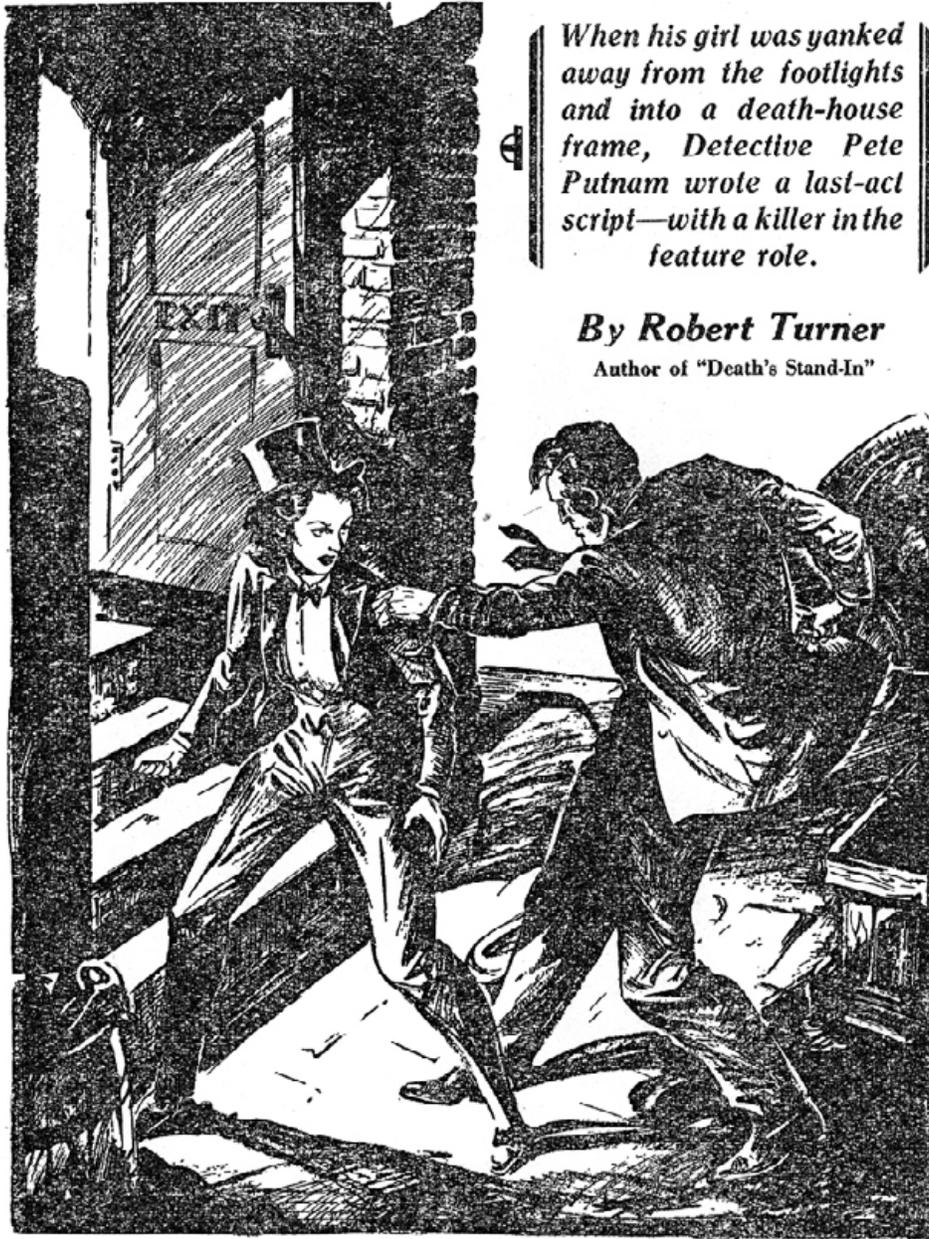


# Murder—Now Playing



When his girl was yanked away from the footlights and into a death-house frame, Detective Pete Putnam wrote a last-act script—with a killer in the feature role.

By Robert Turner  
Author of "Death's Stand-In"

**T**HE voice came from the gloom of the alley, hoarse and strained. It whispered: "Pete! Pete, please!" Then it was quiet.

All Pete Putnam could see was a vague silhouette against the dim light at the far end. He bunched his fists, his whole body

tensed for action, as he stepped from the Times Square side street into the blackness of the alley.

Groping fingers reached around his neck. A body shocked against him. He moved fast, whipped those arms from around his neck, twisted violently

backward and yanked the figure out into the glare of the street light.

Putnam was holding a slender person in top hat and evening dress. He grabbed a handful of satin lapels in one fist, cocked the other. "You called my name," he said. "What is it? What—"

He broke off as the top hat was flipped off. Curls the color of goldenrod tumbled down to frame a heart-shaped face—a face glistening with grease paint, black-streaked with tears and mascara. The eyes were swimming. There was a roundness to the stiff bosomed shirt.

"Kathleen!" Pete Putnam cried. "Darling—"

"Back in the alley, Pete—quickly."

Crimson-nailed fingers pulled his sleeve. He trailed the flapping swallow tails into the alley. Again hands crept around the back of his collar.

Putnam pulled her close. The shoulder of his jacket muffled her sobs, blottered grease paint and tears. His fingers crept under the curls at the nape of Kathleen's neck.

"What is it, baby?"

Her breath rushed warm against his ear. "I—I had a fight with Malcolm Lechere, Pete. It—it was terrible. I left him—lying there—on the floor. He was so white—"

"Kathleen—you didn't do anything—anything crazy?"

"I don't know." Her fingers dug into his back. Her eyes burned up at him through the dark. "He was very drunk. He—he started to maul and I shoved him. He went backward over something and his head hit the radiator. I—he just lay there and I ran out."

"Why did you go there, Kathleen? You know Lechere's rep."

**S**HE pulled away from him, fumbled in her pocket and then there was the glow

of a match. Over the flame their glances met and locked as she lit a cigaret. The flame went out and Kathleen's fingers came up and touched the thin white scar across Putnam's cheek.

"He called me at the theatre just as we came off stage for intermission," she said, exhaling smoke. "He wanted to see me right away, at his office. It was business—important. I didn't want to go, but Blair Nelson said I'd better, that Lechere might be angeling a big new show. He might want me for a lead or something."

Pete Putnam squeezed her hand. "What *did* he want?"

"Nothing. It wasn't business. I—I told you, Pete, what happened. Pete, I've got to get back to the theatre. I'm late now. I used alleys to get here from Lechere's building. I was crying. I didn't want anyone to see—"

He guided her toward the street.

"You go back on stage, forget about this. Lechere's all right. Drunks don't get hurt."

Out on the street, as they walked along toward The Square Theatre, half a block away, Pete Putnam wiped the grease paint from his shoulder with his handkerchief. Kathleen kept her head bowed, her silk hat tipped low so that it was hard to see her face.

She stopped short just before they reached the stage door. She stared up at the lights on the marquee ahead as they flashed the words "Top Hat Revue" on and off.

"Pete, my gloves. The gloves that go with this outfit. I left them at Lechere's office."

Putnam took the butt of her cigaret as she started to throw it away, took several deep drags and flipped it toward the street.

"I'll go get them. Don't worry about it, kid. Go on in. I'll see you after the show."

He watched Kathleen, trim and cute in

her top hat and tails, run toward the door. A hand slapped his back. He turned toward a big stoop-shouldered man in a loose flowing silk shirt and corduroy slacks. It was Blair Nelson, producer of Top Hat Revue. Nelson was just getting out of a hack. He paid off the driver, said:

“How’re the boys on the Broadway Squad, Pete?”

“Fine, Nelson,” Putnam said, and turned up Broadway. He wasn’t in the mood for a chat. He was busy thinking about Malcolm Lechere and what Kathleen Hart had just told him.

Lechere, a dapper old millionaire real estate broker, was interested in show business. At least he liked frontline choruses. He had plagued Kathleen all through rehearsals of the Top Hat Revue. Pete Putnam hadn’t worried much about that. Kathleen was a smart girl. She handled Lechere. But something like this was different. He wanted to have a little talk with Lechere.

At Forty-sixth Street and Broadway a man racing and dodging through the crowd the opposite way almost knocked Putnam down. The man was slender, with a long-nosed, sensitive face. He was in evening dress. He mumbled, “Sorry,” and dashed on without even looking back.

Putnam recognized him as Arnold Blake, a chorus boy in Kathleen’s show. Blake was going to be later even than Kathleen.

A few minutes later Putnam reached the building where Malcolm Lechere had his office. He strode past the day elevators toward a small, self-operating lift used for night service.

He went up to the fourth floor and along the corridor toward a door marked *Malcolm Lechere—Real Estate*.

Putnam walked into a deserted reception room, saw a light shining from

an inner office marked *Private*. He stepped across a thick-piled rug toward that door.

MALCOLM LECHERE’S private office had been luxuriously furnished. It was a wreck now. A stuffed chair was overturned. The oriental rug was scuffed. A chair side ash tray and a dictaphone record holder had been knocked over. Butts and splinters of dictaphone discs were scattered around.

Then Pete Putnam saw Malcolm Lechere. The real estate broker was sprawled on his back under the window, one hand clutching rich-hued drapes. His silver-gray head was against the radiator. His eyes stared wide. His mouth was opened so wide that intricate plate work showed.

The front of the broker’s shirt was dark and sticky with blood. There was an ugly wound at his throat. It was raw-edged and deep—close to the jugular. Some unusual weapon had stabbed into that fat, soft throat. It had killed the man.

Pete Putnam stood so still he could hear his own breathing. He sniffed. There was a peculiar odor in the room. Something was burning—or had been. It was like the smell of burning candles.

He looked around but could see nothing to cause that odor. He forgot about the smell when he saw the tiny pair of white evening gloves. One was on the glass-topped desk, the other on the floor with all its fingers curled up except the index. This digit pointed toward the corpse. It made Putnam remember.

Footsteps pounded in the hall, paused by the door. There was a sharp rap. Putnam’s eyes darted quickly around the room. He went up onto the balls of his feet, darted toward a small door to the left, and entered a private lavatory. He left the door open a crack so that he could see out.

The outer door opened slowly. A big, shaven head poked in. It had handlebar mustaches and popping, apologetic eyes. The mustaches twitched.

“Uh—Mr. Leechere—you be leaving soon, yes?”

There was silence. The protuberant eyes gazed ceiling ward, patiently. When no one replied, they glanced around the office. They reached the window and stopped. Now the eyes began to pop and shine like big green marbles, blinking rapidly.

The door opened wider and the man tiptoed toward the window, staring down. The tips of his mustache quivered. The long-handled broom in his chunky fist began to shake.

The shirt-sleeved figure of the building porter stopped halfway across the room, then whirled suddenly. There was the gasp of suddenly exploded breath and muttered garblings: “Dead. . . Dead! He’s somebody’s—”

That was all Putnam heard. The door slammed. Footsteps echoed down the corridor, faded. Putnam glanced around the lavatory. The wash basin was wet and there was water on the floor around it. The murderer had taken time to wash before he left.

Putnam stepped back into the office, toward the desk, picked up a white glove. He bent and retrieved the other, crumpling the pointing finger of it.

Looking around the office once more, quickly, he seemed to see Kathleen’s face peering at him from the walls. He felt her fingers squeezing his arms, her voice: “Pete. Please, Pete.”

He shuddered and ran toward the door and into the hall. The lift was still there. The porter had used the stairs. The ride down seemed hours. And then he was breathing the crisp outside air.

Putnam saw the porter about twenty yards up the block with the street crowd circling around him, warily, staring. The porter still held the broom. He was waving it. He was going around in circles, mumbling to himself and once in awhile finding his voice and hollering:

“Police! Help, police!”

THE detective squared his shoulders, clamped his lips until the scar on his cheek pulled taut and white. He jammed through the crowd toward the porter. He grabbed the man’s waving arm.

“I’m a cop, buddy. Putnam of the Broadway Squad. What is it? What is it?”

The rolling green eyes found Putnam’s face. “I want the police,” the porter repeated, crazily. His mouth remained open, the mustaches standing stiffly out and quivering. “Oh,” he said. “Cop? Oh. Something terrible. Mr. Leechere. Come with me.”

He wheeled toward the building. Putnam followed. They entered the lift, the porter grabbing Putnam’s arm. The detective felt the vibration of the other man’s whole body through the grip.

“I wanted to clean up the office,” the porter jabbered. “I went in. He was there. On the floor—” He finished with a flourish of his forefinger across his throat.

Putnam nodded. They got out of the lift and entered Leechere’s office again. Putnam went straight to the phone, picked it up gingerly with his handkerchief, using two fingers, and dialed Homicide and ordered a crew down to the scene.

He helped the jittery porter to the chair that hadn’t been upset. “Sit down,” he told him. “The others will be here in a few minutes. We’ll want to talk to you.”

The porter didn’t take his eyes from the corpse by the radiator. His Adam’s apple jumped up and down. His mouth

opened and closed without saying anything.

While he looked around for clues, Putnam questioned the porter. “Do you know if Mr. Lechere had any visitors tonight?”

The man pulled his gaze from the corpse. He nodded his big head up and down, swiftly.

“A young man,” he said.

“What did he look like?”

Popeyes looked toward the ceiling, then fluttered back to Putnam, met his gaze for a moment.

“He had long coat tails and high hat. A swell. He was very young. He asked me what floor was Mr. Lechere’s. He smelled like perfume. I remember I said to my—”

“All right,” Putnam said, bending and pushing his fingers through torn and crumpled papers spilled from an upset waste basket. Someone had righted the basket again after it had spilled its contents.

“Would you recognize him again?”

“No. I didn’t get a good look at his face.

“Anybody else?”

“There could’ve been. I no see them, though.”

Putnam tautened, paused. He was examining a big black blob stuck to the bottom of the wastebasket. There were splatterings of it on some of the trash, on the insides of the basket: A few drops on the floor. Putnam dug his nail into it, stared at the flake that came off under his fingernail. It was waxy and brittle.

Outside, the automatic elevator hummed. Then the door swung open and a uniformed cop entered. He didn’t see Putnam. He started toward the porter.

“What happened?” he bawled and then he saw the corpse. “Who done that?”

“I did,” Putnam told the radio car cop, disgustedly.

The cop gaped at Putnam. “Hullo, Pete. You—you’re foolin’, huh? It was you called on this?”

Pete Putnam didn’t answer. He was looking down at Lechere’s body. He was looking at something glistening on the back of the dead man’s hand. There was some on the suit, too. It was grease paint. Putnam touched the scar on his cheek. His mouth drew tight.

He straightened up. He looked at the cop, now sprawled on the arm of the chair the porter was sitting in, nodding owl-like as the porter gesticulatingly told the story of how he found the corpse.

Putnam reached the door before the cop noticed him, was able to yell: “Hey, where ya goin’, Pete?”

“I’ll be back,” Putnam said and went out.

AS HE hit the street, he saw a group of men from Homicide striding from a police car toward him. With them was a short, roly-poly man with a waxed mustache and an important bustling look. It was Harvey Elmore, an assistant D. A.

Putnam turned his head, merged into the crowd. He went down Broadway fast, pushing into people, not even seeing their angry stares.

He turned in the stage door of The Square Theatre, nodded to grips and stage hands. He pushed through the little group in the wings, looked out onto the stage.

A chorus line, all dressed in evening attire, was kicking and prancing to the tune of “There’s An Old Spinning Wheel—” by the band in the pit. Front stage, in a green spot, Kathleen Hart, specialty dancer, was doing cartwheels.

What made her acrobatic dancing a feature of a hit Broadway revue was the speed and precision of her movements. Right now she was turning three complete wheels to every beat of music.

From the wings Putnam watched her shift into a fast clog, then into a succession of amazing back flips. He felt proud. This was his girl—the one he was going to marry. Then he tightened all over, remembering why he was here.

He had to wait another few minutes while she blurred up and down the stage in time with “The Old Spinning Wheel.” She finished near the wings in the finale of that part of the show. She held the curtain, bowing to thunderous applause, then ran into the wings. Into Pete Putnam’s arms.

“Pete, darling. Did you get the gloves? How’d—”

He pulled her behind a piece of scenery, held her arms firmly. His eyes were hot-bright. The scar on his face twitched.

“Something’s happened, Kat,” he said, quickly. “Don’t lie to me. Did—did you tell me *everything* about your visit to Lechere’s office?”

Kathleen paled. “Of course, Pete. What is it? What happened?”

He studied her, staring hard, wanting to make sure. Then he closed his eyes, rubbing them with the back of his hand.

“Something tough, kid,” he said.

“Tough for both of us. Brace yourself and I’ll tell you.”

He looked around, made sure no one was listening. “After you left Lechere, somebody else went there and killed him. Stabbed him in the throat.”

“Pete—”

“Wait,” he said. “Let me talk. Everything is against you., The porter saw you, remembers your costume, though he didn’t get a good look at your face. The real murderer got in like I did without the porter seeing him. There’s grease paint on Lechere’s hand and suit from your struggle with him. Your finger prints are probably all over the place. You have no alibi. You did have a motive. They can’t

help but hang this thing on you, Kat. Did anybody but Blair Nelson know about Lechere’s call?”

“No, Pete.” Kathleen dug white teeth into her under-lip. Her great blue eyes looked scared. “What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know, exactly. Get you out, some way. I’ve got to—”

“Pete!” She clutched his lapels. “Pete, you’re going to get into trouble. Forget about me. Don’t try to cover me. I’m innocent. It’ll work out.”

“You don’t know what you’re bucking. Keep quiet, now, and listen. You—you didn’t go to Lechere’s, understand? You started to but changed your mind. That’s our only—”

“Look behind you. Coming back stage,” Kathleen interrupted.

Putnam pivoted and saw the rotund figure of Harvey Elmore, hurrying toward them, with a couple of men from Homicide. He came right up to Putnam and Kathleen. He placed his hands on his round hips, teetered back and forth on polished, pointed shoes.

“Well, Putnam, since when you been running the department, taking things into your own hands?” he asked in a stertorous, courtroom voice. He twisted the waxed tips of his mustache. “Why’d you leave the murder scene without orders? Why’d you come here?” His lips curved into a satisfied smirk.

**P**UTNAM got red, clenched his fists, but he managed to keep his voice steady. “I figured it just like a wisenheimer from the D. A.’s office would. I came here for the same reasons you did. I saw the greasepaint on Lechere. The porter told me about the slim young man in evening dress who smelled of perfume.

“I remembered the gossip column piece about Lechere carrying the torch for

a sweet young specialty dancer in the Top Hat Revue. I tied it all together and came down here and questioned the suspect I knew you'd try to pin it on right away. But we're on the wrong trolley line, Elmore."

Elmore's chubby, talcumed cheeks puffed out like the belly of a blow-fish. His small eyes glittered. "A likely story," he barked officiously. "You're going to question the girl you're going to marry, eh. Hah! . . . I don't like this, Putnam. You're wading in hot water."

Pete Putnam pulled back his knotted fist, but he held the blow as a stoop-shouldered man in a silk shirt and silver-rimmed glasses ran toward them from the wings, waving his loose sleeves, shouting:

"Hey, cut it out!"

Putnam said. "What's *your* trouble, Nelson?"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Blair Nelson moved into their midst. "I got a show. I could hear you out in the wings. Just a few minutes and this part of the show will be over. What's happened? What goes on?"

"Just a murder," Elmore said, grinning, enjoying himself. He tapped Nelson's silk shirt with an important forefinger. "And the murderer's in your cast. Somebody wearing evening dress."

"No," Nelson said. "You're crazy. Who got bumped?"

"Malcolm Lechere," Elmore told him.

Blair Nelson repeated the name. He looked at Kathleen. "Oh," he said. "I—I say!"

Harvey Elmore was shrewd. He caught that look. He put in quickly: "What do you know, Nelson? What do you know about this girl and Lechere?"

Blair Nelson folded his silk-clad arms. He shifted from foot to foot, eyes down. "I—uh—I don't like to say anything that might tend to incriminate her. It might not mean anything at all. It—"

"Out with it," Elmore ordered.

"Well," Blair Nelson began. He shot a pitying glance toward Kathleen. "She went up to Lechere's office during intermission."

"Wait a minute." Pete Putnam stepped forward. His fists were clenched, his scarred cheek was pale. "Kathleen didn't go up to Lechere's office."

"He called her. She said she was going," Nelson said. "She left the theatre."

"She met me," Putnam gritted. "She told me about the call. I advised her not to go. We went and had coffee."

Harvey Elmore glowered. "Can you prove that, Putnam? Where'd you go?"

"The Coffeemat," Putnam replied. He grinned.

"Quick thinking." Elmore smoothed his mustache. "No waitresses. Big crowd. No proof that you weren't in that place."

"Not only that," Putnam went on. "You're picking on Kathleen because the porter described a slim young man in evening dress, smelling of perfume. Because Lechere had grease paint on him. There's a whole chorus line in this revue who are dressed the same. They were all off during intermission, too."

Elmore made thoughtful noise with his tongue and teeth. Suddenly he went into action. He hustled back and forth. "Round 'em all up, Nelson. Round up everyone who was in evening wear. I'll get to the bottom of this thing."

**H**ARVEY ELMORE and the homicide men grilled the cast. Three quarters of them were out together at a cafeteria. The rest all had alibis. All except one chorus boy. The man who had almost knocked Pete Putnam over. Arnold Blake.

"You got to tell us where you were, Blake." Elmore told him, "or I arrest you on suspicion of this murder."

"Go ahead," Blake said. His thin chin stuck out. He was very pale. "Where I go

during intermissions is my own business. A murder that I had nothing, to do with won't force me to divulge my personal movements."

"All right," Elmore said, moistening the bottom of his mustache with his tongue. "There are fingerprints all over the murder scene. We'll compare them all with Blake's and Kathleen Hart's. One of them's guilty, I'll bet."

A uniformed cop came rushing into the group. It was the owl-faced squad-car man Putnam had left at Lechere's office. He spoke to Elmore.

"Listen, you fellows," the cop bawled. "Captain Owen is up at Lechere's office. He's sorer'n a boil because you guys ran out before he got there. You gotta come right up."

"Has he found anything?" Putnam said.

"I don't know, but he's madder'n hops."

"I feel sort of involved in all this," Blair Nelson said. "We'll all hop into my bus and go up to the murder scene."

"Swell," Elmore said, bustling toward the stage door. "C'mon. We'll compare fingerprints while we're up there. Blake and Kathleen Hart come along."

Pete Putnam started to object, but stopped. He was in this head first already. They were going to find Kathleen's prints up there anyhow. They'd know that he had put his love for the little specialty dancer before his duty as an officer. Not only would Kathleen be held for murder, but he, Pete Putnam, would be broken, maybe charged with complicity.

He took Kathleen's arm as they headed for the exit. "Courage, kid," he told her. The look in her blue eyes made up for it all. It gave him new hope.

Blair Nelson owned a huge custom built limousine. He talked incessantly as he drove through the traffic of Times

Square. He told proudly the merits of the car, how he'd got it for a song from a war-broke foreign merchant.

When they all tramped into Malcolm Lechere's private office, Captain Owen looked up from a dictaphone machine with which he was fiddling, and let out a blast:

"If you birds are through seein' The Great White Way, we got a murder case to work on. What have you been doing all this time? What you got?"

"Plenty, Captain Owen," Elmore said and pushed his plump figure forward. "We have two ace suspects. If you have any prints ready, we'll compare them."

"What have you found, captain?" Putnam put in desperately. He didn't want those fingerprint comparisons made yet.

Captain Owen pulled in his double chins, narrowed his faded blue eyes. "We've been putting these broken pieces of dictaphone records together. But I don't think they're going to tell us anything."

He stopped and looked down at his big thumb. He stuck it into his mouth and sucked. "Cut myself on one of the damned slivers of wax," he grumbled.

"Wait a minute, Captain Owen," Pete Putnam said. He was looking at the pieces of dictaphone record that were lined up on the glass-topped desk.

They were all pretty well put together again. All except one. That one had a long, wedge-shaped piece missing from it. It had cracked cleanly. The gap in it tapered to a fine point.

"Have you found the murder weapon, captain?" Putnam said. He was rubbing the white scar on his cheek. His eyes were bright.

"I'm glad you mentioned that, Putnam," Owen said. He nodded his head in such violent approval that both his chins bounced against his collar. "Funny thing about that. We didn't find the weapon. We don't even know what it was. The medical

examiner noticed flecks of waxlike substance at the edge of—”

“Thanks,” Pete Putnam interrupted. He was remembering things. The strange burning scent he had noticed upon discovering the murder. And something else. He picked up the waste basket.

“I know what that weapon was, Captain Owen.”

WHILE they all watched silently, Putnam picked up a fresh dictaphone cylinder from a rack at the bottom of the machine. He banged it on the edge of the desk, deliberately breaking the record. A wedge-shaped sliver remained in his hand. He held it up. It tapered to a razor-sharp point.

“The missing sliver from that dictaphone cylinder on the desk was used to kill Malcolm Lechere,” Putnam said. “It had a needle-sharp point. Captain Owen knows it’s a capable weapon. He pricked his finger.”

“Very imaginative,” Harvey Elmore sneered. “But what was done with the sliver after the murder?”

Pete Putnam held the waste basket up for all of them to see the black blob in the bottom of the basket. “There it is,” he said.

He set the basket down, whipped matches from his pocket. He struck one, applied the flame to the tip of the wax sliver he held in his hand. Black drippings fell into the bottom of the basket.

“I’ll be damned,” Owen said, huskily as the wax dripped faster and faster, ate slowly toward Putnam’s fingers.

The part he held between his fingers started to melt. Pete Putnam dropped it with a startled exclamation. The last half-melted glob of black wax dropped, hit the edge of the basket and sprayed black drops around.

The detective bent then, and started to rub splatterings from around the cuff of his

pants. As he did so, his eyes traveled around the circle of legs. He skipped the police and Elmore.

He came to the smartly creased evening trousers of Arnold Blake, studied them. He didn’t find what he was looking for. His gaze hit the baggy, corduroy slacks of Blair Nelson. He straightened up, started toward the producer.

“It’s over, Nelson,” he said, coldly. “You left some of the wax between the cords of your slacks.”

Blair Nelson moved so fast his arms were just a blur of loose, whipping silk. His hand came out of the soft folds of his shirt, wagging a small automatic. He leaped backward away from the group.

“All right,” Nelson said. “Stay put. Another kill won’t bother my score.”

Behind their steel-rimmed glasses, Nelson’s eyes were wildly restless. He started backing slowly toward the door, one hand stuck behind him, groping.

A tuneful whistle then broke into the sudden silence. The whistler was rendering a lively version of “The Old Spinning Wheel.”

It only took Pete Putnam a second to get it. He jerked his head toward Kathleen. She was looking at him out of the corner of one eye. Her pretty lips were puckered, whistling.

Thoughts tornadoed through Putnam’s brain. He couldn’t let her do it. Nelson was crime-crazy. He’d shoot her down like a dog.

“No!” Putnam shouted, suddenly. “No, Kat, don’t!”

But before he had even finished the words, Kathleen was no longer there. She was cartwheeling toward Blair Nelson’s retreating figure. Putnam couldn’t see her. Just flashing legs and arms and a top hat that stayed put, the motion was so fast.

THERE was the sharp, flat crack of Nelson's automatic. Instantly, Nelson let out a cry as dancing pumps smashed into his face. His glasses skittered through the air. The gun barked again. A bullet thudded into the ceiling, bringing down a little shower of dust and plaster. Nelson stumbled backward as Kathleen tumbled sideways at the interruption of her cartwheel.

Pete Putnam had his fist poised even as he darted toward the murderer. It slammed against Nelson's jaw with all the force and speed and momentum of his hurtling body.

Nelson twirled like a ballet dancer, went back against a wall and slumped down, limply, mouth gaping, blood ribboning from the corner.

Putnam rubbed his knuckles, helped Kathleen to her feet. He pulled her close. Once again he got grease paint on his jacket. But this time he smiled and the scar at his cheek twisted into a slight curve.

"Oh, Pete, Pete!" Kathleen gasped.

"Uh—ahem!" Captain Owen coughed. "There's some things I want straightened out, Putnam. How did Nelson work this thing?"

"Ask him when he comes to," Putnam said, nodding toward the sagging figure of Blair Nelson as two homicide men picked him up. "In the meantime, here's my version and I think it'll check. Nelson followed Kathleen here, tonight, during intermission. He saw her rush out, all excited. He came here and saw Lechere on the floor, out cold after walloping his cruller on the radiator.

"He saw the dictaphone records broken in Kathleen's tussle with Lechere. He had murder on his mind so it didn't take him long to figure the possibilities of one of those sharp slivers. No one had seen him enter the building. He'd made sure no one saw him leave. He had a perfect cat's-paw in Kathleen. So—"

"Where's the motive? Where is it?" Harvey Elmore put in, locking his fingers across his paunch. "Got to have a motive for the jury."

Kathleen put her arm through Pete Putnam's and squeezed it to her. "There's a rumor," she said, "that Lechere was the secret backer of the Top Hat Revue. If so—"

"You hit it, Kat," Putnam said. "If he was, it would mean the biggest percentage of the profits would go to him. This is the first real hit Blair Nelson ever produced. It was a sleeper. No one expected it. He didn't want to share his surprise gold mine."

Putnam stopped, looked down at Kathleen, then at Captain Owen. "Mind if we leave now, cap?" he asked. "Be back later."

"Go on with you," Owen said gruffly. "And hereafter when you're on duty stay away from the stage door of The Square Theatre—after tonight."

As Putnam and Kathleen exited from Lechere's office, a thin figure in evening dress pushed past them with mumbled apologies. It was Arnold Blake. He was in such a hurry that he didn't use the elevator. His flying swallow tails disappeared down the stairs.

"Where's he flying to?" Pete Putnam asked, laughing.

"To tell Mrs. Lechere that everything is all right, honey," Kathleen told him.

The detective didn't say anything for a minute, then exploded: "He's seeing Mrs. Lech— So that's where he was during the intermission and you knew and yet didn't—"

"I think it was very gallant of him," Kathleen pouted.

Then the automatic elevator hit the ground floor, but Pete Putnam liked romantic young ladies, so the doors didn't open for quite a few minutes.