

 **DIME
MYSTERY
MAGAZINE**
COMBINED WITH 10 STORY MYSTERY

NEXT ISSUE OUT NOVEMBER 3rd!

Volume 31

November, 1944

Number 1

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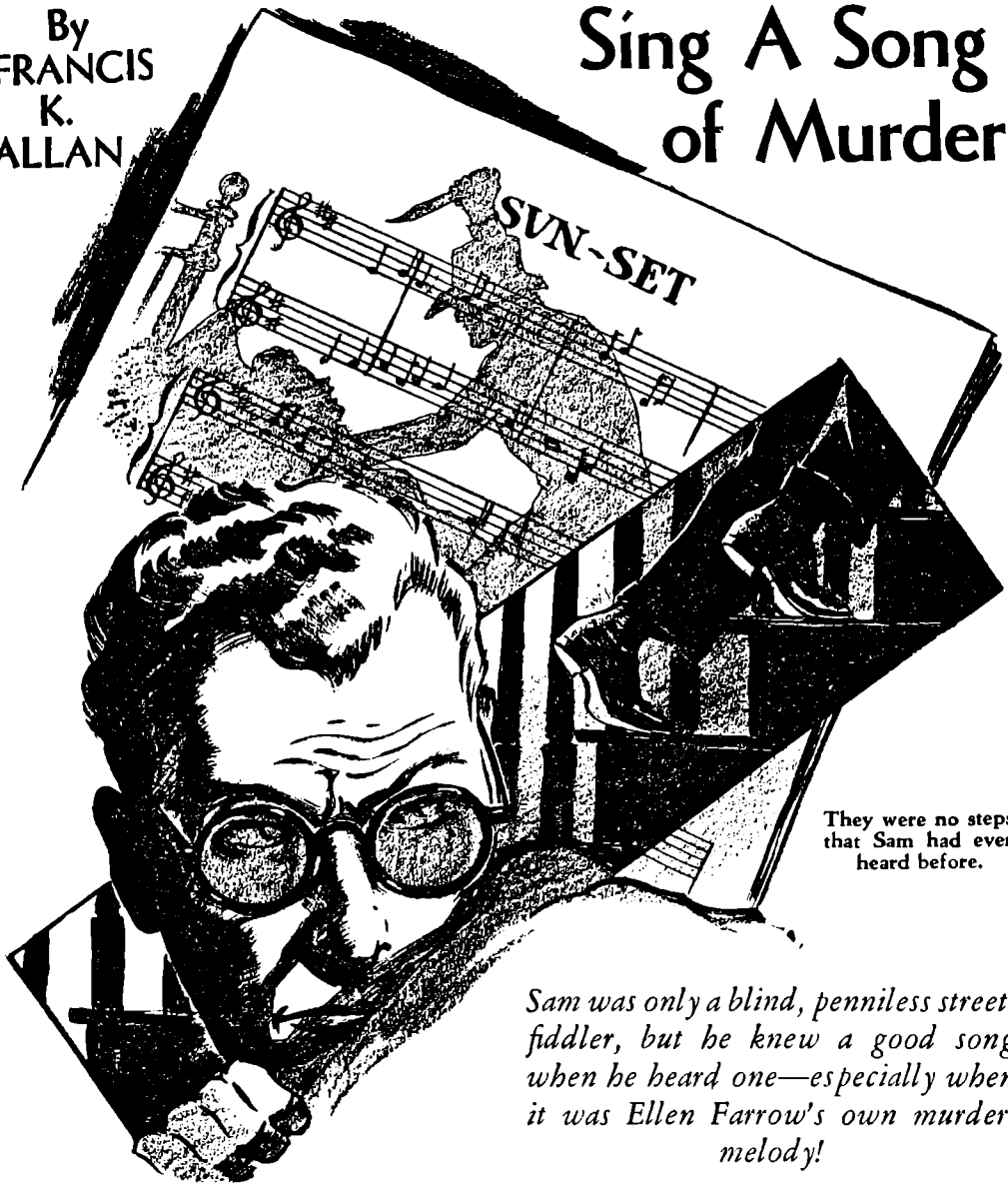
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Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive Offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter March 4, 1941, at the postoffice at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1944, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Six-issue subscription in U. S. A. 90 cents. Foreign postage 28 cents additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.

By
FRANCIS
K.
ALLAN

Sing A Song of Murder



They were no steps
that Sam had ever
heard before.

Sam was only a blind, penniless street-fiddler, but he knew a good song when he heard one—especially when it was Ellen Farrow's own murder-melody!

IT WASN'T even a hotel. It was a three-story, delapidated mansion, and no one ever called it anything but Mrs. Bane's Place. The rooms were not high, and breakfast and dinner were included. It was clean and—most important—it was only three blocks from Broadway's theatrical offices.

Prince Brahmin, the Mind-Reading Act, lived on the third floor. Joey Schultz who, on his sober days, was a hot trumpet lived there too. On the second floor were the girls from Maine, Texas, Ohio and Washington. The girls who had been in the little theaters

back home—who'd come to New York to find that end of the rainbow. But now they lived at Mrs. Bane's because it was cheap, and they could walk to the casting-offices. . . .

And on the first floor, just to the right of the front door, lived Sam Fiddle. Really his name was Johnson, but that was long-forgotten. It was also forgotten that he'd once led his own band on the stage of the old Belvedere, even before Mrs. Bane's time, or the golden-haired girls from Spokane.

Sam's hair was curly grey, and his skin was weathered. His left shoulder was hunched

from the way he held the violin. His clothes were worn, but they were clean. And he lived on that first floor because he was blind, and because he'd been at Mrs. Bane's longer than anyone else.

There was always a sandwich on his dresser when he came back late in the afternoons. Mrs. Bane knew a street-fiddler couldn't afford to buy lunches. He ate the sandwich slowly after he'd taken off his coat and massaged his left arm and shoulder. He emptied the coins on the table and sorted them in denominations. This Friday afternoon, there was three dollars and twenty cents. Better than he'd done in . . . he started to think.

He stopped. His head tilted. He listened. A song was coming from the room above—the room that had been vacant. But it wasn't that—it was the song itself. Sam knew them all, yet this was one he had never heard. A girl's low voice was singing in a slow half-tango rhythm. “. . . someday, when the sun-set reaches home. . . .”

It drifted away, and the girl's heels clicked about the room overhead. Sam kept listening, but she sang no more. He frowned, probing back into memory—He knew he had never heard it, yet the tune lingered in his ears with its haunting melancholy.

Sam finished his sandwich and put on a clean shirt and tie. Usually he listened to his radio in this hour until dinner. Now he moved slowly down the hall to Mrs. Bane's room. He knocked. “Come in,” her big voice called. “Oh, hello, Sam,” she greeted more softly. “How's the music business?”

He nodded abstractedly. “The room above mine—you rented it?” he wondered slowly. “Sure thing. It's a Miss Farrow, this time. She came in about one o'clock. Acts like she's got a little more sense than those others,” Mrs. Bane added tartly. “She paid cash in advance.”

“She's a musician?”

“Hum,” Mrs. Bane grunted blankly. “I didn't ask her.”

Sam nodded. He kept trying to remember the song. “The sandwich was good,” he remembered to say as he left the room. He moved slowly back down the hall, deciding to sit in the living room awhile.

AS HE sat there, his well-trained ears brought the threads of the house to life before his sightless eyes: the tables were being set in the dining room; Brahmin was using his electric-razor in the back bathroom; Peggy, the little ballet-dancer, was listening to a news-report in her room. Then he heard the new strange footsteps coming down the stairs. He knew it would be Miss Farrow. He waited, and presently she came into the living room.

“Oh . . . Hello, I . . . Oh,” she stammered. Sam knew she had seen his eyes. “Hello,” she repeated simply.

“Hello. I'm Sam. Sam Fiddle,” he said.

“I'm Ellen Farrow.”

He heard her sit down on the couch. “Your room is right over mine,” he said. “I heard you singing a while ago.”

“Oh, was I?” The girl seemed to laugh silently.

“I liked the song, but I don't remember it. I . . . You see, I'm a street-fiddler, and I know most of them. That one—”

“Which was it?” she wondered.

“It was something about ‘When the sun-set reaches home. . . .’”

“Oh, that!” Then she laughed aloud, softly. “No, you've never heard it. But someday, perhaps, you will. I—”

“Hello, Sam!” Peggy's gay voice rushed into the room. “Want to lend me a hundred dollars?” Her voice was mocking, half-laughing. But Sam knew it wasn't all gay. He wondered how much more money she had. He'd heard her crying last night—softly, when the house was still. Soon she'd be going back to Texas.

“Peggy, this is Ellen Farrow,” he introduced. And then the dinner-bell rang. He sighed. He'd wanted to know about the song. Maybe I can talk to her after dinner, he thought.

But after dinner she hurried to her room, then her heels clicked down the stairs and the front door slammed behind her.

Sam played chees with Brahmin until ten. Most of the girls went out. Some of them had dates, but most merely went to walk up and down Broadway to look, to hope. . . .

At ten Sam went to his room. He undressed slowly and raised his window. As he lay in bed, he thought again of the song. Maybe he would see Ellen Farrow at breakfast. The song was so beautiful in its unfinished simplicity. . . .

It was after midnight. Sam had heard the chimes ringing in the Cathedral. The front door opened, softly closed. The tip-toeing steps passed his door and climbed the stairs. The door of the room above whined as it closed; the light-switch snapped.

“Someday. . . when the sun-set reaches home. . . .” a soft whispering voice hummed. Sam lay very still, waiting. . . . The bed creaked. At last the light clicked out. He sighed and turned over.

One by one the others came in. Joey was drunk again—Sam heard his fingers sliding up the rail. The girl from Oklahoma came in. And somewhere between midnight and one, Sam heard the other footsteps pass his door and climb the stairs with slow, dragging steps.

They weren't Brahmin's. Nor were they girl's steps. They were no steps that Sam had ever heard before. He listened as they passed into silence above. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard Ellen Farrow's door opening. A full minute passed. He heard the bed creak gently. At last the light was turned on. Papers rustled gently. Drawers opened and closed. At last he heard one clicking sound—peculiar sound, not metallic or mechanical, but softer, more cushioned. He heard a heavy breath, then the same low clicking sound again. The light was switched off. The door closed. Sam lost the trail of sound until he heard the strange and uneven steps pass by his door. The front door closed, and Mrs. Bane's house was silent again.

A restlessness filled Sam. Part of it was the unfinished song. But there was something else—an uneasiness, bred of years of acute blind sensation. He felt something stir and prick his nerves. He twisted beneath the covers. . . .

He heard the girls coming in. It was after one.

A FRIGHTENED scream shattered the silence. Upstairs something fell and shattered. A door opened and steps clattered down the hall. "Mrs. Bane! Brahmin! Somebody come here!" a girl cried hysterically. "Come here! Wake up!"

It was the girl from Maine, Inez. Sam threw back his cover and clutched his bath robe. As he stumbled into the hall and upstairs, he heard doors opening, closing, slamming around him; voices calling—answering.

Inez was stammering, ". . . the knife! There in the bath-room! With blood all over it! It is blood!" she cried. "There in the waste-basket!"

"Don't start crying," Brahmin's deep voice commanded. "I will investigate this matter," he announced in his dignified stage-manner.

"Well," snapped Mrs. Bane, "you can start looking at the floor. Unless I'm blind, that's blood down there."

"So it is. Drops of blood. . . . We shall follow them." Sam tagged after them, nervous and impatient in his blindness. "Hah! They come from this room!" Brahmin breathed dramatically.

"That's Peggy's room!" Inez exclaimed. "It's my room!" Peggy's voice cried. "But I didn't have any blood in my. . . . I mean I—"

"Mrs. Bane," Sam whispered softly to the woman. "I don't hear Miss Farrow's voice. Please—quickly! Knock at her door." He followed her quick, padding steps to the next door. She knocked. No answer. "Open it!

Open the door!" Sam urged the older woman.

The door whined open. The light snapped on. He heard Mrs. Bane gasp, choke. "Oh, God!" the woman breathed. "She's dead! Her throat—that knife cut her throat!"

Inez screamed wildly. Brahmin choked and cursed, the stage manner gone. Sam felt a cold knot gather in his stomach.

"The police—you'd better call them, Mrs. Bane," he said.

"Yes. Yes, the police," the woman echoed blankly.

THERE was a stiff hush in the living room.

Sam could hear breathing, swallowing—matches striking, lighting cigarettes. Firm solid steps came down the stairs.

"That's Captain Edwards!" Mrs. Bane panted. "I guess they're through upstairs."

"Now I have some questions to ask," the Detective Captain's deliberate voice began. A hush tightened in the room. Sam felt the man's eyes roaming over his face. "Mrs. Bane, when did the dead girl come to this house? What do you know about her?"

"Nothing, I. . . . She moved in yesterday at about one o'clock. She just rented a room and moved in. Her name is—was Ellen Farrow. I don't know what she did or where she came from or anything about her. Really, I don't," she stammered.

"You don't know what her business was? Where her family lives? Who her friends might be? You don't know where her possessions or luggage are?"

"No. No, I. . . . Nothing, but. . . . She had a big bag, and then a little brief-case and a portable typewriter. She put them under the bed. I noticed that."

"But they aren't there now," Captain Edwards said flatly. "There is nothing in that room but the body and the furniture." He paused. "Now, who lives in the room adjoining that room?"

"I—I do," Peggy Martin stammered.

"You heard nothing unusual in that next room tonight?"

"I was out. I went to a show and then I—just walked," she said. "I was thinking—I was worried about getting a job."

"You had met Ellen Farrow?"

"Just once. Just before dinner, for a minute."

"Perhaps you had noticed her diamond bracelet? Or her ring and watch?" The voice was slow, lazy, yet ruthless.

"No, I—what do you mean?" Peggy stammered.

Sam heard something rattle on the table. "I found these in the drawer of your dresser, hidden in a glove," Edwards stated. "A diamond bracelet, with initials E. F. in the band. I found this ring and this watch. And I

found these. . ." There was a crisp rustling sound. "A hundred in ten dollar bills. And that glove is stained with fresh blood!" he stopped.

"But you—you don't think that I killed her!" Peggy started blankly. "You don't mean that I. . ."

"LISTEN, Captain," Sam interrupted anxiously. "Let me talk. I'm blind, but I hear better than most people, and I know Peggy didn't kill Ellen Farrow! I know it!"

"Oh," came the mincing word. "How do you know?"

"I was awake tonight, see? I can recognize the steps of everyone who lives here. I heard Ellen Farrow come in alone just after midnight. She went to her room, and soon she turned out her light and went to bed. About half an hour later I heard strange steps pass by my door and climb the stairs. They weren't the steps of anyone here, I swear. I heard an uneven sound of one foot, as if the foot was dragging the floor softly. That person—whoever it was—went to Ellen Farrow's room. I heard him slip in. At last the light was snapped on, and he moved around. I heard a strange soft clicking sound once—then again about half a minute later. I never heard Miss Farrow's voice. He must have killed her as soon as he went in that room. I heard him leaving the house—"

"So you heard strange footsteps, a funny clicking sound, and you *know* all about the murder?" Edwards mused ironically. "What about this watch, the ring, all the money, and the diamond bracelet?"

"But I know Peggy didn't kill that girl!" Sam insisted.

"You said you were worried about a job?" Edwards asked Peggy.

"Yes, I don't have any money to. . ." she breathed, and her words vanished.

"What about the trail of blood that leads from your room to the bath room, and the knife? Can you explain that?"

The girl began to cry. "I swear I didn't kill her! I need money but. . ." Her hands started toward her face. Abruptly there was a choked gasp. "Oh God!" Peggy screamed wildly.

"So you forgot to wash your hands," Edwards said very softly. "And there's blood on your fingers." Sam heard him rise. Let's go, Miss Martin. . ."

"What do the papers say, Mrs. Bane?" Sam asked.

"They done it!" the woman said indignantly. "The jury found her guilty this afternoon! She's going to die, they say!"

"They wouldn't listen to me," Sam said emphatically. "Because I'm blind, they think I'm

a fool! I know those weren't Peggy's steps, but—"

"But the proof was smack in her face," Mrs. Bane countered. "It was Ellen Farrow's blood on her hands—those rings and money and. . ."

"It was planted on Peggy!" Sam exploded. "The whole case is crazy! They never have found where Ellen Farrow came from! They don't know a thing about her! On top of that, whatever happened to her bag and that brief-case and typewriter you saw? Why did somebody take those things, but leave the money and diamonds?" He hammered the chair-arms furiously. "They don't know anything about the case, I tell you! She was killed for a reason nobody's even touched! Nobody knows!"

"No use getting hot, Sam," Mrs. Bane said wearily. "The jury's already found her guilty. It's too late now." She sighed. "But I declare, I just don't believe she killed her!" she fretted.

Sam opened and closed his fingers. He rose and felt his way from the room, down the hall, and to his own room. He turned on the radio and sat down. The feeling within him was not merely anger; it was a deep, gnawing frustration—a sense of helpless futility. *He knew*—but no one believed him.

The music grew from the loud-speaker and a voice was singing:

" . . . I'll never be alone,
When the sun-set reaches home. . ."

Sam leaned forward abruptly, his ears tingling!

"That's *her* song! The song she was singing!" he whispered. The voice stopped singing; the orchestra played through the lifting half-tango rhythm again. Then the announcer's voice came on, advertising beer. The program was ended. Sam leaned back. It was the first time he'd heard the song since that night, two months ago.

The next program came on. He rose and reached for the dial. The opening strains of the tango-rhythm again. He heard the announcer saying, "The orchestra opens the Perkin's Hour with the new love song from Broadway's newest hit, *SUN-SET*, by Carlton Porter."

The song filled the room. That same song. . .

WHEN it was ended, Sam slowly switched the dial off. He moved to the closet and reached for his good coat, his good hat. From his cigar-box bank, he took one of the bottom bills—a five.

As he was leaving the house the news-report from the living-room radio blared:

“. . . Peggy Martin, the convicted slayer of the unknown Ellen Farrow, will die in the electric-chair a week from today. The day and time was set by Judge . . .”

Slowly Sam closed the front door behind him. His cane tapped its nervous way toward Broadway.

At Times Square, he clutched an arm. “I’ve got to find a theater—the one where there’s a play called *SUN-SET*,” he said.

“That’s at the Gilwyn on 46th,” a man’s voice answered. “I’m going that way. Come on.” He led Sam across the street, past 44th and 45th. They turned. “Okay, Pop. This is it,” the man said.

“Thanks,” Sam said quickly. His cane tapped across the lobby.

“No peddlers in here,” a voice snapped.

“No, I want to see the manager—the manager or Mr. Carlton Porter,” Sam explained. He pulled out the limp bill. “Please. Just show me where the office is.” He thrust the bill toward the voice.

“Well, I’ll be—” A hand took his arm. His feet moved over deep carpets, up stairs. This door. But don’t tell the boss that anybody let you in,” the voice warned. The steps departed. Sam found the door and knocked.

“Yeah, come in,” a deep voice called. He opened the door and closed it behind him. “What’re you looking— Who let you in?” the voice interrupted itself angrily.

“Please. I’m no beggar,” Sam said quickly. “I’ve got to ask you a question. What is your name?”

“I’m Ed Gorman, but I don’t—”

“Just let me ask a question or two, please.” Sam tapped his way to the desk and found a chair. I was listening to my radio a while ago when I heard a song that came from your play here—a song about ‘sunset’.”

“Yeah, yeah. So you heard it. What about it?”

“Can you tell me who wrote it?”

“Porter wrote it. He wrote the book and music for the play. Why?”

Sam inched his chair forward and lowered his voice. “Can I—I’d just like to talk to him, please. I won’t be long.”

“It’s no skin off my back. He’s in the next office. Hey, Porter!” he called loudly. Sam heard a chair scrape, a door open. Steps moved in the hall, then the door behind him opened.

“You call me, Gorman?” a man asked.

“This—he wants to ask you something,” Gorman said wearily.

“Yes? What did you—” There was an abrupt, blank silence. “What did you want?” Carlton Porter asked slowly.

“My name is Johnson. I heard your sunset song. I had to ask you—did you ever hear of anyone named Ellen Farrow?”

“Ellen Farrow. No. Should I?” came the slow question.

“She was singing that song the day she moved into my rooming-house. And that night she was murdered. She—”

“What the devil is this?” Gorman exclaimed.

“I’m trying to explain,” Sam said anxiously. “You see, the police never could trace her, never could find out who she was or who her enemies were. Now they’ve sentenced a girl to die—a girl who didn’t commit the crime! And that song is all I’ve got—don’t you understand? That’s the only connection with Ellen Farrow or her past. You must have known her, or she must have known you! Can’t you remember?”

“I never heard of such a screwy story,” Porter said. “And I never heard of any Ellen Farrow.”

“But you *must* have!” Sam exploded. He rose excitedly. “Think! Did you—” His cane fell and clattered to the floor.

“I never heard of her,” Carlton repeated. His steps approached. Sam heard a soft, strangely dull click. He heard it again.

Here’s your cane,” Porter said.

“Thanks. But can’t you—” Sam stopped. He swallowed. He felt Porter’s eyes upon

him. "Thank you," he said thickly again. "I'll be going now."

He tapped his way to the door and into the hall, a salty bead of sweat on his lips, stumbling swiftly along the hall toward the stairs. He heard the door open and close behind him. As he moved, he could hear the steps that followed.

The steps of the death-night! Uneven! As though one foot were dragging very slightly! Sam knew that the killer of Ellen Farrow was following him!

HE FUMBLLED his way out the door and across the lobby, onto the walk. He hesitated frantically, then hurried in the direction of Broadway. In the roar of the traffic, in the cross-currents of the crowds, he sought an escape. But in the mingling hash of noises, his ears lost the trace of the following steps. He knew then, that he shouldn't have come this way; the person to whom he turned for help might be the killer!

Sweat coursed down his cheeks and turned salty on his lips; his breath was fast and hard; his cane beat a frantic staccato on the echoing pavement. Everything was clear in his mind now. . .

"Don't make a noise. It's a gun," spoke a dry raw whisper beside him. Something blunt and hard settled against his ribs. "Keep your mouth shut. You're blind and I'm leading you. That's the way it'll look," the voice said. "Come on."

"Walk!" The fingers ground into his arm. He was led, fast, roughly along the walk. The dragging steps beat a hypnotic rhythm in his ears, recalling that night of murder, when first he had heard them.

"Here. In here," the voice commanded. He stumbled up steps. A door opened. Another door opened, then closed. A light-switch snapped on and a key grated in a lock. He was shoved into a chair.

"What happened back there in that office? You found out something! I saw your face when I handed you that cane—what happened?" Carlton Porter asked furiously.

"That clicking sound when you bent down! It's your knee snapping. It made the sound when you bent down to get my cane. And it snapped that night you killed Ellen Farrow—when you bent down to get the typewriter and bag from under her bed. You're lame—that's why your step drags—and why just one knee-joint snaps. One leg is stiff. You killed her! You did it!"

Sam's fear added a mixture of fury. His fingers clenched the chair and his blind eyes bore through the blackness toward Carlton Porter. "You killed her and I know why!"

"Do you?" the voice minced. "Tell me about it?"

"That play—it's not yours! She wrote it! Somehow you read it, heard her music! You knew it would be a hit! You killed her and stole it!"

"You're smart for a blind man, Mister," Porter murmured. "And you're right. We lived in the same hotel uptown. I was trying to write a book. I read what she'd written—it was her first try. I knew it had something. I waited until she'd finished it, then I told her I had some friends in the business. She let me take the manuscript. I removed her name, and got an offer from Gorman of twenty-five grand as a starter. I told her she ought to change her name—it was really Edith Fuller; I said that was corny. Then I told her to move down near the theater-district—that the play was a cinch for a hit. I followed, watched her pick that rooming house, and looked it over. You know the rest—"

"You killed her! You took all her possessions! Her real name wasn't known! And you framed the murder on Peggy! You smeared Ellen Farrow's blood on that door-knob, knowing someone would. . ."

"It was a nice afterthought. I saw that door open—the room was empty. Why not make it perfect?" Carlton laughed dryly.

"What are you going to do with me?" Sam whispered.

"I've got another knife," came the simple answer.

Sam's fingers curled against his palm. His frightened mind was trying to think, to plan. "I . . . can I have a cigarette?"

"I don't smoke."

"You should," Sam said, pushing a note of sarcasm into his voice. "You're going to need one."

"Why?" Porter's voice was suddenly edgy, steely.

"Why don't you take a look out the window? I have a feeling you'll see a cop. You see, I was sort of a decoy. The cops heard my story three days ago. I've been hanging around the theater listening to your foot-steps."

"I don't believe you! You're lying to. . ."

"Take a look out the window," Sam mocked.

THE dragging steps moved, swiftly, softly. And just as swiftly Sam's fingers tightened on his cane. He dragged in a hard breath. He remembered the sound of the light-switch—it had been straight ahead, maybe six feet. . .

He bolted from the chair. Squarely into the wall he plunged. Wildly, frantically his fingers raked the plaster, and finding the switch, he smashed down with his cane, shattering it!

Porter cursed. His feet shuffled, then stilled. Sam dropped to his knees and inched along the wall—stopped.

If Porter didn't smoke, maybe he had no matches, Sam thought swiftly. There might be a lamp in the room, but he would hear Porter moving. Now it was blindness against blindness—and blindness was old to Sam. His fingers, cold and damp, shifted nervously on his heavy cane as he listened.

Crunch . . . drag . . .

The sound was small, yet distinct, Sam crept on his knees, following the sound without breathing. A chair bumped slightly. Porter was still. Sam knew where he was—directly to the right and against the wall. He balanced the cane. His lungs ached for air. One more movement, one more sound. . .

Then—the creak of a board.

Sam's cane lifted. He swung it in a wide slugging arc toward the sound.

Porter's scream thickened into a gasping sob as the cane smashed into yielding flesh and bone again and again.

Porter groaned harshly. Sam heard his finger-nails rasping down the plaster wall and hurled himself forward. His fingers dug into the flesh of the throat! He slammed the limp body twice against the wall. . . His fingers loosened. The room was silent.

Slowly he pulled himself up. He fumbled at the door-key, feeling his way into a hall. Outside, he heard the crowds moving about him. He clutched at an arm. "A policeman! I want a policeman!" he exclaimed.

"What's the trouble, Pop?" an amused voice wondered. "Somebody steal your pencils?"

Sam straightened and stiffened. For the first time in years of blindness, a thundering indignation rose in his throat.

"Get me a cop!" he roared. "I'm a busy man!"

IT WAS better than playing on the street-corners. It was warm in the Club Majestic, and he was making a hundred a week. He had a letter from the Mayor and a letter from the Inspector of Detectives. And when the Club closed, he always had a drink at the bar. Maybe two.

But the part Sam liked best was something else. . . The waiters whispered it behind his back—sometimes customers whispered it when they recognized him: "That's Sam Johnson—the guy that caught the murderer. Licked hell out of him. And blind!"

But after the second drink, Sam thought it over himself. Maybe he wasn't so blind. Maybe not. . .