

The Grim Reaper's Audition



By Wallace Umphrey

Author of "Homicide Hunch," etc.

Before he knew what the case was about, Investigator Nick Carnavan was up to his ears in mystery. And to get his murder bearings, he had to tune in on a private bullet broadcast—with vengeance at the controls.

HE CARRIED a bulging brief case under one arm and he came through the door of my office fast, his pink baby face screwed up tightly in alarm. He skidded to a stop, took a frantic backward step and slammed the door, putting his broad back against it and staring at me out of worried China-blue eyes.

"There's a key in the lock, too," I said.

He took a deep breath like the sound of a flat tire and he didn't speak. His fat body

was tense. He was so jittery he reminded me of a kid who has just walked past a graveyard at midnight.

I laid the morning paper flat on my desk so I could still look at the picture and headlines. CONVICT ESCAPES IN JAIL BREAK. Prison pallor didn't build Ike Muller up any, and he looked like hell in a "stir" haircut.

"Carnavan?" the fat guy's voice was high-pitched, jittery.

"Nick Carnavan, private investigator,"

I said, staring at him. Pudgy face. Naive blue eyes. Clothes neat and expensive. This last meant money—maybe. “What’s on your mind, mister. . . .?” I asked, letting my voice rise on the “mister” and making a question out of it.

He took a chair and said: “John Faramonti.” He set down his brief case between his chubby legs and ironed out the knees of his trousers with the palms of his hands. “You have to help me.” The tone of his voice made a statement out of it.

“No.” I shook my head for emphasis. I prowled around to the front of my desk, sat down on the edge and lit a cigarette, waiting to get smoke into my lungs before going on.

“I don’t *have* to do *anything*.” I said. I paused a second to let that sink in. Then: “Perhaps you’d better tell me what you want.” I didn’t let my voice sound too interested.

“I want you to help me, protect me.” His words came fast and brittle, like the steady drip of water. “Somebody’s trying to kill me. Twice already they’ve tried. Next time they’ll do it.”

“Somebody?” I asked. “They?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know who they are. Once it was two men. They were waiting in a car in front of my hotel. Before they could do anything, a party got out of a taxi and went inside. I went with them and the men couldn’t shoot. That was two nights ago. Last night one of these men was waiting in my room. I hit him and he ran away. He had a gun.”

“You hit him?”

He nodded and leaned forward, his fat belly cradled on his knees. “Maybe they’re trying to steal my invention.”

“No doubt,” I said. It sounded like a spy plot. Probably he was just suffering from delusions of persecution. “What’d these guys look like?”

“The one in my room was short and thick-set. About fifty years old, with gray hair. He wore a dark blue overcoat with a black velvet collar. I didn’t see the other very well. I’d say he was taller, younger.” He paused and asked, “May I have a drink of water?”

I FILLED a paper cup and handed it to him. His description wasn’t any help. He took three white pellets from his pocket, popped them into his mouth, sipped the water and swallowed with an audible sound.

“Aspirin,” he said, choking a little. “My nerves. I’m just a bundle of nerves.” He sounded like a phonograph with the needle stuck. “You’d be that way too, with somebody trying to kill you.”

“Guys have tried,” I said, thinking about Ike Muller. “How many of those things do you take a day?”

“Nine, ten.”

“All right. How about your invention?”

“It’s something new, something startling.” He sounded very serious. “We all know that speech creates a series of sound waves in the air. Such waves continue indefinitely, only they are too weak to be heard by the human ear except at the time of creation.”

“Pretend I know what you’re talking about,” I said.

He leaned forward. “I’ve invented just such a machine.”

“You mean you can pick up things said in the past?” It sounded pat—too pat. “How far in the past can you hear?”

“Up to half an hour.”

“Why don’t you go to the cops?”

“The police!” He made it sound like an insult. “I don’t care for their muddling. Inefficient blusterers, all wrapped up like mummies in red tape.”

I thumbed out my cigarette. “I’ll tell

you what to do," I said. "Go straight to the Hotel Sealth and register under the name of John Gregory. I'll pick up some clothes for you at the place where you've been living. You'll be safe for a while." I watched him to see how he'd take the suggestion. The Sealth was just about the most expensive hotel in the city.

He didn't bat an eye. "That's splendid! I won't need much. I'm living at the Hampton Arms." He handed a key to me. "I'm paying you mainly for protection, but if you find out who is behind these attempts on my life, so much the better."

I told him I'd drop by in about half an hour. He took out a cigar, lit a paper match. Tossing the book into the wastebasket, he picked up his brief case and went out. I called the Sealth.

"Hallorahan," I said into the phone. After a while a hoarse voice drifted over the wire, "Carnavan," I said, and told him about Faramonti, "Keep an eye on him, huh? He seems to have dough."

"Okay, Nick," Hallorahan said. "I see Ike Muller crushed out."

"I'm all goose pimples," I said.

"He swore he'd get you, Nick, for sending him up."

"Don't let it throw you," I said. "Take care of Faramonti. I'll drop around after a while."

I cradled the phone. Hallorahan was the house dick at the Sealth, a good guy. The door bounced open again and Faramonti ran in, carrying a square box instead of the brief case under his arm. He didn't say anything.

The box, about a foot square, looked like a portable radio. He set it down on my desk, flipped a switch, twisted a couple of dials. A faint hissing came from the box, "No," the box said. "I don't *have* to do *anything*."

It was my voice, all right. There was more of it and I said at length: "Okay, I

guess you've got something there." I felt a little silly.

He picked up the box and went out. This time I watched him from the window. He jogged out to the curb, climbed into a tan sedan and drove away. A maroon coupe pulled out behind him and followed him down the street, and I began wishing I'd asked about the car the two guys had been sitting in two nights ago.

It was a cloudy morning but it didn't look like rain. I left my office without bothering about a coat.

THE Hampton Arms was only a little smaller than the city hall, with a white-washed brick facade and an inset court. I edged past a splashing fountain into a dim foyer, rode the automatic elevator to the fourth, and gained Faramonti's apartment.

I went in. From the bathroom I heard sound. I reached for the .44 in the worn leather holster at my shoulder.

"I've got you covered, pal," I said.

There was no answer. The blinds were drawn and the room was in gloom. I backed to the window and jerked at one of the blinds. The cord slipped out of my grasp and the blind whirred up with a snapping sound.

"Come on out, pal," I said.

Feet dragged across the tile, and a haggard face showed around the frame of the door. The tall thin body of a kid with black tousled hair followed the face. He looked scared. His tweed suit was old, rumpled, dusty.

"Better make it good," I told him. He looked about twenty or twenty-one. One hand was buried in the side pocket of his coat. A shave would have helped him. He leaned against the door jamb, not much limper than a dish rag.

"Get your hands out where I can see them," I said.

His hand came out—empty. He didn't seem to know what to do with it, and he began finger-combing his hair. He stared at me in a lost, defeated silence.

"I'm listening," I said. He put red into his lips by biting down hard on them, and he still didn't speak. "Talk!" I said.

I reached into his pocket, keeping him covered. He could have been the younger of the pair who were after Faramonti. He didn't have a gun in his pocket, only about a dozen small white pellets and a cardboard box.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Aspirin."

The box bore the label of a Market Street drugstore in Frisco. It looked about big enough to hold the pellets. "Back into the bathroom, pal," I said.

He moved mechanically, his knees buckling a little. He jostled my arm, and I was ready. I slid the blow off my shoulder, going away, and before he could swing again I hit him. He spun halfway around and flopped to the floor, his eyes dazed and hurt.

"I know all the tricks," I told him.

"Tough guy."

"I'm still alive and kicking. On your feet, pal."

The bathroom floor was white tile, the walls tinted a pale green. A medicine chest had tubular lights on either side, and I took down a squat green bottle with an aspirin label. It was about half full, and I dumped some of the pellets into my hand. They looked like the ones in the kid's pocket.

I touched one to my tongue. It was aspirin. I had to taste three more before I was sure. The fourth wasn't aspirin.

"Arsenic," I said.

His face turned a sickly green, matching the walls. He shook his head. I slapped his face with my open palm, not hard. His knees buckled, and I held him flat against the wall with one hand against

his chest.

"You tried to poison Faramonti," I told him. "You mixed arsenic tablets with the aspirin. That's it, huh?"

He didn't answer. His face was still green and his eyes were closed, the dark lashes flat against his cheeks. He looked awfully young. I stepped away, and his back slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor. Out cold.

I searched him. Then I sat down on the edge of the tub, turned on the cold water and flipped water into his face. After a while he stirred, sat up. I shut off the faucet.

"I found your wallet, kid," I said. "No money — just a California driver's license made out to Johnny Forbes. That you?" He nodded and I asked: "How long since you've eaten, Johnny?"

"A day and a half. I came in today on the freights."

"Without any money. But enough poison to kill a dozen guys. You want to talk about it?" He didn't. "Maybe you didn't hit town today," I went on: "Maybe it was a week ago. So maybe you should have got Faramonti that other time. See what I mean?"

"It doesn't matter," he said bitterly. "What happens to me doesn't matter. I don't care. I just got to town today, and his name isn't Faramonti—or maybe it is."

"I'm not very smart, Johnny."

"He used to call himself John Fairman. That's the name he used when he sold mother a lot of nice pretty stock in an invention to revolutionize the oil industry. It took every penny she'd saved to send me to college. It killed her." He stared at me. "The whole invention was a fake."

"So you came here to knock him off," I said. I looked down at the .44 in my hand. Maybe it was the truth and maybe it wasn't. That didn't matter—the kid had murder in his heart. "Look, Johnny," I told

him. "Maybe your story is okay, but you can't expect to knock people off like that. Why didn't you go to the police?"

"That wouldn't bring mother back. I'd try again."

"Sure you would, and that's the trouble. You'd try again and maybe next time you'd pull it off. Maybe you've got a damn good reason and maybe you haven't." I stared into the mirror. "Maybe you think killing Faramonti is justified, but the way I look at it murder is never justified. So I've got to have you put away."

"Hell," I told him, "I've never been a guy to squawk copper. But I can't let you run around loose. I don't know a thing about you. Maybe Faramonti is a louse, but I can't take the chance."

"You trying to argue yourself into something?"

"You can see it, can't you?" I asked. "Suppose you kill Faramonti. Can't you see it puts me behind the eight ball? Any kickback would mean my license."

He stared bitterly. "All right, call the cops."

"I've got a part of it," I said. "Your mother died and you got a job in a drugstore. You brooded about Faramonti. So one day you made up some arsenic tablets to look like aspirin, lit out and landed here."

HE WENT Sphinx on me. The telephone was on a small table near the door. I still didn't want to call the cops but there was nothing else to do. I got Sergeant Silver on the wire, told him about the kid. He said he'd be right over. The kid's black eyes watched me all the time.

After a while Silver came in. He was a rugged cop with graying hair and a tanned, sensitive face, the only decent friend I have on the force.

"Hi, Nick. This the kid?"

"That's him," I said. "Feed him right away, Lou. He hasn't eaten for a couple of days. Treat him right."

"What about the poison?"

I handed him the aspirin bottle. He eyed me for a second and said thoughtfully: "Ike Muller's still on the loose."

"I should have killed him instead of winged him," I said.

"He swore he'd get you, Nick. Better watch out."

"He won't," I said. "He's too busy trying to keep from getting picked up. How's the missus?"

"Better, Nick." Silver hoisted the kid to his feet. "Did you see the write-up Faramonti got in the paper a couple of weeks ago?"

I shrugged.

They went out. The kid walked woodenly, without protest. He turned his head, staring at me until he went through the door. His eyes were hurt. I went to the window and watched them climb into the police machine. I couldn't forget the look in his eyes.

I thought about Ike Muller. He'd robbed a jewelry store and killed one of the clerks. I was working for the Jewelers' Protective Association then, and I'd sent him to prison. The loot was never found. Ike Muller was a tall, thin guy with very long, sleek, black hair that fell down in his eyes when he was nervous. His picture in the paper looked funny because of the short haircut.

Packing a suitcase with Faramonti's things, I left.

The Sealth was a big place with a lobby as shiny and as formal as the bank I did business with—which wasn't often. A desk clerk said: "Hallorahan? Whom shall I say is calling?"

"Tell him Nick Carnavan is here," I said. I was still busy remembering the

bitter, defeated look in the kid's eyes, and I needed some help in forgetting. "Tell him I'm waiting in the bar."

"He's upstairs some place."

"Did John Gregory get registered all right?"

He consulted the directory. "He's in 1428."

The bar was deserted at this time of day. I swung aboard a stool, setting Faramonti's suitcase on the floor. "Scotch," I said to the bartender. "Better make it double."

I put the Scotch down in one chunk and ordered another. In the bar mirror was a short, thick-set man standing just inside the doorway staring at my back.

His hands were sunk into the pockets of his dark blue overcoat. He had gray hair and he looked about fifty years old. He stood there motionless, waiting. Although it was warm, the overcoat was buttoned all the way up to his throat. The bulge in his right hand pocket looked a whole a lot bigger than just a hand would make.

I turned and asked: "What'll it be, pal?"

He paced toward me, his step slow and even. He slid carefully onto the adjoining stool, keeping his overcoat buttoned and holding the skirt of it against him as he sat down.

"Hello, tough guy," I said.

"Not tough, just careful." He had a softly modulated voice, and he spoke out of the corner of his mouth so you couldn't hear him over three feet away. "You working for this fat guy, this Faramonti?"

"You've got ideas," I said.

He said: "Okay, lay off."

"Have a drink."

"I don't drink before noon. It keeps me from being a heel."

IDUG a cigarette out of the pack on the bar in front of me, tucked it between my

lips. A cigarette helps me think. I watched the hand in his coat pocket. I didn't say anything, just watched him quietly with the cigarette between my lips.

He tossed a book of matches onto the bar in front of me. I lit the cigarette and tossed the matches down beside my cigarettes. He left them there.

"Are you asking?"

He shook his head. "Telling."

It would take him a fraction of a second to get his gun out. I'd have plenty of time. All I wanted was to show him I knew all the answers. I didn't want him to get the wrong opinion of me.

"Are you the guy who sent Ike Muller up?" he asked.

"More ideas," I told him.

"We don't want trouble, Carnavan," he said.

I punched out my cigarette, turned and blew smoke into his face. "You heel," I said, and swung.

I aimed at the side of his head. My swing carried me up and forward off the stool, so that I was standing on the brass rail. I didn't know all the answers.

He hunched his neck down inside his blue coat, and my fist just grazed the top of his head. Off balance, I fell awkwardly against him. His free hand came up and grabbed the front of my coat. He held me there. I weigh one-ninety, but he just held me. His other hand came out with a .45.

His face didn't change expression. He reversed his grip and swung the butt hard against my forehead. Not just once—three times, very fast and very hard. His hand moved up and down so fast that I wasn't out after he finished, even though it was the first blow that knocked me unconscious.

He was good—and really tough. Not just a showoff.

After hitting me the third time he just shoved me away and stood up. My head

flopped down on the bar, and I sagged forward there on the stool. My elbow tipped over my glass. I didn't know all this until later, of course. I didn't know anything for quite a while.

He was gone when I came to. The bartender said: "Boy, he laid into you, he really did."

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"Me stop him? Hah, hah, don't be funny."

I got his point. The thick-set guy was one of those muggs you leave alone. I ordered another Scotch and interviewed my brains, but nothing came of it. I picked up my stuff off the bar and went out to the lobby.

The desk clerk hadn't seen the debacle in the bar. He'd noticed the thick-set guy enter, but he didn't know what had happened to him. Probably he'd just strolled out.

"You find Hallorahan?" I asked. The clerk shook his head. "He's probably shooting craps in the basement," I said. "I'll be back later."

An elevator took me up to Faramonti's floor. My head still felt vacant and empty, except for the pain. I knocked on 1428. No answer. I pushed inside. Faramonti wasn't there, but I saw Hallorahan. He wasn't shooting craps in the basement.

He lay face down on the rug, a big, shaggy guy with sloping shoulders and a thick chest, wearing a too-small gray pin-stripe suit. He'd been shot once, through the heart.

The room was neat and un-lived in. Just the body of Hallorahan and nothing else. The Sealth was proud of its sound-proof walls, and that was why the shot hadn't been reported.

I set the suitcase down beside the bed, went out and quietly closed the door. There was no point in the silence, except that I'd liked Hallorahan. Down in the

lobby I called Lou Silver at headquarters. He didn't sound very enthusiastic. I told him I'd be at my office.

On the way I picked up copies of the newspapers for the past two weeks from a second-hand dealer. It took me about twenty minutes to find what I wanted, a feature article on Faramonti tucked away on an inside page. Faramonti was just about the most guileless looking guy I'd ever run into.

THAT'S what Lou Silver told me when he arrived. His rugged, friendly face looked unhappy. He flopped down in a chair, and his shoulders sagged with most of the cares of the world.

"Faramonti just looks naive," I said. "He told me he hit the thick-set guy and chased him away. I know different. That guy just doesn't scare. So that means Faramonti pulled a gun. Naive guys don't pack rods."

"Hallorahan was killed with a .22 Woodsman, if that means anything."

"It doesn't," I said.

"We're still holding the kid, Nick. Chances are he's in on it. He won't talk except to say he'll try to kill Faramonti as soon as we let him loose."

"Put him on a train, send him out of town."

Silver shook his head. "He'd just come back."

The kid's face got tangled in my mind again. I had a hunch his story was on the level, but I could see Silver's point of view. I'd put the kid behind the bars, and it was up to me to get him out.

I pushed a cigarette between my lips, using the matches the thick-set guy had left behind. I play my hunches—they sometimes take the place of brains. I found the empty book of matches Faramonti had thrown into the wastebasket. Both were from *Jack Riley's*.

"It doesn't mean anything," Silver said. "What if they are from the same place?"

"It was just a thought," I said.

"Yeah, you're dumb, Nick. The guy at the Sealth was after Faramonti's invention. He's working with a younger guy—probably Johnny Forbes."

"What about the thick-set guy?"

"How in hell do I know?" Silver asked gloomily. "All we've got is his description."

"Listen, Lou," I said. "Johnny Forbes was in jail when Hallorahan was shot, and that means he isn't in on it. The guy who took me down at the bar packs a .45. His partner killed Hallorahan and snatched Faramonti. And he isn't the kid at all."

Lou Silver shrugged. "I don't know, Nick. What you say may be right as rain. But how do I know? The kid swears he's gonna kill Faramonti as soon as he gets the chance. That's enough for me."

"I've got a fee tied up in Faramonti," I said.

"Yeah," Silver said, standing up. "Don't let Ike Muller put you where you can't collect it."

"Perish the thought," I said.

Silver went out. I figured I might as well have lunch. *Jack Riley's* won the toss.

It was below street level, a combination restaurant and card room.

At the moment the town was wide open, and the boys playing rummy left the stakes in plain sight. Right now you could run a crap table out on the sidewalk and get away with it. *Jack Riley's* wasn't a joint. It was just a good place to carve a steak and argue about the fights.

I tossed away a couple of nickels on a crane machine, then sat down in a booth. It was a little after the lunch hour, but the place was still crowded. A waiter dragged up.

"Has a guy named Faramonti ever eaten here?" I asked. "A little fat guy with an invention?" The waiter looked blank and I said: "Skip it. Bring me the business man's lunch." If he'd ever seen Faramonti, he'd have remembered him.

The lunch didn't kid me into believing I was a business man. Afterwards, I helped myself to a toothpick and asked the cashier about John Faramonti.

"That was a couple of nights ago," he said. He had a perfect Rotary Club face, and he laughed too loudly. Nothing was funny. "It was around nine in the evening. The little fat guy was sitting in a booth by himself, drinking beer and eating aspirin. He had a brief case. He just sat there, then went outside. He came back with thing that looked like a portable radio. He started a spiel and got some of the boys gathered around."

"Then what happened?"

"Nothing. He fiddled with the dials and words came out. He tried to sell stock in the gadget."

"Do you remember a thick-set guy about fifty wearing a dark blue overcoat?" I lit a cigarette, hoping I'd hear what I wanted to hear but afraid I wouldn't. "He'd maybe be with a younger guy, a taller guy."

The cashier shrugged. "Maybe. I remember the fat guy because of the invention. Seems there were a couple of guys like that sitting in the booth next to him. I wouldn't know."

Maybe we were getting somewhere. "And then?" I held my breath so that smoke from my cigarette tickled my lungs.

He spread his hands palm up on the felt dice board. "They didn't pay any attention to him. That's all. They just went right on talking."

I took a couple of chances on a cigarette punch board for something to do.

"Were they here when Faramonti went out?"

"I don't remember," he said. "Yeah, I guess so. The guys broke it up when this Faramonti went out. I think maybe these guys followed him. Not trailing him, just following him out."

"Thanks," I said, pushing away.

"Hey," he called after me. "You won a pack of cigarettes."

I got Lou Silver on the wire, told him where I was and what I'd found out. He told me to wait for him. He said: "This thick-set guy *might* be Sam Warren. I'm not saying it is, but it *might* be." His voice didn't sound very excited.

"I'm listening," I said.

"Sam Warren has done a stretch in Walla Walla. He's been out a couple of months, but he's been keeping his nose clean."

"That's where I sent Ike Muller," I said.

"Yeah, Nick. Maybe the younger guy is Hod Rankin. He and Warren were pretty thick in stir. I'll be right over."

I SLID into a booth and nursed a beer. Things were shaping up. If we could get Warren and Rankin, we'd get Faramonti too. That way I'd get my fee—maybe. But Johnny Forbes was still in jail. With Faramonti loose, they'd still have to hold the kid. He still had murder in his heart.

Then I thought about Ike Muller. Sam Warren and Hod Rankin might be just coincidental. And maybe not.

"Easy," a voice said, and somebody slid into the booth across the table from me.

It was the thick-set guy. His gray hair was neatly combed and he still wore the blue overcoat buttoned to his throat. His face was expressionless. Both hands were hidden under the table, and it didn't take a

diagram to show that his .45 was in one of them.

"Take it easy," Sam Warren said. "I can handle you again. Only this time it'll be a slug in the belly."

He didn't have to talk himself up, because I already knew what he could do. "Maybe we can work something out," I said.

"I've got a job for you." I shook my head. "I've got one."

"This job," he said, "I can't do it because I'm hot. The cops are looking for me." He unbuttoned his coat with his left hand. His head went down a little and I could feel the muzzle of the .45 tickling my knee. He said: "I remembered the matches I left at the Sealth, and figured you might be here. Let's take a walk."

We went down the block, around the corner and up a side street. People hurried past without a glance. Sam Warren had his hands in the pockets of his overcoat, the gun pressed against me. We turned into a doorway of a cheap hotel where a weathered sign said: *Transient Rooms, 50c & Up*.

A couple of flights of dark narrow stairs wound upward. Warren knocked three times on a door, and it was opened by a tall, thin, young guy who was holding a .22 Woodsman.

"He was there, all right, Hod," Sam Warren said, shutting the door.

The room was dreary, the furniture old and battered. A window was open and a breeze stirred the stiff worn lace curtains. Across the room was a closed door. John Faramonti sat on the edge of the bed, his clothes mussed and his lip cut.

Faramonti ignored me. He said to Sam Warren: "I hate cops as much as you do."

"So you hired this private shamus."

"That was before I knew the score. I didn't know what you guys were after."

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Let me feel a little smug while I still have the chance.”

Faramonti and Rankin looked at me, Rankin standing a little to the side with his .22 Woodsman in his hand. Sam Warren was behind me with a gun in my back.

“You guys first ran into Faramonti at Jack Riley’s,” I said, watching the closed door. “You figured he might have a permanent record of what you’d been talking about. You fell for his spiel, and you had to snatch him to find out. You couldn’t have him running to the cops.”

It was logical. I was thinking as I talked, and I’d been dumb not to see it sooner. They weren’t after the invention itself, but only what it might have picked up.

“I’m dumb,” I said. “Faramonti’s machine could be dangerous if it happened to pick up the wrong things. And you didn’t want me messing around. Both of you were hot after the affair at the Sealh, so now you want me to go over to Faramonti’s apartment to see what I can find.”

Hod Rankin scowled. “Maybe you know what we were talking about.”

“About Ike Muller,” I said.

FROM Rankin’s face I knew I’d hit it. They’d known Ike Muller in prison, and they had planned to hide him out. Not because they loved him—it would be for a share in the loot that had never been recovered from the stickup of the jewelry store. That’s what they’d been talking about at *Jack Riley’s*, and why they were afraid of Faramonti’s machine.

“You’re pretty smart,” Hod Rankin said. His Woodsman swung up to cover me.

“I’ve still got more,” My talking had got ahead of my thinking, but it all fitted so beautifully. I might as well shoot the works. “Maybe you’d like to hear it.”

They didn’t object.

“Faramonti’s invention is a fake,” I said, still watching the closed door. “Not that it matters—the result is the same. He carries a tiny compact dictaphone in his brief case and picks up what people say. Then he shoots it over a portable short-wave radio transmitter in his car. The box he brings back is just a portable receiver. Every time he demonstrates his invention he has to take the brief case outside and then return with the receiver.”

“Maybe this way it’s worse for you guys,” I told them. “If he happened to pick up your conversation, he’s got it permanently transcribed on a dictaphone record.”

Faramonti moistened his lips. “I didn’t pick up what they were talking about. It was another conversation. I tried to tell them that but—”

“But they wouldn’t believe you.” I took my eyes off the door and looked at him. “Now they want me to find out for sure.”

Hod Rankin was staring at me. I could almost see his mind working, absorbing what I’d just said. His eyes flicked past me and I knew he was watching Sam Warren, watching for some signal.

I stared at Rankin now, not taking my eyes off his face. I couldn’t see Faramonti sitting on the edge of the bed, but I was waiting. Maybe Faramonti looked guileless and naive, but he was tough. And he knew both of us were on a spot. So I kept watching Rankin and hoping Faramonti could read what was in my mind.

The bed squeaked once, then Faramonti bounced into my range of vision. He leaped squarely on top of Rankin, smothering him with his fat body. Hod Rankin started to swing his .22 Woodsman around.

I didn’t wait for more. Sam Warren

was behind me, his .45 aimed at my back. Every fraction of a second I expected to feel a slug plowing into my spine. I fell flat on the floor and kicked behind with both feet. They caught his ankles and he fell down on top of me. His gun exploded harmlessly. I rolled over and kicked him in the jaw before he even moved.

Faramonti and Hod Rankin were struggling for possession of the Woodsman. Both had their hands on it. Faramonti was straining at the barrel, bending it away from him and in toward Rankin's thin body. It made a sullen little *pop!* and Rankin went limp. Faramonti struggled to his feet, his face flaming and the .22 Woodsman clutched in his hand.

The door behind me opened, the door leading out to the hall. A voice said: "Okay, Carnavan."

I recognized the voice even as I turned. It was Ike Muller. The closed door across the room was probably just a closet. I'd figured Ike Muller would be hiding there, but I'd been wrong. This was my day for guessing wrong. He'd had a room next door.

A gun was in his hand. His face was pale, his eyes bloodshot. He wasn't the smoothie now, and somehow he looked funny with the short "stir" haircut. He'd always worn his hair long.

"Drop the rod," he said.

I didn't drop the .44—just let it swing down loosely in my hand. Faramonti wasn't going to be any help, not with the unloaded Woodsman.

"Nice," Ike Muller said softly. "I swore I'd get you. Nice of you to walk right in."

"I should have killed you that other time," I said. The bore of Ike Muller's gun looked awfully big.

"I've been thinking about it," he told me, his lips off his teeth. "Every night in the big house I dreamed about getting

you."

He was working himself up to a frenzy. I asked: "What are we waiting for?"

"Nothing," he said. "Not a thing."

I watched him, my gun pointing at the floor. He tossed his head—and that was it.

I FELL away to the side, bringing my gun around. His weapon cracked and the slug went wide. I shot him in the chest and he lay down like a heavy sack of cement.

He'd telegraphed the shot. It was a gesture I knew—that tossing of his head. He'd always worn his hair long, and he tossed his head before shooting to get his hair out of his eyes. And even though it was short now he couldn't forget habit.

Faramonti was backing away from Hod Rankin's body. His fat legs trembled. The corners of his mouth were pulled down in a snarl, and he kicked Hod Rankin in the head. "Dirty, lousy rats," he said.

His face was ugly. He picked up Sam Warren's .45. Warren groaned a little, and stirred. "You're another," Faramonti said, and shot Sam Warren in the face.

I stepped away. That was too much—shooting an unconscious guy. That was just being kill-crazy. Slowly the anger went out of Faramonti's face, like a summer shower.

"The three others who knew your invention was a fake are dead," I said. "You told them you didn't hear their conversation at *Jack Riley's*. I think you did. I think you've got the whole thing down on a record. Even to the place where the loot is cached. I'm the only one left who might know."

"That's right," he said, and fired.

I'd been expecting it, but I muffed it a little. The slug slammed into my shoulder as I fell forward. I kept on falling,

swinging my gun up. Before he could fire again, I had him—my gun bucking twice in my hand.

Through the throat where it would be fatal. Blood bubbled and he put both hands around his throat, trying to stop the pain. That way he died, the hard way.

He'd fired first and I'd shot him in self-defense. That was okay. But I still felt like a butcher. I could have just winged him and let it go at that.

Thinking of Johnny Forbes helped a little. The cops would have to let him go now. Faramonti was dead, and the kid could no longer make good his threat.

I wondered if the dictaphone record was in the back of Faramonti's tan sedan. I'd never collect my fee from Faramonti, but what I'd get in the way of a reward would be a whole lot better. I stepped over to the window without looking at the dead.

Somebody had called the cops. Sirens were wailing in the street.