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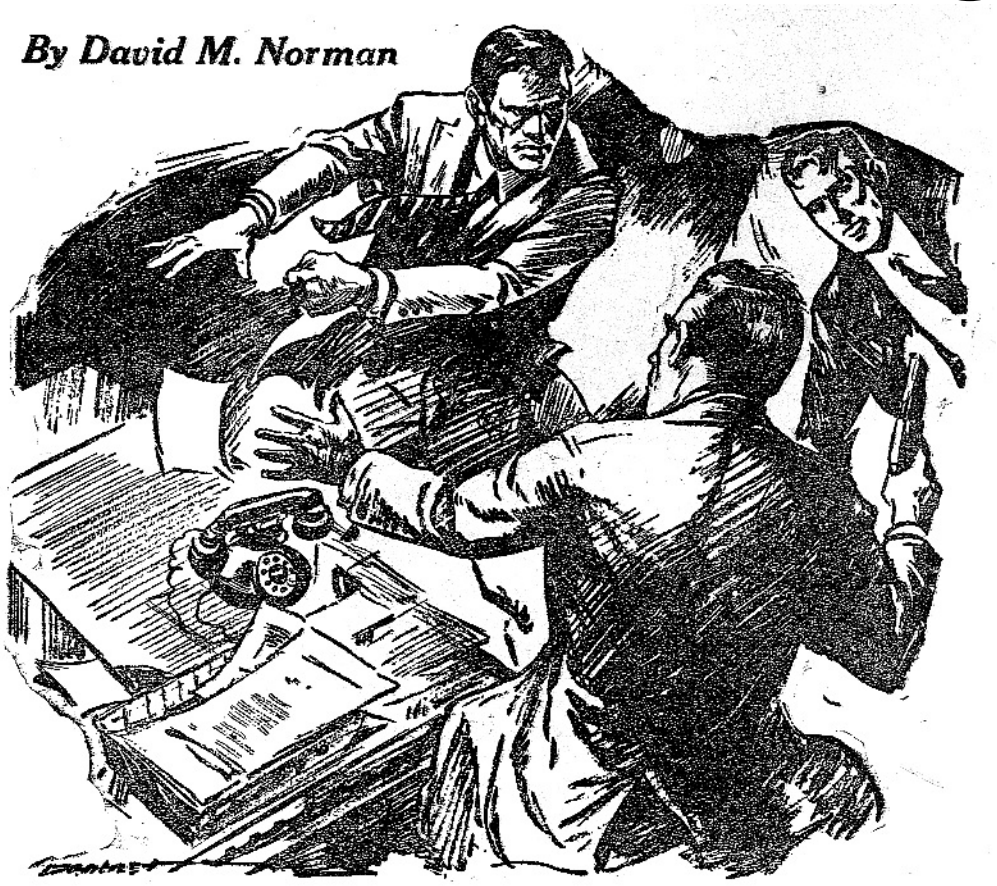
Mr. Corpse Calling

By David M. Norman



Jim Abbott, D. A., had just returned from seeing the remains of his predecessor in his coffin. But now the dead man was phoning him, giving him information from the grave. And, to solve the mystery of the corpse that wouldn't stay dead, Abbott himself had to cross-examine the Grim Reaper.

THEY were all there to honor Jim Abbott, the new district attorney. Fifty odd men and women who had helped elect him attended the banquet. There were speeches, toasts. Jim Abbott, who looked much too young for the office he'd won, responded to them all.

A grizzle-faced old Common Pleas Court judge really indicated just how everyone felt.

"Now, with Jim Abbott in charge of criminal prosecutions, we may expect speedier trials, fewer *nolles* and a little more hard work from the district attorney's office. Jim Abbott replaced Ralph Hamilton because Hamilton didn't have what it takes to be a good D. A."

There was more—lots of it. Then someone opened the door and walked up behind Abbott's chair. A waiter spoke very softly, very deferentially.

"We did not wish to bother you, sir, but there is a phone call. Very urgent, sir."

Abbott threw down his napkin, excused himself and went out. He walked down the long corridor of the exclusive club, stepped into a phone booth indicated by the waiter, and picked up the receiver.

A girl's voice spoke. "Mr. Abbott? Just a moment, please, Mr. Ralph Hamilton is calling."

Hamilton! Abbott frowned. What did Hamilton, who had lost the election, want now? At this time of night? Hamilton's voice came on, speaking plainly, slowly, but without much pause.

"Congratulations, Jim. Don't bother to talk, just listen. I want you to come to 29 Carmody Avenue immediately. Now I said not to ask questions. Just get there as fast as possible. Believe me, it's important for your future. Good-by."

There was a click. Abbott hung up slowly and grunted in exasperation. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have paid any attention to a message like this, but Hamilton's voice had been so compelling. Abbott shrugged, asked for his hat and sent word to the chairman of the banquet group that he would return soon.

Abbott's car was out front, and he drove it toward Carmody Avenue, a teeming business section, not very far off. He kept wondering what in the world Hamilton wanted. They weren't exactly enemies, but Hamilton had certainly not spared him during the campaign.

HAMILTON had been fighting with his back against the wall, knew it and used every trick known to politics. But Abbott had won because every thoughtful voter knew a change in the D. A.'s office had become necessary.

Abbott found 29 Carmody Avenue, braked and pulled to the curb in front of the next dwelling. He peered out. There was the proper number, faintly illuminated. There was a dimout here and all curtains were drawn. It was a big, imposing place. Abbott walked up the porch steps and then gasped. There was a sign—blacked out now—but visible from a short distance. This place was a funeral home.

Abbott frowned. Why had Hamilton urged him to come here? Perhaps someone was dead—a suspicious case—and Hamilton wanted to throw the whole thing into Abbott's lap. That would be just about his speed. Abbott punched a bell beside the door.

A tall man dressed in black admitted him. Abbott stepped into the hallway and got the odor of flowers. An everlasting odor here, perhaps.

"I came to see Mr. Ralph Hamilton," he said. "Is he here?"

"Yes, he is here. This way, please."

Abbott walked past several funeral rooms, a small chapel and then down a dim corridor. The undertaker opened a door. Abbott stepped into a room with tiled floor and walls. He gave a surprised start. In the center of the room was a table and on it lay a form covered with a sheet.

The undertaker walked over to it, looked up at Abbott and spoke in an apologetic voice.

"Of course we did not expect anyone to see him tonight. You—ah—may need rather a strong stomach—"

"Hey, wait a minute," Abbott cried. "Are you trying to tell me that is Ralph Hamilton?"

"That *was* Ralph Hamilton," the undertaker corrected mildly. "Of course, you knew he was dead. I—oh now, I'm beginning to understand. I recognize you, Mr. Abbott. The new district attorney, isn't it? Of course. Mr. Hamilton fell or jumped from the twenty-first story window—his office window.

"The police indicated it was suicide. Perhaps because he lost the election to you. Naturally, they didn't inform you about the affair because you were being honored by a banquet tonight. Then

someone did tell you—and you misunderstood."

"Misunderstood, my eye," Abbott said. "Hamilton himself phoned me not more than fifteen minutes ago and asked me to meet him here."

The undertaker lifted a corner of the sheet. "Did you think he phoned you fifteen minutes ago, Mr. Abbott?"

Abbott gulped and turned away. No question about it—Ralph Hamilton was dead. He was a man of outstanding features and there could be no mistake.

"How long has he been here?" Abbott asked.

"We brought him here an hour ago. He jumped at eight o'clock or shortly after that. So you see he certainly could not have phoned you."

"Yes," Abbott said slowly, "he certainly could not have—and yet, he did. I recognized his voice. Listen—forget about my coming here. I've an idea this may be a horrible trick of some kind. I—I'll go now and thanks."

ABBOTT'S face was grim and somewhat pale as he drove his car to Ralph Hamilton's offices in the County Building. Abbott's offices now because he'd be expected to take over at once with Hamilton dead. He kept hearing the dead man's voice drumming in his ears. That phone call couldn't have been faked. He'd listened to Hamilton's voice many, many times during the campaign, followed his speeches over the radio, in meeting halls. He'd often met the man face to face in court.

Abbott took an elevator to the twenty-first floor, stepped out and advanced toward a door marked *DISTRICT ATTORNEY*. Light shone through the opaque panel. He opened the door and walked in. The outer office was empty, but a pretty girl, with eyes red from weeping, came from an inner office.

"My name is Jim Abbott. I came for some information."

"Yes, Mr. Abbott," the girl said. "Won't you come in? After all, this will be your office tomorrow. I'm Florence Walker. I—used to be Mr. Hamilton's secretary."

"Good," Abbott said. "You may prove very useful to me. Now I want to know about Hamilton's death. What happened?"

She shuddered and sat down in front of the dead man's desk. Abbott occupied the big leather chair of his predecessor.

"I'm not sure," the girl said. "Naturally, Mr. Hamilton was cleaning up the office in preparation to vacating it. He was in an office down the hall. The next thing I knew, the police came in and told me he was dead."

Abbott arose and walked to a large window with a rather low base. It was wide open.

"This one?" he asked pointedly.

She nodded. "Yes, that one. They insinuate he jumped, but I refuse to believe it. He fell."

Abbott sat down again and pointed to a large pile of legal papers. The girl picked them up carefully.

"Just routine business," she explained. "I took them out of the safe. I would like to go to my own office. These things must be sorted and it's getting very late."

"Go ahead," Abbott said. "I'll just relax here a few minutes and get the feel of the place."

Two seconds after she was gone, Abbott did get the feel of the office. It seemed to be closing in on him. It seemed as though a dead man lingered here, trying to make himself seen and heard. Abbott shivered and decided he'd like it better by daylight.

The door opened and the girl looked in. “There’s a phone call for you, Mr. Abbott. It came through the switchboard. Will you take it?”

Abbott picked up the phone and held his breath. Not a soul knew he was here. There was a click, as if the secretary had switched him on. Then Abbott felt the short hairs at the nape of his neck rise. The same voice spoke. The voice of Ralph Hamilton, who was dead.

“Hello, Jim,” he said. “I haven’t much time, so just listen. Your first duty is to find out who murdered me. I don’t know for sure, but two men are the most likely suspects. Two crooks named Arnt and McBain. They hate each other like poison, but they’ll hate you worse. You think I’m dead, don’t you? I’m not—entirely. A man just doesn’t give up even when death strikes. I must have my vengeance, Jim. It’s up to you to help me. Get Arnt and McBain to the office. Make them talk. One knows the answer. Good-by—for now.”

THE new D.A. felt rather than heard someone standing just inside the door. He looked up with haggard eyes. It was only Florence Walker, and he sensed that she’d been standing there for several seconds.

“Mr. Abbott,” she said. “What’s wrong? Are you ill?”

“Maybe I’m crazy,” Abbott said. “Tell me, did you recognize the voice that came over the wire just now?”

“Why no—or perhaps it was a bit familiar. Something has happened, Mr. Abbott. May I be of assistance?”

Abbott didn’t answer. He picked up the phone and contacted a telephone supervisor. He identified himself and asked to have any calls made to the D. A.’s office within the last ten minutes. He got his answer in two or three minutes.

“Sorry, Mr. Abbott. No calls were put through to your office that we know of. Your number is handled on a special circuit, and even if it was dialed, we’d know. There were no calls, sir.”

Abbott hung up and leaned back. This was getting beyond him. A ghost voice saying Hamilton had probably been murdered, even giving him the names of the killers. Abbott knew them both—Arnt and McBain. They’d practically run every crooked, scheming racket in town for six years. One took the north side of the tracks, the other the south. They never invaded each other’s territory, for such an act would have caused instant warfare. They’d dabbled in it years ago.

Abbott poured himself a drink from a thermos on the desk, swallowed it in one gulp and then arose. He heard footsteps outside the office. A man came in—with a gun in his fist. A second thug followed, also armed.

“Just sit down, pal,” the shorter of the pair snapped. “Keep your paws on top of the desk and just answer one question. Can you open that safe?”

“No,” Abbott said and broke out in a cold sweat. If these men were after something in that safe, then Florence Walker must have it in her office.

“Joe,” the short man said, “go take a look around the rest of this layout.”

“I’m all alone here,” Abbott said quickly, and he realized that neither of these two men recognized him. The tall man departed just the same and began to search all the offices.

The short crook sat down on a corner of the desk. His gun was pointed directly at Abbott’s head.

“Just who are you?” he demanded.

“I’m one of the junior attorneys, that’s all. I had some overtime so I thought I’d find out what it was like to sit at the boss’ desk, that’s all.”

“Yeah.” The thug wrinkled his nose.

"Now get over there and open the safe, you hear me?"

Before Abbott could refuse, the taller man came back and reported all the offices were empty. The short thug signaled. His pal walked around the desk, grasped Abbott's neck in a mighty grip and began methodically to bang his forehead against the edge of the desk.

"When you're ready to open the safe, pal," the short crook said, "my friend will stop bashing your brains out—if you got any."

"I can't open the safe," Abbott cried. "I swear I can't."

The torture ceased instantly and the tall man cursed. He removed his coat, walked up to the safe and started to manipulate the dial. He kept this up for half an hour while Abbott stared into the muzzle of a gun and wondered if his term of office was going to end before it began. His head ached badly and was filled with thoughts of a corpse on a slab. A corpse that would not remain dead, but phoned him—gave him information from the grave. Abbott shuddered and the short crook laughed gleefully, mistaking it for terror.

FINALLY the tall man got the safe door open. He threw the beam of a flashlight inside and then cursed again. The safe was empty. Both men slowly backed toward the door. The short one spoke in a harsh voice.

"Okay, wise guy. You stalled us here while somebody else got away with the stuff we were after. So you can do one of two things—either take a dry dive out the window or inhale a couple of slugs. You got ten seconds to make up your mind."

Abbott's brain cleared instantly. He arose, looked over his shoulder and then suddenly scooped up the thermos jug and hurled it. Both men ducked. Abbott was around the desk in a flash, heading for a door leading into another office. If it was locked, he was done. The door was even slightly ajar and he bolted head first through it.

He'd accomplished this in a split second, before the pair of killers could orient themselves. Now Abbott looked for another weapon, but gave up when he heard the outer office door slam shut. He tried to phone the lobby, but no one answered. He shrugged. A pair of mugs like those two would have entered by some other means.

He thought of Florence Walker and started looking for her. He opened supply closet doors, called her name. She was nowhere about and neither were those papers which she'd removed from the safe.

Abbott went back to Hamilton's office and used the phone. He called police headquarters and got the lowdown on Arnt and McBain. They were rivals all right and ready to kill each other on sight. Hamilton, who lay dead on an undertaker's slab, wanted Abbott to bring both these men to this office. Why? Abbott could no more figure out that angle than he could the method by which a dead man could phone him.

Yet dead or alive, Hamilton should know who had murdered him and he indicated it was one of this pair. That it had been murder was no longer doubtful in Abbott's mind. Those crooks had entered with the express purpose of getting evidence of some kind.

Then Abbott stewed about the girl. Why had she left so opportunely—and with the papers? Was she part and parcel of the mob, working here undercover? Perhaps she worked for McBain and the pair of killers were from Arnt's gang. Perhaps one of the crooks was trying to get enough on the other to put him away legally and rule the city alone.

"Rule the city," Abbott expressed his thoughts aloud. "The only rule here is going to be a legal one."

He jammed on his hat, winced as his swollen forehead protested by streaks of pain, and then set his jaws grimly. He walked out of the office, taking care to leave the main door unlocked. An elevator took him to the lobby and he reached his car without being stopped.

Abbott drove downtown, toward the regions where the underworld held sway. He wanted no assistance from anyone. In the first place, to get such aid, he'd have to tell about Hamilton's voice and they'd think he was crazy.

It wasn't midnight yet when he walked into a cafe jammed with people. This was known to be Arnt's headquarters and the place was just really getting started for the night. Abbott brushed aside a headwaiter, paid no attention to the coaxings of a checkroom girl and walked to the rear of the place.

He saw two men lounging near a door and grabbed one by the lapels of his tuxedo. "My name is Jim Abbott, the new D. A. I want to see Arnt and right now. Or would you rather have me come back with a wrecking crew?" The thug made a derisive sound, but opened the door and led the way toward a narrow, steep staircase. He pushed a button on the wall and pointed upwards.

"The door at the head of the steps, pal. Arnt ain't afraid to see nobody—not even a young squirt of a D. A. Go on up."

THE door opened when Abbott was halfway up the steps. He kept on going. Two more hoodlums greeted him and Abbott knew that in some way word had been flashed of his coming and his identity. One of the thugs bowed low with a mocking grin. Abbott stepped into a lavishly furnished office and saw one of the two crime czars who ran the city.

Arnt was a wizen-faced, shrewd-eyed little bandit. He appraised Abbott swiftly and then arose with outstretched hand. Abbott paid no attention to the gesture. He walked to the desk and looked squarely at the crook.

"Well, well—" Arnt rubbed his hands— "Don't tell me the new D. A. is ready to do business? I thought we'd have to give you a period of breaking in."

"At the present moment," Abbott said icily, "I'm not interested in your rule over this part of the city. I'm much more interested in the possibility that you may be a murderer."

"A—what?" Arnt gasped, all the cockiness gone and the hand-rubbing changed to a tight clenching of the fingers.

"You heard me. Ralph Hamilton was killed tonight, only he isn't altogether dead. He told me, only a short time ago, to look you up, Arnt. Of course, you will have an alibi. But it's my business to break it, so go ahead and tell me why it was impossible to have killed Hamilton and been somewhere else at the same time."

"Hamilton—croaked?" Arnt gulped and sat down slowly. "He told you I did it? Honest, Abbott, I didn't. I haven't even got an alibi because I don't know when the murder was committed. Say, maybe this is a rib. How can Hamilton tell you anything when he's dead?"

"I wish I knew the answer to that one," Abbott grunted. "Somebody called me on the phone and mentioned your name."

Arnt's eyes went hard. "McBain—sure, that's the answer. McBain is behind this. He killed Hamilton and he's trying to pin it on me. That's his way of muscling in. Well, it ain't going to work."

Abbott shrugged. "Your war with McBain means little to me until you boys begin shooting one another up. Then we'll keep the chair warm at the state prison.

Arnt, I haven't enough on you to make an arrest, but so help me, you will go downtown on a suspicion-of-murder charge unless you show up at my office in exactly an hour and a half. That's one o'clock.

"We'll have a little talk there about McBain and yourself, too. One o'clock, Arnt. This gaudy place of yours isn't going to look very pretty if I have to send a squad down here to smoke you out."

Abbott turned and walked away. He descended the steps, brushed past the two gorillas at the bottom and strode through the dining room. No one made an effort to stop him. He had Arnt buffaloed.

McBain might be different. He wasn't as smart as Arnt and more given to having things out on the spot. Abbott wondered why the voice of a dead man had asked him to bring these two crooks together in the office. It didn't make much sense to him—unless. Hamilton knew these two men intimately enough to realize just what they'd do if confronted with each other.

That was it! Abbott turned a corner sharply, straightened out and saw headlights flash in his rear view mirror. He took another turn and the same car followed. Abbott began to feel quite uneasy. If Arnt's men were trailing him, they might have orders to finish the case with bullets. Abbott decided he had to know who was in that car.

ABBOTT speeded up a bit, took an. other corner on two wheels and came to an abrupt stop. He leaped out of his car and got set. The pursuer shot around the corner, too, and had to slow up to make the sharp turn. Abbott raced toward the car, grabbed the door handle and swung onto the running board.

He had a glimpse of a pretty face that looked thoroughly frightened. It was Florence Walker, Hamilton's secretary. Abbott gave the door latch a yank. The door opened faster than he figured on, and at the same instant the car hit a slight depression in the road. Abbott went flying up and out. He fell and lay quiet for a moment or two, the wind knocked out of him. He saw the car come to a quick stop and begin to back up. He saw Florence's head stick out of a window.

Then Abbott managed to sit up. The car started off again and disappeared.

Abbott stood erect, carefully testing his limbs. There were no broken bones, but he had bruised himself in half a dozen places. He limped back to his own car, got aboard and turned around. At least no one would be following him from now on.

His mind went back to the pair of hoodlums who had opened the safe, to the papers they were after. The same ones which Florence had lifted and carried away most conveniently. Abbott hated to think of such a pretty girl involved with a bunch of lugs like Arnt and McBain, but it certainly looked as though she had an interest somewhere.

McBain had no such lavish headquarters as a cafe. He occupied an office on the same floor with a poolroom. Abbott was given curious glances as he walked between the tables, but nobody tried to stop him. He opened the door of McBain's office.

McBain looked up and then jumped to his feet. He was a burly man, crude in appearance and manner. His little eyes grew narrow, but he gestured to a couple of hoodlums apparently assigned to guard him. They made no move to intercede.

"You're Abbott, the new D. A.," McBain said. "I don't want any trouble with you, Mister."

"You're already in it up to your neck," Abbott said flatly. "This time it's a murder case, McBain. Hamilton was killed tonight and things appear to indicate that you're

it."

"Hamilton — bumped? Listen, I ain't been outa this office all night. You got nothing on me."

"We'll see," Abbott said. "I'm willing to give you one break. Be at my office shortly after one o'clock. That's little more than an hour from now. Don't show up—and alone, McBain—and I'll consider you ducked out because you are guilty."

"Arnt!" McBain yelled. "He put you up to this. Maybe he knocked off Hamilton."

"Maybe," Abbott conceded. "Be at my office and we'll iron it out. One-fifteen or so, McBain."

JUST before one o'clock, Abbott entered Hamilton's office. He left the door ajar, sat down at the murdered man's desk and waited. He kept his eyes glued to the telephone, half expecting it to ring.

At one sharp, Arnt arrived and sat down. Now he had an alibi all planned and proceeded to give it. Abbott knew how difficult it would be to break that alibi down.

"Sounds okay," he told Arnt, "but I heard something different. The man who accuses you is coming soon."

McBain swaggered into the office shortly. He stopped quickly and glared at Arnt. Then he looked over at Abbott.

"So 1 was right—this little rat did sing. You can't believe him, Abbott. He's been trying to frame me for years. Wants to take over the whole town. I—"

The phone buzzed. Abbott forgot that two dangerous men faced him, forgot everything but the fact that this call must be coming from the grave. A corpse calling.

He lifted the receiver, glued it to his ear and heard that same familiar voice.

"You've done very well, Jim. No reason why you won't make an excellent D. A. Better than I at any rate. Now stop trying to talk and just listen. I can't spare much time. There are certain documents these two men are after. They'll kill each other to get them because those papers explain exactly how I protected these two men. How I took their bribes and their taunts. Ask them where those papers are. Good-by, Jim. This time for good, I'm afraid."

Abbott hung up slowly. "Believe it or not," he said, "that was Hamilton. He told me you men had bribed him, but that he prepared for something like this and made written statements. Those papers are missing. Two crooks came for them. Now—which one of you hyenas sent those lugs here?"

Arnt suddenly jumped to his feet and a gun appeared in his hand. He must have been hiding it under his hat. He stepped back slowly, gun covering McBain mostly. Arnt reached the wide open window and stood directly in front of it.

"I didn't send anybody," he snarled. "That means you, McBain. Well, I'm going to let you have it. I—"

Arnt suddenly doubled up. The gun dropped from his hand. He half turned and then fell. His feet still touched the floor, but his body hung over the window sill, head and arms dangling outside.

Abbott rushed toward him. So did McBain. There was a sharp click in the room. A voice—from the grave—boomed out a warning.

"That's how I was killed. Look out!"

Abbott whirled. McBain was bearing down with both arms outstretched. The moment Abbott would have tried to lift Arnt, McBain was prepared to tumble him out of the window. Abbott ducked under those arms, smashed a pair of hard blows to McBain's middle and then straightened him up with an uppercut. McBain crumpled.

Arnt had slipped back into the room and was trying to pick up his gun when Abbott landed on him. Arnt wasn't much to polish off. Abbott went to the phone and called headquarters. Then he picked up the gun and sat down.

DETECTIVES arrived. Abbott said, "Book these two for murder. Keep them apart, and if they should wake up on the way to a cell, pretend they are resisting arrest. Question them individually and tell each that the other is making murder accusations. They'll talk."

"And how they'll talk," a detective sergeant grunted. "These two been at each other's throats for years."

Abbott grinned. "Don't kid yourself. They've worked hand in glove and only pretended to be enemies. Take them away. I've got things to do."

When the office was cleared, Abbott turned to the inter-office annunciator on his desk. He spoke directly into it.

"Miss Walker, will you come in, please?"

Florence Walker, slightly pink, walked slowly into the office. Abbott smiled at her and indicated a chair.

"Let me guess how this was done," he suggested. "First of all, Hamilton knew he was done for. Beaten in the election he was of no more use to Arnt and McBain. He knew they'd try to wipe him out because he knew too much—so he prepared a series of recordings. They got me deeply interested in the case by summoning me to the funeral parlors. They gave me tips to pick up Arnt and McBain. One of that pair sent a couple of men here for Hamilton's papers which you conveniently smuggled out before they arrived."

"So far, Mr. District Attorney, you're perfectly right," Florence said.

"Good. Hamilton knew they'd try to kill him in such a way as to resemble an accident. He didn't know how, but he was sure it would happen in his office. You played those records over the phone. That's why the call couldn't be traced. What I want to know is, how did Hamilton know those two monkeys would try to dump me out of the window? Arnt pretended to faint. Naturally, I'd have gone to help him and McBain was ready to push me out. They'd have vanished, and to all purposes another D. A. would have hit the sidewalk."

Florence said, "Hamilton made that last recording just in case. I followed you to make certain you were accepting the suggestions to bring both men here. I was in another office when you returned, and I listened in through the annunciator. When I realized what was happening, I turned on the record and transmitted it through the annunciator.

"You see. Mr. Abbott. Hamilton wasn't all bad. They got him into this gradually—until he was up to his neck. What he didn't know, was that Arnt and McBain worked hand in glove all the time. Well, it's over now. One of that pair will crack. Will you excuse me now? I have to get some rest. Big day tomorrow—looking for a new job."

Abbott walked over and looked down at her. "You've got a job. You had it from the moment I walked into these offices."