

# THE BIRD MASTER

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

*Twitterings and squawks that presage looting and death hand a cuckoo of a murder case to astounded Police Detective Mickie O'Day!*



## CHAPTER I THE BIRDIES SING

**W**HEN Captain Jim Doran phoned me to come to his office in the Detective Bureau down at Headquarters I had a hunch he didn't want to discuss the rainy weather.

"I've got a job for you, Mickie," he said in his deep, rumbling bass, when I entered. "Sit down and listen."

I sat down cautiously, as a man will when he is six-foot-two and weighs a hundred and ninety. Sometimes furniture had a way of unexpectedly collapsing with me and it always offended my dignity as a first-grade detective.

"Go ahead, Cappy," I said. "I'm all ears."

"I know you are—you've got the best hearing of any man in the Police Department," he said. "That's why I want you to work on this case." He frowned. "And don't call me Cappy."

I just grinned. I owed him a lot and we both knew it. Ten years ago I had been working in a steel mill and an accident had left me totally deaf. Doran had learned that I was anxious to join the police and had dug up a good surgeon who picked the pieces of steel out of my skull and made me hear again.

I made the grade in the examinations and finally worked my way up to first-grade detective. I was so glad to be able to hear that I'd trained myself to really listen, and I was good at it.

*A  
Baffling  
Complete  
Crime  
Novelet*

"It's a strange case," mused Doran. "I'd have thought Swenson was nuts, if it hadn't been for Brackton, and even with him I'd have put it down to coincidence if it hadn't been for Marshall."

"And we'd have ham and eggs if we had some ham and we had some eggs," I said. "What are you talking about?"

"Crimes and twittering birds," said Doran. "Three of them."

The more he talked the crazier he sounded. I let him keep on talking, hoping it would begin to make sense.

"Two weeks ago a private house was broken into on Riverside Drive," he said slowly. "The family was in Florida. There was only a caretaker at the house, but there was ten grand in jewels in a wall safe."

"Served them right for leaving the stuff around," I said.

"Yeah, but there's a law against taking jewels from other people, in case you've forgotten. And how a patrolman making his rounds saw the front door open and went in. He found that caretaker, Swensen, on the floor. He'd been hit on the head so hard he nearly died. When he regained consciousness in the hospital he kept babbling, 'I hear birds. . . . I hear birds! Strange birds!'"

"Just the wallop, Captain," I said. "You do queer things when you've been conked on the head."

**D**ORAN looked at me. "Yeah?" he said. "Well, get a load of this. Three nights after that Dean Brackton, of the Park Avenue clan, is driving home from a swell binge. He's a guy about fifty, but husky. He's also been gambling, and has close to eight grand in his clothes. He's reached his private garage when he hears this bird—"

"What time was this?" I interrupted.

"Four in the morning!"

"When all good little birds should be

asleep. Go on."

Doran went on. "He figures it might be fun to hunt for the bird when he hears it again. Then he hears another bird—and somebody saps him, and he goes out like a light. When he comes to the eight thousand is gone, so he reports to the police."

I let out a deep breath. It was crazy.

Doran went on and told me about the third case. John Marshall was a crusty, miserly old man who didn't believe in banks and kept all his cash hidden in his dingy apartment on the lower East Side. Two nights before he'd been awakened by a bird call outside his window.

Marshall thinks of his money. He gets up and looks in the safe. The money is gone—twenty-five thousand dollars, his life's savings. It seems to the old man he heard more than one bird when he first awoke, but he's not sure. He's certain about the bird outside the window though."

"And you want me to go hunting birds," I said. "All right. But isn't it a cold trail?"

"When I got the report on the Riverside Drive robbery and the caretaker raving about birds, I didn't think much about it," said Doran. "Then the other two cases came up and I decided to put you to work, Mickie."

Suddenly, Doran's phone rang. He answered and kept saying, "Yeah. . . . Yeah." Then he hung up and looked at me with a gleam in his eyes.

"That was Fred Swenson," he said. "He just saw one of the guys who conked him, and knows where the man lives."

"Why not send a squad car around to pick the guy up?" I asked.

"Because Swenson wouldn't give the man's name or address over the phone. Said it was too risky. He wants a detective to come see him at the house on Riverside

Drive. He's back on the job. His employers haven't come home. Ten grand in jewels didn't seem important enough to break up their vacation."

He gave me the address of the house and said the absent family's name was Decatur. I drove uptown and onto the Drive. It was still raining and the day was gloomy. I didn't hear any birds chirping.

When I reached the Decatur place I parked at the curb. It was a big four-story house. I could live on the taxes its owner had to pay, and maintain a staff of servants besides.

The front door was half open. I climbed the steps and pushed the bell-button and there wasn't any sound. Then I yelled for Swenson and nothing happened. I began to feel a little creepy.

I pushed the door all the way open and jumped inside, fast, in case someone with a gun or a blackjack had seen me and didn't care for visitors.

**S**TILL nothing happened. The house seemed filled with bleak silence and was pretty dark because all of the shades were drawn, the shutters were closed tight, and no lights were on.

"Darned queer," says I to me. "I'd better take a look around."

Just the same I didn't want to go blundering into something. I stood there listening. Then my trained ears caught it—a distant, muted thumping, as though someone pretty weak was kicking his heels against something. I could visualize someone kicking on a floor as he died.

I located the direction from which the sound was coming. It seemed to be toward the rear, on the second floor. I hurried up the stairs. Once I paused and sniffed as I caught the distinct odor of Red Stag smoking tobacco. The kind a lot of folks use when they roll their own. I had to know about that thumping.

The second floor was even darker than down below. I carry a pocket flashlight and a gun, and it struck me that right now was a good time to have them both ready, so I drew them out.

The light gleamed on a closed door, and I was sure the thumping came from the room beyond. I reached out and opened the door, and the beam of the flash centered on a thin man lying face down on the floor. His head was still bandaged so I figured he must be Swensen. There was a knife sticking in his back, and if his feet had not still been moving just a little I would have been sure I was looking at a corpse.

I dashed to him, rolled him over on his side. I knew that nothing could be done for him, but I had to get his last words, whatever they were. His face was horrible as he opened his eyes and glared up at me.

"I'm from the police, Swensen," I said. "It's all right."

"Take care," he mumbled. "There's death—"

He almost passed out as he murmured the last word. I wished I could give him enough of my own oversupply of strength to keep him going.

"Come on, Swensen," I cried. "What happened?"

He fought back from the grave to give me a break. The agony sweat burst out on his face as he strained to talk.

"Before I was stabbed," he managed to mutter, "I heard a bird."

I was suffering with him, knowing it was useless to make any attempt to get a doctor or an ambulance. I said the first thing that came into my mind.

"What sort of a bird?"

Then I cursed myself for a fool. This guy was dying and I asked him about birds. But the effect was strange and somehow horrible. He pursed his mouth to whistle. His face became a dead-white,

sweaty mask. Droplets of perspiration spotted his upper lip, and there in the room where he was dying with his last breath he managed to whistle.

A sound that was something like "*Pee-wee-oo! Pee-wee-oo!*" issued from his lips, then faded as a death rattle came from his throat, and he died in my arms.

"Birds," I muttered, staring down at the still form. "Birds that kill!"

## CHAPTER II SHADOWS



UNCONSCIOUS of all the sounds about me, I lowered the body of Fred Swensen to the floor and stood erect. There are times when I found my hearing too keen for my own comfort. It was as though I were listening to a great symphony orchestra, but instead of blending, each instrument was playing a solo part that only I could hear.

Somewhere on the third floor of the house a window blind flapped. The stairs creaked and groaned, and the whole house was filled with muted noises, like an old ship at sea. To me the beating of the rain on the roof was as definite and insidious as the drum part of Ravel's "Bolero." I could hear the swish of tires out on the Drive.

The bird call Swensen had whistled with his last breath lingered in my memory. I tried to whistle it myself, there in the room that held the silence of death and yet held so many sounds for my ears.

I could echo the call all right, and I whistled it a bit louder. Then I stopped. The eerie sound, echoing and reechoing through the empty house gave me a chill.

But I had work to do. I began to search the place, not expecting to find anything much and hurrying because I must report the murder of Fred Swensen.

Unconsciously I whistled that bird call several times as I scoured the premises. I did it as much to get away from the crazy feeling of unease at hearing weird echoes as anything else.

*"Pee-wee-oo! Pee-wee-oo!"*

Well, I told myself, if Brackton and Marshall reported hearing the same sound I'd at least know that the same person or persons were in on the three robberies, to which murder had now been added.

I found a telephone on the lower floor and phoned Captain Doran. He told me that the Homicide boys would take over and to wait there until they arrived, or until he could send the men in the nearest patrol car. As I put down the phone it dawned on me that I might be sticking my neck way out in hanging around the house alone.

"Mickie," I told myself, "you're a stupid cluck! This killer must have known Swensen had spotted him, so murdered him to keep him from spilling what he knew. That killer might be sticking around, and here you go all through the house whistling that queer bird sound. You're just asking for trouble."

I was mighty glad when a patrol car arrived, for it was getting late, and soon would be dark. I had the two cops take over until Homicide got there. I wasn't scared, but I had heard of few dead detectives solving a case, and I didn't want to try it as a gob of ectoplasm.

Doran had given me Dean Brackton's Park Avenue address, so I drove there. A stuffed shirt in a butler's livery informed me that Mr. Brackton was not home, with the air of being in a hurry to get away from a bad smell.

"Snap out of it, Jeeves," I said, practically rubbing his nose on my badge. "This is police business. Where did Mr. Brackton go?"

The butler thawed like an ice-cream cone on a hot stove, and named a high

class gambling joint. I knew the place, and it called for evening clothes and plenty of folding money. So I went home to get my dinner and dress for the occasion. Dolly—she's my wife—had a swell meal ready, and looked as young and pretty as she did when we were married five years ago.

After dinner I got out my evening clothes and dressed. Dolly sort of sniffed when she saw the get-up, and made some cracks about blondes, but stopped when she saw the serious look on my face.

"I'd like to take you," I said, "but it may not be all fun."

"You likely to get shot at, Mickie?" she asked anxiously.

"Nope," I said, though I wasn't so sure.

"Then why can't I go?" she asked.

"Business," I said.

"Monkey business," she retorted, but she looked anxious.

"Bird business," I said, and went out to head for the gambling joint.

**I**T WAS the usual place of this type, with plenty of plush and hush-hush. I never drink or gamble, so I wasn't known at the club. But I must have looked like ready money, for I didn't have any trouble getting in.

There were quite a few men there, and as I looked them over I wondered if the guy who had killed Fred Swensen was among them. I spotted Dean Brackton at the roulette table. I had seen enough newspaper photos of him to know him. At fifty he was still doing the playboy act, which struck me as silly with a war going on, but it wasn't my job to correct his morals or morale.

I edged up to the roulette table and managed to slide into a place near Brackton. I placed a fifty-dollar bet, and didn't pay much attention to it. Instead, I kept watching Dean Brackton out of the

corner of my eye. I saw him literally smear the table with hundred buck markers. He seemed to have money to burn, and he certainly had the fire going. It didn't trouble him, either.

He was a handsome guy, with thick white hair, six feet tall or so, and weighing close to two hundred, but there was no fat on him.

A thin-faced, dark-haired man next to him shook his head as he watched him.

"I can't understand how you can drop so much without batting an eye, Brackton," he said.

"Dough is to amuse yourself with, Carlson," Brackton said. "So I'm having fun."

He was rather belligerent about it, as though daring Carlson to make something of it. I saw he could be quarrelsome for no good reason. He was just the sort of a mug to have an argument with a killer and get himself shot or stabbed.

"And I haven't any nerves," he added.

To prove it, he took out a pack of Red Stag and rolled himself a smoke. He did it with one hand, too, and didn't spill a crumb of tobacco. It gave me a shock to find this guy smoking Red Stag after I had discovered the scent of it in the house where Swensen had been killed.

I edged over closer to him, and began to whistle, scarcely above my breath. My heart was hammering, for a lot or nothing might depend on the results.

*"Pee-wee-oo! Pee-wee-oo!"*

It didn't seem to have any results. I kept right on with it. Finally I could see it was getting Brackton's goat, but knew it might be that its monotony annoyed him, rather than that the sound meant anything. I noticed Carlson had moved away, as though the sound had annoyed him, too.

Finally Dean Brackton turned to look full at me.

"Listen, guy," he said, "are you going

to stop that fool whistling, or do I have to take you apart?"

"Whistling?" I said, dead-pan, as though I didn't know what he was talking about.

"Well, whatever you call that noise you're making, quit it."

"Yeah, cut it out," said the croupier sharply. Brackton was too good a sucker to antagonize. "That stuff doesn't go here."

I quit whistling and stuck to Brackton like a leech until I got a chance to speak to him when no one else could hear me.

"Just why should a bird song get you?" I asked.

He stiffened. I grabbed his elbow, hard.

"Keep playing," I said. "You might get a knife in you, see? Cop a sneak in a minute and I'll follow if you're interested in birds."

**H**E WAS interested and excited, though he tried to hide it. And pretty soon he cashed in and departed for the men's rest room. I started after him, after five minutes or so.

"Don't you want your dough?" the croupier snapped at me.

I remembered then and looked at the number I had been playing. I had neglected to pull down or take in my winnings and they had automatically pyramided. I put five hundred dollars' worth of markers into my pocket and wondered why guys ever took up detecting.

Brackton was alone in the rest room. He stood watching me as I entered, his back close to the wall. He was not fool enough to risk getting stabbed in the back.

"Now what's this about birds?" he demanded.

"Just this," I replied. "Whistle for me the bird sounds you heard the night

somebody took you for eight grand."

He glared at me for a moment. He didn't know me from Adam. But he was game. He whistled, and the sound that came out was no more like "*Pee-wee-oo*" than a hog's squeal is like the braying of a burro.

My props kind of collapsed under me, wondering just what to do next.

I guess I looked dangerous to him. He probably thought when I told him he might get a knife in him that I was threatening to do the art work with the shiv. Anyway, he swung at me.

But he missed. You have to shoot 'em fast to tag a guy who's practically listening to your thoughts. I didn't miss. He went down from a stiff right to the whiskers, out cold.

I left him there and walked out to the croupier.

"I just tagged Brackton on the button," I said. "See that nobody gets to him who might roll him, will you?"

I saw Carlson grinning at me, as though he liked the idea of Brackton being socked. I cashed in my chips and got out of there in a hurry before the croupier got the idea of having some of the hired help do a little fancy work on my rugged frame. The place wouldn't take too kindly to a good cash customer being knocked out.

I got out all right, and breathed a sigh of relief when I reached the street. I wanted to know about birds and their calls and I had a hunch I might be able to learn a lot from some of the keepers at the Bronx Zoo. They had a bird house up there.

It was around ten o'clock, and the zoo wasn't open at night, but I decided to drive up, anyway. I might be able to find someone who could give me some information. So I got into my car, top-hat and all, and started.

On the way I tried to whistle as

Brackton had. It wasn't easy. Try whistling the words: "*White-oak! White-oak!*" It was birdlike, all right, but certainly didn't sound anything like "*Peewee-oo.*"

It was obvious that Swensen and Brackton had each heard a different bird call. That might mean there were two killers, perhaps more. Then I got to wondering what the bird call that old John Marshall had heard had been like. I wanted to know about that, too.

So I pulled to the curb, got out and found a phone booth in a drug store. Marshall didn't have a telephone, but I asked Information to do what she could, telling her it was police business. A neighbor called Marshall to the phone.

"Mr. Marshall," I said hurriedly, before he could hang up as his impatient snapping-turtle voice warned me he might do, "I'm after the men who got your money. I understand you heard bird sounds. Tell me if you heard either one of these."

I did the best I could to whistle the sounds, and he listened.

"Nothing like that," he snapped. "I know birds and the sound I heard was a poor imitation of the call the loggerhead shrike makes!"

### CHAPTER III

#### SWELL WIFE FOR A DETECTIVE



PHONED Thornhill, the head keeper at the zoo, gave him my name and told him I was a detective from Police Headquarters and wanted to talk to him about a murder case right away. He said he would be waiting for me at the main gate of the zoo.

As I drove uptown I kept thinking of my phone conversation with Marshall,

which had made everything just as clear as mud. What did I know about loggerhead shrikes? The answer was very little.

By the time I was halfway to the zoo I had a hunch that another car was following me. It had stopped raining, but there were heavy clouds still in the night sky, and it was a nice night for a murder. But I reached the zoo without being murdered and parked my car in front of the main gate.

A stocky, gray-haired man was waiting with the gate open.

"Mr. Thornhill?" I asked, and when he nodded, "I'm O'Day from the Detective Bureau at Headquarters."

He seemed surprised at my evening clothes, but took me to his office and we talked. I told him I was anxious to visit the bird house, as bird calls played an important part in the case on which I was working.

"Is that really necessary?" Thornhill asked. "I hate to light up the bird house and wake up all the birds at this time of night unless you feel it's vital, Mr. O'Day. Perhaps I can help you by trying to identify the bird calls you heard."

"All right," I said. "Let's try it."

First I gave him the "*Pee-wee-oo*" call. He had me repeat the whistle a few times, then nodded.

"It's not exactly right," he said. "But it sounds like it might be an imitation of the call of the pewit, or lapwing. What else?"

I did the best I could with the call that Brackton had given me just before I had to sock him. Thornhill listened, then nodded again. The "*White-oak—White-oak*" whistle meant something to him.

"Might be someone was trying to make a sound like the call of the whitethroat," said the head keeper finally. "That's a small bird found more in Europe than it is in this country. Is that all?"

"All except the call of the loggerhead

shrike,” I said. “And I know that one. Thanks much, Mr. Thornhill.”

“I thought you might want to talk about some of the other birds,” he said. “Like the rail, the redstart, the scaledove. You know, *Scardafella squamosa*. Or the Senegal—*Lagonosticia minima*.”

“Not now,” I interrupted hastily. “Some other time, Mr. Thornhill, and thanks again for your trouble.”

He unlocked the main gate for me, still reeling off a list of unusual birds. When he finally locked the gate from the inside and walked away I was glad to see him go. A little more of his chatter and I’d have thought I was a canary and asked to be put back in my cage.

A dark sedan was parked halfway down the block but I didn’t pay much attention to it. Just as I reached my coupe a little guy jumped away from the far side of my car and dashed for some trees and bushes at the edge of the zoo grounds.

It looked as if he had been trying to steal something out of my car, so I chased after him. It wasn’t until I got back in among the trees that it dawned on me that I was doing just what the little guy wanted. He had run when he was sure I had spotted him, hoping I would come after him.

I REACHED into my pocket for my gun and cursed when I didn’t find it. I had left it in my other suit when I had changed into evening clothes.

“All right, wise guy,” said a gruff voice out of the shadows. “We’ll fix you for being too nosy!”

It wasn’t the little guy I had been chasing, but a big man who spoke as he lunged at me out of the bushes. I thought I was going to feel cold steel, but he didn’t come with a knife. He came with his fists, and he was a heavyweight if I ever saw one, with some idea of how to use his dukes.

His teeth were exposed in a snarl, and as he came out of the shadows he reminded me too much of the ghost of Frankenstein’s monster. He got in one good blow before I could get set, which proved he was pretty fast.

His wallop spun me clear around and showed me something that got me feeling a little jittery. If I had gone straight backward I’d have smashed against a sharp branch of a tree, broken off at just about the height of my shoulder-blades. It would probably have impaled me, and it looked as if that was just what the big guy had intended to happen. .

I sidestepped and began fighting. I was up against a killer and it wasn’t any time to do the minuet. I started the old fists doing their stuff and began to cut his face up like nobody’s business. But he wasn’t just standing around taking it. He was socking me plenty.

That wasn’t all that was worrying me either. I hadn’t forgotten the little guy I had chased in among the trees. I had a vision of getting fists in my face from the big man and a knife in my back from the little one. It wasn’t a nice prospect for the home team.

I called it right though. Just about the time the big guy and I were both groggy the little man leaped out of the shadows. And he had a knife in his right hand.

“Look out, Hawk!” he called. “I’ll get him.”

“Keep out of this, Sparrow,” growled the big guy. “I’ll knock this lug cold in a minute.”

And the way he was landing hard rights and lefts on my face and body had me nearly convinced he was betting on a sure thing. Then I got mad and the O’Days are not noted for their placidness in anger.

I biffed him on the chin so hard it nearly knocked him over. I blackened his right eye and made his nose bleed. Then I



got in a straight right that came from way down here and landed just where I wanted it to go. The big Hawk went down looking like a dead duck.

But Sparrow still wanted to play. He lunged at me with the knife when I wasn't set for him, and got me with it the first rattle out of the box. He ripped a nice gash along my chest clear down to my belt buckle. It burned like blazes and the blood was hot on my flesh.

I hit Sparrow and knocked him back before he could get me again with the knife. For a moment it looked as if I was all set to report the enemy vanquished, then Hawk came to and grabbed me by the ankle.

I hit my head so hard on the ground when I went down that I thought I was going to pass out, but I fought against it. With two guys trying to kill me this didn't seem the time for slumber.

With a kick of the heel of my other foot on his wrist I broke Hawk's hold on my ankle. I managed to get to my feet, though it seemed to me I was doing it in slow motion. The trees spun around and the sky seemed pretty wobbly. I was nearly out on my feet.

"I'll fix you!" shouted Hawk. "We'll teach the police to leave the Birds alone!"

He grabbed me by the shoulders, his fingers biting into me like hooks, and lifted me clear off the ground. Terror gripped me as I understood what he was trying to do. He was using all his strength to smash me back against that razor-sharp broken tree limb.

I kicked him in the stomach, and he let out a yell and dropped me. I fell on my back, pretty much of a wreck. Sparrow flung himself in, leaning over me with the knife raised to do the rest of the job.

A pistol cracked. The knife disappeared out of Sparrow's hand, which was some shooting in that kind of light.

The two mugs did a fast fade-out. They didn't care to have anyone hear pistol shots.

"I told you to take me with you," said a voice I loved like nobody's business. "What a time I've had trailing you around."

It was Dolly. The missus was the one shadow I could never drop if she set her mind to the job—which I was mighty glad she had done in the present instance. She is never afraid of anything, that gal. A swell wife for a detective.

I tried to cheer, but everything went black and I went out like a light. . . .

When I opened my eyes I was in a hospital with the dawn coming in through the windows. Dolly was sitting beside the bed, looking a little worried, but mighty lovely. I smiled at her, feeling bruised and battered but all in one piece.

I didn't feel like shouting for my clothes, and dashing madly out in search of a couple of killers named Hawk and Sparrow. I'd been a detective too long to consider myself a one-man Police Department.

"Good morning," I said to Dolly. "How long am I supposed to stay here?"

Before she could answer, a nurse came in with an intern who was making his morning rounds. He took my pulse and nodded.

"You're all right," he said. "Rest is all you need."

I didn't argue. I wanted to do some heavy thinking, and a hospital bed was as good a place to do it in as anywhere else.

The intern and the nurse left, and Dolly and I talked a while. She told me she had had a hunch that I might get in trouble and so she had trailed me all evening in her car. She had parked around the corner at the zoo after she had seen me go in with the head keeper. She hadn't seen me come out through the main gate,

but she had finally become worried and walked to my car.

Then she had heard faint sounds coming from back among the trees and had sneaked back to investigate. She had arrived just in time to shoot the knife out of Sparrow's hand.

I told her the whole story of the case I was working on, as far as I knew it. I never was one of those strong and silent guys who act mysterious with their women folk. Besides, Dolly often had bright ideas that gave me some good leads.

"Sounds to me like there might be a bunch of crooks who call themselves the Birds," she said when I had finished. "And they use the names of our little feathered friends. You said the big man was called Hawk and the little one Sparrow."

"You've got something there, Dolly," I said. "I've got to get out of here by noon and down to Headquarters. I want to talk to Captain Doran. How about going home and getting me some fresh clothes so I won't look as if I'd been out all night getting myself bunged up?"

"All right," she said. "You try and sleep until I return."

She kissed me and left. A nurse brought me some breakfast and I went through the usual hospital routine until Dolly came back around noon. I had slept a good bit and was feeling fine.

#### CHAPTER IV ROGUES GALLERY PHOTOS



BY one-thirty I was in the Detective Bureau talking to Captain Doran in his office. I told him everything that had happened since I had left him the previous afternoon.

"So we know that Swensen heard an imitation of the call of the pewit, both

when the house was robbed and he was hit over the head, and when he was stabbed," I said. "Brackton heard someone trying to make a noise like a whitethroat, and Marshall the loggerhead shriek. It all adds up."

"Yeah, to zero," said Doran. "But go on, Mickie."

"Each bird sound is an identification, as I make it out," I went on. "It's a command to the person to whom it is addressed, and to whom it also identifies the one who is making the bird call. No gang of cheap crooks thought that up all by themselves. It was done by somebody who knows birds, and knows them well. He's the guy we've got to find."

"How?" asked Captain Doran.

"By contacting every expert on birds in New York City."

"And how do you expect me to do that?"

"Maybe there's a Curator of Ornithology at the Museum of Natural History," I said. "He'll have the names of all the experts at his fingertips. Phone him and get him to bring those men to Headquarters."

"All right," said the captain, reaching for the phone. "I'll see what I can do."

I stuck around while he called the museum. He had to do a lot of talking, but he finally put down the phone with a satisfied expression.

"The curator will try to have them all here by three o'clock this afternoon," he told me.

"Good! Now me for the Rogues Gallery and a gabfest with its keeper," I said. "See you later. And, oh, yes—try and have Brackton and Marshall here at three o'clock, too."

I went to the Gallery, where the old man who runs the place has more knowledge of crooks in his head than there is in the files. He's been there since they

started mugging crooks and what he doesn't know hasn't been found out.

"Look, Mr. Casey," I said to him. "I've got a queer one for you to untwist. Is it true that you can put your hands on almost any picture anyone asks for without reference to the indices?"

"Just about," he said.

His face was beaming with pride in his own knowledge. He doesn't make much money, and is no detective—at least not on the rolls—but he wouldn't change places with the Commissioner of Police. His job is too interesting to him.

"What'll it be?" he asked.

"I'm interested in monickers and characteristics. I want the pictures of men who have strange nicknames like 'The Hawk', 'The Owl', 'The Buzzard', 'The Loon'—you know, things like that."

He nodded. "How about 'The Ferret' and 'The Mole'?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing but names of birds."

He walked away from me and when he came back he dumped a fistful of pictures on the desk. I took a gander at them and got excited, for it looked as if I was on the right track. Every one of those hardened criminals had some sort of a bird nickname.

There was "Buzzard" Blake, who had served ten years for robbery, but was free now; "Swallow" Carson, who was a killer, and "Robin" Hill, who was a third-term offender. I started looking through those pictures hoping to find a big guy whose nickname was "Hawk" and a little one called "Sparrow" but it wasn't so easy.

"More of them, Casey?" I asked when I had gone all through the first batch.

"I've got a houseful," came his muffled tones from somewhere in the depths of his files.

PRETTY soon he came in with more. I went through them all. I spent nearly two hours before I found the ones I wanted. Joe Quinn, known as "Hawk." He had escaped from prison and was wanted for murder in the first degree. "Sparrow" Larkins, also a killer, who had escaped with Quinn. Just a couple of nice playful boys.

"Thanks, Casey," I said. "I'll keep this batch." I grabbed a stack of pictures and left.

I showed Captain Doran what I had found. The first thing we did was put out a "pick-up and hold" order with a description of the two men. That went out to every precinct station in the city. Quinn and Larkins would have every policeman in the Department on the lookout for them from now on.

"Of course, there's probably more in the Bird Gang than just those two," I said. "Lord knows how many—but if we get Hawk and Sparrow and make them talk we'll get somewhere fast."

"Don't forget the guy higher up," said Doran. "For all we know he may be one of these bird experts who are due here in ten minutes."

I nodded. "And when these bird experts leave here, have each one of them shadowed. Let's see what we can find out."

"Behave, sonny boy." The captain grinned. "Don't try to teach me my job. I've already given a bunch of plainclothesmen their orders."

At three o'clock the bird experts were all there; fourteen of them. I smiled when I saw that Thornhill, the head keeper from the zoo, was among them. I certainly had gone to the right man last night. One or two of them looked like average businessmen. Others had long hair and a look of absent-mindedness.

I looked them over carefully, but with the exception of Thornhill everyone was a stranger to me. Then I happened to notice one man's eyes, and had an almost positive feeling that I had seen him before.

He was a little old guy, who looked like a bird himself. I kept watching and listening when he talked. Then someone addressed him as Carlson, and I knew why he seemed familiar. He reminded me of that other and younger Carlson who had been in the gambling joint, and who had grinned when he heard I had bopped Brackton. Probably the two Carlsons were related.

In another room were Dean Brackton and old John Marshall. I went into the room with them.

"We're checking up on possible suspects," I said to them. "I'd like you to go into the other room, take a good look at the men sitting there, then come back and tell me if you recall having seen any of them before." I looked at the playboy with recognition then, and smiled. "Hi, Brackton."

"Somebody did a lot better job on your face than I did," he said, for I still looked pretty battered. "I couldn't take a chance of having a knife stuck in me, could I?"

It was pretty much of an apology, so I answered in kind.

"And I couldn't have somebody interfering with the law," I said.

Doran had fixed it so I could watch the bird experts without being seen. Brackton went in first. The experts looked at him curiously. He came back, shook his head, and my heart sank. John Marshall nearly gave me heart failure. When he went in he called all fourteen of those men by name, shaking hands with each one. It was all of a minute before I remembered he had told me when I phoned him that he knew birds. It was natural for him to know guys with similar interests.

But Marshall, I got to thinking then, should have been in there among the suspects. If he were the brains behind the gang he might well have robbed himself as a cover-up.

I WENT back into the other room and gathered up the bunch of pictures I had brought from the Rogues Gallery, those of Sparrow and Hawk among them. I asked the bird experts to look them over and see if they recognized any of the men.

It took a long time to get through this, and I was watching faces all the time. Their expressions didn't change. Not one of those men, according to his say-so, had ever seen any of the criminals in the pictures. From the attitudes and expressions of all of them I figured they were telling the truth, and the captain seemed to feel the same way about it.

Before he apologized to his visitors for detaining them so long and thanked them for coming, I stacked the pictures on Doran's desk.

There was the usual confusion during their departure, which always occurs when fifteen or sixteen people are telling one another good-bye. When everybody had gone Captain Doran sat down.

I dropped into a chair, feeling disappointed. The interview with the bird experts had not been much of a success in my estimation. If any of those men had been able to identify any member of the Bird Gang from the Rogues Gallery photographs they certainly hadn't given any sign of it.

With that thought in mind I looked over to where I had stacked the pictures on the captain's desk. My eyes widened and my mouth opened and closed like a fish.

"What's the matter, Mickie?" asked Doran, surprised by my expression. "Is there something wrong?"

"They're g-gone," I managed to

stammer. Then I got a grip on myself. "Somebody swiped all of those pictures from the Rogues Gallery!"

"Huh?" Captain Doran looked blankly at the top of his desk, as though unable to believe his eyes. "You're right! They *are* gone! But why, Mickie? Tell me that!"

"Somebody in that bunch of men who just left here did know and recognize some of the members of the Bird Gang!" I said excitedly. "Whoever that was took the pictures in the hope of concealing the identity of those men. Don't forget not only the names and records of every one of those crooks was with their pictures, but also their fingerprints!"

"Whoever did it didn't know too much about police routine," Doran said pretty grimly. "We've still got the original negative of everyone of those Rogues Gallery files, provided all of the men were mugged here. If not, some other Police Department has them." He smiled then, satisfied. "It's a good thing I have a man tailing every one of those suspects."

"Wonderful," I said ironically. "And I suppose you can have detectives search fourteen houses, and have fourteen lawsuits on your hands?"

"That's true," he said with a frown. "Then what's to be done, Mickie?"

"It's my case, and I'll take care of it," I said. "I'm going looking for the cuckoo who stole the birds!"

Already I had a definite hunch. And as I barged out of Captain Doran's office I had decided to play it for all it was worth. We had taken the names and addresses of all the bird experts while they were at Headquarters and I had the list in my pocket. It was the little guy named Carlson who interested me and I had decided to pay him a visit.

I kept thinking of the thin-faced young fellow in the gambling joint who also had been named Carlson, and I was anxious to

learn the relationship between him and the old bird expert who had come to Headquarters. From the list I learned that the old man was named Giles Carlson and that he lived up in the Bronx.

The bird experts and Brackton and Marshall had spent a long time at the Detective Bureau, and it was growing dark as I got into my car and drove uptown. I did a lot of thinking during the journey, and finally decided that I would try and nose around Carlson's place without being seen.

## CHAPTER V SOUNDS IN THE NIGHT



SOON as I reached the street I wanted in the Bronx I drove by Carlson's place. It was a big old-fashioned house located in a lonely section with not many close neighbors. That suited me fine.

Across the street from the house I spotted the plainclothesman who had been detailed to watch Carlson, but I didn't let him see me. This was a solo job as far as I was concerned.

Night had descended, and with the dimout and all it was plenty dark in that neighborhood. I parked the car around the corner and sneaked back across lots. When I reached the house luck was with me, for a back door was open. I stepped into the kitchen.

Most of the lower floor of the house was dark, so I had to guide myself by my hearing more than anything else. There were plenty of birds there, for I heard them twittering sleepily somewhere not far away. I figured they must be in a lighted room, otherwise they would have been silent.

I made a bee-line for that room through the dark, and reached a closed door. I stood there listening, my ears catching every sound that came from the other side of the panel. I could hear a man inside talking to the birds, and decided it must be Giles Carlson.

There must have been hundreds of birds in that room, and the old man loved them so well he had pet names for them. I could hear him clucking to them, but not once did I hear him whistle a bird call or anything resembling one. He almost caught me out there. He would have, too, if I hadn't been so sensitive to sounds. For when I heard soft-soled slippers coming to the door I had time to duck into the shadows farther back along the hall.

He stood in the light of the open doorway for a moment or two. He was Giles Carlson, all right, and at Headquarters we already knew that he was an eminent authority on birds.

There was a worried expression on his old face as he looked at his watch. Then he glanced back into the room where the birds were—I could see cages lining the walls now—and he smiled. It came to me that whatever his cares and worries might be, he could forget them all in the company of his birds.

I waited anxiously as he put his watch back into his pocket and came along the hall. I didn't want him to find me spying on him. Fortunately he did not turn on the hall lights, and he went into a room not far from where I was standing. He turned on a floor lamp there, went to a radio and turned it on.

He had left the door open, and I could watch him, especially since he was in the light while I was in the dark out in the hall. He sighed and dropped down into an easy chair, watching the radio as though the program he expected to hear was important.

Music came over the radio, a bunch of solid senders giving out with heavy swing. I was surprised when I heard it. Giles Carlson didn't look like the kind of an old guy who was likely to be a jitterbug.

Then the band was switched down low and the announcer started the commercial about the product. Toothpaste I think it was—I didn't pay much attention. I was watching Carlson wiggling around in his chair impatiently.

The program proved to be a sort of vaudeville show on the air. After the commercial there were singers and comedians and more swing, but that didn't seem to be what the old man was waiting for so anxiously. Then the announcer gave a spiel about a special attraction.

"Next," she said, "we will present Peter Cling, the man who is so expert on bird calls that he has appeared on this program for six consecutive weeks and never has been forced to repeat one of his imitations. Ladies and gentlemen of the radio audience, I give you Peter Cling!"

I saw Carlson sit erect in his chair and lean toward the radio as though fearful of missing something. I felt the same way he did about it, for I had an idea that this Peter Cling, whoever he was, might have some definite tie-up with the Bird Gang.

The guy was good. His patter was amusing, and the imitations of various bird calls he gave were really something. At first I wasn't sure of it, then I realized that his patter had a definite tie-up with the bird call he gave. The guy was giving orders to the gang right over the air!

"Of course, if you saw a purple heron walking along Broadway at Seventy-first Street," he would say, "you'd think maybe that last quick one you had was a mistake. My friend, Joe Gilley, wouldn't be surprised though. When he's in the heavy dough he thinks birds are good luck, so he probably does right now. He made a

killing at the races today. Now I'll give you the call of the purple heron."

Get it? Cling was tipping off one of the gang nicknamed "The Heron" that a guy named Joe Gilley who lived at Broadway and Seventy-first Street had won a lot of money on the races that day. I was willing to bet that Mr. Gilley would be robbed before morning.

I knew I couldn't get to the broadcasting studio before the program was off the air. Of course, I could duck out and phone and have the guys in a patrol car pick up Cling and hold him for questioning. But I didn't want to leave right now. I wanted to know what old Giles Carlson had to do with this Cling.

"The fool!" muttered the old man suddenly. "He has always been so headstrong! Now this. I must tell him of the danger."

He went to the phone in the room and dialed a number. When he got his connection, I could hear his words clearly.

"Will you ask Peter Cling to come to this address as soon as the program is over?" he said to the switchboard operator at the broadcasting station, and gave his address. "Tell him it is vitally important, please."

He hung up and stared bleakly into space.

Cling had finished his specialty and the swing band was blaring again. The old man cursed softly and switched off the radio. Giles Carlson *didn't* like swing.

I breathed a sigh of satisfaction. There was a good chance of Peter Cling coming here, and he was one guy I wanted to see.

I slid into a dark living room along the hall and crawled under an old sofa. I didn't want Carlson to find me and it might be a long wait before Peter Cling showed up.

From where I was I could no longer see the old man, but I could get a pretty clear idea of where he was and what he

was doing by the sounds he made. I heard the shuffling of his slippers as he went along the hall, knew by the excited chirping that he had entered the room where the birds were kept.

Time passed slowly, then finally a key grated in the lock of the front door. The door opened and closed with an impatient bang, and there were heavy footsteps going along the hall.

"What's the idea of phoning me at the studio?" demanded a voice that must be that of Peter Cling. "Haven't I warned you never to do that?"

"I had to see you," said the old man in a tired voice. "You are in danger. This afternoon every bird expert in the city was asked to come to Police Headquarters. I was one of those who went."

"Police Headquarters!" exclaimed Cling. "Why?"

"We were asked if we could identify pictures from the Rogues Gallery—pictures of criminals who had the nicknames of birds. I saw that those two friends of yours were among them—the big man called Hawk and the little man named Sparrow. I pretended not to recognize anyone, but I was afraid for you."

"And what did you do about it?" asked Cling.

"I stole the pictures," said Carlson. "I have them here now."

"You old fool! The police will trace those pictures to you and ruin the whole thing! It wasn't enough when you refused to pay my gambling debts, so I had to find another way out. Now you have to mess things up with the police!"

**C**RAWLING silently out from beneath the sofa, I got to my feet. I edged my way through the dark toward the door.

"I have been proud of the knowledge of birds that I taught you through the

years," Giles Carlson was saying now. "I have listened every time you appeared on that radio program, delighted at your ability to imitate the call of so many birds. But tonight was different. As I listened I felt as though my boy had become a fiend."

"Shut up!" growled "Peter Cling." "Forget the sob stuff. I'm taking those Rogues Gallery pictures and getting out of town for good."

I heard the flick of a match, and then smelled the scent of Red Stag tobacco. Evidently Cling had rolled and lighted a cigarette.

I thought of the first time I had detected that distinctive odor in the house on Riverside Drive. I thought of Swensen dying in my arms, of the people who had been robbed, and of the two killers who had tried to murder me outside the zoo.

My face hardened as I moved silently along the dark hall. To me the man who called himself Peter Cling was not a man, but the leader of a pack of human vultures who called themselves the Bird Gang.

"I won't let you leave!" the old man said suddenly. "I'd rather see you in jail for life than to know my own flesh and blood was a criminal at large!"

"Let go of my arm!" snarled Cling. "Get out of my way, you old fool!"

I heard an oath, then the sound of a fist against flesh followed by a kind of moan, and the thud of a body falling to the floor. I drew my gun and raced along the hall.

When I reached the doorway of the lighted room a thin-faced, dark-haired man whirled toward me. I saw then what I had suspected from the moment I had heard the radio program was true. Peter Cling was the younger Carlson I had seen in the gambling place.

"Oh, it's you," he said when he saw me. "The guy who socked Dean Brackton."

I nodded, keeping him covered with my gun.

"O'Day is the name. I'm from the Detective Bureau at Headquarters. You're under arrest, Carlson."

"Looks like you've got me, all right."

He was calm about it. He took out a bag of tobacco and papers and started rolling another smoke. The first cigarette he had made was smoldering in an ash-tray. He paid no attention to the old man, lying unconscious at his feet.

I watched him warily, expecting him to make a break for it at any moment, but the trick he pulled was so old that I never even thought of it until it happened.

He shook the tobacco out onto the paper, took a deep breath and blew the tobacco squarely into my eyes. It stung and blinded me and I cursed and rubbed at my eyes with my free hand.

He leaped to the light switch and plunged the room into darkness. That was where he made a mistake, for I had trained myself to use my ears as does a blind man, and the blackness that engulfed us was to my advantage.

I knew he had a knife in his hand for I heard the faint clatter of it as he accidentally bumped into a wall. He tried to get me with it, but I heard him coming and moved silently out of the way.

I slid around, found that the door key was in the lock. I turned it and dropped the key into my pocket. He could not escape now, for there were no windows in the room.

Out of pure mockery I whistled the call of the pewit. He cursed and lunged toward me. But I wasn't there. I had heard him coming and moved to one side. I reached out and grabbed him with my left hand. The gun in my right rose, then came down on the top of his head with a thunk. He grew limp and dropped to the floor.

I found the switch and turned on the



lights. Carlson was lying on the floor beside his father. I wondered what kind of birdies he was hearing sing now. The old man moaned and sat up as I dropped my gun into a pocket of my coat and snapped a pair of handcuffs onto Peter Cling Carlson's wrists.

There were tears in Giles Carlson's eyes as he got slowly to his feet. I knew that it hurt the old man to realize that his son was a criminal, for I was sure the elder Carlson was as honest as the day is long.

"I didn't know my boy could be so bad," he said, mournfully, as he sank into a chair. "For the past two years we have been almost like strangers."

"You still have your birds," I said soothingly.

"That's right." His face lighted up. "I still have my birds."

I nodded as I went to the phone, called Headquarters and got Captain Doran on the wire.

"It's Mickie O'Day, Cappy," I said. "I've got the main buzzard. We won't have much trouble rounding up the rest of the mob." I grinned as he began asking excited questions. "Tell you all about it later. And if you ask me this has been a bird of a case!"