeup was a garish smear against the pallor of her face. She kept her eyes averted from the dead girl.

“Let's get out of here, Johnny.”

Liddell nodded. “As soon as I find my wallet—”

He broke off at the sound of a siren approaching, swore softly.

“Maybe you're right. Maybe we better get out,” he told her. He crossed the bedroom, caught Muggsy by the arm when she headed for the apartment door.

“Not that way. They'll be coming up the stairs.” He snapped off the light, turned the key in the lock on the inside of the door. “That'll give us a few minutes and we're going to need every minute we can get.” He led the way to the living room window, threw it up.

The redhead clambered out onto the landing of the fire escape beyond. Liddell followed, closed the window after him. He caught her by the arm, started down the steps toward the backyard below on a run.

From the room they had just left, they could hear the sound of pounding on the door.

Liddell had just dropped Muggsy from the first landing to the courtyard when they heard the smashing of the door.

“If you ever ran, run now,” Liddell told her tensely. They started across the courtyard, headed for the wooden door that led to an alley beyond.

They had just reached it when the light went on in the living room. A head and shoulders were silhouetted at the window above. There was a shout from the man in the window. Liddell ignored it, pulled open the alley door, pushed Muggsy through, she tripped, fell to her knees. Liddell followed slamming the door behind him. He stumbled over her, sprawled headlong in the alley.

There was a number of sharp barks and ugly, jagged holes ripped through the planking of the door. Liddell got up, pulled the redhead to her feet. “Keep low, but keep coming,” Liddell murmured. He caught her by the hand, headed down the alley to the street beyond. “It’s not far now,” he encouraged. “All we have to do—”

“Don’t move! Either of you,” a harsh voice ordered.

Liddell looked around, saw no one. He started to inch toward the shadows of the building, there was a sharp crack, a slug bit into the ground in front of his foot, ricocheted off the cement.

Liddell froze.

“Don’t make me shoot you, mister,” the voice warned.

Liddell located the source of the voice as a shadow in the first-floor window of the house next to the alley. There was a metallic glint in the man’s hand, and the sound of the ricocheting bullet in Liddell’s ears that persuaded him to obey orders.

There was the sound of running feet from the yard behind. The alley door slammed open and a patrolman, gun in hand, ran into the alley. He stopped short as the sight of Liddell and the girl standing motionless, covered them with his service revolver.

The man in the window leaned out. “I heard the shooting and the shouting. When they busted into the alley, I figured somebody wanted to talk to them.”

“You’re damn right we do. There’s a dead girl in the apartment they just left.” He squinted up at the window. “How come the artillery?”

“I’m in the job, too. Brinkman, Twenty-Fifth Precinct. I’m doing the eight-to-four.”

The cop in the alley managed a grin. “Lucky for us. Glad to have you on the team. Keep them covered while I see if he’s heavy.”

“Sure thing.”

The uniformed patrolman turned to Liddell. “Okay. Face the wall. Now spread your feet, lean your hands against the wall and keep backing up until I tell you to stop.”

Liddell flattened his hands against the wall, backed up until his full weight was on his hands. The patrolman put one foot in front of Liddell’s leg so he could pull it out from under him at a false move. Then, with a sliding motion he checked under his right arm, his shoulder blades down to his waist, along the waist under the coat and up to the other armpit. He tugged the .45 from its holster. Then he checked the trouser leg, repeated the procedure on the other leg.

“I suppose you can explain the hardware?” he grunted.

“It’s licensed. I’m a private detective.”

“You got something that says so?”

Liddell hesitated. “Not on me.”

The cop grunted. “You’re building up real trouble for yourself either way. If you are licensed, you were bound to report the body. That is, unless you killed her yourself. If you’re not licensed, carrying this kind of iron can mean big trouble.” He glanced up at the man in the window. “I hate to bother you on your time off, but you want to give me a hand taking these two in?”

“Just let me get into some clothes and I’ll be right down.”

Sergeant Richard Steinberg of Homicide North had a cubbyhole office on the second floor of the building housing the section. He was a tired looking man, with tired eyes, once-blonde wavy hair that had receded, leaving a bald pate that inclined to freckle. He listened to the uniformed patrolman’s report, kept his washed-out blue eyes on Johnny Liddell’s face throughout it.

Muggsy stepped forward. “Sergeant, I’m Ronnie Kiely of the *Dispatch*. This is Johnny Liddell, a private detective. We were in that apartment, sure. But I had a tip there was a story there. I don’t like to take these late calls alone, so the paper has arranged for Johnny to work with me whenever I

need him,” the redhead told the man behind the desk with a straight face. “You can call Jim Kiely, the managing editor of the *Dispatch*, if you want verification.”

The patrolman eyed Liddell with no signs of enthusiasm. “He told me he was a private dick, Sarge,” he conceded. “Only he hasn’t got anything on him that says so.”

The sergeant turned his eyes from the cop to Liddell. “You don’t read your license too good. It says you must have it on you at all times. Where is it?”

Liddell shook his head. “I seem to have lost it.”

“You’re a very unlucky fellow,” the sergeant told him.

“Look, Sergeant. You can’t seriously think we had anything to do with the dead girl. She’d been dead for hours when we got there. She was ice cold. You don’t think we killed her and then sat around watching her stiffen up, do you?” Liddell argued.

“How long she’s been dead is something for the medical examiner to decide. Whether you had anything to do with it or not I don’t know, either. I do know you’re guilty of half a dozen other things that we can hold you on until we get some more answers to what’s been going on.” He lifted the receiver on the corner of his desk. “This is Steinberg. I’ve got a man in my office I want held for interrogation in the morning. Book him on obstructing justice, violation of the Sullivan Law, or illegal concealment of a dead body. Anything that will hold him until the M.E. posts his report on the dead woman on East Sixty-Seventh Street.”

“What about me?” Muggsy Kiely wanted to know.

Steinberg grinned at her. “We’re going to wake your father up, have him come over here to identify you, and parole you to him.”

“Lock me up instead,” Muggsy groaned. “He’ll never let me hear the end of it if you drag him over here.”

“That’s the whole idea,” the sergeant grunted. “Maybe he can convince you that in this town reporters don’t go trying to solve crimes on their own, like they do in the movies.”

“Now you better lock me up for sure. If my old man gets on that Hollywood kick I might just as well leave town.” She looked over to Liddell. “Talk to them, Johnny. Tell them I don’t snore. Tell them to lock me up.”

9.

Inspector Herlehy's normally red complexion verged on purple. His hair was standing on end as the result of constant raking with clenched fingers. He glared at a rumpled-looking Johnny Liddell sitting on the back of his spine, his neck resting on the back of his chair, his legs extended in front of him.

"You've got to be some kind of a nut to think you can walk around this one, Liddell," the inspector roared. "You signed the job, then tried to run away. What the hell's gotten into you? You in a second childhood or something?"

Johnny Liddell sighed. "I just told you, Inspector, the whole thing is a mistake. Why the hell would I kill her? I only saw her once in my life when she was alive."

Herlehy got up, walked to the window. He was making a determined effort to keep himself under control. Finally, he turned, stared hard at Liddell. "If you knew how much we've got on you, you'd make it easy for yourself by coming up with some kind of an explanation. Any kind."

Liddell wearily rummaged through his pockets. "I've had a real bad night, Inspector," he complained. He hung the rumpled cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "But just for your benefit, I'll go through it again. Muggsy Kiely went there on a tip that—"

"Goddam it, don't lie to me!" Herlehy roared. "This is no game. The D.A. is getting set to ask for your indictment on Murder One. Can't you get that through your thick head?"

"He's out of his mind." Liddell lit the cigarette, filled his lungs with smoke, blew it in twin streams from his nostrils. "Even the Keystone Kops who dragged me into the pokey can tell you she was ice cold by the time I got there. What time did the M.E. post?"

"A little after one A.M. give or take maybe an hour."

"And it was almost four when we went there. So?"

Herlehy walked over to his chair, dropped heavily into it. "That was the second time you were there," he told Liddell flatly.

"It was the first time I was there. I told you I only saw the dead girl once and—"

“The arresting officer said you couldn’t produce proof that you are a licensed private detective.”

Liddell grunted. “I don’t suppose I have to prove it to you after all these years. That jerk—”

Herlehy stared at him bleakly. “Where is your identification, Johnny?”

Liddell smoked silently for a moment. “I don’t know. I misplaced it someplace. It’ll show up.”

Herlehy bobbed his head. “It did. You weren’t there when they moved the body. They found your wallet with your identification in it on the bed. Under the body.” He watched the expression on Liddell’s face. “The way the D.A. reads it you went up there around one and killed her. In the struggle, you dropped your wallet. When you missed it, you knew you had to go up there and you took Muggsy Kiely along to play chickee while you looked for it.”

“Just like that? I say to her ‘Hey, Muggs. I just killed a babe up on Sixty-Seventh Street and I lost my wallet. Want to come up and cover me while I look for it?’ That make sense to you, Inspector?”

“Earlier in the evening, you showed up at Identification and you were looking up female pickpockets.” Herlehy raked his fingers through his hair. “The dead girl was identified as Lorna Vale, by her fingerprints. Her picture is in the pickpocket file. Some of the boys on the Midtown Squad have been checking their stoolies. There were a lot of questions being asked around town last night. About Lorna Vale. You didn’t know her name when you checked her out in the files. Yet a few hours later, you know where to find her.” He shook his head. “You’re in trouble, Johnny.”

“That’s what comes of having a thin skin, I guess,” Liddell told him. “If you want to bring in a stenographer, I’ll give you a full statement.”

The Homicide man stared at him bleakly for a minute. “I’m sorry, Johnny. But you couldn’t expect to walk a tightrope forever without taking a fall. I’m just sorry it’s this big a fall.” He reached over, pressed the button on the base of his phone.

The door opened, a uniformed man stuck his head in the door.

“Bring your book, Ray.”

The stenographer’s head disappeared from the doorway, he walked in a moment later with a notebook and pen. He drew up a chair, made a production of unscrewing the cap on his pen, looked up expectantly.

“Testimony taken from Johnny Liddell, a licensed private detective in the State of New York, relative to the murder of one Lorna Vale, alias Laura Valentine. The following testimony is being given of his own accord. He has neither been promised leniency nor has he been forced into making the statement. He has been warned that anything he says may be used against him,” the inspector dictated in a monotone. “That understood?” he asked Liddell.

The private detective nodded.

“Okay. Let’s have the statement.” Herlehy got up, walked to the window, locked his hands behind his back, and stared out.

Liddell took a last drag on the cigarette, found another in his pocket, chain-lit it from the butt. He crushed out the first cigarette, waited for a moment to collect his thoughts.

“On the morning of May seven—two days ago—I was in Grand Central Station meeting the Twentieth Century Limited. A girl, whom I did not know then but now know to be Laura Valentine or Lorna Vale rushed up to me, put her arms around my neck and begged me to help her escape some man who was following her. She immediately disappeared and it was then that I realized she had stolen my wallet. I never saw her again until Ronnie Kiely of the *Dispatch* and I found her dead in her apartment at about four A.M. this morning.”

The inspector turned from the window, frowned at him. “You playing games with us?” he snapped.

Liddell shook his head wearily. “Like I said, Inspector, I’ve had a bad night. You wanted my statement and I’m giving it to you.” He turned back to the uniformed cop. “In the middle of the night I got an urgent SOS from a client who had been approached by someone claiming to be me with a blackmail threat. I went to this client’s home—”

“The name of the client?” Herlehy wanted to know.

“Privileged information,” Liddell told him. “I went to the client’s home and he showed me a photostat of my license which accompanied a photostat of the blackmail material. I realized for the first time that my wallet hadn’t been lifted by just an ordinary mechanic, but that I had been selected deliberately.”

“Who do you expect to believe this fairy tale?” the inspector growled.

“You. The D.A. The Grand Jury. And anyone else I tell it to,” Liddell told him. “Yesterday afternoon, I told the whole story to Jim Kiely at the *Dispatch*. If you’ll get a copy of last night’s edition you’ll see a box outlining the story as I just told it. And Muggsy Kiely can testify that she was with me from midnight on at her apartment.”

Herlehy groaned, shook his head. “You couldn’t have told us all this without us shaking it out of you?”

“Like I said, that’s what comes of having a thin skin. I figured the dip was after my money and that she’d throw the papers away. So, instead of making myself the laughingstock of the town by announcing that I got rolled, I figured to lay off until I could get dupes. The way they played it, they left me no out. I had to go after them, papers or no papers.”

“Why did you go to the Valentine girl’s apartment?”

“She took the papers. Somebody either paid her to do it or she was working with the shake artist. Either way, I wanted to find out his name. I put out a lot of feelers once I made her in the file. Some of them paid off and I came up with the address. I wasn’t in the place five minutes when the Dolly Sisters come driving up, their siren screeching. It didn’t seem like a good time to get acquainted, so we took the only out, a window. And what happens?” he asked disgustedly. “Some off-duty cop believes like the manual says that he’s on duty twenty-four hours and almost shoots my toes off for my trouble.”

“You’re lucky he wasn’t a real eager beaver on the make for a citation. He could have aimed for your head.” Herlehy leaned back, stared at the ceiling. “You’re still a long way from in the clear, but you’re in a helluva lot better spot than you were in an hour ago,” he grunted. “Anything you want to add to the statement?”

Liddell shook his head.

“Type it up in triplicate and bring it in for him to sign, Ray. And have some coffee sent in while we’re waiting.”

“Make mine black,” Liddell told the uniformed man.

“Regular for you, Inspector?” Ray wanted to know. “Same as always?”

“Same as always.”

The stenographer left the office, closed the door behind him.

“Thing I don’t understand,” Liddell grumbled, “is how the boys in the radio car timed it so close.”

“Accident,” Herlehy grunted. “One of the tenants on the ground floor was coming in a little after you. He saw you fiddling with the hall door, waited until you were inside, watched where you went, and phoned in a squeal.”

“My luck is consistent, if nothing else,” Liddell told him.

“What are you complaining about? You’re still walking around. The girl’s on a slab in the morgue.”

The door opened, the uniformed patrolman reappeared with two coffees. “The one with the pencil mark is the regular,” he pushed one container across the desk to Herlehy, handed the other to Liddell.

Herlehy gouged the top out of the cardboard container. “I should say you’re still walking around—so far. I’d like the movie rights to what happens when Jim Kiely reads in the opposition sheets that you and his kid were playing games in her apartment until the wee hours.”

Liddell warmed his hands around the cardboard container, pursed his lips. “It could look bad,” he conceded.

The inspector stirred his coffee with his index finger. “Maybe I’d be doing you a big favor to toss you into the pokey and throw away the key. I hear Kiely has a pretty bad temper and—”

The door to the office burst open, the uniformed patrolman was back with an early edition of the *Dispatch*. “I thought you ought to see this real quick, Inspector.” He laid the paper on the desk in front of Herlehy, stared accusingly at Liddell.

The headline read:

DETECTIVE’S WALLET IS STOLEN IN GRAND CENTRAL

Under it there was a three column subhead in bold:

“DISPATCH” MESSAGE TO PICKPOCKET RESULTS IN DISCOVERY OF MURDER

The inspector raised his eyes balefully from the newspaper to Liddell, moved his lips silently to murmur something that did not appear to be in

admiration. He dropped his eyes to the newspaper, read the article. He crumpled the paper in his big fist, threw it at the waste basket.

“Almost word for word what you gave us,” he growled. “You think the other papers are going to believe that I didn’t show favoritism to the *Dispatch*?”

“Why should they kick? I didn’t damage the reputation of their daughters by staying in her apartment all night. This proves that my being there was strictly business.”

“Monkey business,” the inspector spat at him. He turned to the stenographer. “Never mind typing up that statement. Just get this character out of my sight.”

“You mean he’s free to go?” the uniformed man asked.

“As far as I’m concerned.” Herlehy eyed the private detective balefully. “He belongs to the D.A. now. Deats can decide what to do with him. Personally, I hope he’s able to hang something on him that will let us throw away the key.”

Liddell took a deep swallow of his coffee, set the container down on the corner of the desk. He got up and followed the uniformed cop out of the office.

10.

Wilson Deats, District Attorney of New York County, frowned at the short, untidy-looking man standing across the desk from him.

The D.A. was tall, loose-jointed. He wore his hair long, parted low on the left side, brushed straight across his skull with kinky little curls bunched over each ear. His nose was broad at the base, his lips full and mobile, his eyes sharp and piercing.

“You’re my assistant, Mark. I’d prefer that you handle it. That, after all, is what an assistant is for, isn’t it?” Deats held his well-manicured hands out, palms up. “You can’t expect me to see everybody who comes walking in here with a complaint.”

Mark Jacobs looked unhappy. He was a product of City College, a school where only the fittest survived, with a hundred scratching and gouging for every desk available. He had worked as a clerk in the Post Office while he got his law degree nights at St. Johns University. After that, he had labored in a law office days, and nights he had haunted the Democratic Club of the Twenty-Third A.D., sending out letters, pinch-hitting as a corner orator, doing the million and one jobs a politically minded lawyer must do to come to the attention of the party powers that be.

After the Democratic sweep in 1952, he had been named as one of the many assistant district attorneys appointed by the party. For ten years he had silently played his cards, pulled strings and sought favors until the day he finally made it from the Indictment Bureau to the coveted plum of Chief of the Homicide Bureau.

A day never passed that he didn’t walk past the big double doors that opened on Wilson Deats’ office so that he could visualize how it would look when Deats moved on to Gracie Mansion. Then there would be a gleaming brass plaque and it would say: “Marcus Jacobs, District Attorney.”

And now this had to happen!

“I think you’ll want to talk to this one yourself, Chief,” Mark Jacobs told him unhappily. “It’s Jim Kiely, managing editor of the *Dispatch* and he’s got blood in his eye.”

“What about?”

“Liddell. We charged him with obstruction of justice and bound him over for the Grand Jury.” He licked at his lips. “Those were your orders, Chief, and—”

Deats cut him off with a gesture from his well-manicured hand. “My orders? I was under the impression that you were Chief of Homicide in this office, and that this man had interfered with a homicide investigation.”

Jacobs managed to look even unhappier. It was just as he had feared. Deats was going to drop this hot potato right into his lap. “Maybe we were a little hasty,” he conceded. “But if you remember, we all agreed it was time we—”

“Have you given out any publicity on Liddell’s arraignment?”

The Assistant D.A. shook his head.

Deats reached for the phone on his desk, dialed a number. “This is the District Attorney. You are holding a man named Liddell for Grand Jury action. Have the papers been drawn?” He listened anxiously, then seemed to relax. “Never mind drawing them. Have Liddell sent to my office as soon as possible.” He dropped the receiver back on its hook, glared at his assistant. “I’ve managed to save you from making a real bonehead of this one.” He leaned back, examined the luster on his fingernails. “Have Mr. Kiely shown in.”

Mark Jacobs bobbed his head, turned and almost ran from the office. A moment later, he was holding the door open for Jim Kiely. The newspaperman brushed past him, strode to the edge of the desk.

Deats was on his feet, his hand held out in welcome. He frowned slightly when the newspaperman ignored his outstretched hand, waved Kiely to a chair. “Good to see you, Jim. It’s been much too long.” There was a note of regret in the District Attorney’s suave tones.

“Maybe you won’t be glad to see me when I tell you why I’m here, Will.” He glanced from Deats to Jacobs and back. “I understand your office has declared war on the *Dispatch*. I’ve been informed that although Homicide North found no reason to hold Liddell in the Laura Valentine case, your office has been tearing the books apart, trying to find some excuse to hold him.”

Deats looked blandly to his assistant. “This is the first I’ve heard of it, Jim. How about it, Mark?”

The Assistant D.A. looked unhappy. “We’ve been talking to Liddell,” he conceded. “There were a couple of things we wanted to straighten out—”

“Our story in our first edition straightened them out,” Kiely snapped.

“From my understanding of it, he did find a murdered woman and then attempted to escape questioning by the police—,” Deats broke in.

Kiely turned cold eyes on him. “He was acting under the instructions of my daughter, who was on a story. He had full intentions of reporting finding the body when the cops broke in.” He leaned his hands on the desk. “Maybe that’s why you’re giving him the business? Because we were able to scoop the other papers? Something we couldn’t have done if Liddell stayed around and answered questions.”

“I didn’t mean that, Jim. I just pointed out—,” Deats protested.

“If you’re that anxious to cooperate with the other papers at our expense, Mr. Deats, maybe we should reconsider our support of you as a mayoralty candidate. Maybe the other papers you’re so worried about—”

“You misunderstand me completely, Jim. If I had known that Liddell was representing you,” he cast a malevolent glance at Mark Jacobs, who sighed softly, “I would certainly have taken steps before now to correct what is obviously a grave mistake.” He picked up a pencil from the desk, rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. “As soon as I heard the circumstances, I ordered Liddell brought up here. Naturally, as soon as he explains the circumstances, we will be very happy to cooperate.”

Kiely managed to look mollified. “And the Grand Jury?”

“The Grand Jury may have some questions to ask him, but pending his appearance before it, I think we can arrange to have him released in your custody.” He played with the pencil, didn’t seem to notice that it had snapped between his fingers. “At this point I have a feeling that his greatest offense was poor judgment.” He pasted a smile on his thin lips. “Not an indictable offense as far as I know. So I anticipate no serious amount of trouble in disposing of the matter.”

“How soon do you expect Liddell up here?”

Deats turned to his assistant, who made a production of checking his watch. “How soon, Mark?” the D.A. wanted to know.

“Forty-five minutes or so,” Jacobs told him.

“I won’t wait around. As soon as you’re through with Liddell, send him over to the *Dispatch*.” He looked from Deats to his assistant and back. “We’re assigning Liddell to find the Valentine girl’s murderer. With today’s exclusive, this is our baby and we intend to play it for all it’s worth.”

“But murder is a job for the police and—”

Kiely nodded. “Don’t worry. As soon as Liddell turns him up, we’ll turn the killer over to the police, nicely gift-wrapped. And if you boys behave, we’ll include enough proof to buy him a ride on the thunderbolt up at Sing Sing.” He nodded curtly to the man behind the desk, brushed past his assistant who trotted behind to open the door for the newspaperman.

When the door was closed behind Kiely, Jacobs turned to the D.A.

“You really pulled a first class booboo on that one,” Deats snapped at him.

Jacobs shook his head. “But, chief, we all agreed—”

“You agreed. I didn’t. If your bonehead costs me the support of the *Dispatch* in November, you’ll be licking stamps in the mail room in December.”

Jacobs sighed, nodded. “Yes, sir. Do you want to talk to Liddell when they get here? Or shall I handle him?”

“Haven’t you done a good enough job of handling him up to now? Bring him in here the minute he arrives. Maybe I can undo some of what you’ve done.” He picked up the shattered pieces of the pencil, seemed to see them for the first time, threw them into the basket. “Now, get the hell out of here and see if you can do something right.”

He picked up the phone as his assistant tiptoed out, dialed the number of the patronage dispenser for the party. A newspaper still had plenty of power, but not as much as in the old days. Today, a newspaper was big business. It no longer lived on the number of copies it sold with sensational exposés. It had to have advertising and advertisers needed the goodwill of the administration. It wouldn’t hurt to make sure that the *Dispatch* didn’t go off half-cocked with election only six months away.

Wilson Deats was still seated behind the big desk, an hour later, when Mark Jacobs opened the door and ushered Johnny Liddell into the room. The District Attorney pasted a smile on his lips but made no effort to get up. “Seems like there’s been a bit of a misunderstanding all the way around,

Liddell.” The smile consisted of a twisting of his lips upward. The cold expression in his eyes didn’t change. “As soon as I learned all the circumstances, I took steps to correct the mistake.”

Liddell dropped wearily into a chair opposite the D.A. His eyes were red rimmed, there was a faint stubble of beard along his chin line. “I’ll bet,” he grunted. “That why your boys have been giving me the works since morning? I’ve been accused of everything but frottage.” He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. “Okay?”

A quick flash of annoyance wiped the smile off the D.A.’s lips. “I just admitted a mistake had been made. There’s no necessity for the persecution act,” he snapped. “If you didn’t break a number of laws last night, you sure bent hell out of them.” He enumerated on his fingers. “Breaking and entering—”

Liddell lit his cigarette. “The door was open. I’ve got a witness to the fact. Muggsy Kiely.” He blew out a stream of smoke.

Deats looked to Jacobs, who nodded unhappily.

“Failure to report a murder,” the D.A. continued. “As an officer of the law, you’re obliged to do so at once.”

“I was on my way to do it.”

Deats glowered at him. “By going out the window and through the yard?”

“I read someplace that you’re not supposed to use the phone at the scene of a murder. It might smear the real killer’s fingerprints.”

A scowl wiped the last vestige of simulated good nature from the D.A.’s face. “Don’t get smart, Liddell. You know we’re in a position to pull that license of yours right off your wall.” He reached over to a humidor, selected a fat Havana, bit the end off it, and spat it at the square wastebasket. “The only reason I’m even considering giving you a break is because Jim Kiely asked me to—”

Liddell grinned around his cigarette. “Asked you to?”

A faint flush crept up from the D.A.’s collar.

“Jim Kiely never asked for a favor in his life.” Liddell leaned forward. “I got a flash for you, Mr. D.A. I know you’d like to shaft me and maybe this time I did stick my neck out. I don’t know who killed that girl, but I’m going

to find out. Maybe you better reconsider doing me any favors, because when I do, the *Dispatch* gets him first. Regardless of who he is.”

The flush became a purplish tinge. Deats bounced the cigar off his desk top. “Are you insinuating that we’re trying to cover anybody?” he roared.

“I’m not insinuating anything. Only I know some of the people involved in this and you don’t. And it could be that this is going to be one of the hottest ones you ever handled.” He leaned over, crushed out his cigarette in an ashtray on the desk top. “I’m pretty tired. So, either book me and let me get some sleep or let me get out of here.”

Deats was working hard keeping his temper under control. “We’re letting you walk out of here because we don’t have anything worthwhile pinning on you—yet.”

“So you’re giving me some more rope to do a good job of hanging myself with. That it?”

The District Attorney shrugged. “That depends on how smart you are.”

“The police found my wallet in the girl’s apartment. Like it said in the *Dispatch*, she stole it from me. I don’t suppose there’s any objection to my getting it back.”

“You’ll get it in due time—”

Liddell stood up. “Today, Mr. Deats. The wallet and my identification belong to me. I’ll need my papers today. Without them I can’t carry my gun.”

“That didn’t seem to bother you last night.”

Liddell frowned at the man across the desk. “I just told you. I know some of the people involved in this. It’d be safer going up against them in a Sherman tank, but a .45 is the best I can do. So, if you don’t mind—”

The D.A.’s thin lips were a bloodless line. “If you’re figuring on going out and spreading corpses all over this town—”

“I’m just trying to make sure that one particular corpse won’t be spread over town. Mine. I have a license for that gun, you know.”

“You have a license to carry a gun. Not a hunting license. We’ll hang onto your gun and papers for the time being.”

Liddell considered, shrugged. “I’ll be going up against them anyhow, Mr. D.A. That means that you’re setting me up for a kill without giving me a

chance to fight back. You better start praying that I don't even catch cold, because if anything happens to me, the *Dispatch* will tear your hide off."

Deats' eyes glared at Liddell, then dropped. "See that he gets his papers back on a temporary basis," he snapped at his assistant. He looked back up at Liddell. "You're walking away from this one on a technicality. But you'll be back some day when we've got you dead to rights and nobody can stop us from throwing the book at you," he told him coldly. "And when that happens, I'm personally going to see to it that they throw away the key."

"You should live so long," Liddell told him.

"I will. I just hope you do."

11.

Muggsy Kiely was sitting in Jim Kiely's office when Johnny Liddell dragged himself in. She looked perky to a degree that threatened to nauseate him.

"Well, well," she chirped. "Our hero has come home from the wars." She grinned at him. "How'd you make out, Johnny?"

He fumbled for words to describe his adventures since he last saw her, settled for one totally inadequate word. "Lousy." He turned to Kiely. "Thanks for making like the Marines and galloping to the rescue, Jim. They were measuring me for stripes until you butted in." He stumbled over to a chair, dropped into it. "I don't suppose you could find a drink on the premises."

"That'll be the day," Muggsy told him.

Jim Kiely reached down, brought up an almost-full bottle of Scotch from the bottom drawer. Muggsy walked over to the water cooler, spilled a little water into each of three cups, brought them to the desk.

"You sure picked up some fancy vices in Hollywood," her father grunted. "You spend half the night with this guy, you drink your liquor nearly straight."

"I smoke hashish, too," Muggsy confided.

Kiely grunted, poured some liquor into each of the cups, waited until Muggsy had delivered one to Liddell.

"First things first, Johnny. The *Dispatch* is plenty happy with the story on your wallet and the dead girl. We want to stay on top of it, so the *Dispatch* wants to hire you to find out who killed Laura Valentine and why."

Liddell took a deep swallow from his cup, felt the welcome warm glow in his stomach. "I already have a client, Jim. I've taken his money and he has first call."

Kiely frowned. "Can't you work for both of us?"

Liddell drained the cup, settled back in his chair. "I'd have to get his okay first. I don't see that there'd be any conflict, but that would be up to him."

“You are going out after the killer, aren’t you?” Kiely persisted. “So who would it hurt if you held up turning him over to your client or the police long enough to make a telephone call?”

Liddell glanced at the empty cup in his hand, made no effort to resist when Muggsy lifted it from his fingers, took it to the desk, and refilled it.

“I do owe you something for the spot I put Muggsy in last night,” Liddell conceded. “But the Dummy took longer getting me the dope I needed than I figured—”

“That’s right,” Kiely growled. “You owe me plenty for that. I went all over town this morning looking for a horsewhip to avenge my daughter’s honor. You have no idea how hard it is to locate a horsewhip these days.”

Muggsy brought the drink back to Liddell. “Don’t let him blackmail you, Johnny.” She handed him the cup. “If you owe anything to anybody, you owe it to me, not the *Dispatch*. So when we get the story—”

“We?” Liddell echoed hollowly.

The redhead bobbed her head. “You’ll be getting the killer, I’ll be writing about it.” She eyed her father challengingly. “That’s about the fastest way I know how to get and keep my by-line back on page one.”

Kiely groaned. “Look who’s talking about blackmail. We’ve got a lot of good feature men here who could—”

“Who could spend the night with Liddell in the interests of the paper? I doubt if they’re his type.”

“I probably would have been better off if Deats had tossed me in the pokey like he wanted to,” Liddell grunted. He tossed off the straight shot, felt it reinforce the glow in his midsection. “I’m making no commitments. Right now, the only thing I have on my mind is a few hours shut-eye. If I stir up anything when I get back on my feet, I’ll be in touch—”

“With me,” Muggsy told him firmly.

“With you,” Liddell agreed docilely.

It was a few minutes after midnight when Johnny Liddell opened his eyes. He got out of bed, walked into the bathroom, splashed some cold water in his face to complete the waking up process.

He walked back to the bed, sat on the side of it, and dialed the number of his answering service. There had been just one call, with a Long Island number to be called back as soon as possible. He promised to make the call, dropped the receiver back on its hook.

A hot shower made him feel almost human, an effect heightened by a stiff Scotch. By the time he was dressed and ready to leave, he had erased most of the effects of the night before.

An hour later, Johnny Liddell was leaning on the bar of the Hotel Strellis with the ease born of long experience. The late crowd was just beginning to filter in for the last show in the hotel's supper club. Already a line was forming on the wrong side of the plush rope that extended across the entrance to the club. Every so often, there would be a whispered discussion between the headwaiter and a patron on the wrong side of the rope. Inevitably, it would be ended with a shake of the headwaiter's head.

In the lounge adjoining the bar, the lights were dim, a four-piece orchestra was playing softly. Most of the tables were filled with couples. Here and there was a table for four, the brand of the suburban commuter out for a night on the town easily recognizable.

Liddell took a deep swallow from his glass, set it down on the bar, made concentric circles with its wet bottom.

At the far end of the bar, a big blonde, her hair carefully coiffed in an upswept hairdo, sat playing idly with a cocktail glass. As she felt Liddell's eyes on her, she raised hers to meet his stare appraisingly. She had high cheekbones that hinted at Slavic ancestry, eyes that were startlingly blue even at that distance, a generous, thick-lipped mouth. A mink stole was draped negligently across her shoulders.

She picked up her glass, held it to her lips, set it back on the bar empty.

Liddell signaled to the bartender. When the man had shuffled over to where he stood, Liddell asked him to buy the blonde a drink. The bartender bobbed his head, walked down to the end of the bar, whispered to the blonde. She inclined her head, smiled.

Liddell picked up his glass, walked down to where she stood. "I didn't want to be presumptuous, but I do hate to drink alone," he told her.

"So do I." Her slanted, carefully-tinted eyes studied his face, seemed to approve. "I don't think I've seen you in here before. I'm sure I would have remembered."

“I don’t get around this way very often,” he told her. She didn’t seem to mind that his eyes were taking inventory of her assets. The low cut of the neckline of her dress revealed the deep hollow between her breasts and served to accentuate their prominence and perfect roundness. “I didn’t know what I was missing.”

The blonde smiled, accepted a cocktail from the bartender. She held it up, touched it to his. “Now that you’ve found the way I hope you’ll come often.” She lifted the glass to her lips, turned the full impact of her eyes on him over the rim.

“Do you live here in the hotel?” he asked innocently.

The blonde lowered the glass from her mouth, smiled. “No. But not very far from here. Just around the corner, in fact. Why?”

Liddell shrugged elaborately. “Just wondering.” He took a sip from his glass, looked around. “This place is pretty crowded and noisy, isn’t it?”

The girl took another sip from her glass, set it on the bar. “If it’s bothering you, we could drop by my place. Then I could return your hospitality by buying you a drink.” She studied him from under half-closed lids. “That is, if you don’t have other plans.”

“You twisted my arm.” Liddell brought out a roll of bills, separated a five from it, put it on the bar. “I’m ready to cut out anytime you are.”

“Right now.” The blonde hopped off her bar stool, flashed a smile in the direction of the bartender, preceded Liddell toward the exit. Her walk was a production. She had the kind of extravagant curves that would one day turn to fat. But until that day came, she was enough to make any man drop what he was doing and look.

Most of the men at the bar did, as she walked by, and she was pleasantly aware that there was a momentary break in the murmur of conversation, then some interested whispers. She heightened the effect of the well-rounded hips against the tight fabric of the gown.

The cool breeze flapping some of the awnings along the avenue felt good after the closeness of the bar. The blonde caught his arm, smiled up into his face as they walked.

“My name is Sheila Nielsen, honey,” she told him. “What do I call you?”

“Johnny.”

The smile broadened. “I get to meet a lot of Johnnys,” she told him.

The building housing her apartment was only two blocks from the Strellis. She led the way through the lobby to a self-service elevator in the rear, pushed the button for four.

She opened the door with a key from her purse, snapped on the light in the living room. She waited until he had walked in, closed the door behind him, put on the chain. She slid the stole from her shoulders, folded it over her arm.

“The liquor’s over there on the bar. Help yourself. I’ll be right with you.” She headed into the bedroom, closed the door behind her.

Liddell walked over to the bar, dropped some ice from an ice bucket into a glass, splashed it down with some Scotch. He walked over to the couch, sat down. He was almost through with his drink, when the door to the bedroom opened and the blonde walked out.

She had changed her dress for a peignoir that revealed more than it concealed. Her breasts looked full, heavily nipples through the sheer fabric. Her waist was narrow, trim, swelling out into well rounded thighs.

“Honey, I’m sure you understand. This is a pretty expensive town for a girl and—”

“Sure. How much?” Liddell wanted to know.

“I knew you were regular just from looking at you. It would be a hundred if you wanted to spend the night—” She watched while he dug the roll from his pocket, peeled off five \$20 bills and laid them on the end table.

“Does that buy me another drink?”

The blonde smiled at him lasciviously. “You sure you want one? The evening’s still young.”

Liddell drained his glass, got up. “I think I’ll make it.”

The blonde studied the heavy shoulders, the trim build of the man. “If you couldn’t nobody could.” While he was building his drink, Sheila caught the neck of the peignoir, pulled open the snaps. It peeled away from her body, she stepped out of it.

There was a little too much flesh on her hips, her belly was softly rounded, the shadow of things to come. She reached up, released her hair, let it cascade down over her shoulders. She picked up the five bills from the end table, opened a drawer and dropped them in. She was just straightening up when Liddell walked back to the couch.

“Won’t you be more comfortable with your coat off?” she wanted to know.

“This won’t take long,” Liddell told her.

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What is this, a pinch?”

Liddell shook his head. “I’m no cop.”

“Then what are you? Some kind of a nut?”

Liddell nodded to the peignoir. “You better cover up. You could catch your death of cold.”

Fear shadowed the blue eyes, the blonde licked at her lips. Involuntarily her eyes sought out the door. “What do you want?”

Liddell shrugged. “Maybe we can talk a little.”

Some of the fear drained out of the girl’s face as her eyes hopscotched from the door back to his face. She smirked slightly. “Oh, you’re a talker.” She reached over, picked up her peignoir, started to put it on. “You want to do the talking, or should I?”

“You’ve got me wrong, I’m not looking for kicks. I want to talk about Laura Valentine.”

The fear was back in her eyes. She backed away slightly. “I don’t know any Laura Valentine—”

Liddell sipped at his drink. “That’s funny. She used to work out at the Strellis. The papers were full of how she got strangled—”

The blonde backed away. “You are a nut.” Her eyes raced around the room, estimated the distance to the telephone, realized she couldn’t make it. “Look, mister, I’ll be extra nice. But no rough stuff—”

“Tell me about Laura Valentine, Sheila.”

The girl shook her head. “I don’t know anything about her. I don’t know who killed her and I don’t want to know.”

Liddell set down his glass. “There’s nothing to be scared about. I just want to talk to you.” He circled around the couch, cut off her retreat to the bedroom.

“You stay away from me,” the blonde shrilled. “You try any rough stuff and you’ll be sorry. We’ve got protection. Big protection. And they’ll get you if you touch me.”

Liddell studied her thoughtfully. “How big protection?”

“The biggest. You lay a finger on me and Joe Palone will take care of you,” she threatened.

“Who?”

“Joe Palone, that’s who. The biggest. You better not try anything, I’m warning you.”

Johnny Liddell’s face grew bleak. He walked over to the telephone, brought out the Long Island number his answering service had given him to call. He gave it to the operator, waited.

Someone on the other end picked up the phone on the third ring.

“Palone? This is Liddell. I have a message to call you.”

“You took your time about it,” Joe Palone snarled. “I called you around eight. Here it is about—”

“I didn’t call you to find out what time it is,” Liddell cut him off. “I called you to tell you that all bets are off. I’m returning your dough in the morning.”

“You can’t do that. I hired you to find out who’s putting the shake on me ___”

“And I told you I wouldn’t take a dollar of your money unless it was disinfected. I tried to disinfect it, but I now find it’s impossible to clean the stink off it.”

“What are you talking about?” the man on the other end roared.

“I don’t hire out to pimps. And if you killed Laura Valentine, I’m going to nail you for it.”

“You on the needle?” the phone roared in Liddell’s ear.

“Laura Valentine was one of a troupe of hustlers you’ve been selling protection to. You could have recognized her from my description of the dip who got my wallet. You knew she was a dip before she started making her living on her back. So, as of now, you’re on your own. And you better start praying that I can’t prove you were the killer.” He slammed the receiver down on its hook, looked over to where the blonde stood, peignoir pressed against her nakedness, staring at him wide-eyed.

“Thanks for the use of the hall, Sheila,” he grunted. He walked to the door, disengaged the chain, and walked out of the apartment.

As soon as the door was closed behind him, the girl ran to the door, attached the chain with shaking fingers. Then, she crossed to the bar, poured herself a stiff shot of bourbon and swallowed it with a gulp.

12.

The phone on the backbar in the Hotel Strellis started to jangle. Most of the barstools were empty, two die-hards were holding down the far end of the bar, engrossed in the solemnity of a drunken political argument. Most of the couples had left the cocktail lounge beyond and all of the commuters had long since run for their trains home.

The bartender checked his watch, decided it was too near closing to bother with any more phone calls. He ignored the phone, continued to clean up his backbar.

When the phone continued to jangle and showed no signs of giving up, the bartender snatched it off its hook.

“Yeah?” he snapped into the mouthpiece.

“This is the way you answer the phone, when it could be business, punk?” a cold, hard voice asked. “You know who this is?”

The bartender was conscious of a sinking sensation in his midsection. Anytime Joe Palone called the Strellis personally always meant trouble for someone. “Y-yes, sir. I was just getting ready to close and—”

“You been shooting off your mouth about me, punk?” the receiver cut him off.

“Me?” A stricken look clouded the bartender’s eyes. “I don’t talk to nobody about business. I never drop anybody’s name, let alone yours.”

“Somebody did. You have anyone in there tonight asking questions about Laura Valentine?”

“No, sir.”

“About protection, or about anything where my name crops up?”

The bartender shook his head. “No, sir.”

There was a menacing note in the cold voice on the phone. “You better think hard. There were no strangers in there asking questions?”

The bartender screwed up his face in the agony of concentration. “There were a couple of strangers in here tonight, but none of them asking questions. Only one of them walked out with a girl. The others stayed in the cocktail lounge most of the night, then left alone.”

“The one who left with a girl. What’s he look like?”

“Big guy. Heavy set shoulders, thick hair with maybe a little grey. Didn’t look like the kind of a guy who’d have to buy it—”

“Who’d he leave with?” Palone wanted to know.

“The blonde who calls herself Sheila. Sheila Nielsen.”

“You know where to reach this Sheila?”

The bartender bobbed his head. “I got her number here in the book.”

“Get her on the phone. I want to see her in the office of the Sahara Club at four o’clock.”

“Suppose it was an overnight and the John is still there?”

“You don’t hear so good, punk? I said I want to see her at the office at four.” There was a pause to underscore the menace. “If she don’t show, I got to figure you don’t know how to follow instructions.”

“She’ll be there.”

“You see to it she is.” There was a click at the other end of the phone.

The bartender wiped the beaded sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. He brought a leather covered address book from his hip pocket, flipped through the pages until he came to the name he wanted.

He lifted the phone, dialed a number. The sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach was back when there was no answer after five rings. Finally, the receiver was lifted.

“Yes?” the voice on the other end was slightly blurry, either with sleep or alcohol. “Who is this?”

“This is Morty, Sheila. The bartender at the Strellis.” He dug a wadded handkerchief from his pocket, swabbed his gleaming jowls. “I hope I ain’t interrupting anything? You got an overnight?”

“That creep I walked out with, you mean?” There was a quaver in the blonde’s voice. “You know what I think? He was some kind of Jack the Ripper type. He pays for the full treatment, then all he wants to talk about is how poor Laura got strangled. I think he was working himself up to doing the same thing to me.”

“How’d you get rid of him?”

There was a slight pause. “I told him what would happen to him if he laid a finger on me. I pay plenty for protection, Morty, and I expect to get it ___”

The handkerchief made another circuit of the barman’s face. “The Big Boss is coming into town. He wants to make a meet with you at four in the office of the Sahara Club.”

“Four o’clock?” the blonde complained. “That’s the middle of the night.”

“With him it’s the middle of the afternoon. And if I was you, I’d be there. It’s a lot better than having him send someone to get you.”

“What’s it all about?” A worried note had crept into the girl’s voice.

The bartender shrugged. “He didn’t confide in me. All he told me is that he wants you to be there at four.”

The neon lights over the entrance to the Sahara Club had been doused by the time the cab bringing the blonde rolled to a stop outside.

The cabby eyed the darkened doorway, swung around in his seat. He brought a shattered toothpick from beneath his teeth. “Don’t look like anybody’s around. You sure this is where you want to go?” he asked.

The blonde nodded, brought a bill out of her bag, pushed it through to the cabby. She got out, crossed the sidewalk to the entrance.

Although the neon sign and vestibule lights were off, a dim light filtered from the inner room into the darkened entrance, indicating that someone was still inside the club. Sheila opened the door, crossed the vestibule with its hat-check alcove. She walked to the entrance of the supper room. Chairs were piled on tables. An unshaded work-bulb spilled a blinding light from the bandstand into all corners of the room. A cleaning woman, dust cloth wrapped around her hair, was doing a half-hearted job of chasing the dust and cigarette butts around with a broom.

At the far end of the room, a man sat at a table, drinking coffee. He watched with incurious eyes as the blonde picked her way through the tables and upended chairs to where he sat.

“I’m Sheila Nielsen. I was supposed to meet Mr. P. here at four.” She consulted her watch. “Has he arrived yet?”

The man at the table shook his head. "I'm Tommy Alpert. I run the club." He gave no sign of the feeling of relief the girl's words brought. He had been surprised by Joe Palone's call saying he would be in around four. It wasn't unusual for Palone to drop by at a moment's notice to examine the books, and at an hour when he wasn't likely to run into reporters or police. But tonight there had been something in his voice that had made the night club manager uneasy. "Can I get you some coffee while you're waiting?"

The girl shook her head, dropped into a chair opposite Alpert.

The nightclub man took inventory of her obvious assets, relaxed. Then the girl was the reason for Palone's visit, proving that he was human, too.

"You don't know what he has on his mind, do you?" She fumbled in her bag, brought out a cigarette, stuck it between the full lips.

He reached over, held a light. "I've got a pretty good idea. And you should have, too, if you've looked in a mirror lately."

The blonde filled her lungs with smoke, let it escape through half-parted lips. "I've never met him, face to face. What's he like?"

The night club man considered, shrugged. "He's a man." He let his eyes roam over her more salient features. "Just a man."

The blonde smiled confidently. Tommy Alpert was right. Palone was a man just like all the rest. That's what she liked about being a woman. No matter how big they were, nor how important, there always came that moment when being a woman put her in control.

A man in a blue suit, grey fedora pulled down low on his forehead appeared in the entrance to the supper room. He was followed by a white-haired man whom she recognized from newspaper photographs as Joe Palone.

Tommy Alpert jumped up from his chair, hustled across the room to greet Palone. "You made good time, Mr. Palone," he bobbed his head. "I guess traffic coming in is pretty light this time of night."

The white-haired man looked past him to the table where the blonde sat smoking in short, nervous puffs, her assurance of a moment before beginning to desert her.

"That Sheila?" Palone wanted to know.

"I don't know her, Mr. Palone. She came in and said you wanted her to meet you here at four. I let her stay. I hope it's okay?"

Palone glanced over to where the cleaning woman stood watching them curiously. “Put her on her broom and get her out of here,” he snapped. “You might as well go on home, too. Lew and I can handle her.”

The night club man hesitated, recognized the menace in Palone’s expressionless eyes, nodded. “Okay, Mr. Palone.” He headed for where the cleaning woman stood leaning on her broom, dismissed her for the night.

Then, he walked over to the bar, unlocked the backbar cabinet, brought out a bottle. He filled a bucket with ice, picked up three glasses, and headed for the door marked “Private.”

He hoped tonight would not be a repetition of that other night when Palone had used the office for a session with Al Longese, a former partner turned government witness in its suit to deport Palone. Longese had never been seen after that meeting. The condition of the office the next day gave some indication what had gone on during that session.

Palone, later questioned about his former partner’s disappearance, had testified that Longese had always said he was long overdue for a rest. Alpert had good reason to suspect that Palone had made a donation to Longese’s going-away fund and that it had been in lead.

He had been careful not to express the opinion aloud, even to himself, because Palone was aware that Alpert was the only one who knew about the middle-of-the-night meet. Tommy had set it up at Longese’s request and the white-haired man wasn’t likely to forget it.

Every time Joe Palone called, Alpert had the sinking sensation in his stomach, wondering if Palone had ever suspected him of being something more than just an in-between man. If Palone ever found out what had been discussed during the meeting between Longese and Tommy Alpert would have gone on the same trip with Palone’s former partner.

Even now, a sudden call from Palone telling him to keep the club open until he arrived sent chills up Alpert’s spine.

He brought the tray containing the bottle, ice, and glasses into the private office, set it down on the desk.

“Anything else, Mr. Palone?” he asked.

The white-haired man scowled at him. “Yeah. Get out of here.”

13.

The man in the blue suit stood looking down at the frightened blonde in the chair, ran his eyes from the top of her head to the cantilever construction of her chest. She made two attempts to start a conversation, both of which he ignored.

The club manager had gone directly from the private office to the front door and had left. The cleaning woman, after a lot of muttering and banging of broom, mop, and pail had followed.

The blonde brought a fresh cigarette from her bag, chain-lit it from the butt of the last one. Her hand shook slightly as she placed it between her lips.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the door to the private office opened, the white-haired man motioned them inside. The bodyguard nodded to the blonde, waited until she had gotten to her feet. She smoothed the tight sheath skirt over her round thighs, crushed out the cigarette. With a last dab at her hair with her fingertips, she started toward the office. Lew followed in her wake.

The white-haired man was sitting on the corner of the desk with a half-filled glass of whisky in his hand as she walked in.

“I’ll call you when I need you, Lew,” Palone told him.

Obediently, the man in the fedora closed the door behind the blonde.

“You were the girl with Liddell tonight?” Palone wanted to know.

Sheila licked at her lips. “I don’t know his name, but I was with the man who called you tonight,” she told him.

Palone took a deep swallow from his glass. “You know the rules? Nobody mentions Palone by name. You did.”

“I was scared, Mr. Palone. I get this guy up to my room, get all ready, and he don’t even want to take off his coat. All he wants to do is talk about Laura Valentine.” She licked at her lips. “Right away I figure maybe this is one of them weirdos who get their kicks roughing up girls like Laura and me. So I told him if he laid a hand on me, you’d fix him.”

“How do you know this guy isn’t the law?”

“I was scared, I tell you. I didn’t think.”

Palone hopped down off the corner of his desk, walked over to where she stood. “You know what this could mean if this was the law? It could mean the government wins its case and kicks me out.” He lashed out with the flat of his hand, smacked her sharply across the face, knocked her sprawling into a heap. “All because you got a big mouth.”

The blonde lay on the floor, her hand to the side of her cheek where it was already stained a bright red. Her skirt was hiked up over her hips exposing a wide expanse of thigh. She stared up at him fearfully, watched as he loosened his belt.

“No, Mr. Palone, please don’t.” She scrambled away from him on hands and knees, flattened herself against the wall. “Please don’t.”

Palone took the belt, ran it through his fingers. “You know something? You’re lucky. You ever hear of the water cure?”

The girl’s lips moved, no sound came out. She shook her head, her eyes glued on the belt. Palone wrapped the buckle end around his knuckles, let the rest of the belt hang from the side of his hand.

“Dames like you, they get out of line in the old days, we drop them in a tub of boiling water. Next time, you think about opening that mouth of yours, remember that.”

He swirled the belt over his head, lashed out at the girl. It made a whistling sound, then a sharp smack as it connected with the bare skin of her shoulders.

Outside, the man in the blue suit shook his head as the girl’s shrill screams came through the door. He lit a cigarette and settled down to wait.

If Joe Palone ran true to form, the merchandise that went in as a tasty dish would come out hash. He sighed at such a waste of good material.

He was on his second cigarette when Palone pulled open the door. “Take care of her,” Palone told him in a harsh voice.

The blonde lay huddled against the wall, whimpering and moaning softly.

Lew caught the girl under the arms, dragged her to a chair.

Her eyes opened, rolled back into her head, a thin red stream ran from the corner of her full lips. Her carefully-coiffed blonde hair hung dankly down in her face, her head rolled uncontrollably from side to side. She seemed to lack the power to hold it up.

Sheila was no longer a desirable package. Her eyes, when she did get them open, were watery, seemed out of focus. After a moment, she managed to get her chin up off her chest, stared around.

Lew walked to the desk, spilled some whisky into a glass. He held it to the blonde's mouth. Some of it ran down her chin. She coughed and gagged as the straight liquor seared its way down her throat.

"I don't know where she lives, chief. I—"

"What's your hurry? You've got all night. She's paid for." Palone threaded the belt through the loops on his trousers. "I'll have Martin drive me home. There's no sense of you going all the way out there just to come back again."

"Come back again?"

The white-haired man shrugged into his jacket. "Liddell doesn't work for me any more, Lew. He's all yours." He tossed a contemptuous glance at the blonde, who was slowly coming back to full consciousness. "So is she." He reached up, flattened the hair over his ear with the palm of his hand. "I hope you enjoy both of them."

He walked to the door, opened it and walked out into the supper room.

Sheila reached up, laid the back of her hand to the side of her mouth. She studied the red smear it brought away.

The man in the blue suit poured more straight whisky into the glass, handed it to the girl. She tilted it over her lips, drained it, handed it back. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "He takes thirty percent of what I make for protection. This is what he calls protection?" she wanted to know.

Lew set the glass down on the desk. "What are you kicking about? You're going to walk away from it. But wait'll you see the other guy."

The double glass door at the end of the hall in the Federal Building bore the words "Treasury Department," surmounting a reproduction of a seal inscribed "Thesaur * Septent * Sigil." Below it, in smaller letters it said "Internal Revenue Service Intelligence Division."

Johnny Liddell walked down the hall, pushed his way through one of the doors. The stenographer's bullpen made up the front of the office, the rear

was given over to a number of small offices, most of the doors of which were closed.

Liddell crossed to a waist-high railing behind which a dark-haired girl was busily transcribing some notes from the stenographic notebook that stood tented alongside her typewriter. “May I help you?” She looked up, smiled.

“Is Rex Turner in?”

The girl consulted a typewritten list on the corner of her desk. “May I ask who’s calling?”

“Johnny Liddell.”

The girl picked up her telephone, relayed the information, nodded. “Mr. Turner will be right out.” She hung up her telephone, went back to her pothooks.

Rex Turner was tall, rangy. His hair was sandy, clipped short. His face was tanned a deep mahogany, wrinkles dug white trenches around his eyes when he smiled. He was smiling as he walked from his office to open the gate in the railing for Liddell.

“Hi, Johnny,” he pushed a muscular, heavily corded hand at Liddell. “What’s the matter? Your conscience making you turn yourself in for cheating on your income tax?” He gave Liddell’s hand a firm squeeze, took his hand back. “Come on into my office and maybe we can arrange for you to cop a plea.” He turned, led the way back to his cubbyhole office in the rear. He waited until Liddell was inside, closed the door and walked around his desk. He sank into his chair with a comfortable sigh, reached for his pipe. “What’s the occasion?”

“You boys are after Joe Palone, aren’t you?”

Turner stuck the pipe between his teeth, scratched a match, held it to the bowl. “Immigration and Naturalization is. That’s the Department of Justice.” He took a deep drag, rattled the juice in the bowl. “We’re all on the same team, of course. But they were the ones that were trying to deport him.”

“What happened?”

The T-man blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. “His partner, hood named Longese, was supposed to be the prosecution’s key witness. Dee-jay had a couple of their wonder boys watching him, but one night he slipped out and never came back.” He shrugged. “The deportation proceedings have

been dragging along ever since.” He sucked on the pipe stem. “That is, unless there’s been some new developments?” Liddell shook his head.

Turner took the pipe from between his lips, grinned. “Looks like you’ve pushed everybody off the front pages. I read about you playing mark for a dip.” The smile faded a little. “Any connection with your interest in Palone?”

Liddell brought a crumpled cigarette out of his pocket, stuck it in the corner of his mouth. “I think so.” He touched a match to it. “My wallet was lifted for a very special purpose. To shake Palone down.”

The T-man raised his eyebrows. “That’s no way for a man to break ninety.”

“Or a woman, either,” Liddell told him glumly. “You probably read that the girl who did lift my wallet was murdered the next night. But what you didn’t read and what no one knows yet is that this girl, Laura Valentine or Lorna Vale, whatever you want to call her, paid protection money to Palone. She was part of a stable of hustlers he operates out of the Hotel Strellis.”

Turner considered for a moment, reached for his phone, stopped with his hand on it. “You can prove this?”

“Not your kind of proof. But good enough for me.”

The man behind the desk looked disappointed. “We have plenty of things we know Palone has his fingers in, but none that we can prove. Palone made a monkey out of the Federal D.A. last time. This time he won’t go up against Palone unless he has him dead to rights.” He eyed Liddell curiously. “How come you come to Treasury? You know Immigration and Naturalization is under the Department of Justice.”

“You didn’t ask me how they were going to shake Palone down.”

“Okay, Mr. Bones. How were they going to shake Palone down?”

“They sent him a photostat of a ledger page. The entries read like telephone numbers. Sounds to me like a second set of books for some of Palone’s enterprises.”

Turner sighed. “We’ve been on the trail of that legendary second set of books for years. If there ever was one, it’s been burned by now.”

“Not this one page,” Liddell told him.

“You actually saw this page?”

Liddell nodded. "It was a photostat, sent along with a photostat of my license."

The T-man frowned. "What was that for?"

"I was supposed to be the guy pulling the shake. The real shake artist probably wanted to see how Palone reacted. If he didn't get tough, the shake artist would probably try to hire me as go-between. If he did get tough, it would be my head that would wear the bumps."

"Do you really think there is a second set of books still in existence?"

"Palone must think so. He hired me to find the guy who has them. Paid a thousand retainer."

Disappointment washed out the interest on the T-man's face. "You're working for him?"

Liddell shook his head. "I sent back his retainer by registered mail the first thing this morning. Second thing this morning I had to keep my secretary from pulling out all her hair when she found out what I did—"

Turner grinned. "Probably had it all spent for crazy things like back salary, overdue rent, stuff like that."

"Probably."

The T-man sucked on his pipe, found that it had gone out. He tapped out the dottle into the oversized ashtray on his desk. "So now what?"

"Yesterday afternoon, the *Dispatch* offered to retain me to find the Valentine girl's killer. I figure that when I do, I'm more than likely to turn up that second set of books."

"How does that follow?"

Liddell took a deep drag on his cigarette, blew the smoke at the ceiling. "Well, the way I see it, someone hired Laura Valentine to cop my wallet. When she did it, she didn't know what he intended to do with it. When the notice appeared in the *Dispatch*, she learned about the shake for the first time. When she called me, I told her how much was involved."

"She called you?"

Liddell nodded. "Around seven the night she was murdered. She was supposed to call back at ten. I never heard from her again."

Turner tapped the pipe stem against his teeth. "You figure she wanted a bigger cut and the shake artist killed her?"

Liddell nodded. "So he's the boy who has the second set of books."

Turner considered, nodded cautiously. "And?"

Liddell shrugged. "Naturally, I plan to cooperate with you boys by turning them over."

Turner sighed. "Get to the point. What is this going to cost us?"

"I'll expect you to cooperate in return. I want a chance to examine all of the reports made by the men who investigated Palone, any statements made by Longese, his partner, before he disappeared—"

Turner filled his pipe bowl with rough cut tobacco, tamped it down with his thumb. "I don't think the Dee-jay boys will play with those rules."

Liddell took a deep drag on his cigarette, shrugged. "Then they can't be very anxious to nail that deportation rap on Palone."

"Don't you believe it," Turner grinned glumly. "They want that so bad they can almost taste it." He stuck the pipe stem between his teeth, chewed on it. "But they've got some kind of a rule in Immigration and Naturalization that nobody but the person involved can have access to the confidential information in the files."

"So Palone gets to walk away from it on a technicality. Doesn't it matter that a government witness got knocked off?"

"You can prove that Longese is dead? Nobody else has been able to."

"That's where my way of doing business has it all over yours. Me, if a guy who can put a killer like Palone out of business, suddenly disappears, and is never heard from again, that's all the proof I need. You guys, you've got to have a body, you've got to have a witness and even if the guy has a hole in his head you could drop a basketball into, you guys have to have an autopsy to make sure he didn't die of old age." He got to his feet. "Sorry to have wasted your time, Rex."

"Stop getting so hotheaded." The T-man held the flame of a wooden match to the bowl of his pipe, smoked thoughtfully for a moment. "I'm not promising anything, you understand. But let me see what I can do. They're pretty narrow-minded about anyone who tries to cut through the red tape over there in I and N, but they're also pretty narrow-minded about characters who erase their star witnesses. Where can I reach you late this afternoon?"

"From here I'm going to the *Dispatch* to take Jim Kiely up on his offer. From there, I'm going to my office. Try me there. If I have to go out, Pinky

will know where to find me.”

The T-man nodded, stood up. He shoved his hand across the desk at Liddell. “I’ll be in touch.” He watched thoughtfully as Liddell walked out of the office, closed the door behind him. Then he sat down in his chair, planned his approach. Finally, he picked up his telephone. “Honey, see if you can get me Les Willets over at the Department of Justice,” he told the switchboard girl.

14.

Jim Kiely sat across the table from Johnny Liddell in a rear booth in Mike's Deadline Cafe. His long, thin nose was practically twitching with eagerness as he smoked with short, nervous puffs.

"Maybe the girl will talk," he suggested. "Maybe she'll testify that Palone is still running the call girl racket." He rolled his eyes in ecstasy as he visualized the headlines. "Brother, what a beat that would be!"

Liddell shook his head. "In the first place, we'd need more than just her unsupported word. In the second place, if she agreed to finger him, she wouldn't be around long enough to make her identification stick." He lifted his glass from the table, slowly swirled the liquor in it around the sides. "What we really have to find out is who has that second set of books. We don't find that out until we find out who killed Laura Valentine." He glanced up at Kiely. "And I don't even know where the hell to start looking."

Kiely looked unhappy. "You're not going to lay down on me, are you, Johnny? We got something going real good for us on that story. We've been out in front ever since you lost your wallet. I don't want to let it slip away from us." He tugged a folded newspaper from his side pocket, opened it up, and spread it on the table. "You can see the play we're giving it, but I can't keep it up on the top of the page with fluff. We've got to get some meat."

Liddell nodded glumly. "You'll get your meat. Nice and red." He tilted his glass over his mouth, drained it, set it down. "What do you know about Al Longese?"

Kiely folded the paper, stuck it back into his pocket. He leaned back against the wall of the booth, took a thoughtful drag on his pipe. Liddell could almost see the drawers in the filing cabinet that was the newspaperman's brain opening as he sorted through them for the information.

"Longese was a partner of Joe Palone's in the old days. Then they had some kind of a falling-out and Al started running the Club Sahara." He sucked ruminatingly on the pipe. "Then the roof fell in on Longese. The Feds moved in on an old tax rap and he lost the club. Guy named Tommy Alpert took it over. We heard rumbles that Alpert was really fronting for Palone, but we couldn't prove it."

"Longese facing deportation proceedings, too?"

Kiely shook his head. “They couldn’t make that stick. Al was born down on the East Side. No, they had him measured for a cell up in Danbury.”

Liddell shook his head. “I must have missed the story about it.”

Kiely shrugged. “We didn’t play it up too much. Income tax prosecutions don’t sell papers. Most of the readers are on the side of the guy in front of the gun, so we keep it down to a couple of inches on an inside page.”

Liddell caught the eye of a waiter, signaled for two refills.

“Then the word is out that the Feds are getting ready to wrap Palone up in a nice neat package and ship him back to Naples. And Longese is going to be a star witness for the prosecution.” He shook his head. “He must have known that was just like walking out a twenty-story window.”

Liddell waited until the waiter had removed the two empty glasses in front of them, substituted two fresh drinks. When he had moved out of earshot, “Way it looks now, Longese had some old records that could hang Palone with the income tax boys. He probably was counting on the fact that Palone wouldn’t do anything to him while he still had the records.”

“But he was going to testify. What did Palone have to lose?” Kiely argued.

“Was he?” Liddell wanted to know.

The newspaperman frowned. “What do you mean, was he? I just told you he was the star witness for the prosecution.”

“And if he doesn’t testify, what happens?”

“The government’s case folds up like an accordion.”

Liddell nodded. “Right. So the Feds have a guard on him. Why? To keep others from getting to him or to keep him from getting to others?”

Kiely looked thoughtful, pursed his lips.

“So, one night he slips away from his guards,” Liddell continued. “That means whoever he saw that night, he wanted to see. My guess is that he’s using the government to soften Palone up for a shake. He has these records. He can sell them back to Palone for enough to square the tax rap against him and everybody walks away from it.”

Kiely whistled noiselessly. “Then where is he?”

Liddell shrugged. “Dead, probably. Palone never had any intention of buying the records back. He probably tried to beat them out of Longese and maybe leaned a little too hard and put Al out for good.”

“Nobody’s ever found Al’s body or any proof that he’s dead,” Kiely pointed out. “Maybe he’s the one who’s trying to shake Joe now.”

“It could be,” Liddell conceded, “but I doubt it. If Al were still alive, he’d be the first one Palone would be after. The fact that he didn’t even consider him a possibility is proof to me that he knows where Al is and that Al is in no condition to pull the shake.”

The newspaperman’s nose was twitching again. “If there are records like that still around, you know what a beat we’d score if we could turn them up?” He raked his fingers through his hair. “There’d be a Pulitzer in it for any paper that put Palone behind bars or out of the country. Johnny, there’d be a five thousand dollar bonus in it for you if you could pull it off for the *Dispatch*.”

“What else do you know about Longese? Any wife, any family?”

The newspaperman shook his head. “There was a babe he was keeping. A week after Al checked out, she hopped a boat for Europe. Far as I know, she’s still there.” He considered for a moment. “She couldn’t have known anything, though. The Feds wrung her out like a damp cloth. If she knew anything about records or anything else, they never would have let her leave the country.”

“That takes care of that end. Looks like the only jumping-off place we have left is Laura Valentine. She knew who was shaking Palone and whoever it was is scared enough of Joe to make him kill her to keep her from talking.”

“You eliminating Palone as the killer?”

“Not completely. But my guess is that he had nothing to do with it.”

“Why?”

Liddell considered. “First, the Valentine girl was no fool. She would never have let Palone or anybody connected with him into her apartment. There was no sign of a struggle, no evidence of forced entry. Meaning that she probably knew the killer and wasn’t particularly afraid of him.”

“Could be. On the other hand, maybe when she opened the door, she found herself looking into the business end of a .38 and she behaved, hoping to talk the guy out of it.”

“That could be. But the clincher for me is the fact that there were no signs of any search. If Palone thought she had the records he would have torn that place apart looking for them.”

“Maybe the killer was interrupted.” Kiely argued.

Liddell shook his head. “I got there hours after the murder. She was already cold. And the body hadn’t been discovered until then.” He shook his head again. “No. The killer had all the time in the world to search that apartment. The fact that he didn’t, indicates that the killer wasn’t interested in finding the records. He knew where they were. Because he has them.”

“Okay. You sold me. You bring him in and there’s five thousand in it for you.”

“Dead or alive?”

Kiely squinted at him for a second to determine whether or not he was serious. “Dead or alive,” he nodded “As long as the records come with him.”

Tommy Alpert sat behind the desk in the office of the Sahara Club, chewed on the unlit cigar that was tilted from the corner of his mouth. He had the bottom drawer of the desk open, his feet planted in it. He wondered how the blonde had fared with Joe Palone and his meatball the night before.

Alpert had come into the office early in the event that it needed straightening up as it had the day after Al Longese’s interview. None of the signs of a persuasive interview were present, the top of the desk had been hardly disarranged.

The other time, the walls and even the ceiling had been splashed with blood. A chair had been overturned and the papers from the desk top had been scattered all over the floor.

Alpert hadn’t been particularly sorry for Longese. Over the years there had been plenty of bullet-torn corpses and cracked skulls that had borne Longese’s signature. There must have been plenty of his victims on the welcoming committee when Al made his debut in hell. It wasn’t Al Longese that Tommy Alpert had been worried about. It was Tommy Alpert.

He wondered how much had been battered out of Longese and what he would have to face the next time Palone required use of the office. He remembered Longese’s warning the last time they had talked. If, for any reason, Al were not dead and Alpert failed to follow those instructions, it would be just jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

But that night, when Palone's meatball dropped by the office after the first show and looked around the office critically, there was no sign that Longese had talked. Lew Harris, on the contrary, had seemed pleased with the clean-up job that had been done.

The next contact he had with Palone was also encouraging. The white-haired man, in checking the books, had made it apparent that he was satisfied with the way Alpert was running the club.

Months after Longese had disappeared, and when Alpert was reasonably sure that it was permanent, he had gone down to the wine cellar. The briefcase was right where Al had told him it would be, in the last rack under the bottles. That night he had visited Longese at Al's request, Longese had bragged that this was his life insurance and that if anything happened to him, Alpert was to turn it over to the Feds.

He opened the rusty lock with the key Longese had given him that night. One glance at the ledger pages it contained convinced him that he was holding dynamite. Hastily, he replaced the pages in the briefcase, replaced it under the bottles. The next time Joe Palone came to the club, he would give it to him and get off the powder keg.

He had never really intended to get hooked as badly by Laura Valentine as it had happened. She was expensive, she was dangerous, and she was highly desirable. Before he knew it, Tommy Alpert was over his head. There were unpaid tabs out, there were gambling debts, and last, but not least, there was the money he'd dipped into the Sahara till for.

He wondered what the conference with the blonde had been about. She must have had some information worthwhile to Joe Palone for him to come all the way into New York to see her. From Palone's attitude, Alpert knew that his earlier assumption that it was an assignation was wrong.

On an impulse, Alpert dropped his feet to the floor, pulled the telephone over and dialed.

The familiar voice of the bartender at the Strellis came over the wire. "Bar. Hotel Strellis."

"This is Tommy Alpert at the Sahara, Morty. How are things?"

"Awful quiet, Mr. Alpert." There was a pause. "That Valentine kill put the damper on things all over."

"That was real tough. Hear anything about it?"

“Nobody wants to do much talking. The girls are feeling real feisty. Ready to jump out of their skin if you even talk to them.”

“That was a real nice piece of goods you sent over to the club last night, Morty. Too bad the boss had first choice.”

Morty snorted. “You kidding? He don’t fool around with that grade merchandise. He wants something, he pays top money, gets top quality.”

“I’ll take his leavings if that’s an example of them.”

There was a leer in the bartender’s voice. “I been saving my tips for a crack at that one myself. But if you were figuring on a matinee, I’ll have to dig you up somebody else. Sheila’s called in to sign herself off until further notice.”

“You mean the boss ruled her off the turf?”

“Nothing like that. She would have been dragging if he put her down that hard. She sounded pretty happy about the whole thing. Sounds like she might have latched onto something regular for awhile. You know?”

“I was sure surprised when she walked in last night and told me the boss wanted to see her.”

“You were! She was scared stiff when I told her to get her ass over there. The boss was real boiling about someone shooting off their mouth—”

Alpert frowned. “About what?”

“Some guy gets up into her apartment pretending he’s looking for a party and he starts asking questions about Laura. Sheila thinks this guy is a Jack the Ripper, so she tells him Joe Palone’ll take care of him if he lays a hand on her. Turns out it’s some dick named Liddell Palone hired to find the one who did kill Laura.”

“No kidding?” Alpert sounded impressed. “Well, okay, Morty, I’ll be in touch.”

“You sure I can’t send over something nice?”

“I’ve got a whole chorus line of my own I have to take care of,” Alpert told him.

“Okay, Mr. Alpert. I’ll let you know when Sheila gets back on call.”

“If you hear anything more about Laura, Morty, give me a ring.” Alpert dropped the receiver back on its hook, picked up his cigar. He regarded the cold, soggy end distastefully. He tossed it at the wastebasket.

So Johnny Liddell was working for Joe Palone. It had to be that way. He wondered how soon Liddell would find the link between him and Laura Valentine and how he would add it up. He glanced at his watch, wondered whether tonight would be the night Palone paid him that visit.

15.

By early evening, it had turned to rain. It slanted down from a black sky, looked like buckshot hitting the puddles along the curb. Lew Harris, Palone's meatball, yanked on his coat collar, drew it closer to his face in a fruitless effort to stave off the cold drizzle.

It was a lousy night in all respects but one. Very few pedestrians were abroad, and those that were leaned against the wind and clutched their hats, paying no attention to the man who stood in the shadows of the building across the street from the entrance to Johnny Liddell's apartment building.

He took a deep drag on the soggy cigarette he held cupped in his hand, consoled himself with the vision of what was waiting for him back in Sheila's apartment.

It had been a long vigil in the rain, but sooner or later the shamus would show up. Lew squeezed back against the questionable shelter of the building line, consulted the wet face of his watch. If it wasn't tonight, it would be some other night. There was one thing he was sure of—the sands were running out for Johnny Liddell.

He decided to give it one more half-hour tonight. It was possible Liddell might not come back to the apartment before he went out for the night, but doubtful. Still, there was no sense standing around in the rain for hours when that warm bed was waiting for him.

He took a last drag on the cigarette, dropped it to the ground, crushed it out. He hunched his shoulders, dug his hands into his jacket pockets. The gun butt in his hand felt warm, reassuring.

He peered up and down the length of the street. Pale yellow street lights with halos of mist did a reasonable job of lighting the rain-blackened pavement. Despite the fact that it wasn't quite seven o'clock, the darkness of the skies, combined with the blackness of the pavement, made it seem much later.

At the far corner, a cab turned onto the street, headed down the block to where he was standing. Lew flattened back against the building, his blue suit merging into the darkness.

The cab driver brought the cab to a slow stop at the entrance to the building across the way. A man got out, paid the driver, and started toward

the entrance as the cab roared away.

Lew recognized Liddell, pulled the .38 from his pocket.

At the entrance, Liddell paused, as if for a last clean breath of the rain washed air.

Suddenly, the silence of the street was shattered by the blast of a gun. Liddell threw himself to the side, went to his knees. The blackness of the wall of the building across the street started belching orange flame, and Johnny could hear the angry buzz of bees. The slugs gouged trenches in the cement of the wall over his head.

Liddell managed to get the .45 from its holster. The wall across the street started belching flame again. Slugs screamed wildly and shrilly as they ricocheted, holes appeared in the thick glass of the doorway.

Liddell squeezed the trigger twice, the .45 sounded like a cannon in the sudden silence of the street. Somewhere a woman started screaming hysterically. Johnny got the impression of movement behind him in the lobby as the desk clerk ran toward the doorway.

“Stay back out of range,” he bellowed.

There was another roar from across the street. An insect stung Liddell on the side of the head. He heard the roar of thunder as his head started to spin. He tried to focus his eyes on the source of the gunfire, found his gun too heavy to lift. It seemed to drag him down with it. He was unaware when his face hit the pavement. The spreading inkiness engulfed him and dragged him down into its depths.

A sickly sweet smell persisted in his nostrils.

Johnny Liddell opened his eyes, stared around the sterile whiteness of the room. The little clock on the bedstand said ten minutes to nine. His eyes completed the circuit of the room, came to rest on two familiar figures standing at the foot of his bed.

The events of early evening came rushing back. Someone had tried to potshot him when he got out of the taxi in front of his building and had nicked him on the side of the skull. He put his hand up, felt a mass of bandages.

“Sleeping Beauty had nothing on you, pal,” Inspector Herlehy told him with a grunt.

“I hope you haven’t spent your evening around here kissing me to wake me up,” Liddell grunted. He tried to sit up, winced as his head throbbed dizzily, dropped back onto his pillow.

“Maybe you’d better not try to talk to him tonight, Inspector,” Jim Kiely suggested. “Maybe we better get an okay from the doc.”

“Stop worrying. How could he be hurt? He got hit in the head, didn’t he? What damage could that do?” Herlehy wanted to know.

The newspaperman hustled to the door, opened it, and stuck his head out. In a moment he was back, accompanied by an interne in spotless white ducks. The interne pushed a treatment tray over, sat down on the side of the bed. He removed the bandage, studied the wound critically. “Nothing to worry about.”

“I’m glad there’s nothing for you to worry about, doc. You’re real brave with my blood.”

“It’s just a slight crease along the side of the skull,” the interne told him. “Looks as if the bullet was spent. Ricochet, maybe.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. I’m worried that whoever threw that one may improve with practice.”

The interne picked up some gauze and a few bottles from the tray. “Maybe we can make you more comfortable with a smaller dressing.” He grunted once or twice as he worked when Liddell winced and attempted to pull away. “It may sting a little,” he conceded.

“It does sting. And not a little,” Liddell informed him.

The interne finished, leaned back. He had transformed the mass of bandage into a tiny patch. “There that’s better.”

“Now can I ask him a couple of questions?” Herlehy wanted to know.

“And if I said no?”

“I’d ask them anyway,” the inspector grunted.

“That’s what I figured. So be my guest.” The interne rolled the treatment tray back to its position against the wall. “As far as I’m concerned, he can walk out anytime he likes. It would be better if he spent the night, but he’s okay as he is.” He winked at Liddell, walked out of the room whistling.

Herlehy turned back to Liddell, who was exploring the patch on his head with the tips of his fingers. “Who was it, Johnny?” he asked.

Liddell shrugged. “How the hell do I know? He didn’t wait long enough to get acquainted. Didn’t you guys get any kind of line on him?”

Herlehy shook his head disgustedly. “By the time my boys got there, he had disappeared into a building across the street. The minute the shooting started, everybody in sight buried their noses so deep in the dust they could smell Chinese cooking.”

“Joe Palone, Johnny?” Kiely wanted to know.

“Joe Palone was out at his Long Island place. We checked him out first thing.” Herlehy told him.

“Why Palone?” Liddell wanted to know.

Herlehy raked at his hair with clenched fingers. “Maybe you got me pegged as a comic cop, but I do hear things. Like, for instance, that you’ve been trying to work a deal with Treasury to get the dope on Al Longese. That ties to Palone. You advertised for the dip who picked your pocket because there was a shake involved. Longese had the what with to pull a shake. So, it adds up to two people—Longese and Palone. Palone was home when the shooting occurred. Where do we find Longese, Johnny?”

“I don’t have the foggiest idea, Inspector. And I’m levelling. If you ask me for an educated guess, I’d say Longese was dead.”

“What are you giving me? There are no holsters in a shroud. And whoever threw that lead your way was plenty alive and kicking. He didn’t intend for you to be the same way.”

“Ballistics?”

The inspector shrugged irritably. “Nothing worth a damn. They were all soft-nosed slugs and they flattened out into nothing. Weight checks out for a .38, but that’s all.” He squinted at Liddell. “You should have some ideas who was behind that .38.”

“All I know is that I’m a lucky guy that first shot missed. After that I kept moving around when he started spitting that lead at me. I don’t suppose one of mine might have winged him?”

Herlehy shook his head. “No sign of it.”

“Figures.”

Herlehy groaned. “For me, nothing comes easy. Anybody else, some character tries for him we just sift out the people whose feet he’s been stepping on and we eliminate. A guy like you, you make enemies so fast if

we tried to eliminate the possibilities the guy would be too old to prosecute by the time we got to him.”

“Maybe not,” Liddell told him. “I’ve got a hunch whoever it was isn’t going to live very long.”

“Don’t play games with me, Liddell. If you know who it is and you go gunning him, you’re flirting with Murder One. You missed him when he made the try, so self-defense is out. Hunt him down now and its premeditation.”

Liddell looked unimpressed. “So I missed him first time out. You know something? I got a hunch this character is hard to discourage. Next time he makes the try I might just be waiting for him.” He grinned wryly. “It might turn out different that way.”

He swung his legs over the side, sat up.

“It’s too soon, Johnny,” Kiely warned. “Why don’t you play it smart and do what the doc says? Stay the night.”

“You heard what else he said. I can walk out of here anytime I feel like it.” He managed to get to his feet, swayed dizzily for a moment.

“I heard what he said,” Kiely grunted. He got a firm hold on Liddell’s elbow, steadied him. “I also heard that they’re saying they’re going to send a man to the moon. That don’t mean they know what they’re talking about.” He lowered Liddell to the side of the bed, watched him anxiously.

“I am a little weaker than I thought,” Liddell conceded shakily.

“Jim’s right. You better spend the night,” Herlehy put in.

Liddell looked up at him, grinned glumly. “You mean I’ve got a choice?”

“A hit in the head like that takes more out of you than you realize,” Herlehy told him. “I probably shouldn’t have bothered you so soon. We can let the questions go until tomorrow.”

Liddell offered no resistance when Kiely lifted his legs, dumped him on his back on the bed. “We’ll get out of here and let you get some rest, Johnny.”

Liddell lay with his eyes closed. “Before you go I want to give you a message for Muggs, Jim. She’s probably pretty worried.”

“Out of her mind,” Kiely told him.

“Well, I’ll get on back to my office as long as I can’t give you a lift, Jim.” Herlehy turned to Liddell. “I’m leaving a man on the reception desk if you want anything, Johnny.”

“Thanks, Inspector.”

As soon as Herlehy had left the room, Liddell opened his eyes. He turned to Kiely. “What happened to my gun, Jim?”

The newspaperman shrugged. “Police property clerk is holding it, probably.”

“You carrying?”

Kiely shook his head. “I gave up carrying one when I took a desk job. Only use I’d have for one these days is to make my coat hang straight.”

“You can get me one, can’t you?”

Kiely frowned. “If you think you need one, let me get the cop Herlehy left at reception and stake him out in here.”

Liddell shook his head. “I don’t want the cop in here. I want a gun.”

Kiely studied Liddell’s face, saw that he was in earnest “Getting a gun in to you won’t be too easy.”

“How about sending me a box of candy?”

The newspaperman started to frown, his face cleared. “What kind of candy do you like?”

“Any kind. As long as it’s .45 caliber.”

Kiely nodded. “I’ll have a box up to you by messenger within an hour.”

16.

Joe Palone paced the floor of his study on Long Island, puffing the cigar that was tilted in the corner of his mouth and occasionally locking his hands behind him. For the tenth time he stopped in front of the banjo clock that hung on the wall and compared it with his wristwatch.

Finally, at 10:45, there was a knock on the door of the study. He stopped his pacing, whirled to face the door. "Come in!"

The door opened, Lew Harris walked into the study. He eyed the white-haired man apprehensively. "Sorry it took me so long to get here, Mr. Palone. Traffic on the Expressway is pretty heavy and—"

"Close the door," Palone rumbled. He waited until the man in the blue suit had complied. "You hear the news?"

The meatball swallowed heavily. "I just heard on the way out. The hit on Liddell didn't take. But there's always a next time, Mr. Palone. I was waiting there so long in the rain, maybe my hand shakes a little. But next time—"

"That's the reason your hand shakes, because of the rain? Or are you cracking from shacking?" He tore the cigar from between his teeth, waved it at the man in the blue suit. "You think this Liddell is a mark? You think he don't know where to come looking?" He hit his chest with the side of his hand. "He comes looking for Joe Palone. And that kind of trouble I don't need."

"The radio said he'd be out in a day or so. Then—"

"We don't wait. We hit him now!"

Lew stared at the white-haired man. "Now? He's in a hospital. They probably got cops all over the place. Mr. Palone, a day or so won't—"

"Now! Tonight," Palone cut him off. He walked around the desk. "I'm a good friend of Liddell. So I call the hospital to find out how he is. Resting easy, they tell me. I ask what's his room, I want to send flowers. His room is 106. On the first floor in the wing." He looked up from his notes. "That means you just walk in, make the hit, and walk out."

"But there's bound to be cops watching everybody who goes in and out. At this hour—"

“You arguing with Joe Palone?” the white-haired man roared. “He goes tonight!”

The man in the blue suit stared. There was a note of panic in Palone’s voice. Suddenly, he realized that the years of soft living had taken something out of the gangster. In the old days, the prospect of facing up to a Johnny Liddell would not have caused such a panic.

“Okay, Mr. Palone. Tonight.”

The white-haired man had himself under control again. His voice was low, cold. “You remember how Buggsy Levin made the hit on Tony Abrams? He signs himself into a hospital, walks out a fire exit at midnight, takes a cab to where he makes the hit. Then he walks back into his room through the fire exit and the cops can never pin it on him. So we do it just the opposite. He can walk in and out of the fire exit, so can you.” He opened the top drawer of his desk, brought out a silencer, handed it to the other man. “We wouldn’t want to disturb the other patients.”

Harris dropped the silencer into his jacket pocket, considered. He bobbed his head, the bobbing became more animated as the blueprint sank in. “It could work,” he agreed.

“It will work,” Palone told him coldly. “On the way in, you drop by the Sahara, you get one of those white linen coats the busboys wear. That way, some one sees you walking down the hall, they figure you for an orderly.”

The man in the blue suit grinned. “You got it figured out real good, Mr. Palone.”

“Yeah. One of us has to use his head. I don’t want any slipup this time,” Palone told him coldly.

“No slipup,” Harris assured him. He checked his watch. “With any kind of break in traffic, I can get there just as the midnight shift is going on.” He tugged his .38 from its holster, snapped open the cylinder, spilled out six shells. He held one up for Palone’s inspection. “Dumdum. He won’t even be in one piece when these get through with him.” He reloaded the gun, took the silencer from his pocket, and screwed it on the muzzle.

Palone glanced up at the banjo clock. “If you’re going to get to the hospital by midnight, you better get going.”

Harris slipped the gun into his side jacket pocket, nodded. He swaggered slightly as he walked out of the study.

Palone stuck the cigar back between his teeth, stared at the closed door thoughtfully. The punk might be getting a little too big for his own good. In the old days, messing up a contract like he had tonight would have brought him in front of the Council.

In those days when a punk committed any of the cardinal sins—failure to complete a contract, welching, squealing, or trying to move in—the Council sat and passed judgment on him. If the verdict was guilty, the word was passed that all eyes go blank, so there will be no witnesses. All ears go deaf so there will be no one to listen to his plea for help or hideout. The sentence is unappealable, and there is no question that the hit will be made. The only question is when and how.

Palone chewed on his cigar. As soon as he got a few details like Liddell and the shake artist out of the way, he'd have to make some arrangement about Lew Harris. A couple of heavy men imported from Chicago or Detroit would be the answer.

Outside the house, Lew Harris slid behind the wheel of the car he had left parked on the apron of the driveway. He stamped on the starter, swung the car around and headed for the county road. As he followed the twisting driveway away from the house, he glanced back at it.

He had been surprised by the repressed panic in Joe Palone. The old man was covering up pretty good, but he was scared of Johnny Liddell. He shouldn't be surprised that Palone was slipping. This wasn't the Joe Palone of the old days. This was a frightened old man who spent too much time hanging around the house, scared of the Feds, scared of his own shadow. There were too many signs that he was slipping now that Harris looked for them.

He wondered what it had been that Longese had on the old man that made him so violent that night. Whatever it was, if Palone fell, he might take a number of the other Organization leaders with him.

Harris had heard Palone assuring some of the others that everything was under control, that the evidence Longese was getting ready to give would never be given. Harris was the only one in the office of the Sahara with Palone the night Longese had gotten it. He was the only one who knew that evidence was still in existence, that Palone could bring the whole set-up tumbling down over their heads.

Once they knew that, he assured himself, they would agree that it would be safer if Palone was out of the way. And Harris had a handpicked

candidate to replace him.

He glanced back once more at the big house. It could be very nice stepping into Palone's shoes. He would complete this last contract, because Liddell was as big a danger to him as he was to Palone. And it wouldn't do to have any loose strings dangling. When this one was out of the way, he'd be free to devote all of his time to taking over when Palone stepped down.

Harris smiled to himself in the car. He felt better now that he had made the decision.

A red bulb halfway down the alley that ran between the hospital and the staff residence hall identified the fire exit. Lew Harris pulled his car into an empty space in the parking lot, slipped out of his jacket. He took the starched white jacket he had picked up at the Sahara Club from the back seat and shrugged into it. Alpert, the manager at the Sahara, had been a little curious, but Harris had told him nothing.

He took the silenced .38 from his jacket pocket, tucked it in the waistband of his pants. Then, he buttoned the white jacket down over it.

He got out of the car, headed for the alley and the fire door. He was halfway to the red light when the door opened and two nurses walked out. They headed down the alley toward him, chattering and gossiping as they went off duty and headed for the staff house.

Harris froze. For a moment, he almost panicked. The nurses walked right by him without a second glance. He wiped his wet palms along his pants leg, turned and watched the nurses disappear into the entrance to the staff house. He headed for the fire exit.

Inside, he climbed a short flight of stairs to the first floor. He opened the fire exit door on the first floor, peered out. A long empty corridor stretched out in front of him. He slipped through the door into the corridor. There was no one in sight, to pay any attention to his movements.

He walked down the corridor, checking the numbers on the closed doors. Number 106 was the third door from the fire exit. Harris stopped outside, listened. There was no sound from inside. Quietly, he turned the knob and stepped in.

Inside it was dim, but there was enough light for him to make out the bulge under the sheet. He opened the lower buttons of his jacket, tugged out the .38. Then, stepping close to the bed, he started squeezing the trigger.

There was a succession of flat splats from the silenced gun, the heavy slugs ripped the bed apart.

Suddenly, the room was filled, with a blinding light.

Harris whirled to the corridor door. There was no one there.

He swung around, saw the man he'd come to kill standing in the doorway to the lavatory. In his hand, Liddell held a businesslike .45. Harris' eyes flashed to the bed, saw that what seemed to be Liddell under the covers were pillows arranged as a decoy.

He raised the .38, but the .45 boomed first. The heavy slug sent the gunman reeling back off balance. The slug from his gun dug a trench in the plaster of the ceiling.

Liddell squeezed the trigger again, the bullet slammed Harris back against the wall. The .38 dropped from his nerveless finger, clattered to the floor.

The gunman folded his arms across his midsection where the white jacket was rapidly being stained red. He sank slowly to his knees, then hit the floor face first. He didn't move.

The door to the room slammed open, a uniformed patrolman stood there, gun in hand. His eyes jumped from Liddell to the man on the floor. Harris lay face down, arms under him. A thin red stream was snaking its way from his body.

The policeman turned stricken eyes on Liddell. "You gone crazy? This man works here and—"

Liddell walked over, caught the dead man by the shoulder of his jacket, turned him over on his back. The gunman's eyes were open, stared fixedly at the ceiling. Underneath him was the .38 with the silencer.

"What kind of work does he do? Exterminator?" Liddell asked. "This was a hired gun sent here to finish the job he botched earlier."

Behind the cop, the night staff stood crowding the doorway, trying to peer in over his shoulder. He closed the door in their faces. "How did he get in? I've been on the door ever since you got here."

"Probably through some side door. Anybody who saw him made the same mistake you did. Thought he worked here."

The policeman knelt next to the dead man, checked through his pockets for a wallet. He brought it out, flipped through it. "Has a driver's license in

the name of Lew Harris.” He looked up at Liddell. “Mean anything?”

Liddell nodded. “We’ve met.” He sat on the side of the bed, dialed a number. It was answered on the third ring.

“Kiely? Johnny Liddell.”

Muggsy Kiely on the other end let her breath out in a soft whistle. “Are you all right?”

“Of course I’m all right. And I’m on the job, too,” Liddell told her. “Here’s a flash for you. The guy who tried to gun me out earlier tonight just came to my room to finish the job. He didn’t make it.”

He could hear the muffled gasp from the other end of the line. Before she could interrupt, he continued. “His name is Lew Harris. And just for your information, the last time I saw this character he was working for Joe Palone. As a bodyguard. I can’t give you any more, Muggs. The officer here probably wants to call this in to Homicide.”

The cop grabbed the receiver out of his hand. “I thought that’s what you were doing.” He slammed the receiver down on its hook.

Liddell grinned at him. “I was notifying my boss. You notify yours.” He grinned at the alacrity with which the cop started dialing. “Tell them to notify Herlehy. He’ll want to know about it.”

The cop favored him with a sour look.

The door to the room slammed open, a middle-aged doctor in a smock rushed in, closed the door behind him. “What’s going on in here?”

The cop turned his back, started his report as the doctor dropped to his knee alongside Harris. He touched the tip of his pinky to the dead man’s eyeball, looked up. “He’s dead.”

“That’s a pretty fair diagnosis,” Liddell conceded.

“You killed him?” the doctor got to his feet, automatically brushed off his knee. “Why?”

Liddell indicated the bullet torn sheet and the ripped pillows. “He paid me a drop-dead call. He thought that was me in the bed. It was lucky for me it wasn’t. It wasn’t quite as lucky for him.”

The cop dropped the receiver back on its hook. “They’re notifying the inspector,” he told Liddell. “I got orders to keep you here until he gives them instructions about what to do with you.”

Liddell nodded. He turned to the doctor. “Just one favor, doc. Would you find me another room where the housekeeping is a little neater so I can get some sleep?”

17.

Joe Palone sat behind the desk in his study, stared impassively at Inspector Herlehy. “You didn’t have to come all the way out here, Inspector,” he told him. “I could tell you all I know about Lew Harris over the telephone.” He shrugged. “He used to work for me—”

Herlehy scowled at him. “What do you mean he used to work for you? Wasn’t he working for you when he got himself killed?”

Palone tried for an air of injured innocence, missed by a mile. “You think if this punk is working for Joe Palone he’d be put gunning people down?” He shook his head vigorously. “Killing brings heat, Inspector,” he informed him. “Me, I don’t need heat. The Feds, they made it hot enough for me.”

“When did Harris stop working for you?”

Palone pursed his lips. “You know, Inspector, I shouldn’t even be talking to you without my lawyer. But Palone wants to cooperate. He’s got nothing to hide. I fired the punk the night before last.”

Herlehy fished through his pockets, brought up a fresh stick of gum. “So the minute you fired him he goes gunning for Liddell. Why?”

Palone opened the top drawer of his desk, brought out a bottle, and spilled two tablets into the palm of his hand. He returned the bottle to the drawer. “Maybe because he has it figured that Liddell put the finger on him.” He poured some water into a glass from the desk carafe, dropped the tablets into it to fizz and dissolve. “I don’t know if you know, but Liddell was working for me.” He watched the inspector’s face. “You might not believe it, but somebody tries to shake Joe Palone down. I hired Liddell to find out who it was.”

“And he fingered Harris?”

The gangster picked up the foaming glass, took a deep swallow, grimaced, and set the glass down. He shook his head. “This keyhole peeper, he can’t find a fat man in a telephone booth,” he snorted contemptuously. “So I tell him to forget about it. Palone has ways of his own. The night before last I find out Harris is the one pulling the shake, so I fire him.” He shrugged. “He probably figures Liddell gave me the dope so he tries for

him.” Another shrug denied concern. “He tries too hard.” He picked the glass up, drained it.

The inspector made a production of stripping the fresh stick of gum. He wrapped the old wad in the paper, stuck the fresh stick between his teeth. “You had no idea he was going to try for Liddell?”

“Me?” Palone shook his head firmly. “I just told you, killing brings heat.”

“You know this girl Laura Valentine?”

The gangster wrinkled his forehead in concentration. “The name, it sounds kind of familiar, but I don’t place it, Inspector,” he said finally.

Herlehy chomped on the gum, squinted at the man behind the desk. “You should. It’s been in the papers for the past couple of days. She was murdered a couple of nights ago.”

The frown dissolved on Palone’s face. “Sure, that’s where I saw her picture. Real dish.”

“Liddell found her body. She had lifted his wallet that morning; she was supposed to be using his papers to pull a shakedown.”

“No kidding?” Palone raised his eyebrows.

“Quite a coincidence, eh?” Herlehy wanted to know. “We figure whoever was working with her killed her to keep her from putting the finger on him.” He chewed for a moment. “He must have been real scared of the guy he was trying to shake.”

“That’s the way you figure it, huh?”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it?”

Palone considered. “According to the way you look at it. Me, I don’t know this Valentine broad. If you’re hinting that maybe Harris was working with her and killed her to keep her from fingering him—” He broke off. “It could be, I guess. He tried to kill for the same thing. It could be, I guess.” He leaned back in his chair. “You know, Inspector, you’re getting into a lot of questions I don’t know the answer to. I think maybe I change my mind. You got any questions to ask, I want my lawyer around when I answer. That’s what I pay him for.”

“I think you’ve told me most of what I want to know,” Herlehy told him. “Next time I talk to you we’ll have your lawyer present.”

A worried frown ridged Palone's forehead. "That sounds like a threat, Inspector."

"Yeah. Doesn't it?" Herlehy got up and walked to the door. "You fired Liddell and you fired Harris. You haven't fired anyone else lately, have you?" he asked.

"I only have one other employee. My chauffeur."

"I'll tell Liddell," Herlehy told him. He opened the door and walked out.

Johnny Liddell sat watching Jim Kiely hop around his office. The managing editor was bubbling over with excitement.

"We're standing this town on its head, Johnny," he exulted. "We've scored more beats in the past few days than all the sheets in town combined. Now if we can only wrap it up by coming up with the killer of the girl!"

Pinky stood in the doorway to the outer office. "It'd make it even nicer if Johnny could read about it when you do," she commented tartly. "If that gunman had aimed an inch lower, Johnny'd be the one playing gin rummy in the morgue with Laura Valentine instead of Harris."

"A miss is as good as a mile," Liddell grunted. He touched the spot on the side of his head, winced.

"What's your next step?" Kiely wanted to know.

"Our only lead is the dead girl. If we can backtrack her movements for the couple of days before her death, we might come up with something." He leaned back in his chair, hooked his heel on the corner of his desk, crossed his ankles. "It's a cinch she didn't pull that dip bit for a total stranger."

The door to the outside office opened and slammed. Pinky turned to see Herlehy pushing his way through the gate in the railing.

"Chiggers, the cops," she stage-whispered.

Herlehy glared at her balefully as he walked past her into the inner office. He put his balled fists on his hips, planted himself in front of the desk. "So you were the character that was too weak to be questioned last night. You weren't too weak to fill another slab in the morgue, were you?"

"If it had to be him or me. I'm a little selfish," Liddell told him.

"You were expecting him!" Herlehy accused.

Liddell considered it, shook his head. “Not expecting him, exactly, but the thought did occur to me that he might try to finish the job before I had a chance to look him up.”

“Then you did know who shot you?”

Liddell looked pained. “You’re making it sound like I held out, Inspector. I made a guess—”

“You and your goddam guesses! Where’d you get the gun?” He looked from Liddell to Kiely. “Neither of you had one when I left and he had no visitors. But he did get a package. A box of candy.”

“If I asked for a gun, would you let me have one?” Liddell asked.

“No.”

“That’s what I thought. And if I didn’t have one, I’d be on the slab and Lewis would be walking around home-free.”

Herlehy frowned slightly. “I left a man on guard—”

“Playing footsie with the nurse. By the time he got around to looking in on me, I’d be stiffer than a lush on New Year’s Eve.” Liddell indicated a chair. “Sit down and get your blood pressure down, Inspector. I performed a public service and you know it.”

“In your statement, you said Lewis worked for Joe Palone. I just came from Palone’s place. His story is that he fired Lewis two nights ago. Lewis was the one that was blackmailing Joe and Lewis thought you fingered him. So he tried to kill you.”

Liddell swung his chair, let his feet hit the floor with a thud. “You out of your mind?”

Herlehy shrugged. “That’s Palone’s story. Lewis isn’t likely to contradict it.”

Kiely looked from Herlehy to Liddell and back. “Then that would mean that Lewis was the one who killed Laura Valentine. It all fits! Valentine knew Lewis because she was working for his boss and Lewis was the enforcer. They get together to pull the shake and he kills her—”

“There’s only one thing wrong with your picture,” Liddell grunted. “Lewis didn’t kill the girl. Therefore, he isn’t the shakedown artist.”

“Come on, Johnny, don’t ruin our wrap up. It’s perfect this way. How do you know Lewis didn’t kill her?”

“Because he wouldn’t have strangled her. He would have used his gun,” Liddell snapped. “You buy that, Inspector?”

Herlehy bobbed his head unhappily. “It makes sense. But Palone has a smoothie for a mouthpiece who can make it make sense to a lot of people, the D.A. included.”

Liddell snorted. “He just wants to get rid of a hot potato.”

“Just the same, I think the D.A. will buy it whole hog.” He glanced over at Kiely. “And this one you don’t get exclusive, Jim. I turned in Palone’s statement to the D.A. He’ll probably be making a general release on it.”

The newspaperman suddenly looked stricken. He swung on Liddell. “What do we do?”

Liddell scowled at him. “We don’t buy. We find the real killer and we make the D.A. and all the papers who swallow that fairy tale look sick.”

18.

Johnny Liddell spent the rest of the afternoon catching up on correspondence under the goading of the redhead from the outer office. It was dark by the time he finally inserted the key in the lock of his apartment. He pushed the door open wearily and walked in.

A man sat in the big armchair facing the door, a man that Liddell had never seen before. Johnny's hand whipped toward his left lapel to find the familiar bulge under his arm missing.

"Hold it, Johnny. This is friend, not foe," a familiar voice cautioned.

He turned to see Rex Turner, the Treasury intelligence officer pouring himself a drink at the bar in the far corner of the room. "Hope you don't mind our making ourselves at home, but you keep real bad hours, and we didn't know how long we'd have to wait."

Liddell snorted, snapped on the light, studied the stranger. He had a dish-shaped face, a snarl of dark hair, and pouty lips. His pug nose was a dab of putty against the tan of his complexion, his eyes were hard black marbles.

"Meet Les Willets from the Department of Justice. He's assigned to Naturalization and Immigration." Turner carried a drink over to the dish-faced man, offered the one he had made for himself to Liddell. "That little shooting fray you got yourself into last night kind of interested Les. He wanted to maybe trade some information."

"Sorry to break and enter like this," a smile transformed Willets' face, exposed a perfect set of teeth. "We thought it might be better if you weren't seen with us if we were going to work together." He nodded to the bar where Turner was making another drink. "Rex told me that you were interested in our file on Al Longese. I'm interested in what you know about Joe Palone. Maybe we can trade."

"What makes you think I know anything about Joe Palone? Anything that would help you, I mean?"

"It's a cinch he didn't send his number-one torpedo after you because he doesn't like the deodorant you use."

Johnny Liddell walked over to the couch, sank down on it heavily. "Like I told Rex, I saw a photostat of a sheet of figures. Someone had sent it to

Palone and wanted \$100,000 for the whole ledger. Rex told you how I got involved with Palone?”

The dish-faced man nodded. “They stole your papers, tried to use them to throw a scare into him.”

“Yeah. Well, I want the one who killed the girl. You want the papers. I think we both want the same man.” He took a deep swallow, managed to come partially alive. “My guess is that Longese had those records.”

Willets pursed his full lips, finally nodded. “A pretty good guess. We figured that he’d produce them at Palone’s trial and we could nail him.” He grinned ruefully. “We didn’t realize how much larceny Al had in his heart. No sooner was it announced that Longese would testify against his former partner than Al started to deal with Palone to sell him back the records.” He shrugged. “That’s the way we read it, anyway.”

“You think the night he disappeared, he was dickering with Palone?” Liddell wanted to know.

“Figures,” the Department of Justice man nodded.

“Your department thinks Longese is dead. Right?”

Willets nodded. “We can’t prove it, though. We’ve torn apart every conceivable place a body might be hidden. Even if it was dumped in the river, by now there should be some trace of it.” He shook his head. “Palone would have to know that if the government witness against him was found dead he’d have a lot of explaining to do. So he made sure it never showed up. How, I wouldn’t know. But the fact is that no trace of Longese has ever been found.”

“Then who might have the records now?”

“Up until Rex told us the story, we took it for granted that Longese was tortured until he turned over the papers and then he was killed. But as long as you’ve seen a photostat of a page of them, maybe there’s still enough of them around for us to still nail Palone.” He reached down alongside the chair, brought up a briefcase. “As you probably know, this is highly irregular. The department very rarely lets any outside agency examine its records. But we’ll cut all kinds of red tape if we can just nail Palone.” He brought out a thick file, laid it on his knee.

“A lot of this you already know, I’m sure. So I’ll just hit the highspots. If there’s anything that strikes you that you want me to go into in detail, just interrupt.”

Liddell bobbed his head.

“Back in the old days, Al Longese and Joe Palone were partners. They ran stuff in from Canada during Prohibition, they had their own boats bringing some Scotch in and hundreds of cookers in Harlem flats making alky. By the time Repeal came they had a big stake.” Willets flipped through some pages. “After Repeal, they owned a piece of a brewery, but their salesmen tried to sell the way they did during Prohibition, with bats and pineapples, and they lost their license. Then they took over a wholesale liquor house and had a falling-out. Longese sold out to Palone and opened the Sahara Club.” He glanced up at Liddell. “Anything in there of interest?”

Liddell shook his head. “Palone had no interest in the Sahara?”

“Not in the beginning. And not now for the record. The license is in the name of Tommy Alpert. But Palone owns it lock, stock, and barrel.”

“How’d he freeze Longese out?”

“Palone kept feeding him credit on liquor until he was in Longese so deep, Joe took the club over. That was—” He flipped through some flimsies until he found the sheet he was looking for. “That was four years ago. For over a year, Longese was owner in name only. He was actually Palone’s employee. And Joe never let him forget it.” He frowned at Liddell. “Joe took great delight, apparently, in humiliating his ex-partner. And all Longese lived for was to get even. He got his chance when the government started to move to kick Palone out of the country. Al saw a chance to kill two birds with one stone. Treasury was leaning on him pretty heavily for back taxes and he wanted to get even with Palone for humiliating him. So he went to the Treasury Department, offered to make a deal. For a clean slate on the back taxes, he’d testify against Palone. Right, Rex?”

Turner nodded his head. “I got a glance at one of those pages, too. If the rest of the records were as incriminating as the sample I saw, we had Palone right where we wanted him. I couldn’t make the kind of deal Al wanted, but after a few sessions with him we worked out one that I thought was acceptable to both sides. He refused to turn over the records to us, just guaranteed to make them available when the time came.” He shrugged. “What we didn’t know was that he planned to sell them back to Palone for enough to clear his tax rap and then some.”

“A double doublecross,” Liddell grunted. “You searched his place after he disappeared?”

Willetts snorted. “With a fine tooth comb. We finally came to the conclusion that he took the papers with him that night and that he was murdered and the records destroyed.”

Liddell finished his drink, pulled himself up from the couch, walked over and freshened the drink at the bar. “You’re satisfied he didn’t leave them with his broad?”

The man with the round face nodded. “She left the country and so far as we know she hasn’t come back. I have a tickler on her file and I would have been notified.” He thought about it for a minute, shook his head. “I don’t think Treasury ever would have let her out of the country if there was a chance she had them.”

“Inspector Herlehy had a talk with Palone today,” Liddell told them. “His story is that he hired me to find out who was shaking him. There was no mention of with what.” He walked back to the couch, perched on the arm. “He’s supposed to have found out it was Lew Harris and he fired him. The next day, on his own, Harris decides to gun me out for fingering him. That wraps it up nice and neat. Herlehy has the killer of the Valentine girl on ice, because we’re all agreed that the shakedown artist killed her. I take care of Lewis so there can’t be any kickback to Palone.” He grinned wryly. “Maybe I should have kept his retainer. I sure solved a lot of problems for him.”

“But the papers are still in somebody’s hands.”

Liddell stared down into his glass, swirled the liquor around the sides. “Maybe whoever has them has been scared off. The fact that he killed the girl because she knew he had the records is proof that he has a real deep respect for Joe Palone’s temper.”

Les Willetts closed the file with a sigh. “Just goes to prove. Some days it doesn’t pay to get out of bed.”

“Depends who you’re in it with,” Liddell grunted. “You’re not giving up this easy, are you?”

The man in the chair slapped the flat of his hand to his forehead. “This easy? We’ve been working on this for three years. Every time we get close to Palone, something happens. A witness disappears, records vanish into thin air. Something.” He eyed Liddell speculatively. “You mean you still think you can find out who did kill the girl?”

“That’s my business,” Liddell reminded him. “Maybe I won’t be able to prove it to the satisfaction of a jury. But I don’t have to. All I have to do is to

prove it to my own satisfaction.”

“I’m sorry we haven’t been of more help,” Willets told him.

“Besides his broad, while you had Longese under protective custody, was he in touch with anyone? Did anyone come to see him or try to?”

The file was open again. Willets flipped through page after page of typewritten flimsies. His eyes scanned the pages, sought names. Finally, he underscored a line with the nail of his thumb. “Alpert. Tommy Alpert.”

“The one who took the Sahara over after Longese was frozen out,” Liddell mused. “They were still friends after that?”

The round-faced man shrugged. “Not bosom buddies maybe. But Longese had to know it was Palone, not Alpert, who froze him out. Have you ever met Tommy?”

Liddell shook his head. “A real nothing. He wouldn’t dare go up against Al, let alone Palone. When Longese ran the Sahara, he was just the maitre d’. Palone put him in charge because Tommy was yellow enough to give a blood transfusion to a grapefruit. I wouldn’t figure him to try a doublecross.”

“Who asked for the meet?”

Willets referred to the report again. “Longese. We had him staked out in the penthouse of the Morrow Hotel in Brooklyn. He didn’t get to see too many people and he got tired of playing gin with the same faces. So one day he called Alpert, tells him to come over for a game.” He glanced up. “You’re thinking Alpert took the records out?” He shook his head. “Scratch it. Alpert was searched on the way in and on the way out. He didn’t take any records out.”

Liddell considered it. “Longese may have wanted Alpert to act as a go-between and set the deal with Palone,” he conceded. “In that case, Alpert could be in a good position to know what happened to Longese.”

Turner shook his head. “We’ve questioned him along those lines but he insists that Al just wanted a familiar face for a gin game. If we could prove he set up a meeting between Longese and Palone, that would be something else again. But until we can prove it, he can stand pat on his story that the last time he saw Al was the night Longese sent for him to play cards.”

Liddell expelled his breath in a weary sigh. “So, if Longese is dead, the only two people who could prove it would be Palone, who won’t talk and Harris who can’t.” He finished his drink, set the glass down. “If Alpert is as

timid as you make him sound, they wouldn't let him sit around while it happened, that's for sure. So at the very best you could prove there was a meeting. But that's not good enough."

"What's our next step, Johnny?" Turner wanted to know.

"I don't know about you two characters, but I'm going to get a couple of hours sack time. Maybe by the time I wake up, I'll have some ideas."

"Well, I guess it was a dry well, cloak and dagger bit and all, us sneaking up here tonight," Turner told him disappointedly. "I thought from the way you were talking in my office that you might have some idea where to get your hands on those papers."

Liddell massaged his eyes with the tips of his fingers. "It was no dry run. I think I know who has the papers. My problem is how to prove it and how to make him produce them." He looked up. "If we lean too hard, we might scare him into destroying them and play right into Palone's hands."

19.

The morning tabloids had the full story of how Joe Palone had hired a private detective to uncover a plot against him. The guilty man had been a close associate and when Palone fired him, the man, Lew Harris, had made two attempts on the life of the private detective.

The more lurid of the two tabs had a picture of Harris' body against the wall in the hospital room. Both papers expressed the opinion that the mystery of Laura Valentine's death had been solved, since she had been the dead man's accomplice in the shakedown attempt.

Joe Palone had refused to make any statements, and a lawyer, representing him had turned down efforts to describe the material with which he was to be blackmailed.

"The fact that Mr. Palone was willing to hire an investigator to uncover the blackmailers instead of paying off is proof that there was no substance to the so-called evidence in the hands of the blackmailers. It was merely an effort to capitalize on the unfortunate persecution of my client by the Federal authorities."

Tommy Alpert read through the story twice.

Palone was serving two purposes with the statement made by his attorney. He was warning the blackmailers that he would not stand still for the shake. And at the same time, he was wiggling out from any responsibility for Harris' attempt on Liddell's life.

Alpert folded the paper automatically, dropped it into his wastebasket. It was his chance to walk away from everything without getting hurt. But he had gone so far, he was in so deep and the payoff could be so welcome, he could not force himself to stop now.

He paced the office for a moment, seemed to come to a sudden decision. He reached for the telephone on the desk, pulled his hand away as if it were a coiled rattlesnake. That's all he'd need, for the call to be traced! Instead, he walked out of the office, past the entrance to the supper room. Opposite the coat check alcove there was a bank of telephones. He stepped into a booth, brought out a handkerchief. First, he wiped the dampness around the mouth, then he stuffed the handkerchief in the mouthpiece and started dialing. After a moment, a cold, familiar voice came through the earphone.

“I read the papers, Palone,” Alpert told him with no preliminaries. He made his voice heavier. “You didn’t get off the hook. You just got in deeper.”

“Who is this?”

“I’m the guy with some things you’re in the market to buy. I gave you one chance. Now the price goes up. \$150,000. If you don’t want them, the Feds do. Now more than ever.”

There was a pause.

“Don’t bother trying to trace the call, Palone. I’m in a phone booth alongside the Expressway. By the time anyone got the number I’d be miles away. This is your last chance.”

“I’m in the market. Where do you make delivery?”

“I don’t. You’ve got to trust me because I don’t trust you. You’ll get your ledgers. After I get my money.”

“You got to be crazy. I should lay that kind of money out and maybe I get the merchandise, maybe I don’t. No sale.”

“Okay, Palone. But I got something else for the cops now. You never fired Harris. He was working for you right up until he died. Working under your orders. I’ll call later. Think it over.” He slammed the receiver on its hook, removed the handkerchief from the mouthpiece. He wiped his face, stepped out of the booth.

He walked to the entrance to the supper room. The floor show was going on on the postage stamp-sized floor. A line of chorines in spangled brassieres and tight satin pants were scampering around the floor, bare legs flashing, bare stomachs undulating. They ran off the floor to be followed by a tall, full-breasted brunette in a strapless red gown. She sang in a low and throaty voice. The lyrics of her song were blue and off color, but she maintained an expression of complete innocence.

There was a tap on his elbow. Tommy Alpert started uncontrollably. The cigarette girl stood behind him. “The phone has been ringing in your private office, Mr. Alpert. I heard it when I came off the floor.”

The manager smiled his thanks, crossed to the private office, slammed the door after him. He pulled the receiver off its hook. “Alpert.”

“What took you so long to answer the phone?” A familiar cold voice demanded.

“Why, I wasn’t expecting to hear from you tonight. I usually check the floor show this time every night to make sure nobody’s letting down. I’m sorry you had to wait, sir,” he added contritely.

“Anybody been around there asking questions? About me or Lew Harris?” Malone wanted to know.

Alpert held the pause just the right length of time. “No, sir. I’ve been reading about him in the papers, though. Pretty tough.”

“You don’t know Harris and about me you only know what you read in the papers,” Malone instructed. “Anybody comes asking questions, I want to know immediately.”

Alpert bobbed his head obediently. “Yes, sir. Immediately.”

The receiver at the other end clicked to break the connection. Tommy Alpert stared at his instrument, walked around the desk, and took a drink from the bottle in the bottom drawer.

It was a little after midnight when Johnny Liddell, freshened by a three-hour nap, walked out of his building, waved down a cruising cab. He gave the cabby the address of the apartment to which the blonde from the Strellis Hotel had taken him. He leaned back against the cushions, found a cigarette, and lit it. The smoke eddied, then curled out the slim opening of the window.

“You read about the close call this private detective had last night, buddy?” The cabby rolled the toothpick he had in the corner of his mouth to the other side. “How you figure he manages to have a gun in bed with him?”

Liddell sniffed. “Doesn’t everybody?”

The driver started slightly, studied his fare’s face in the rearview mirror. One thing he hated was wise guys. He caught a glimpse of Liddell’s strong profile, heavy jaw. He decided not to pursue the subject.

At the blonde’s apartment house, Liddell pushed a bill through the cab window for the sixty-five-cent fare, walked into the lobby. He pushed the button for the fourth floor in the self-service elevator.

The blonde answered the door in response to his knock. She stood swaying in the doorway, eyeing him blearily. Her eyes were swollen from crying, the glass in her hand testified to the reason for the untidiness of her hair. Her lipstick was an uneven smear on her full lips. She looked like she had been drinking steadily since the night before.

When she finally recognized him, she tried to slam the door in his face. He blocked it with his foot. “You get out of here, you hear?” she shrieked at him. “I’ll call the police. I still got some rights.”

“Why don’t you call Joe Palone?” Liddell suggested.

The blonde’s façade of resistance crumbled, she began to cry with hiccuppy sobs. She made no effort to resist as Liddell walked in, closed the door behind him. The blonde staggered slightly on her way to the portable bar, made a visible effort to maintain her dignity. She poured a stiff shot into the glass.

“You’ve got a nerve coming here,” she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “You kill the only guy I could ever go for, then you come here. What do you want, a medal?”

“I didn’t kill Harris, Sheila. The guy who sent him there sent him there to be killed. I just pulled the trigger.”

Sheila steadied herself on the edge of the desk, frowned as she tried to grasp the concept. “You killed him. The papers said you killed him.” She hauled back, threw the glass of liquor at Liddell. He ducked; it shattered against the wall. “You lousy killer. You know you killed him.”

“Palone sent him there knowing he’d be killed,” Liddell told her. “He’s the one you should be sore at. Not me.” He took her by the arm, led her to a chair. “If you want to get even with him for putting your man on the spot just help me to—”

“Help you!” she snorted. She brushed the hair back out of her face, showed him a discolored bruise on the side of her face. “That’s what he gave me just for talking to you. Anyway, I wouldn’t help you do anything but get yourself killed.”

“Or yourself.”

The blonde started, looked up at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Palone told the police that he had fired Harris. You know different.” He pointed to her bruised cheek. “You saw them together the other night. You know Harris was still working for Palone.”

“I’m not telling you anything,” she told him defiantly.

“You don’t have to. But Palone can’t be sure of that, can he? You could put him in a real tough spot by telling what happened that night and he knows it.”

Sheila dropped her eyes to her hands in her lap. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“There was another girl who knew something about Palone she wasn’t supposed to know. Laura Valentine. He made sure she didn’t do any talking by sending Lew Harris to talk to her.”

The girl’s eyes shot up to his face. “That’s a lie. I heard the radio news say Lew killed her. He didn’t. He wasn’t partners with her like Palone said. He wouldn’t touch the best part of her.”

“She couldn’t be deader.”

“Lew didn’t kill her. He wouldn’t kill anybody.”

“No?” Liddell grunted. “I’m glad to know that. He sure could have fooled me the way he kept emptying that gun in my direction.”

“You asked for it.”

“How? By stepping on Palone’s toes? So did Laura Valentine.”

“Why don’t you stop playing that tune? If Palone killed her, he did it himself. Lew didn’t kill her, I tell you.”

“Then who did?”

“How do I know?” the blonde managed to get to her feet, weaved uncertainly to the bar. She found a fresh glass, spilled some bourbon into it. “Maybe her old man strangled her for all I know.” She tilted the glass over her lips, some of it ran from the corner of her mouth to drip off her chin.

“She was being kept? By who?”

Sheila shrugged. “Who knows? She never showed him off. Maybe he was married. Maybe he was ashamed to be seen with her. Who knows?” She drained the glass, set it down, steadied herself against the bar. “What are you doing here anyway? Didn’t you do enough to me, killing my guy?”

“I’m trying to help. You want him to be blamed for a killing he didn’t do? If I can find the real killer I can clear his name.”

“That going to bring him back to me? Answer me that, is that going to bring him back?”

“No. But it will put the killer where he can’t kill any other girls. You, for instance.”

“You’re just trying to scare me,” the blonde snorted. “Why should anyone want to kill me? I don’t know anything about Laura Valentine. I don’t know anything about Joe Palone.”

“You know that. But maybe the killer can’t be too sure. There’s one way he can be sure. If you’re dead. You’ll be doing yourself a favor if you tell me anything you know about Laura Valentine that—”

“I don’t want to do any favors for anybody. You especially.” She headed unsteadily for the bedroom, closed the door after her.

Liddell swore softly under his breath, started to leave when there was a floor shaking thud in the bedroom. He tugged the .45 from its hammock, ran to the bedroom door, pushed it open.

Sheila lay flat on the floor, her cheek against the rug. As he stood there, she started to snore softly.

Liddell replaced the gun in its holster, walked over to her. He caught her under the arms, wrestled her up onto the bed. She was snoring away her heartache, but it was just a prelude to the headache that was to come.

20.

The last floor show at the Sahara was over.

Most of the tables had empties, the few die-hards who still huddled over their last drinks were getting ready to go. Their waiters stood leaning against the wall, checks in hand, waiting for the opportune time to present them. Finally, one by one, the last few tables emptied, the waiters headed for home, and the night cleaning crew took over.

In the office, Tommy Alpert was checking out the receipts for the night, getting ready to leave.

There was a tap on the door, it opened, and Martin, Joe Palone's chauffeur, walked in. Alpert looked out behind the chauffeur.

"The boss isn't with me. He's out at his place, Mr. Alpert," Martin told him. "He wants me to bring you out there."

A frown ridged the manager's forehead. "Out there?"

The chauffeur shrugged. "He said something about expecting an important phone call so he couldn't leave. But something's come up he wants you to handle for him."

The pang of apprehension in Alpert's midsection dissolved. If Palone was waiting that anxiously for the call, he was going to be that much easier to deal with. It wouldn't hurt to keep him waiting another day.

"He's the boss," Alpert nodded. "This stuff can wait until tomorrow, I guess." He put the pile of dinner checks into his top drawer, locked it, and stood up.

The thin man walked out of the office, headed for the vestibule. Alpert switched out the office light and followed.

Palone's black sedan was parked halfway up the block. The driver had nothing to say as they walked toward it, Alpert was busy with his own thoughts and plans.

As Martin opened the door to the back seat, Tommy Alpert ducked his head, started in. He froze at the sight of Joe Palone sitting in the far corner a gun cradled in his lap. The nightclub man started to back out.

The driver stood behind him, blocking his way. He held his hand deep in his jacket pocket, jabbed the snout of the gun he held there into the man's,

Alpert's back.

"Get in," Palone snarled.

"What is this?" Alpert wanted to know. "What's going on?"

"You heard the boss. Get in!" Martin shoved the nightclub man, sent him sprawling on the floor, slammed the door behind him.

Alpert got up on his knees, his eyes glued to the muzzle of the gun in Palone's hand. "What's wrong, Mr. Palone?" he whined. "I don't know what this is all about."

Martin got behind the wheel, started the motor. The big car swung away from the curb.

"We take a ride someplace quiet, where we can talk," Palone told Alpert. "You and me, we got a lot to talk about, you know?" He waved the snout of the gun. "Get up on the seat."

Alpert crawled onto the seat, was having difficulty controlling the shaking of his knees. "Sure. I'll tell you anything I know. But why the gun?"

Palone glanced down at the gun. "You know something? It's years since Palone carry one of these. I always had plenty of guys around to handle for me. This time, though, this time I'm going to enjoy doing it, myself."

The nightclub man licked at his dry lips. "What do you mean?"

"You got Palone figured for stupid." He shrugged. "Maybe for awhile he is stupid. But whoever figures a mouse is going to try to be a tiger?" He studied the pale blob that was Alpert's face in the dim light of the car's interior. "Tonight when you called me—"

"You called me," Alpert told him.

"After you called me. The minute I hang up, I start thinking. So I call to see how you sound. Then I think some more. You made a big mistake, punk. There's only two people who knew Lew was still working for me. You and the broad. I think about the broad. Then I remember whoever's trying to pull the shake is partners with Laura Valentine. So it's got to be a man. Where she was, but no butch. So it's got to be a man. That leaves you."

Alpert was shaking his head wildly. "You're wrong, Mr. Palone, I wouldn't—"

"So I think some more about you, punk. I made some telephone calls around town. You know what they tell me? They tell me you got plenty of

markers out. They tell me you're spending money like it's going out of style." He bared his teeth in what passed for a smile. "You don't spend like that on the dough Joe Palone pays you. I keep a close check on the books, so you're not getting it there. The boys are getting ready to move in, so you get desperate. You decide to shake Joe Palone."

Alpert was still shaking his head. His lips were moving spasmodically, but no sound was coming out. The whites of his eyes gleamed in the darkness.

"I'd never do anything like that, Mr. Palone—"

The man with the gun shook his head. "I try to figure since I got that letter who's got the guts to shake Palone. The shamus, Liddell, could. But you were just using him for a front. So I think about all the guys I know, but you I never think about until tonight. You, I figure, wouldn't have the guts." He glanced up to the driver. "You see what a broad can do to a chump, Martin?"

"I don't know anything about any shakedown," Alpert managed to whine. "What would I shake you down with? I don't know anything about you that—"

Palone lashed out with the barrel of the gun. It caught the nightclub man across the cheek bone, laid open a two-inch gash. Alpert screamed, flattened back into the corner. He pulled the handkerchief out of his breast pocket, tried to staunch the flow of blood.

"That's for lying."

"I'm not lying. I—" Alpert broke off, cringed back as Palone raised the gun again. "Don't. Please don't hit me again," he pleaded.

"Like I said, we're going to have a nice long talk where it's private and we won't be interrupted."

"But why are you doing this to me?" Alpert wanted to know. "I've been loyal to you. After that night you had the meeting with Longese I never opened my mouth. I wouldn't try to doublecross you."

"You know something? That's the way I had it figured. But you let this broad get under your skin, you get in over your head spending money on her. So you go crazy." He eyed the frightened man opposite him. "I should have figured you before. Who else would Longese trust? He has you figured like I figure. A mouse, with no guts. You, he figure, wouldn't cross him."

"I never crossed anybody, Mr. Palone."

“You know what happened that night, punk? Longese wouldn’t talk. He wouldn’t tell me where the records were. I let Harris work him over. Harris liked that. But Longese suddenly started to fight back and he grabbed a letter opener and came for me. Harris shot him. He died before I could make him talk. Then, when I don’t hear nothing about the record, I figure Longese hid them and they won’t show up.” He shook his head. “You should have left it that way, punk.” He turned, looked out the window at the dark warehouses that lined both sides of the street. “How soon, Martin?”

“A few minutes, boss,” the driver told him.

There was no more talking in the back seat. Alpert sat nursing the gash on his cheek, Palone sat watching the buildings flash by.

The car passed under the West Side Drive, crawled along the deserted piers that line the waterfront. At Eighteenth Street, it swung off onto an unlighted pier. The driver doused his lights, felt his way cautiously to the stringpiece.

There was another car standing there, its lights out. With a start, Tommy Alpert recognized it as his own.

“Sure, that’s your car,” Palone saw the start of recognition. “That just goes to show how thoughtful we are. We wouldn’t want you to have to walk home after our little talk.” He pushed open the door on his side, stepped out, kept Alpert covered with the gun. “Get out.”

The driver got out, circled around the car, stood alongside Palone. He stuck his gun in his waistband as the nightclub man got out of the car, his eyes hopscotching from one to the other fearfully.

“Look, Mr. Palone, I never meant anything by—”

The driver moved close to him, sank his fist to the cuff in Alpert’s unprotected midsection. He caught the nightclub man before he could fall, straightened him up, and hit him again. This time when Alpert folded over, Martin brought up his knee, there was the crunching sound of bones breaking as Alpert’s nose was flattened against his face. He hit the ground face first.

“Get him on his feet, Martin,” Palone ordered.

The driver caught Alpert by the collar, dragged him to his feet, and propped him against the fender. Alpert’s head rolled, his knees sagged. His face was a gory mass.

“That’s just a sample of how we’re going to spend the night, punk.”

Alpert rubbed the back of his hand across his smashed lips, winced as he touched his nose. “I’ve had enough, Mr. Palone. I-I’ve got the records. You can have them, but, please, don’t beat me any more.”

“Sure you have the records,” Palone snarled. “And there never was any question you’d turn them over. But I owe you, punk. I owe you real good.” He slammed the side of the gun against Alpert’s jaw, knocked him sprawling onto the pier. He nodded to the driver.

Martin managed to get the nightclub man to his feet again, had to hold him to keep him from falling. “Where are the records?” Alpert stared at him blankly, didn’t seem to comprehend. “Can you hear me? Where are the records?”

Alpert’s battered lips seemed to be trying to frame words. Only an unintelligible gurgle came out.

“They’re not in your apartment. We took that apart. Where are they?”

Alpert held a shaking hand to his lips. “I’ll take you to them,” he was able to mumble.

“No you won’t,” Palone told him. “You’ll tell me where they are and Martin will go for them.”

“What happens to me if I give them to you?”

“We’ll talk about that when I see the records. Where are they?”

When the man with the smashed face seemed to hesitate, Palone caught him by the soggy front of his shirt, pulled him to his tiptoes. “You’re going to give them to us, don’t worry about that. And we’ve got all night to get them.” He shoved Alpert back against the fender of the car.

“In club basement. In wine cellar in the last rack. Behind the bottles.”

Palone grinned his triumph. “How do you like that? Right under my nose all the time.”

“I left them there to give them back to you when I saw what they were. Honest, Mr. Palone. I was going to give them back—”

“Too bad you didn’t, punk. Too bad for the broad, too bad for Lew Harris. Too bad for you.”

21.

The superintendent of the building at 321 East 67th Street, where Laura Valentine had been murdered, lived in the basement apartment. The entrance was under the steps leading to the vestibule, there was an iron grill gate in front of the door. Johnny Liddell pressed the button alongside the door.

When there was no response, he rang the bell again. This time he leaned on it and kept it ringing. He was rewarded with a light being turned on inside the apartment. After a moment, the door swung open, an old man, wearing long-sleeved winter underwear and a pair of pants stood behind the iron grillwork.

“What’s the matter with you, ringing doorbells in the middle of the night?” he wanted to know. “You get out of here or I’ll call the cops.”

Liddell brought out his badge, gave the superintendent a look at it. “I don’t care who you are. Cop or no cop, I got my rights. You got no call to be getting a man up in the middle of the night.”

Liddell dug into his pocket, brought out a roll of bills. He peeled off two fifties showed them to the old man.

The superintendent let his eyes drop to the bills. They widened at the denomination. “What’s that for?”

“A few minutes of your time.”

The old man managed to tear his eyes away from the bill to study Liddell suspiciously. “What kind of a cop are you, going around giving away that kind of money?”

“I’m a private detective. My client will make this up to me.”

The old man shook his head, started to close the door. “No, sir. This is a respectable house. There ain’t going to be any raids here as long as—”

Liddell peeled off two more fifties. “No raids. I’m not looking for divorce information. I’m investigating the Valentine murder.”

The old man gave up the struggle to take his eyes off the money, licked at his lips. “I’d get fired if there was any more bad publicity. We lost two tenants already on account of what happened.”

“No publicity. I just want the name of the man who rented the apartment for Laura Valentine.”

The old man tousled the shock of grey hair with a scratching motion. He shook his head. "I saw him once or twice. Never got a good look at him, though. Never got to know his name."

Liddell had difficulty disguising his disappointment. "He never paid the rent by check or anything like that?"

The superintendent shook his head. "Cash. Right on the barrelhead the first of every month. Real regular and—," he broke off, snapped his fingers. "Hey, I just thought of something." He indicated the four fifties Liddell still held. "All you want for that is his name. Right?"

Liddell nodded.

The old man unlocked the iron grill door, stepped aside as Liddell walked in. He carefully relocked the door, led the way into the basement apartment. A stout woman stared fearfully from a partially opened bedroom door. "What is it, Albert? Who is that man?"

"Go to bed," the old man snapped.

The stout woman slammed the door. Liddell followed the superintendent into a small alcove that was apparently used as an office. There was a battered desk, a metal filing cabinet. The old man pulled open the second drawer, started fumbling through some folders. He grunted his satisfaction as he came to one, pulled it out. From it, he took a folded legal-sized document. He flipped through the pages, grinned.

"You got it?" Liddell asked eagerly.

"The Valentine girl's lease. We usually get sixty days' security. When she signed, she didn't have enough with her. But she gave us this name to call. He guaranteed the rent."

"What's the name?"

The old man held out his palm, Liddell laid the four bills on it. The superintendent stuck them in his pocket.

"The rent was guaranteed by a man named Tommy Alpert. He runs a nightclub."

Liddell snapped his fingers. "The Sahara."

The old man bobbed his head. "I think that's the one." He eyed Liddell fearfully. "That's all you wanted," he reminded him.

“That’s all I wanted,” Liddell told him. He headed back across the room, unlocked the iron grill door and headed for the street. The old man scampered behind him, locked the door.

The bedroom door opened, the stout woman came out with a bathrobe held together by a cord around her ample middle. “Now, Albert, what was that all about?”

The superintendent grunted. “Just made us some money.” He reached into his pocket, brought out a single fifty. “Paid me fifty dollars just to find out who rented the Valentine apartment.”

The telephone directory listed Tommy Alpert’s business address as the Sahara Club, his apartment address at 716 Third Avenue. Liddell decided to try his apartment first.

It turned out to be in one of the new super-modern piles of plate glass and concrete that have taken the places of the old, squat, soot-stained buildings that used to huddle in the shadow of the El.

The lobby was huge, cold, and uncarpeted, the elevators self-service. Liddell checked the tenant chart next to the elevator bank found a listing for “Alpert, T.—311.” He stepped into the cage, pushed the button for the third floor.

311 was in the front of the building, facing out onto Third Avenue. Liddell pushed the bell button and waited. When there was no answer on the third ring, he dug into his pocket, brought out his wallet. From it, he extracted a thin piece of celluloid. He worked with the celluloid for a moment until there was a click.

He opened the door, stepped into the dark apartment, closed the door. He brought the .45 out of its holster, waited for some sign of occupancy. He listened for anything that might betray another presence. The only sound in the room was the sound of heavy breathing. His own.

He snapped the wall switch on, stood for a moment staring at the signs of an extensive search.

Books were spilled out of the bookcases, drawers were sagging open, their contents strewn over the floor, the pillows from the couch and chairs had been overturned.

Liddell walked through the littered living room, glanced into the kitchen. Here too, there were signs of a search. In the bedroom, drawers had been

emptied out onto the floor, pillows had been slashed, the bed was torn to ribbons. The contents of the closet were piled on the room's only chair.

Liddell whistled noiselessly at the relentlessness of the search. That crossed off the possibility of a sneak thief or a burglar. Whoever searched the apartment knew what they were looking for and were determined to find it.

He walked to the telephone, dialed Homicide North, and asked for Inspector Herlehy. The man on the switchboard informed him that Herlehy would not be in his office before eight o'clock.

"This is Johnny Liddell," he told the switchboard operator. "Get hold of Inspector Herlehy even if you have to drag him out of bed. Tell him to call me at Regal 9-3221."

The operator started to argue.

"Look, suit yourself," Liddell told him. "Only that's a nice easy detail you've got there. If Herlehy doesn't get that message, you'll be switching your tail out in the Canarsie flats." He dropped the receiver on its hook, brushed the clothes off the chair and sat down to wait.

Inspector Herlehy sounded far from happy when he finally got back to Liddell. "What's so important you've got to get me out of bed in the middle of the night?" he roared.

"I've got your killer, Inspector. The one who murdered Laura Valentine. But there's one catch. I think Joe Palone has him, too."

"What? Who is it?"

"Tommy Alpert, manager of the Sahara. The guy who visited Al Longese just before Longese disappeared. I'm at his place now."

"What makes you think Palone has him?"

Liddell looked around. "The place has been torn apart. That means Palone came to the same conclusion I did, only faster. If he does have Alpert, he probably has the records. And he wins the ball game."

"I'll have a pick-up out on Alpert immediately. You stay there until I can get somebody there to relieve you in case Alpert does come wandering in. Then you meet me at Homicide North."

Liddell nodded. "Okay, Inspector. See you later." He dropped the receiver back on its hook, wandered out into the living room. He found an

unspilled bottle of Scotch laying next to the overturned bar, opened it, and took a deep swallow straight from the bottle.

Alpert wouldn't mind. Unless he was pretty far wrong, Alpert wouldn't be in any condition to mind anything when they found him.

22.

Martin swung the big car onto the Eighteenth Street pier, doused his lights as before. On the seat next to him was a mildewed leather briefcase, its lock rusted. It had been just where the nightclub manager told him it would be. He hadn't opened it to check its contents. Whatever they were, they had already caused enough people headaches and he wanted no part of them.

At the end of the pier he could make out the bulk of Alpert's car and the white-haired man standing next to it. It wasn't until he stopped the car and got out that he saw Tommy Alpert.

The nightclub man lay sprawled against the front wheel of his car, his hands held out in front of him. The fingers were twisted, bent in crazy shapes, his face bore only a fair resemblance to human features.

Martin stood for a moment, rooted in his tracks at the savagery of Joe Palone's revenge. Palone had said that he was looking forward to paying off the blackmailer, but Martin was shaken up by the extent of the payoff.

Palone walked over, took the brief case from his driver. He worked on the rusted lock for a moment, tugged it open. From inside the briefcase he brought out a sheaf of ledger pages. In the dimness, he squinted at the dates the ledger started and the final entries, was satisfied that it covered the entire period. He grunted his approval, returned the pages to the briefcase, and tossed it onto the seat of his car.

"Get him behind the wheel of his car," he told Martin.

The driver tried to lift the inert mass of the tortured man, had difficulty in getting him into the front seat. Palone swore softly, lent him a hand. When Alpert was finally propped behind the wheel, Palone turned the key in the ignition, slammed the car door shut.

"Okay. Over the edge," he told his driver.

They got behind the car and pushed. It rolled slowly to the edge of the pier. They doubled their efforts as the front wheels went out over the edge. The momentum carried the car forward, it upended and disappeared into the black void beyond. There was the sound of a loud splash, then silence.

"Let's get home, Martin," Palone grunted. "I wouldn't be surprised if we had a big day tomorrow." He got into the back seat, picked up the briefcase. It had already been a big day for Joe Palone. With the records safe in his

hands, with nobody to give evidence against him, the Feds wouldn't have a leg to stand on.

Rex Turner of Treasury and Les Willets of the Department of Justice were summoned to an early morning conference in Inspector Herlehy's office. They sat in stunned silence while Johnny Liddell gave them a detailed report on the events of the previous night.

Turner and Willets exchanged dour glances when Liddell finished.

"I guess we don't have to worry that the Valentine girl's killer won't get what's coming to him," Turner growled.

"My guess is that he already has. Palone is pretty narrow-minded about people who try to shake him down. Especially if they work for him," Liddell told them.

Willets sighed. "Score again for their side. Those records were our only hope of nailing Palone. He won't make the same mistake twice. By now he's destroyed them and he probably handled the job himself." He turned to Herlehy. "How about your department?"

The inspector shrugged. "We can't disprove Palone's theory that Harris was the girl's partner and that he killed her." He turned to Johnny. "I'm inclined to agree that it happened just like you said. But proving it would be another matter."

"Even with proof that Alpert was her sweetheart and was paying for her apartment?" Liddell wanted to know.

"If you put every man in jail who did that, there'd be as many inside as there are outside. Just because she was playing house with him wouldn't mean she wasn't open to pick up a buck on the side with Harris. Or any other guy for that matter."

Liddell frowned, nodded. "I suppose so." He looked around. "So we're all agreed the round goes to Palone?"

"The round?" Turner snorted. "The whole damn shooting match. With those records, my department could have moved in on him. Then, once we got a conviction on income tax fraud, we'd have fielder's choice. Either stick him away for ten or twelve years or deport him."

"And we could have made it stick," Willets added.

“You guys are forgetting one thing,” Liddell told them. “Palone sent his boy out to knock me off. I’m a little sensitive about things like that. I still intend to nail him.”

“For what? Spitting on the sidewalk?” Herlehy growled. “This guy pays plenty for his mouthpiece and he expects plenty. You start leaning on him without anything to get your teeth in and that license of yours will be a fond memory.”

“Just the same, I’m going to nail him. And it won’t be for spitting on the sidewalk, either. It will be for the murder of Al Longese.”

The other three men stared at him as though he’d suddenly announced a trip to Mars.

“There’s one slight technicality,” Turner put in. “To even start investigating a murder you have to have a murder. And to have a murder, you have to have a body.”

Liddell nodded. “When I get around to pinning it on him I’ll have a body.”

“Look, Johnny, no one wins them all,” Herlehy told him. “You think we didn’t look for a body after Longese disappeared? You think Treasury didn’t look for a body? We dredged ponds, we sent divers down in both rivers, we gave it the real college try. No body.”

“You don’t just wish a body away. Especially if you inherit one suddenly,” Johnny argued. “I don’t know where it is, but I do know that it’s around. And if it’s around, I’m going to find it and hang it around Palone’s neck like an albatross.”

“You make it sound awful good,” Turner conceded. “But Palone had been two steps ahead of us all the way. And he’s not going to get careless now.”

“I’m not concerned with what he does now. I’m just hoping that he was careless before now.” He looked from face to face, got no encouragement. “Look, the law knows that Al Longese can put Palone away for a long time. Anything happens to Longese suspicion is bound to fall on Palone. Right?”

The other men considered, Herlehy nodded. “So?”

“So, my guess is that Palone wasn’t planning on killing Longese. He planned to get his hands on the records and laugh at everybody. Longese’s testimony wouldn’t be worth a thing without the records. But something goes wrong and Palone has a corpse on his hands he didn’t expect. He has to

get rid of it permanently. It must never show up again. What's he going to do with it?"

"Tie a concrete block around its ankle and drop it in the river," Turner growled.

"It could float to the surface. It's been known to happen. Burn it? Too risky. The same thing with an acid bath. And don't forget, it has to be done fast and with no previous planning."

"You sound like you have an idea," Herlehy grunted.

Liddell grinned glumly. "Just a glimmering. But I'm keeping it to myself. Because if anything goes wrong, I wouldn't want to be responsible for you kissing your pension goodbye."

Herlehy sighed. "Things aren't bad enough this character's planning to go out breaking the law on top of it."

"Bending it a little," Liddell admitted. "Not exactly breaking it. If it works out the way I hope it will, there'll be enough glory in it for all of us. And another extra for the *Dispatch*." He got up from his chair. "Speaking of which, I'd better get over there and inform my boss that his star reporter, namely me, blew the whole shooting match by a matter of hours." He nodded to the others, walked out of Herlehy's office.

Willets stared at the closed door, turned back to the inspector. "What do you think?"

Herlehy raked his fingers through his hair, shook his head. "With that character, nothing ever surprises me. You saw the way he traced the shakedown to Alpert? It wouldn't surprise me one damn bit if some day soon he came walking in here with Al Longese's body over his shoulder."

23.

Jim Kiely looked as if he had lost his last friend.

He sat, his elbow on his desk, his forehead supported in his open hand. A paper cup half filled with whisky was forgotten alongside his elbow. Muggsy sat in a chair across the desk from him, watched him sympathetically. Johnny Liddell leaned against the wall.

“So we’re out in left field without a paddle,” Kiely said finally. “The other papers used the story that Harris was the girl’s partner and killed her. We poohpoohed it and now we look sick because we can’t prove it was Alpert and not Harris who did it.”

“Why toss in the sponge so fast, Pop? We’re just taking it for granted that Alpert is dead. Maybe he got word that Palone was wise to him and took off,” Muggsy suggested.

Kiely lifted his head off his hand, looked to Liddell eagerly. “You think we could get that lucky?”

Liddell considered, shrugged. “Maybe. But I can’t figure Palone getting that careless. If he was sure enough of Alpert to tear his place apart, he probably had somebody keeping an eye on him until nobody was around and it was safe to move in.”

Kiely reached for the paper cup of whisky, downed it. He crushed it into a ball, looked to Muggsy. “How do we handle the crow-eating?”

The redhead shrugged. “I guess it’s up to me. I ran wild and got off on a tangent.” She grinned ruefully. “There are a lot of characters on the other sheets in town that say the only reason I got that top of the page by-line was because I was your kid. They’ll just shrug it off as proof that they were right.”

“It burns my gut to have to take it laying down,” Kiely growled.

“Then why do it?” Liddell wanted to know.

Kiely peered at him. “Will you make up your mind? You just told me that there isn’t a chance of a snowball in hell to prove Alpert killed Laura Valentine if Palone has him. You also told me that you’re sure Palone has him. So where’s the choice about taking it or not taking it?”

“That’s in the Valentine case. Don’t forget besides her and probably Alpert, there’s another corpse kicking around in this case. Al Longese.”

Kiely’s look of incredulity turned to one of interest. “What about Longese?”

“We’re sure of two things. Longese is dead and Palone either killed him or had him killed.”

“You know it and I know it, but how are you going to convince a jury? Hell, we can’t even prove he’s dead,” Kiely pointed out.

“That’s the first thing I’d like to do. Prove he’s dead. From there on, I’ll make it my business to prove Palone killed him.”

Kiely looked from the private detective to Muggsy. She shrugged uncertainly. “Sounds like a big bite to take, but if we could bring it in, we’d regain all we’ve lost and then some in reader confidence.” She looked unhappy. “You know what it’s going to do to our circulation if we have to come out and admit that every other paper in town was right and we were wrong about Lew Harris?”

The managing editor turned back to Liddell. “How much is it going to cost?” he asked cautiously.

“In money? Practically nothing. But I need plenty of manpower.”

“What kind of manpower?”

“The door-ringing kind,” Liddell told him. “I’ll need every one of your legmen on their time off. The only thing I can offer them is a chance to be part of a big beat.” He paused, grinned wryly. “If we pull it off.”

“And if we don’t?”

“Then they get a lot of exercise. And Muggsy and I get a bump on our head.”

Kiely was about to reply when the phone on his desk started ringing. He lifted the receiver to his ear. “Yeah?” He listened for a moment, a strained look came into his eye. “Stay with it.” He dropped the receiver on its hook, looked from Muggsy to Liddell. “They just found Tommy Alpert. He’d driven his car off a pier. Some worker spotted the car under water. Divers brought the body up. I guess there’s no question it’s Tommy Alpert.” He slumped back in his chair. “That means we try it your way, Johnny.”

“Good. First I’ll need the date Al Longese slipped away from his guards in that Brooklyn hotel.”

Without question, Kiely lifted the receiver off its hook, asked for the morgue. When the guardian of the files answered, “This is Kiely. Get me the date the story ran on Al Longese, a witness in the government trial against Joe Palone slipped his bodyguards. No. Better call me back.” He dropped the receiver on its hook. “I’ll have it for you in a few minutes. When do you want my people to start?”

“As soon as Muggs and I do a little research.”

Kiely nodded. “And what is it you want them to do?”

“I’ll give them a list of names and addresses. All I want to know is whether the person on the list ever lived there or not.”

Kiely was having difficulty restraining his curiosity. “And if they did?”

“Then they’re not the one we’re looking for,” Liddell told him.

The managing editor was about to ask another question when the phone cut him off. He lifted the receiver to his ear, listened. “March 23rd, 1960? Okay, thanks.” He scribbled the date on a piece of copy paper handed it to Liddell.

Johnny folded it, stuck it in his pocket, and opened the door for Muggsy, followed her into the City Room, leaving Jim Kiely with still unsatisfied curiosity.

The Bureau of Vital Statistics in the Department of Health is housed in an old, greystone building on Worth Street in New York.

The clerk behind the counter was a tall, thin woman with wispy hair and prominent front teeth. She was dressed primly in a dark blue dress with a white Peter Pan collar.

She smiled as Muggsy approached, examined the press card Muggsy handed to her. “What can I do for you, Miss Kiely?” she wanted to know.

“I’m trying to back check on a burial that took place on March 25, or March 26, 1960. You’d have a record of it, wouldn’t you?”

The woman nodded. “Certainly. The procedure is for the death certificate to be filed with us, then we issue the burial permit, which is required by the cemetery.”

Muggsy looked to Liddell, who nodded.

“Could we see those records,” Muggsy told her.

“Do you know the name of the deceased?” the clerk wanted to know.

Muggsy smiled, shook her head. “We’ll just have to try to find it by elimination.”

“You’ve got a job cut out for you,” the woman told her. She opened the gate in the railing. “We have thousands a day.” She led the way to a library table, pulled back two chairs. “I’ll bring you the files for March 25 and 26, 1960.” She walked into an adjoining room which had files from floor to ceiling.

In a few minutes she was back with a large file. Set it on the table. “If there’s anything else you want I’ll be glad to help.”

“I think we’ve got enough to keep us busy for quite awhile,” Liddell told her.

Three hours later, Liddell straightened up to ease his cramped back. He massaged his right wrist, shook his head ruefully. “This is murder,” he complained. “How are we doing?”

“We’re about finished with March 25,” Muggsy told him.

“Let’s take one day at a time. If March 25 doesn’t check out, we’ll come back in a couple of days for the March 26 list,” he growled. “My writing arm is about to fall off.”

The entire staff of the *Dispatch* was assembled in the City Room after the last edition of the paper went to bed. They stood clotted in little groups, sitting on desks, or desk-hopping. There had been no explanation for the call that brought in district men and beat men as well as rewrite men and feature writers. The room was abuzz with speculation as to the meaning of the summons.

“I’ve been at a newspaper’s funeral before,” one old timer shook his head pessimistically. “This was the way they broke it to us. Called us in and told us the paper was suspending.” He snapped his finger. “Just like that. And after twenty-two years.”

A beat man, who covered Homicide North, talked around a cigarette that was dangling from the corner of his mouth, nodded. “It was that Laura Valentine snafu. I told the boss the brass down at North were satisfied with Harris as the killer—” He broke off as the door to the managing editor’s office opened. Jim Kiely walked out, followed by Muggsy and Liddell.

He held his hand up, an unaccustomed silence fell on the City Room. “First, let me assure all of you that this is no obituary announcement. The *Dispatch* is in no danger, despite any rumors you may have heard.”

The staffers exchanged relieved glances, some applauded.

“We have been beating the opposition to headline story after headline story. Yesterday, announcements made in the Valentine case made it look as if we were on the wrong track. We’re not. We still have the making of the biggest scoop in newspaper history. But I’m going to need the help and the time of every one of you.” He cut off applause with a raising of his hand. “No one need take part. It will be on your spare time. And, I’m not even sure you’ll be compensated for your time.” He grinned at the silence that greeted the announcement. “But I’ll tell you this. If we pull this one off, you’ll have good reason to be proud to be part of this team.”

There was a roar of applause. Kiely signalled for silence.

“You all know Johnny Liddell. You know he’s been the source of most of the exclusives we’ve been running. He’s got the biggest one of all up his sleeve. Let him tell you about it.” He gestured to Liddell.

“I can’t tell you what it’s all about,” Liddell told them. “I can only tell you this. We’re trying to find an undertaker who buried a person on March 25, 1960. We don’t even know the person’s name. We just know that it was under unusual circumstances.”

There was an excited buzz throughout the room.

Liddell signalled for quiet, got it. “We have a list of every person buried that day. We think it was probably from Manhattan. So we’re breaking the list up into as many parts as we get volunteers.” He looked around. “Can I have a show of hands of those who’ll give the time?”

Every person in the room raised a hand.

“Good. Now here’s what I want. I want to know of any cases where the person named did not live at the address or of any other circumstances you encounter that seem unusual. I want the name of the undertaker and his address. That’s all I can tell you. You’re all trained people and I count on your experience to smell the one I’m after when you come across him. We’ll start by passing out ten names to everybody willing to take part tonight. Miss Kiely will give the assignments.”

The entire assemblage in the City Room queued up and shuffled to the front of the room where Muggsy Kiely passed out to each a sheet of paper

with ten names typewritten on it.

24.

For the next two days, the staff of the *Dispatch* worked a double shift. As soon as their chores at the paper were completed, they picked up their list where they had left off the night before and checked out the families of those who had been buried on March 25, 1960.

Johnny Liddell spent all of his time close to a telephone, ready to check out any suspicious circumstances reported to him. Three false alarms were sounded before a call came in that sounded interesting.

It was Tim Ryan, a sports writer, who called it in.

“Liddell, this is Tim Ryan. I got one you might like. Guy’s name was Salvatore Lessell. The address on the death certificate turns out to be a flop house on the Bowery. The guy is a D.O.A. and they ship him to the mortuary. He’s scheduled to be shipped to Potter’s Field like on a Thursday. On Monday an undertaker comes in and claims the body.”

Liddell could feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. “The undertaker’s name?”

“Solomon Sampson,” Ryan told him. “Address is 3241 Hester Street. Way down on the old East Side. You like?”

Liddell bobbed his head up and down. “I like. What else?”

“I went over the records in the city morgue. The body went out on the 24th, the date you got here for the burial was the 25th. They sure didn’t keep him around long. Another couple of days, the city would have done the job for nothing.”

“You didn’t tip your hand to the undertaker?”

“I haven’t even seen him. I got all this information at the morgue. And if it works out, Jim Kiely better get up the ten bucks it cost me,” the sports writer told him.

“We’ll do better than that,” Liddell promised. “We’ll see to it that you share the by-line when we break the story. I’ll get back to you.” Liddell depressed the bar on the telephone, got the dial tone, dialed the *Dispatch*. He relayed the information to a highly excited Jim Kiely.

“You think this could be what you’re looking for?” Kiely wanted to know.

Liddell bobbed his head again. “I swear that if I was looking for a pattern, it couldn’t have been closer. I ought to kick myself for not spotting the address myself.”

“You going up against the undertaker?” Kiely wanted to know.

Liddell snorted. “He’s the last one in the world I want to know that we’re interested. By the time we go up against him I want to be packing such heavy artillery that he’ll fold like a campstool.”

“Good. What can I do?”

“Do you know where to locate Muggsy? She and I are going to pay a visit to the cemetery where Salvatore Lessell is buried. After that, I’m on my own. If I’ve pulled a bloomer on this one, I don’t want a lot of other people to get dragged down with me. Okay?”

There was a note of regret in Kiely’s voice. “You’re calling the shots. But I’d sure like to be in on the kill.”

Liddell grinned. “The old firehorse bit, huh? Okay. But just you and me.” The grin grew broader. “It’ll be like in the old days before you got to be a desk jockey. And, Jim—you know that gun you haven’t carried since you got a desk?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, when we move in for a kill, you won’t be behind that desk.”

“I’ll be carrying. In the meantime, I’ll locate Muggs and have her check in with you as soon as I can.”

The Valley of Rest Cemetery was enclosed by a hoked picket fence. The granite shafts and tombstones seemed to stretch for miles, were practically leaning against each other. Here and there faded remnants of floral pieces were rusting on the graves.

Johnny Liddell followed the fence around to the entrance to Valley of Rest. Two large iron-bar doors opened onto a driveway that ran past a small stone building that served as an office, then curved around between two rows of trees into the cemetery proper.

Liddell drove in through the gates, braked the car to a stop in front of the office. Inside, they could see an old man get up and limp to the door. He opened the door, walked out to the car.

“Howdy, folks. Anything I can do for you?”

Muggsy pulled out her press credentials. “I’m a feature writer for the New York *Dispatch*. We’re doing a series of articles on well known local painters and Salvatore Lessell is on our list.” She brought out a folded piece of copy paper, referred to it. “Our information shows that he died in March, 1960, and was buried here. We’d like a picture of his resting place.”

The old man plucked at his lower lip, wrinkled his forehead. “Name don’t strike a bell, miss. Maybe if you’d come into the office, we can look it up.”

Liddell stayed behind the wheel while Muggsy got out of the car, followed the old man into the office. He brought down a huge volume from the shelf, wet the tip of his finger and started flipping through the pages.

“Lessell you say his name was?” he asked.

“Yes. Salvatore Lessell.”

The caretaker continued to flip through the pages, stopped, ran the tip of his finger down the list of names. He came to one, held his finger on it. “You say he was famous?”

“That’s right.”

The old man shook his head. “There was only a hearse. No limousines. They’ve buried him in Section 7.” He looked up. “That’s our cheapest section. You sure you have the name right?”

Muggsy bobbed her head. “You must be mistaken. Our understanding was that he had a big funeral, dignitaries and all.”

“Somebody’s pulling your leg, miss.” He pointed to a number next to the name. “That means he’s in plot 4 in Section 7. That’s away out back near the fence. Drainage isn’t what it should be, ground is rocky. Plot out there couldn’t cost more than \$100.” He reexamined the notations in the ledger. “And whoever gave you that story about the big funeral was pulling your leg. They’re checked in and they’re checked out. One hearse, no limousines.” He looked up. “You still want a picture of the grave?”

“More than ever. A genius who dies in poverty is even better news than one that dies rich.”

The old man slammed the big ledger shut, replaced it on the shelf. “I’ll tell your driver how to find it.” He led the way out to the car.

Johnny Liddell was sitting behind the wheel, smoking a cigarette. He looked up as they approached. Muggsy, walking behind the old man, winked. As she slid into the front seat the old man walked around to the driver's side.

"Plot she's looking for is number 4 in Section 7," he told Liddell. He turned, pointed up the winding drive. "You follow this drive far as you can go, then make a right. Section 7 is the last section over. Plot 4 will be marked by a stake in the ground with the number 4 on it."

Liddell nodded. "Got it."

The old man stepped back, Liddell eased the car into gear, followed the winding drive through the trees and acres of marble orchard.

"You still think you're right Johnny?" Muggsy wanted to know.

"I've got to be," Liddell told her. "It's the only answer."

As the car approached Section 7, the size and quality of the monuments and shafts dropped off. The section itself was far less desirable than any through which they had passed. It was in a far corner of the cemetery, an area which its developers had apparently never considered using. Liddell parked the car on the dirt road, they picked their way through the graves.

Plot 4 was a sunken piece of ground, marked only by a stake with the number painted on it. Liddell stood staring down at it while Muggsy took a picture of it.

"If we can't use this on the front page of tomorrow's paper, at least it'll come in handy as an illustration when I get around to writing 'The Rise and Fall of Johnny Liddell'," she grinned. The grin didn't succeed in wiping the worry out of her eyes.

The drizzle that had started in early evening had become a downpour by midnight.

Johnny Liddell sat behind the wheel of the sedan, Jim Kiely alongside him, sucking on his pipe. The rain lashed furiously at the closed windows of the car, the atmosphere was grey-blue with smoke.

Kiely peered through the rain-streaked windows out into the darkness through which they were passing.

"How we going to do this, Johnny?" he wanted to know. "We can't just walk in with a couple of shovels over our shoulder and start digging."

“We park behind the back fence. I don’t think we have to worry about any watchmen prowling around in this weather. They’ll stay pretty close to the office out front.” He squinted through the inverted V cut by the windshield wiper. Ahead of him, in the reflection of his headlights, he could make out the dark shapes of the tombstones and shafts. “There is the cemetery up just ahead.”

Jim Kiely dug into his breast pocket, brought out a folded map. He unfolded it on his knees, snapped on the dash light. “Section 7 we’re looking for. Right?” He studied the map, stabbed at it with a stubby finger. “There it is.” He consulted the scale in the corner. “About a mile in from the beginning of the cemetery on this road.”

Liddell nodded, swung left onto a poorly paved road that ran along the back wall of the cemetery. About a mile in, he pulled under a big tree and cut his lights. It was so black, Liddell had the feeling that he could almost reach out and touch the darkness.

“We walk from here, Jim,” he grunted. He opened the door on his side and stepped out. The shovels were on the floor in the back seat. He picked them up. “Don’t forget the flash, Jim,” he warned in a low voice.

They did no talking as they plowed through the high weeds to the back wall of the cemetery. Liddell tossed the shovels over one at a time.

“You’d better boost me up,” Kiely croaked in a hoarse voice. “I’m not as agile as I was at my peak as a grave robber.”

Liddell made a stirrup for him by interlacing his fingers. Kiely stepped into it, was boosted to the top of the wall. He sat on it for a moment, swung around, and dropped to the other side. In a minute, Liddell, too, was straddling the wall and on the other side.

They stood in the darkness for a moment, getting their bearings. Kiely masked the flash with his fingers, let enough light out for a quick look around. They walked over to the nearest grave, Liddell checked the wooden stake.

“Number 9,” he told Kiely. “It must be five plots over.”

They walked past the sunken oblongs that marked the graves, stopped at the fifth one. Kiely flashed the light on the stake, Liddell checked it, looked up and nodded.

“This is it.” He straightened up. “I think the best way would be to work in relays.”

“How far’s the office from here?” Kiely wiped the rain from his face, looked around.

“A couple of miles. At the entrance on the main road. I’ll start the digging. You keep an eye peeled just in case.” He stepped on the grave, his shoes sank in the loam. The shovel bit into the dirt. “If I’m wrong, I sure owe Salvatore Lessell one helluva apology.”

“You’ll have plenty of time for it. About ten years, if you get the wrong judge,” Kiely grunted.

Liddell was knee deep in a six-foot hole when Kiely spelled him. The newspaperman worked steadily for ten minutes, was breathing hard when Liddell took over again.

They had been at work over thirty minutes when Johnny Liddell’s shovel scraped on wood. He stopped, tapped with his shovel. “Hit it,” he grunted.

Kiely jumped down into the hole with him. “We’ll have to clear enough room to pull the whole box out. We can’t work down here. You take a rest topside. I’ll get in a few licks. When I yell, drop the hooks and I’ll get it set to pull out.”

It took another ten minutes to clear enough space around the plain pine box to attach the hooks. Kiely clambered out, stood at the edge of the grave, panting. “Soon as I get my breath, we pull her up and slide her out.”

But it took fifteen minutes of grunting, swearing, and sweating on the slippery clay before the coffin finally slid out onto the ground. Jim Kiely leaned breathlessly against the casket.

“And you were going to be the hero who was coming out here to do this all by yourself?”

“I never intended to. I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist the temptation,” Liddell told him. He brought a flat pint of bourbon from his hip pocket. “I brought this along in case of an emergency and this, surer than hell, is an emergency.” He unscrewed the cap from the bottle, handed it to Kiely, who took a deep swallow, then he drank himself. He recapped the bottle, laid it down on the ground. “Now to work.”

He inserted the tip of his shovel under the lid of the coffin, used it as a lever. The lid creaked complainingly as it was forced open. A hot, dry odor of decay rose from the interior.

“That does it.” Liddell was glad for the warm glow the liquor had left in his section. “You’re the one who knows Longese. Take a look.”

Kiely moved to the side of the box, flashed his light into it, whistled soundlessly. “That’s not Al. That must really be Salvatore Lessell.”

Liddell leaned over, reached into the coffin, caught the body by the shoulder, tugged. As the body turned over onto its side, Kiely could see another body beneath it. He flashed the light under the first body, looked up. “Al Longese,” he said. “You hit the jackpot, Johnny!”

Liddell dropped the body of Salvatore Lessell, reached for the bottle. He took another deep swallow, handed the bottle to the newspaperman. The rain dripped off Liddell’s nose, made mud puddles of the patches of clay that clung to him.

Kiely handed the bottle back. “Now what do we do?”

“We get the hell out of here and have Herlehy come back with an exhumation order as soon as he can get one.” He pushed the lid down on the coffin to keep out the rain, picked up his shovel. “Let’s get moving. Those characters might not catch pneumonia, but I’ve got a feeling I might.”

The office was still half-dark when Johnny Liddell awoke. There was a fuzzy brown taste in his mouth. He got up, walked over to the sink, stuck his head under the water. Then he scrubbed it dry with a towel. It made him feel a little better, not too much.

Jim Kiely was snoring in the customer’s chair, his legs sprawled out full length, his neck cradled on the back of the chair.

Liddell walked over to the window, ran up the shade. The light hurt his eyes, he blinked. Kiely stopped snoring, opened his eyes.

“What time is it?”

Liddell consulted his watch. “A quarter to eight.”

“We should have heard from Herlehy by now,” the newspaperman grunted. He got up, walked over to the sink, filled a glass with cold water, and held it to his forehead. “Oh, my splitting head.”

“Well, I think we managed to stave off pneumonia,” Liddell managed a grin.

The phone on the desk jangled, Liddell picked it up. “Yeah?”

“This is Herlehy. I just wanted to make sure you two characters were still there. Stay there. I’m on my way up.” He slammed down the receiver,

broke the connection.

Kiely watched Liddell's expression as he replaced his receiver on its hook. "Herlehy?" he asked.

Liddell nodded.

"Figures."

"He's on his way up," Liddell told him.

"With handcuffs and chains, no doubt."

"No doubt."

It was almost fifteen minutes when the inspector came striding into the inner office. Liddell was sitting behind his desk, chair tilted back, feet crossed on the corner of the desk. Jim Kiely was sucking on his pipe in the customer's chair.

Herlehy's normally red complexion had a purplish tinge. "Well," he said, looking from one to the other. "I hope you feel as bad as you look. You must have been swimming in that joy juice all night."

"We were staving off pneumonia," Liddell told him placidly.

"You really tore it this time, Liddell," Herlehy told him. "The relatives of the guy you dug up can sue for every penny—"

"He doesn't have any relatives. He lived in a flop house on the Bowery. How about the other body? Get a definite make on it?"

Herlehy nodded. "It was Longese, all right. We got a definite make from his prints as soon as the boys brought him in. The medical examiner's working him over now, but it looks like he stopped a bullet with the back of his head." He shook his head at Liddell. "You're sure a lucky guy, walking away from a rap like this." He couldn't conceal his curiosity any longer. "Want to fill me in?"

Liddell looked over to Kiely, who nodded. "Why not? But why do it twice?" He pulled the telephone over, dialed a number.

"Who are you calling?" Herlehy wanted to know.

"Muggsy Kiely." He turned to the phone. "Muggs? Johnny?"

Muggsy's voice was petulant. "Where the hell have you two been all night? I'm half out of my mind with worry."

“Look, Muggs. Herlehy’s here and I’m going to give him the story. You get it at the same time over the phone in plenty of time to beat the whole damn town to the story.” He glanced over at Herlehy. “Okay?”

“You mean I’ve got a choice?” the inspector grunted. He pulled over a wooden chair, sank into it.

Liddell began telling his story into the telephone. “We were all pretty sure Longese was dead and that Palone either killed him or had him killed. I was pretty sure that it hadn’t been intentional because Longese turning up dead would increase the heat on Palone. So, it was very important that the body never show up. Well, what do you do with a body on your hands in the middle of the night?” He paused for a moment. “You can’t burn it, you can’t just bury it any place and you can’t kick it around until it wears out. But there’s one place you can stick a body and it would never be discovered. In a cemetery. So that’s where we had to look for Longese.”

“Nice figuring,” Herlehy conceded. “But where do you start looking?”

“Well, in order to bury a body, the undertaker must have a death certificate to get a burial permit. Right?”

Herlehy nodded.

“So my first guess was that Palone might have gotten some crooked doctor to fake a death certificate. So we decided to check out every person who was buried on March 25, 1960.”

“Why March 25?”

Liddell shrugged. “Longese walked out on his guards on March 24. I figured that they wouldn’t want to have his body kicking around any longer than they had to. So we used the 25th as a starting point. If we didn’t hit pay dirt, we would have tried the 26th.”

“Go on,” Herlehy nodded. “You decided to check out every burial.” He shook his head. “There must have been thousands.”

“It seemed like millions when we were copying the list. Then, we divided the names among the members of the *Dispatch* staff and they visited the address on the death certificate to make sure there had been such a person. One of them, a sports side man named Tim Ryan—” He broke off, addressed the mouthpiece. “Incidentally, Muggs, I promised him you’d share the by-line with him on this one. Okay?”

“Okay,” the redhead told him. “A pleasure.”

Liddell addressed himself to Herlehy again. “Tim comes up with one whose last address was a Bowery flophouse. He’d been in the morgue almost long enough to get shipped out when this undertaker comes in and claims him. Less than twenty-four hours later he’s buried. So Palone didn’t have to take a chance propositioning a doctor. He just delivered the body to the undertaker where the chances of it being discovered were nil, then getting a stiff with a death certificate and stuffing Longese in the same box with the stiff.”

“You make it sound very simple,” Herlehy grunted.

“That was the beauty of it. It was simple. The last place you’d look for a body would be in a cemetery.”

“That doesn’t alter the fact that you were guilty of grave robbing. Why didn’t you do it legally, get an exhumation order and—”

Liddell snorted. “If I tried to get an order on what I just told you, what would they tell me? They’d tell me to go get my head examined.”

“Suppose all that fancy guesswork was wrong?”

“But it wasn’t. That was the way it had to be. There was no other logical explanation of how they could get rid of that body so permanently with so little planning.”

Herlehy contented himself with a grunt.

“From here on, it’s up to your technical boys, Inspector. But let’s make sure we nail the lid down real tight on Palone before we show our hand.”

“The medical examiner will turn the bullet that killed Longese over to ballistics. They’ll check it out against the gun Harris was carrying the night he tried to gun you. If it matches, we’ve got Palone. There’s no question that Harris was working for him the night Longese got it.”

“And the undertaker?”

Herlehy grinned wryly. “We pulled him out of bed the minute we got word that there were two bodies in that box.” He glanced at his watch. “They’ve been sweating him for hours. He’ll cooperate and finger Palone as the guy who delivered the body. This time I think Joe won’t walk away from it.”

“You get all that, Muggs?” Liddell asked.

“Every word,” Muggsy chortled over the wire. “How’s Dad taking it?”

Liddell glanced over to where Jim Kiely was sitting on the edge of his chair. “I think he’s busting at the seams to get down to the office and get this extra rolling. So you better start getting the story down on paper.” He glanced at Herlehy. “I wouldn’t imagine you’ll have any official word for the press until this afternoon, will you?”

Herlehy maintained a straight face. “It should take at least that long to check out the technical data.” He looked at his watch. “I figure we’ll be picking Palone up at—” He glanced at Kiely.

“Noon?” Kiely suggested eagerly.

“At about noon,” Herlehy nodded.

Kiely hopped off his chair, scuttled over to the desk, pulled the receiver out of Liddell’s hand. “Meet me down at the office as soon as you can, Muggs,” he told the redhead. “Just by coincidence, the *Dispatch* will hit the street about noon with the whole story.” He slammed the receiver down on its hook. “What’ll you be charging him with, Inspector?”

Herlehy considered. “Suspicion of murder if the bullet checks out, illegal transportation of a corpse. We’ve got plenty to hold him on, and if we didn’t have, the Feds do have.”

“That’s right,” Liddell grinned. “That ought to make Rex Turner and Les Willets real happy.” He leaned back in his chair, laced his fingers at the nape of his neck. “Do you think they’ll give me a break on my income tax for this?”

“Why? You expecting to be in a high bracket this year?” Herlehy wanted to know.

Liddell looked over at Kiely. “Well, with the \$5,000 bonus the *Dispatch* is paying me, it just could happen.”

Jim Kiely sighed. “Me and my big mouth!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Barely Seen* by Frank Kane]