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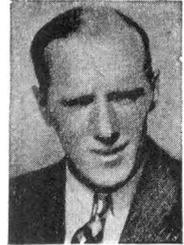
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Dan Turner— HOLLYWOOD DETECTIVE

Vol. I

October, 1942

No. 4

*Adventures of the Movie Colony's Super-Sleuth—
A Bookful of Novelettes and Short Stories*

BY ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

Feature Novelette

- FOUR MINUTES PAST NINE** 6
A bullet stopped her clock, but it couldn't make time stand still. Nor could it end the grisly plot that was still ticking on to its inevitable end.

Other Novelettes and Short Stories

- JUDAS JEWELS** 40
Was she telling the truth about the Gestapo, or was she hooking Dan into a publicity gag?
- DUMMY KILL** 52
Gus was only a ventriloquist's prop, but the germs of murder lurked in his sawdust insides.
- TELEPHONE TANGLE** 62
Under certain circumstances Dan can condone a stick-up, but premeditated murder is something else!
- DEATH'S DARK STAR** 74
The movie magnate was marked for killing, and Dan thought he'd found the wren who'd done the marking!
- HOMICIDE HAUNT** 86
Months ago she'd been electrocuted in her bathtub, and now she was back with a charge of murder!

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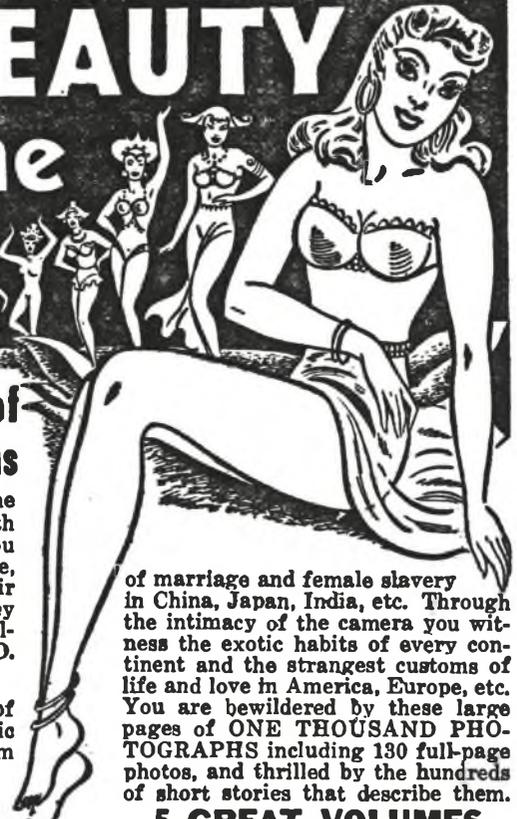
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4 Minutes Past

Her earrings had been torn off, and her clock had stopped at four minutes past nine. But the bullet hole in the movie star's forehead was only the beginning of a maze for Dan Turner



"Suddenly I heard the noise of a shot—and the clock broke."

Nine

SOMEbody was thumping hell out of my apartment's front door. A frantic feminine voice with a Spanish accent was wailing: "*Señor Turner—let me een! Queeck, please! Oh-h-h—Madre de Dios—!*"

The racket brought me out of a sound sleep. I'd gone to bed early on account of a binge with a blonde the night before. Now I sat up, took a quick gander at my clock. In the darkness, it's luminous hands pointed to nine-thirty, even up! The pounding on my door got louder; more insistent.

Smelling trouble, I jammed my feet into carpet slippers, started for the living-room. I yelled: "O-kay. I'm coming. Lay off the clatter."

Just as I said it, the knocking stopped. Then, from the hallway, there came a sudden scuffling sound topped by a shrill yelp of pain. The scream choked off into a moaning gasp.

I snapped on a light; dived for the door, and jerked it open. I stiffened.

I SAW a slender brunette cutie in a tight green dress, struggling in the arms of a tall bozo. The guy wore a pulled-down slouch hat and a dark topcoat with the collar turned up to mask his face. He had

one mitt around the girl's throat, throttling her. With his other fist he was slugging her on the jaw.

I said: "You lousy ape!" and made a lunge at him.

He spotted me just as the brunette wren sagged unconscious in his clutch. He picked her up bodily; tossed her smack at my kiss-er. Then he turned; lammed hell-for-leather down the dim hallway.

The girl's limp form slammed into me. We both went down in a tangle of arms and legs like a Chinese puzzle. Her green silk skirt flurried up, uncovered her garters, drifted across my pan. A chiffon-sheathed leg brushed my cheek.

I squirmed out from under her; leaped to my pins and pelted along the corridor after the tall bozo.

He was just vanishing around a bend as he headed for the stair-case. I put on more speed. But when I reached the turn in the hallway, he was gone.

I swore. I went tumbling down the stairs to the landing below. There was no trace of the guy in the dark topcoat.

I raced back up to my floor, started toward the motionless brunette cutie. She was still lying across my threshold. Just as I ankled past a darkened alcove—

Blooie!

The tall gazabo must have been hiding in that niche, waiting for me to go by. I didn't see him. All I saw was stars. Something hard and metallic bopped down on the back of my noggin. My knees turned to chicken consomme. I pitched forward; the floor came up and soaked me a belt on the smell-er. I heard footfalls thudding

down the stairway behind me. Then silence.

It's a damned good thing I've got a thick cranium. I blinked, shook my head to banish the bird-ies that were twittering in my ears. I hauled myself upright, supported myself against the wall.

There was no use chasing after the tall lug. I realized that he'd had plenty of time to make his getaway.

CHAPTER II

Stand-In

I STUMBLED woozily back to my door. The brunette filly was still sprawled there dead to the world. For the first time, I had a chance to put the focus on her. And as I stared, I felt my glims popping out of their sockets like squeezed grapes.

"Ysobel Villareal!" I whispered.

Then I saw that I was wrong. She wasn't Ysobel Villareal, the glamorous new Spanish star recently imported by Metrovox Pictures. This lassie was younger, fresher than the Villareal wren; less sophisticated-looking. But there was plenty of resemblance. She had the Villareal dame's face: oval and ivory, with long lashes and bee-stung crimson lips. She had the Spanish star's slender, gorgeous figure, too; but not quite as mature.

There was a blue bruise on her chin, where the tall blister had fed her his fist. The marks of his fingers were still on her flawless throat. Her black hair was tumbled around her shoulders like waves of spun midnight. The front

of her green frock was torn open almost to her waist. I could glimpse swelling, creamy contours and satiny skin through the tear in the material.

The hem of her skirt was still up above her knees. White flesh gleamed against black lace. The effect was plenty nice. But I didn't have time for art-study just then. I dropped to my knees, shoved my palm against the yielding region of her heart.

I drew a relieved breath when I felt steady pulsations there. She wasn't croaked; she was just knocked senseless. And when I touched the smoothness of her skin, I almost forgot the ache at the back of my noggin where I'd been conked.

I gathered her up, kicked the door shut behind me; carried her to a divan. She was light, fragile, dainty. I got a boot out of holding her. I laid her on the mussed cushions; poured out a stiff jorum of Vat 69 and dribbled part of it past her lips. I drank the rest of it myself.

She opened her dark, glowing eyes; saw me standing over her. She started to scream.

I said: "Hold it, sweetheart. Go easy. You're okay now. I'm Dan Turner, private snoop. You're in my apartment."

She sat up. Her eyes bored hot holes into mine. "You—you are really *Señor* Turner, the private detective?"

I said: "So the phone-book claims."

Then her white arms snaked around my neck. Her perfume drifted to my nostrils. Fear made her cling to me in a way that boost-

ed my temperature fourteen notches. Tremors skittered through her. I could feel each separate quiver. I liked it.

She moaned: "Oh-h-h . . . I am afraid . . . !"

I soothed her as best I could. "Calm down, baby. Everything's all right now."

"B-but that man . . . he f-followed my taxi all the way from the studio! And wh-when I knocked at your door, he jumped at me . . . !"

I said: "Maybe you'd better tell me what this is all about. What's your name? What are you after? And who was the sharp apple in the topcoat?"

"I—I never saw heem before. I do not know why he should beet me. . . ."

"Well, he's gone now," I said.

She untwined her arms from around me; swayed to her shapely gams. She pulled the ripped edges of her frock together, thereby spoiling the scenery. She said: "I—I am Conchita Albanez. I am Ysobel Villareal's stand-in at the Metrovox Studio."

THAT explained her resemblance to the Spanish star. But it account for a hell of a lot of other things. I said: "Keep on talking, baby."

"Th-there ees no time for talk-eeng, *Señor* Turner! Too many meenutes have been wasted already! You must come weeth me—at once! Dmitri Petronkin needs you. He—he sent me after you when he could not reach you by telephone."

"Dmitri Petronkin?" I said. I knew him, of course. He was Yso-

bel Villareal's director at Metro-vox; a big, beefy Russian who had made quite a rep for himself producing Soviet flickers in Moscow before California grabbed him by offering him scads of geetus. He'd

the finishing touches on the Villareal dame's first Hollywood opus. In fact, she had been especially imported from Spain to do her slinky, provocation stuff in front of Petronkin's cameras.

He picked her up bodily and slammed her into me — then turned and lammed.



been in Hollywood a little less than a year. During that time he had turned out three pix: beautiful things artistically, but box-office flops.

I was pretty well acquainted with him; had met him on several parties. Just now he was putting

I could understand why Dmitri hadn't been able to reach me by telephone. I had the receiver off the hook to keep my beauty-sleep from being disturbed. I said: "So Petronkin sent you after me? Is he in a jam?"

Conchita Albanez nodded woodenly. "*Si, señor*. But you must not waste time askeeng questions. You must hurry and dress!"

She was plenty jittery. I herded her out of the bedroom; then I climbed into my duds, shoved my .32 automatic into the armpit rig where I always carry it. I took Conchita down to the basement garage, boosted her into my jalopy. I headed for the Metrovox lot, just off Sunset.

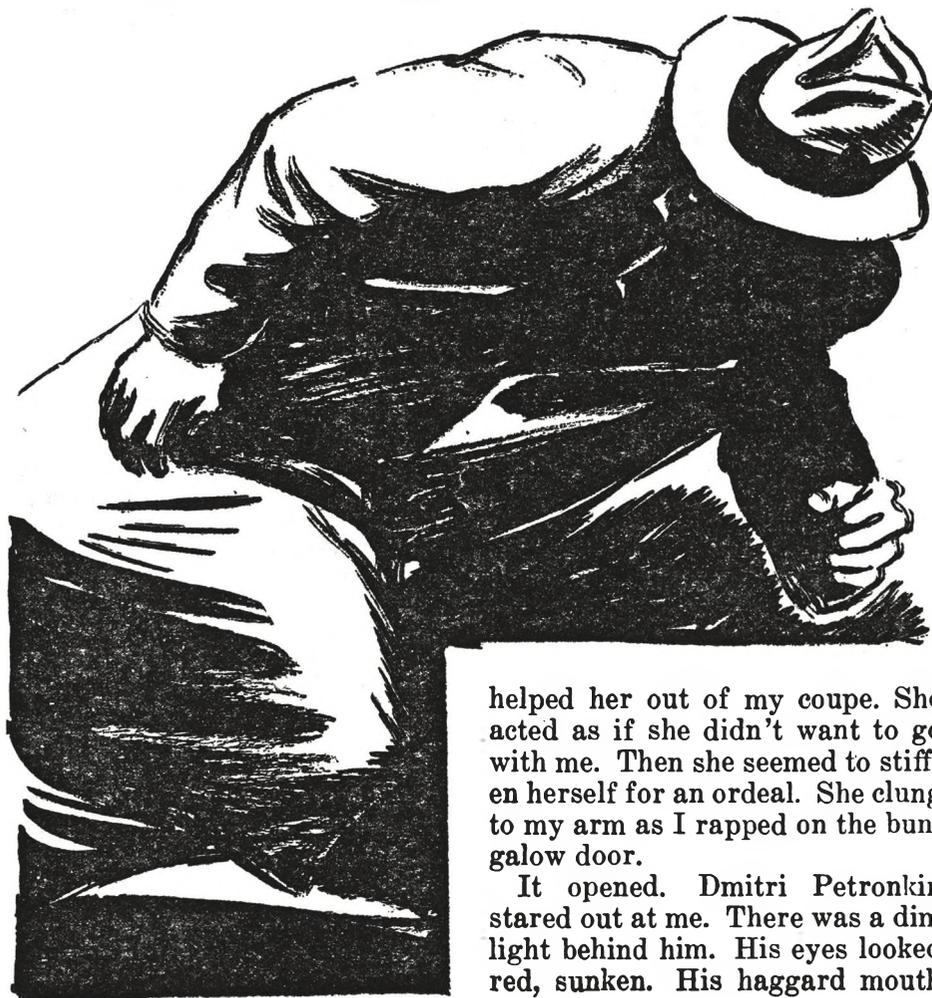
The spick wren flashed her pass at the gate-guard when we got

there. He let us through. She whispered to me: "Straight ahead, *Señor Turner*."

I followed her directions; drove to a row of attractive dressing-bungalows that looked dark, deserted. We pulled up in front of the last cottage on the line. I said: "Now what?"

"Thees ees *Señorita Villareal's* bungalow," she answered me. There was a shivery undercurrent to her tone. "Dmitri Petronkin ees eenside, waiteeng for you."

She seemed to hesitate when I



helped her out of my coupe. She acted as if she didn't want to go with me. Then she seemed to stiffen herself for an ordeal. She clung to my arm as I rapped on the bungalow door.

It opened. Dmitri Petronkin stared out at me. There was a dim light behind him. His eyes looked red, sunken. His haggard mouth

was loose and working. His squat, powerful frame seemed to sag all over.

He said: "Hello, Turner," in a choked whisper. He stood aside for me to enter with Conchita.

I ankleed in. Then I froze. The short hairs crinkled at the nape of my neck. I said: "What the hell—!"

There was a woman on the floor. It was Ysobel Villareal, the glamorous brunette actress from Spain. She was as dead as a pickled herring.

CHAPTER III

The Missing Earrings

SHE WAS sprawled face-upward on an expensive white bear-skin rug. A green silk dress sheathed her slender contours, called attention to the nifty flare of her hips and the pouting mounds of her seductive, well-developed bosom. Her face was serene, beautiful. She looked as if she might be asleep.

But there was a raw, red bullet-hole in the middle of her pale forehead. Her black hair was wet and matted with congealing blood. There was more blood on her earlobes, too. The flesh was torn, lacerated.

I turned my eyes away from the corpse; and I happened to notice something on the dressing-table across the room. It's funny how an insignificant detail will register at a time like that. The object I spotted was a gold-and-cloisonne clock. A slug had struck it, smashed it to hellangone. The hands were stopped at four minutes past nine.

I whirled on Petronkin. "For God's sake, Dmitri—what the hell happened? Who bumped Miss Villareal?"

He stared back at me with lack-luster glims. He looked like a living dead man. His big fists were clenched; he was breathing hard. "I do not know," he said unsteadily. He hadn't any Russian accent to speak of. There was only a certain clipped precision of speech, a careful choice of words, to indicate his foreign origin. He went on: "Tonight I was shooting the final takes of Ysobel's first American starring picture. At nine o'clock I started the cameras rolling on Sound Stage 3. It was an unimportant scene; Ysobel did not appear in it. But she was to make her entrance immediately afterward."

"Yeah. Go on."

"She was due on the set at five after nine. When she failed to appear, I telephoned from the soundstage to her dressing-bungalow. At first there was no response. Then Miss Albanez, here, answered my ring. She screamed that something terrible had happened; that Ysobel was . . . dead."

"Then what did you do?"

"I dismissed the company for the night, without telling them anything. Our unit was the only one working on the lot this evening. Then I ran over here. I found Ysobel . . . as you see her now."

I turned to the dead star's stand-in. "What were you doing here, baby? Did you see what happened?"

SHE shivered. Her pan was pale as hell. "*Señorita Villareal*

had envited me here to put on a dress like the one she was to wear een her l-last scene. I was on the other side of the room. She was by the dresseeng-table. Suddenly I heard a noise—a ‘chuff!’ sound. There was a tinkle of glass and metal.”

“The clock,” I said.

“Si. And then I turned to see what had happened. The ‘chuff!’ noise sounded again. Eet came from that open weendow there. I—I saw *Señorita* Villareal slump-eeng to the floor . . . oh-h-h, *Dios . . . !*”

I grabbed her, shook her until her pert little figure quivered all over. I said: “Snap out of it, Conchita. You saw Miss Villareal going down. But did you see a face at the window. Could you identify the murderer?”

“N-no. I theenk I must have fainted. A reengeeng bell awakened me. Eet was the telephone. I got up and answered eet. *Señor* Petronkin was calleeng from the sound-stage. I—I told heem what had happened. He came at once and sent me after you. And then I was followed by that terrible man who jumped at me outside your apartment.”

I said: “Okay. That’s enough for a while.” I looked at Dmitri. “Tell me something. Was Ysobel supposed to wear jewels in her last scene tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Real or paste?”

“She insisted upon wearing real jewels, Turner. Her own. Why do you ask?”

I pointed to the dead star’s torn earlobes. “Somebody ripped her earrings away, after she was

drilled. Probably while Conchita was in a faint on the other side of the room. There’s your answer to the whole damned thing.”

CHAPTER IV

Under the Slouch Hat

PETRONKIN said: “Then you think it was murder for robbery?”

I started to nod. Then a thought kicked me in the shins. What about the tall gazabo in the dark topcoat; the one who had knuckle-dusted Conchita Albanez in my apartment-house corridor? Where did he fit into the picture?

He was mixed up in the mess some way. Maybe he was the killer. Suppose he gunned Ysobel through her window with a silenced roscoe. Maybe he missed her with his first shot. His slug wrecked the gold-and-cloisonne clock. Then he fired a second bullet and lammed.

In that case, he might have been just outside the studio gates when Conchita left the lot a little later, on her way to my stash. She was dressed in a green silk frock—exactly like the one worn by the dead woman. In the darkness, the tall bozo might have mistaken the stand-in for the star herself. That might make him figure he’d missed with both silenced bullets; make him think Ysobel was still alive. Which would account for the way he followed her to my joint and tried to croak her with his bare hands.

That added up. It made sense. But it didn’t explain the dead wren’s missing earrings. If the

murderer had stolen them, he would have been close enough to the corpse to know his victim was plenty dead. In that case, why did he trail Conchita later?

There was something screwy somewhere. I said: "This thing's got too damned many funny angles, Dmitri. It may not have been a robbery motive, after all. I wonder why the cops don't show up?"

Petronkin licked his flabby lips. "I have not notified the police," he said dully. "I have summoned nobody except you. I need your help—desperately."

I said: "What? You haven't called the law? You damned fool—this is a murder beef!" There was a phone on the dressing-table. I started for it.

The Russian blocked my path. Before I could stop him, he grabbed up the telephone; gave the cord a savage jerk. The wire snapped apart, dangled like a dead worm.

That made me sore as hell. I said: "What do you think you're doing?" and moved in on him.

He backed away. "Listen, Turner. Ysobel's picture was ready for cutting and editing. If the news leaks out that she is dead . . . the film may never be released. Metro-vox may scrap the entire production. That must not happen! I have already made three pictures here in America. All were financial failures. Unless this present film makes good, I am . . . through . . . in Hollywood."

I growled: "So what? You can't cover up a murder, let a killer get away, just to save your own job."

"Why not?" he argued desperately. "Even if the murderer were

captured, it would not bring Ysobel back to life. Listen, Turner. I will pay you five thousand dollars if you will help me to dispose of . . . her corpse. Then I will announce to the press that she has gone back to Spain, incognito. Nobody will ever know—"

Five grand is a lot of lettuce. And I'm in this game for the dough. But I didn't want any part of Petronkin's proposition. After all, I've got some conscience left. I don't believe in letting murderers run loose. I said: "Nuts. This is a case for the cops." I pivoted, started toward the door—

Conchita Albanez cut loose with a yelp that almost froze my capillaries. She screamed: "Look, Señor Turner! There at the window—that man in the slouch hat—!"

I twisted around.

I was just in time to see part of a face disappearing from outside the half-drawn blind. It was a face masked by a pulled-down hat brim and a turned-up coat collar.

CHAPTER V

Secret Marriage

I HURLED myself at the door; smashed out into the night. I spotted an indistinct shape racing away through the shadows. It was a tall gink in a dark overcoat. He was running to beat hell.

I took out after him. I can shove my two hundred pounds of beef over a lot of territory when I get started. I overhauled the shadowy bozo, made a clutch at him. I caught his shoulder, spun him around like a top. I let him taste a fistful of knuckles.

He staggered.

Then he let out a roar and came back at me. He aimed a pile-driver poke at my belly. It landed low. I curled over. He slugged me a hell of a belt on the beezer. It brought blood.

There's nothing like a good swift punch in the nose to get a man's dander up. I said: "You lousy son!" and sailed into him with both dukes flailing. I cracked a stiff one into his short ribs; fed him a jolt to the kisser. His knees buckled.

But he was game. And he knew how to handle his dukes. He closed in; clinched until he got his second wind. Then he started thumping a kettledrum solo on my navel. I took all he had and invited an encore by pasting a black eye on him. He yelped and biffed me in the mush. My head snapped back as if it had been hinged.

He stepped in to finish me off. That's where he made a damned bad error. I let drive with a bash that exploded full on his chin. He went stiff; fell forward. He smacked the hard ground with his face.

I STRADDLED him; rolled him over. I yanked out my pencil-flashlight, snapped it on; sprayed the beam full on his pan. I said: "What the hell—!"

He was Verne Eastland, chief makeup expert for Metrovox. I knew him; and I didn't like him worth a damn. He had a nasty rep in Hollywood. He was an oily rat with sideburns, a handsome map, and a way with the dames. He loved 'em and left 'em. It was rumored that at least two silly



She cut loose with a yelp.
"Look, Senor Turner—
there he is at the window!
The man with the slouch
hat!"

frills had bumped themselves off because of him. Not that anything had ever been pinned to his coat-tails. He was too slick for that. He always managed to keep his nose clean—officially.

But this time I figured I had him dead to rights. I felt like slug-

ging him again for luck. But I didn't. I massaged the back of his neck, joggled his noggin to shake his brains back. After a while his peepers blinked open. He stared up into my flashlight. He gasped: "Damn . . . you . . . !"

I said: "The same to you, thanks. Now listen, lug. What the hell were you doing at that bungalow window just now? And why did you follow Conchita Albanez to my apartment and try to rub her out?"

He squirmed under me. "I don't know what you're talking about, snoop! I never followed Conchita Albanez or anybody else to your apartment! And if you want to know why I was listening at Ysobel's window, I'll tell you."

I said: "Yeah. Better hurry."

"I was getting the goods on you and that murdering Russian!" he snapped. "Petronkin killed Ysobel—and I'm going to see that he hangs!"

"Petronkin killed Ysobel? You must be slug-nutty!" I growled. "He was on sound-stage 3 at the very minute she was getting cooled down. Her clock proves it."

He said: "It's a damned lie! Petronkin killed her. And he hired you to cover it up. I heard him offering you five grand, you crooked rat! And if you hadn't caught up with me, I'd have been phoning the cops right now. How do you like those oranges?"

I grinned in his teeth. "So you were going to phone the cops! Do you expect me to swallow that pill? I suppose you'll be telling me next that you were goofy over Ysobel Villareal and wanted revenge on her murderer."

He said: "You guessed it, snoop. She was going to marry me as soon as she divorced her husband."

That stiffened me. "Her husband?"

"Yeah. Nobody in Hollywood knew she was married. But she was. To a spick ham named Pedro Ybarra. And I'll give you the whole damned lump, since you're interested. Pedro Ybarra plays a bit part in the picture Ysobel was working on! He was here on the lot tonight. He was on the set until Petronkin dismissed the cast. Gargle that one, shamus!"

I yanked him to his pins. I said: "You seem to know a hell of a lot, boy-friend. I think I'll put the clutch on you until the law gets here to take you off my hands. You're too anxious to keep yourself in the clear by tossing suspicion at other people."

He started to put up an argument. I hauled out my roscoe, prodded it into his kidneys. I said: "Get going, darling."

I jogged him up to the main building. We went inside. I found a phone; dialed the home number of my friend Dave Donaldson, homicide squad dick.

CHAPTER VI

Where Is the Corpse?

AFTER a while, Donaldson's rumbly voice said: "Well, what is it?"

"Dan Turner calling," I said. "I'm knee-deep in a murder mess. And I think I've got the killer under glass."

"Murder? For the love of tripe—who's dead this time?"

I said: "Ysobel Villareal, the Metrovox bimbo. She was burned down in her dressing-bungalow here on the lot. Flag your britches out here and bring some men with you. I'll be waiting."

"I'll meet you at the gate in two shakes," Donaldson grunted. He rang off.

I waved my rod at Verne Eastland. "Okay, rat. Let's go up to the main entrance. Then the bulls won't have so far to drag you."

He cursed me; but he went along without starting anything. I flashed my tin at the gate-guard; he let us through. I said: "Listen cousin. If anybody else tries to get out of here, stop 'em. See?"

The guard nodded. His eyes widened when he saw my gat against Eastland's ribs. I shoved the make-up expert out to the sidewalk—

A shadow flitted toward us. I tensed. It was a girl. She was a cute little redhead with a figure-eight shape and symmetrical stems. She wasn't wearing a coat or hat. Her dark linen dress looked as if she'd been poured into it. Every time she took a step her firm bosom jiggled saucily. She came barging up to us, her high heels pattering.

Eastland said: "Bonnie Rafziger—!"

"Y-yes, Verne. I've been waiting hours. I've got to see you and talk to you—" She broke off as she noticed my rod poking his liver. Her hand fluttered to her heart. "Verne darling—what's the matter—"

I said: "He's under arrest. For murder."

Her mouth opened. And then she

pulled something I wasn't expecting. She came clawing into me; ripped at my cheeks with her long, sharp nails. She made a grab for my gun, shoved it downward. She shrieked: "Run, Verne—run!"

THE whole thing caught me flat-footed. Before I could make a move, Eastland was walloping down the street like a greyhound with a burr under its tail. I said: "You damned like floozie!" and slapped the red-haired jane across the kisser.

She staggered backward. I tried to leap past her and start after Eastland. But she hurried into me again; blocked me. She wrapped herself around me like a mess of spaghetti. Her hair was in my eyes. She squirmed all over me like an octopus. Her legs tripped me off-balance; almost sent me into a nose-dive to the pavement.

And meanwhile, Verne Eastland sailed around a corner; vanished in the darkness.

I saw various shades of red. I holstered my .32; went to work on the curvesome wren. I untangled my knees from hers; slapped her another stinger across the cheek. Then I pinned her against the studio wall; mashed my chest against hers. She moaned as I flattened her into a pancake. I reached down, grabbed her wrist. I said: "I ought to twist this clear off, baby."

She got quiet. She knew that the make-up expert had made his lam; that was all she gave a damn about. She laughed in my kisser. "Go ahead and twist, handsome. I just love cave-men!" And then she

put her free arm around me, offered me her lips.

I wasn't anticipating that. But I got a hell of a thump out of the way her mouth parted over mine and her breath came pantingly, warm and fragrant. A sizzling jolt of electricity whammed past my tonsils, curled my toenails. My arteries started to expand from increasing pressure. Every feminine curve the red-haired jenny owned seemed to be where I could feel it against me. . . .

I KNEW it was too late for me to catch up with Eastland. He was gone. And I felt like getting even with the red-headed frill for the way she had messed things up. Besides, she was damned seductive. And I'm as human as the next chump. Her sultry lips had my corpuscles playing leap-frog. I said: "Here's where somebody gets taught a lesson!" and wrapped her in my arms.

I took another kiss. I didn't bother to be gentle about it. I fumbled my finger-tips over her shoulders and her back; jammed her up against the studio wall again. . . .

When I finally turned her loose she had a faint smile on her lips; and my pan was full of lipstick. She said: "Can I go now, handsome?"

"Like hell!" I said. "Why did you help Eastland get away?"

She gave me a frank answer. "Because I love him. If he's in a jam, I want to go to bat for him. So what?"

I said: "So you love him, do you? And I suppose he's the only geezer

you give a damn about—except me."

Her eyes got defiant. "Don't kid yourself. I was just keeping you busy so he'd have time to beat it."

I said: "Maybe you didn't know he was figuring on getting hitched to Yobel Villareal." I had two reasons for firing that at her. First, I wanted to see how she'd react; I wanted to find out if she knew the Spanish dame was dead. And in the second place, I wanted to queer any lingering affection she might have for the make-up expert. When the dragnet went out for him, I didn't want her mixing in and maybe helping him to escape.

Her lips drooped a little. "Yes. I know he wants to marry that spick floozie. She took him away from me. But I can get him back. That's why I was waiting here to see him, talk to him."

Either she didn't know the Villareal wren had been bumped, or else she was one hell of a capable actress. I caught her wrists and said: "Kiddo, you may not know it—but you've stepped into a damned bad mess all the way up to your neck. You've helped a murderer to get away. That makes you an accessory after the fact. Your pretty little shape is headed for the hoosegow!"

She started to answer me. But just then I heard brakes squealing at the curb, over by the studio gates. I turned; saw Dave Donaldson lumbering out of his official sedan. He was alone. He must have come straight from his house; his men would probably arrive a little later. He spotted me; ran toward me. "Is this your prison-



I tried to leap past her after Eastland, but she flurried in to me again, blocking me.

er?" he puffed. He pointed to the red-haired chicken.

I said: "No, damn it to hell. She pulled a fast one; let the louse get away clean. He's Verne Eastland, the make-up man. Better phone headquarters, put out a radio beef for him."

Dave squinted. "Yeah. But let's take a gander at the Villareal dame's carcass first."

The red-thatched nifty stiffened in my arms. She gasped: "Villareal . . . ? Ysobel Villareal . . . dead? You th-think Verne k-killed her? Oh-h-h . . . my God . . . !"

I dragged her through the gates with Donaldson at my heels. We headed for the dressing-bungalow where the Spanish star had been cooled off.

When we were almost there, I noticed that the front door was open. I started to run. I catapulted over the sill; and then I froze

in my tracks. I said: "What the hell—!"

The murdered woman's corpse was gone. There was no trace of Conchita Albanez, her stand-in. And Dmitri Petronkin was trussed to a chair like a Thanksgiving goose.

CHAPTER VII

The One Logical Answer

DONALDSON said: "Say—what the devil is this, anyhow?"

I leaped at Petronkin, untied him. He had a funny glint in his peepers; a wry grin on his mush. I said: "What happened, Dmitri? Where's the body? Where's Conchita? Who tied you up that way?"

The Russian chuckled. His belly shook up and down. "What body are you talking about?" he asked me.

He might just as well have biffed me in the teeth. I yelled: "You know damned well what body I'm talking about. Ysobel Villareal's! Don't stall, you lousy ape! This is Lieutenant Donaldson of the homicide division. Tell him what happened."

Petronkin kept laughing. "Glad to know you, Lieutenant Donaldson. I can thank you for a hundred dollars."

Dave said: "A hundred bucks? What is this, a game? If so, who's supposed to me 'it'?"

"I guess you are lieutenant," the Russian chortled deep in his throat. "It's a rib. Turner and I had a bet on. We wanted to see how long it would take you to arrive if we told you a murder had

taken place. I said you would be here within ten minutes. Turner claimed it would take you at least a half-hour. I won."

I felt myself turning a slow purple. I said: "You lying louse! Ysobel Villareal was croaked right here in this bungalow. You phoned me; wanted me to help dispose of her corpse. If you deny that, I'll paste the living hell out of you!"

"Cut it out, Turner," Dmitri grinned angelically. "The joke is all over, now. Why don't you admit that you tied me up to make the scene look better, and let it go at that?"

The son of a gun had me over a barrel. He had a serious, deadpan look; and I knew it was registering with Dave Donaldson. I knew damned well what sort of game the Russian was playing. It was to his advantage to keep the news of Ysobel Villareal's death from the public. By doing so, he'd have a chance to release her starring pic; regain his own Hollywood rep as a director.

Moreover, he was perfectly aware that I had no murder case if I didn't produce a corpse. And the Villareal wren's body was gone.

Donaldson took a step in my direction. He rasped: "See here, rattlebrain. I've stood for a hell of a lot out of you. But this is the first time you ever pulled a practical joke on me. And I don't like it. I've got a damned good notion to have the commissioner jerk your tin."

"Now wait, Dave!" I said. "I'm leveling with you. Ysobel was bumped off. Tonight. In this very room. She was drilled with a silenced gun. Have a squint at that

clock on the dressing-table. You can see it was smashed by a bullet. Take a gander at the floor. Is that a blood-stain or am I color-blind?"

Dave said: "It's probably paint. And anybody can bust a clock." He was all puffed up like a toad. Anger sparked out of his glims. He was grating his teeth together until I thought they'd be ground down to the gums if he didn't quit.

I WAS plenty steamed up myself. Dmitri Petronkin had smeared a double-cross on me thicker than my wrist. I started to grab him. "You lousy Slav—if you don't come through with the truth I'll—"

Donaldson said: "Aw, stow it. Pay him the hundred seeds you lost and pipe down. You'll be hearing from headquarters tomorrow morning." He turned on his heel, rolled out.

The red-haired nifty said: "Well, so-long, handsome. I'll be seeing you. You're welcome for the buggy-ride." She started to follow Dave.

But I snatched her, held her. I said: "Not quite so fast, beautiful. Before you go, slip me your name and address. I may want to get in touch with you later."

"Me? I'm the Queen of Sheba. You'll find me in the encyclopaedia. Get your damned dirty paws off me."

Then I happened to remember I'd heard Eastland call her by name, outside the lot. But I didn't let on. I said: "Okay, sweetheart, if that's the way you feel about it. Scram." I gave her a shove toward the door.

She walked out. Her hips swayed from side to side with an insolent

movement. She gave them an unnecessary wiggle as she ankled over the threshold. She was telling me to go take a flying flop at the moon—and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

I whirled around to the Russian. He was still quietly grinning. I said: "Now look, Dmitri. You can't get away with this. You're laying yourself wide open for trouble. When Ysobel's body is found, Donaldson's going to remember the way you pulled the wool over his lamps. He'll nail your hide to a cell door."

"For what? I did not murder her. You know that. And they may never find her corpse."

"The hell they won't!" I snapped. "You can't conceal a human carcass. It's not in the cards. You'll be accused of the killing. And even if they can't pin it on you, they'll hand you a rap for obstructing justice."

"There is no corpus delicti. Therefore, there was no crime," he said slowly.

I fished out a gasper, set fire to it. I said: "That's the way you'd like to have it turn out. The mysterious disappearance of Ysobel Villareal would bring plenty of publicity to the picture you directed. It'd be a box-office success. But I'm going to get to the bottom of this stinking mess if I have to do it all by myself. Now tell me what happened? Who tied you up? What became of the body?"

"I suppose there would be no harm in telling you," he shrugged. "After all, if you went to the police with the story, they wouldn't believe you. Not after the way Lieu-

tenant Donaldson acted just now. So here it is, just as it happened, my friend."

"I'm listening!" I snapped.

He said: "After you refused to help me, I realized that Ysobel's murder would have to be made public. You chased after that chap whose face we saw at the window. Conchita Albanez and I stayed here . . . waiting for you to come back with the police."

"Keep spilling," I said.

"Well, after a while Conchita left. She said she was frightened; wanted to go home. That left me alone with the corpse. I heard footsteps; and I thought it was you, returning. Instead, a tall man burst into the bungalow. His hat was turned down, his collar up. I didn't see his face."

"Then what?"

"He caught me before I could realize what he was up to. He hit me; dazed me. He tied me to the chair. Then . . . well, he carried Ysobel away. And that is all I know about it."

I had a hunch he was coming clean with me. His voice sounded truthful.

But the whole damned thing smelled screwy. Who would want to haul the dead jane's corpse off the scene?

There was one logical answer. Maybe the murderer figured on stashing the stiff where it would never be found. That way, nobody could ever manage to pin the killing on him.

A man with his hat turned down and his collar up. A tall man, Petronkin said.

In other words, it was Verne Eastland.

CHAPTER VIII

Save Me from My Folly

SURE; Verne Eastland. He could have had time to get back into the Metrovox lot after he slid away from me, while the red-head Bonnie Rafziger was keeping me occupied. He could have sneaked in through the truck entrance at the rear of the studio; could have done his stuff while I was outside wrestling with the Rafziger cutie.

Eastland was the lug I had to put the finger on. And I aimed to do it, too. I'd been pushed around too damned much; I wanted somebody's gizzard. But I wouldn't get any help from the cops. Dave Donaldson was probably off me for life now. If I wanted to untangle the puzzle, I'd have to do it on my own.

On the other hand, suppose it hadn't been Eastland at all? Maybe the Russian director was still horsing me, the way he had horsed Donaldson. Maybe Petronkin had bribed the Mex frill, Conchita, to help him get rid of the dead dame after I left the bungalow. Maybe the two of them had hidden the corpse somewhere. Then perhaps the Russian had got Conchita to tie him to the chair—to make the set-up look convincing.

I said: "Dmitri, something stinks. And I think you're the guy I smell."

"I know what is on your mind," he smiled at me. "You are under the impression that I concealed Ysobel's body. But you're quite wrong. I have told you the truth."

"It's too thin!" I snapped. "You

I said, "Come clean. Where did you and Dmitri take the corpse?"



had plenty of motive for wanting that corpse out of the way. Your job depends on it."

He shrugged. "I am sorry you choose not to believe me. And what do you intend to do about it?"

I could tell I wasn't going to get

anything more out of him. Not just then. He was shrewd enough to know he held a good hand of cards. And he was playing them close to his vest. He didn't give a belch about obstructing justice as long as he could protect his career by keeping his kisser padlocked.

I said: "Okay, wise guy. Have it your way. But sooner or later I'm going to crack this screwy business wide open. And when I do—look

out!" I started for the door.

"Wait, Turner. Why are you so anxious to bring Ysobel's murderer to justice?"

"Because I'm fed up with being played for a sucker. I've been bopped on the noggin and poked in the beezer. I've had a royal run-around. And I'm going to do something about it."

He said: "Tonight I offered you five thousand dollars to help me, Turner. The offer still stands. Find Ysobel's corpse—and keep the police from learning the truth—and you will be much richer. Think it over."

I felt like putting the bracelets on him, hauling him down to headquarters. But I knew it wouldn't do any good. I didn't have a damned thing to pin on him. I said: "Go to hell!" and ankled out of the bungalow.

I GOT into my heap, drove out of the lot. An idea hit me. Maybe I could get the truth out of Conchita Albanez herself. A little strong-arm stuff might make her spill—if she really had helped hide the Spanish dame's corpse.

I stopped at a druggery; thumbed the phone-book. I found Conchita's address. She lived in a walk-up flat just off Hollywood and Vermont. I climbed back into my wreck, souped the motor. Pretty soon I was banging my knuckles on the stand-in's front door.

It took her a long while to answer. At last she opened up. She was wearing a peek-a-boo nightgown of thin silk. Her black hair was down around her back. Her cute little figure showed through

the gossamer material like nobody's homework. I could follow the silhouetted outlines of her hips, the creamy columns of her thighs through the gauzy silk. She was plenty nifty. She also seemed plenty scared when she took a squint at me. Her pan got white.

"Meester T-Turner—!" she said.

"Yeah. Hello, sweetness." I brushed past her, walked in; closed the door after me. I put the focus on her.

She was trembling. Her fingers jerked. She tried to smile. "I—I am so glad to see you." she whispered without meaning a damned word of it.

"Are you?"

"Si! I wanted a chance to thank you for saveeing me from that man in your hallway tonight. . . ."

That gave me a hunch. Maybe I could get more out of her by buttering her than I could by shoving her around. I said: "That's why I came here, baby. I thought maybe I might stumble into a reward."

Her eyes narrowed. She smiled again. It was more genuine this time. "W-would you like a leetle dreenk, si?"

I said, "Why not?" and sat down on her divan.

She poured two slugs from an amber bottle. I tossed mine down the hatch; almost strangled to death. It was tequila—fiery as hell. I could feel it etching its initials on the lining of my stomach. I said: "Damn, that's good."

She sipped hers; looked at me over the rim of her glass. "You like theengs from Mexico, no?"

I said: "You bet. Especially when they wear thin nightgowns

like that one. Nice piece of silk," I added. I caught a fold of it between my fingers.

She finished her fire-water; snuggled against me. "You are an expert on silk. . . ?" she mocked me.

"So I've been told. Lace, too. This looks like expensive stuff." I fingered the edging around the low-cut vee of the nightgown. The back of my hand touched warm, ivory skin.

She giggled. "You are not *looking* at the lace, *Señor* Turner."

SHE was right. I was getting an eye-full of something nicer than all the lace in the world. . . . My heart was beginning to hammer a tune against my ribs. That spick wren had plenty to tickle a man's blood-pressure. And I'm human, after all. . . .

She cuddled closer. One of her shoulder-straps took a lead off first base; slipped toward her dimpled elbow. My palm felt itchy. I slid an arm around her; hauled her against me. I said: "Have you ever been kissed, gorgeous?"

"*Si*. . . ."

"But not like this, I'll bet," I said. And I gave her the business.

I pasted my mouth on hers; put plenty of curve on the ball. A guy learns lots of technic in Hollywood; and I'm a great hand for remembering lessons. I tossed oscillatory dynamite past her tonsils. And she seemed to explode, inside, all of a sudden.

She started to tremble in my arms. She jammed herself against me; I thought she would singe my chest. "Oh-h-h . . . *Señor* Turner . . . !" she gasped.

I distributed a few more kisses here and there, for luck. I was beginning to enjoy myself. She wore some sort of Mex perfume that reminded me of hot deserts and a blazing sun and strumming guitars . . . with a touch of Tia Juana saloon added. That part was the tequila burning in my gizzard.

At that, I was burning up plenty. Conchita did that to me. That little gal was plenty hotcha. And when her warm fingers slid insinuatingly over my face and ruffled up my hair, and her soft, little body quivered against me while she murmured sweet nothings into my ear, I'm afraid I lost control for a minute or two. . . .

After a while I said: "You like me a little, don't you, baby?"

"*Si*," she sighed.

"You know I'm your pal?"

"You are my *lovaire*."

"Then you won't mind if I give you a spoonful of advice, will you?"

"Advice?" her sleepy eyes widened a little.

I said: "Yeah. I want to keep you out of the calaboose."

She sat up suddenly; stiffened herself. She got pale again. She looked scared. "*The calabozo*. . . ?"

I said: "Yeah. Now listen. I go for you in a big way. You're a damned sweet kid. But you're in trouble—and you don't know it."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

I took a wild shot in the dark; hoped I'd hit a bull's-eye. I said: "I happen to know what you did in Ysobel Villareal's bungalow tonight. And unless you come clean, you'll wind up on the inside looking out."

For an instant I thought she was

going to faint. "*Madre de Dios...!* You—you know what I deed—?"

My pulse started to race. Now I was getting somewhere! She was about to spill her guts!

I said: "Yeah. I know everything. And you can't get away with it, sweetheart."

She let out a sobbing moan; tottered to her feet. "You must save me from my folly!" she whimpered. She stumbled across to a closet, opened it. She fumbled in a shoe-toe. Then she came back to me, panting and quaking.

She shoved her palm out toward me. I saw two big round objects sparkling against her mitt.

Ysobel Villareal's diamond earrings!

CHAPTER IX

Silenced Roscoe

THAT almost floored me. I made a grab for the sparklers. They had little flecks of brown on them. Dried blood.

I snarled: "Where the hell did you get these?"

She sobbed again. "I weel confess everytheeng. I—I deed not faint when *Señorita* Villareal was keeled. Eet was a lie when I t-told you that. Now I tell you the truth. When she fell to the floor and the murderer disappeared from the weendow, I—I robbed her of the earrings. I—I p-pulled them out of her ears. That was what I was doeeng when *Señor* Petronkin telephoned from the sound stage. That was why I was so long answeereeng hees reeng."

I stared at her; tried to guess if she was leveling.

She said: "Oh-h-h, *Señor* Turner, I—I am a weecked girl! But I have been so poor, and Ysobel Villareal had so much. . . . And I thought she would not need the jewels seence she was . . . dead. And so I took them. But I am sorree . . . and I do not want to go to the jail. . . ."

I stuffed the rocks in my pocket; grabbed her. I said: "Conchita, you're a damned liar. You bumped Ysobel yourself! You rubbed her out—so you could glom her sparklers!"

She whimpered: "No! No! Eet ees not so! Eet was a man who keeled her from the weendow. The same man who later followed me to your apartment and t-tried to keel me, too!"

I thought that over. Maybe my first theory was right, after all. Maybe Verne Eastland had gunned Ysobel through the window of that dressing-bungalow. Maybe he saw Conchita leaving the lot a little later; mistook her for the Spanish star. Maybe he thought he'd missed with both silenced bullets. And so he followed Conchita to my stash; tried to bump her with his bare meat-hooks.

Conchita's theft of the sparklers added weight to that reconstruction. Since Eastland hadn't gloomed the rocks, he obviously hadn't examined Ysobel's corpse at close range. So he hadn't been positive his second slug had done the business. It explained why he followed Conchita.

And where the hell did that leave me? Nowhere. Because I couldn't pin a damned thing on Eastland unless I could produce a corpus delicti. I started shaking Conchita

some more. I roughed her up plenty. I said: "Okay, sister. Maybe you didn't croak the Villareal bimbo. *But you helped Dmitri Petronkin to hide her body somewhere!*"

She gasped. "No—no! I left heem and came straight home, soon



after you chased after that man at the weendow. You—you say *Señorita Villareal's* corpse is gone?"

I tied my arms around her. "Give me that gat, sister!"

"You know damned well it's gone!" I growled. "How much did Petronkin pay you to help him lug it away—and to tie him up later? *Where did you take the body?*"

She tried to get loose. "Eet ees not so! I deed not—"

I twisted her wrists; doubled my fist and pretended I was going to bury it in her soft, shapely form. I said: "Come clean! Where did you and Dmitri take the corpse?"

"No! I know notheeng about eet!"

"You know plenty. Maybe you know something about Verne Eastland."

"*Señor Eastland. . . ?*"

"Yeah. The murderer."

"But—but I got the eempresion eet was someone else. Hees eyes were all I saw. And they reminded me of—*Oh-h-h, Dios!*"

She screamed. She was looking toward the doorway behind me. Before I could whirl around, I heard a silenced roscoe say: "*Chuff! Chuff!*" And then Conchita sagged against me; the lights went out.

CHAPTER X

What the Phone Book Revealed

I ROARED: "What the hell!" and let her slump out of my arms. She hit the floor with a nasty dead thud. In the darkness I yanked out my .32 automatic, dived for the door. It was closed. I slapped into it so hard I bounced back three feet. It stunned me.

I gathered myself together, made another leap. This time I twisted the knob and went hurtling into the hall. But I didn't see anybody.

I searched around. No soap. I cursed, pelted back into Conchita's rooms. I flicked the wall-switch; stared at her sprawled form.

Her left eye was a sickening mess. A chunk of lead had driven it back into her skull. Another slug had drilled her through the shoulder. That one had probably been meant for me; somehow it had missed.

I felt the Mex cutie's pulse. There wasn't any. She'd never glom any diamonds again!

There was a phone on the wall. I unforked the receiver, did some fast dialing. Pretty soon I heard Dave Donaldson's voice mumbling: "Now what?"

"Turner again. Another murder!"

He roared: "Damn you to hell—are you drunk or crazy or both? How many ribs do you think you can pull in one night?"

I said: "This is on the level, Dave. So was the first one, for that matter. But this time I've got a corpse to prove it. And I'm sticking right here until you get on the job." I told him what had happened; gave him the address.

"Okay," he rumbled. "But God help you if—"

I hung up on him. I set fire to a gasper; waited. I had a bad case of the drizzling jitters. I needed a drink. I found Conchita's bottle of tequila, tilted it. I drained the whole damned works—and it never even nudged me.

PRETTY soon Donaldson showed up. He took one gander at the Mex cutie's body. "For God's sake!" he bellowed. "Who the hell—?"

I said: "Get this, fathead. Ysobel Villareal was cooled off tonight, whether you believe it or not. Later, while I was outside the studio waiting for you, the murderer tied Petronkin up and carted the corpse away. Petronkin lied when he told you there hadn't been a bump-off. He's trying to protect his Metrovox contract. He doesn't want the public to find out the Villareal dame was croaked. That might ruin his new pic."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Now here's the layout. Not counting the murderer, there were three people who actually knew Ysobel was dead; who actually saw her corpse. Conchita Albanez, Dmitri Petronkin—and myself."

Dave said: "So what?"

"So the killer swiped the body. He figured he couldn't be handed a bump-off rap if there was no *corpus delicti*. Later he realized he was in danger as long as there was anybody alive who had seen the corpse."

"I get it!" Dave said. "You think the louse will go on a murder rampage, kill off the ones who knew of Miss Villareal's death. And he started with this bimbo here." He pointed to Conchita on the floor.

I said: "Right."

"Damn it—who is this maniac?"

"Verne Eastland, the Metrovox makeup man," I snapped. "He probably had a row with Ysobel. He was planning to marry her after she divorced her present husband. But maybe he had a scrap with her; maybe she tossed him over. So he knocked her off."

Dave said: "I'll throw out the hoks for him!" and went to the

wall-phone; dialed headquarters.

While he was barking instructions over the wire, I found the telephone directory; turned to the "R" section. I had a bright idea.

I looked for the name and address of Bonnie Rafziger—the red-haired lovely who had helped Eastland make his get-away earlier that night. She was his former sweetie. She had helped him once; she might do it again. He might be hiding in her joint.

But there wasn't any Bonnie Rafziger listed. It was a funny name anyhow. I couldn't find but one in the book. That was a Johann Rafziger. He was listed as a gunsmith; the address was close to Vine.

I started for the door just as Donaldson hung up. He swung around to me. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to find Eastland for you," I said. I walked out.

CHAPTER XI

"I Killed Her!"

I PARKED my jalopy five or six doors away from a little shop with a dark window lettered:

JOHANN RAFZIGER
GUNS
RIFLES
BINOCULARS

It was a two-story frame building with living quarters upstairs over the store proper. There wasn't any light in the downstairs part; none up above, either. The dwelling entrance was alongside the door leading into the store.

I figured on using a skeleton

key; sneaking upstairs and making a search before Eastland could be warned. That is, provided it was the red-haired wren's joint, and Eastland was really there.

But just as I tiptoed toward the door, I stiffened. Somebody was moving around inside the little shop. I saw the hooded beam of a flashlight. It was masked by pink fingers.

The glow showed me a white face; a girl's face. My ticker skipped a beat. It was Bonnie Rafziger—Verne Eastland's red-haired former sweetie!

She was wearing a long topcoat of dark material; a mannish slouch hat. She was fumbling around on a shelf behind the plain pine counter.

I watched. I saw her pick something up, look at it. I whispered: "I'll be a . . ."

She had grabbed up a long-barreled target-pistol. It had a metal, bulb-shaped dingus over the muzzle. A silencer!

I crouched down. She was coming toward the front of the store. The door opened. She stepped outside—

"Okay baby!" I growled. I leaped at her, tied my arms around her. My hands sank into soft, yielding flesh through her topcoat.

She let out a gasping bleat. "Oh—my God—!"

I said: "Give me that gat, sister. So you're the one that bumped the Villareal bimbo! You were crazy jealous because she took Eastland away from you. You croaked her. And you croaked Conchita Abanez a while ago, too. You tried to drill me while you were at it. Well,

you're headed for a hemp necklace!"

SHE fought me like a wildcat. I tried to snatch the gun out of her mitt. She jerked her wrist. The cannon went sailing across the sidewalk with a bouncing clatter. I turned the Rafziger wren loose, dived after the gun. It skidded into a sewer opening; poised, teetered on the concrete edge. And then the damned thing fell into the drain. I heard a splash under the street. And that was that.

I boiled over. I launched myself back at the red-haired frill. She started to run. I caught her, pinioned her.

"L-let me go!" she panted.

"The hell I will. You're going to hang, sweetheart. I've got you this time. You're through killing people."

She wailed: "You—you don't th-think I m-murdered Ysobel Villareal—?"

"I don't think it. I know it. You were hanging around outside the Metrovox lot tonight. That's opportunity. You hated Ysobel because she stole your man. That's motive. And you just tossed a silenced roscoe down the sewer. That's evidence. Hell, baby—what more do you want?"

She moaned, squirmed. "I—I didn't."

I said: "Nuts. And don't think that cannon is gone. I'll have it fished out before morning. It'll match up with the slugs that bumped Miss Villareal and Conchita Albanez. Your cook is goosed, sweet stuff."

Her glims puddled up. Two big tears dripped down her pale pan.

"You're wrong!" she moaned.
"I'm no murderer!"

"Why did you throw that cannon
away?"

She said: "B-because I didn't
want the police to f-find it in my
father's shop."

"Sure you didn't. You knew it
would hang you."

"N-no. Th-that gun hasn't been
fired since my father took it in on
a trade last year. It hasn't been
t-touched. But I knew the police
would be investigatng me sooner
or later . . . because of my con-
nection with Verne. . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Y-yes. And I was afraid they'd
say Verne borrowed the gun and
used it to . . . to. . . ."

I made a wild grab and tugged.
A dame came tumbling down
on me.



I said: "Oh. Covering up for Eastman again, huh?"

Her chin went up. "Yes." Then her shoulders slumped to a forlorn slant. She whimpered: "All right. Wh-what's the use t-talking any longer? I . . . I admit I sh-shot Ysobel Villareal. Verne didn't do it. I did. I was jealous of her. So I k-killed her. . . ."

CHAPTER XII

A Sucker for Red-Heads

THERE was something phoney about the way she said it. Her confession was too sudden; too damned glib I didn't like the smell of it.

I said: "I hope you know what you're doing. You're buying yourself a ticket to a hanging."

"I—I know. But maybe I'll j-just get life."

"Nix, kiddo. Not when you take the rap for two bump-offs."

"Two. . . ?"

I said: "Sure. Two. If you croaked the Villareal dame, you croaked Conchita Albanez too. Didn't you?"

"C-Conchita. . . ? Oh-h-h . . . yes. I k-killed her."

"Why?"

"I—I—" she fumbled around for words. "I was j-jealous of her."

That didn't add up to make sense. I said: "Tell me something. Where was Conchita when you drilled her?"

"Why — why — in her apartment."

"What address?"

She said: "What difference does it make? I—I don't remember the address."

That was just plain screwball stuff. Now I knew damned well she was lying. I said: "Listen, honey. You never bumped anybody. You're trying to take the rap for Verne Eastland."

"I'm not. I'm the murderer. T-take me to jail."

I said: "Nuts. I've got your number. If I put the pinch on you, you figure you can beat the rap because you know you're not guilty any more than I am. And meanwhile you think Eastland will have plenty of chance to lam."

"N-no. You're wrong."

"I *am* like hell. Maybe Eastland's hiding out in your joint right now. I think I'll have a gander. Come along."

"No—please don't!" She dragged back; threw out all her anchors.

I said: "Scared, huh? Get moving before I slap you silly."

She moaned: "Listen. Why do you suppose I waited all this time before I came downstairs to the store to find that silenced gun? Why didn't I get rid of it as soon as I got home from the studio? I'll tell you. It's because of my father. He's not well. He's got a weak heart. I went to bed; pretended to be asleep. I didn't want to worry him. I waited until he went to sleep before I got up and came down. . . ."

"So what?"

"So you can't go upstairs. You'll wake him. His heart—he might have a spell—"

I said: "You're lying, baby. Verne Eastland's up there. You're afraid I'll nab him. And that's exactly what I'm going to do. Come on."

I jerked her to the door of the store. We went in. I nosed around;

didn't overlook any bets. I didn't find anybody.

"Is there a basement?" I said.

"No."

I looked to make sure. But she had told me the truth. I said: "Okay. Upstairs, then."

I slipped one arm around her waist so she wouldn't try to get away. My fingers pressed hard into her side which was warm and resilient under her coat. With my other palm I covered her kisser to keep her from bleeping a warning. We went up, side by side. We didn't make any noise.

I OPENED the door of a bedroom. There was a grey-haired man asleep. I flashed my light on him. He didn't wake up. I stooped, looked under his bed. Then I searched the room's single closet. There weren't any other possible hiding-places. And Eastland wasn't in that room.

I drew the redhead into the hallway. I went through the rest of the flat with a fine comb. At last we wound up in the girl's own bedroom, at the rear of the stash. I didn't find Verne Eastland anywhere.

Bonnie Rafziger turned on a light, closed her door quietly. "Now do you believe me, Sherlock?" she said. She tossed her coat and hat on a chair.

She was wearing a pair of thin pajamas; that was all. Her skin was whiter than cream through the sheer weave. Her shape was plenty gorgeous. She was a swell dish.

I said: "Yeah. I'm convinced your boy-friend isn't here, if that's what you mean."

"N-not only that. Do you accept my confession?"

"No."

"Y-you still think Verne killed Ysobel. . . ?"

I said: "Damned right."

She walked toward me. Her blue eyes were swimming. "Why don't you give him a break?" she whispered. Her lips trembled. "He w-wouldn't kill her. He loved her. He was going to m-marry her as soon as she divorced her husband. Maybe her husband murdered her. Had you thought of that?"

I said: "Yeah. I've thought of everything."

Suddenly she put her arms around my neck. "I d-don't want Verne to h-hang. I l-love him! I *know* he didn't kill anybody. He wouldn't. Oh, p-please—help him! I'll do anything to get him out of this, anything. . . ."

She pressed her cuddly little body against me. Her warmth filtered into my blood. Her lips were turned up. They were moist, red, inviting. . . .

I kissed her. I stroked her shoulders, patted her back. I dragged plenty of thrills out of the process, too. Steam started to seep through me. I said: "Better be careful, baby."

She didn't bother to answer me. She just clung and quivered. She parted her lips for another red-hot soul-kiss. . . .

The top of her pajama jacket gaped slightly. An expanse of milky skin glistened beneath the material. I began to get ideas. . . .

She let me sweep her off her feet, carry her to the other side of the room.

THEN I said: "Okay, kiddo. I'm a damned sap. But if you say the word, I'll lay off the case. What the hell! I'm not getting any geetus out of the mess."

"No. I don't want you to lay off the case. I want you to find the real murderer. I want you to clear Verne."

I said, "That's a contradiction in terms, sister. If I find the real murderer, Verne Eastland will take a walk up thirteen steps—with a black hood over his mush."

"I—I'm willing to risk that. If he really k-killed Ysobel, he d-deserves to hang. But he didn't do it. I know he didn't. I can feel it—in here." She jammed a palm against her heart. Soft, yielding flesh bil-lowed over her fingers.

"Feminine intuition, huh?" I said. "Don't trust it too far. If your boy-friend didn't bump Yso-bel, then it's got to be either Dmi-tri Petronkin or Conchita Albanez. And Conchita is out. She got cooled off herself, tonight."

"Then Petronkin did it!"

"Yeah? Well, I'll admit he's acted plenty screwy all the way through. But in the first place, he's got an air-tight alibi. He was on the sound-stage from nine o'clock until he found Ysobel's body. Yso-bel was bumped at nine-four; her smashed clock proves that. So Petronkin was on the set—with witnesses—while she was getting drilled. In the second place, he had no motive. The Villareal dame's death wrecks his Hollywood career all to hell. Why would he do that to himself?"

Bonnie said: "All right. Then what about Ysobel's secret hus-band, Pedro Ybarra?"

"Sure. What about him? What about you, for that matter? No matter which way you look at it, everything points to Eastland. You can't get away from it, baby."

"N-no. Verne didn't do it. And you've got clear him. . . !"

Well, I always was a sucker for red-haired janets. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

The Shot in the Dark

DOWN in my jalopy again, I cursed myself for a triple-distilled fool. The Rafziger cutie had sucked me into something. The warmth of her kisses and her responsiveness to my petting had made an ape out of me.

Just the same, I had given her my promise; told her I'd do what I could for her boy-friend. She was a sweet kid.

So it was up to me to start work. This Pedro Ybarra lug was the one I probably ought to investigate first. There was a bare chance that he had tried to effect a reconciliation with Ysobel; tried to keep her from divorcing him so she could middle-aisle it with Verne Eastland. Then perhaps she refused to listen to him; so he croaked her rather than let somebody else have her.

I drove to a night-owl hashery; went into the phone booth. I dropped a buffalo in the slot; dialed a friend of mine in the casting-agency game. He gave me Ybarra's address. It was a bungalow near Gower. I headed my crate in that direction.

BUT when I reached the spick-bit-player's stash it was all

dark. Nobody answered when I rang the bell. On a hunch, I burgled the front door with a master key from the ring I always carry. I slipped inside; hooded my flash-beam with my mitt.

The little one-story house was empty. I made a swift frisk; didn't find a soul. The last room I tried was the bathroom. I broomed it with my light.

I said: "What the hell—!"

There were two or three limp towels on the floor. They were wet. And they were full of brownish-red smudges. Blood-stains! Not fresh blood, either!

Then I saw the shimmer of green over in a corner. I snatched it up; felt silk rustling through my fingers. It was a frock. And the minute I took a squint at it, I tabbed it; knew I'd seen it before.

It was Ysobel Villareal's dress; the one she'd been wearing when she was blasted in her dressing-bungalow on the Metrovox lot. It had been on her corpse as she lay sprawled on the white bear-skin rug!

Finding it in her estranged hubby's bathroom startled the living bejaspers out of me. Along with those blood-stained towels, it told me plenty. The Spanish star's body had been here in this cottage some time during the night—after it was carted out of the dressing-bungalow.

But where the hell was the dead jane now? And where was her husband?

I started searching the joint again. This time I found something I'd previously overlooked. It was a door leading down to a small basement—something unusual for



I hated to do it, but I didn't want any bleat out of her now! I bounced my fist off her chin.

a Hollywood cottage. I went hell-roaring down the steep steps, flashing my torch. The cellar wasn't more than eight feet square. And right up against the wall I saw a pick and shovel—new ones!

There was no earth on them. But I wasn't taking chances. I glommed the pick, started punching it into the bare earth floor. I

was looking for a soft spot; a place where a corpse might have been planted in the last two or three hours.

But the ground was packed almost as hard as cement. There were no soft places. I tested every square inch; made sure. And besides, the pick and shovel were new; had no earth-stains on them. Ysobel Villareal wasn't buried in that basement.

I put my think-tank into high gear; mulled things over. Dmitri Petronkin said a tall bozo in a topcoat and pulled-down slouch hat had carried the corpse from the dressing-bungalow. Okay; then the body had obviously been brought here to this little cottage. Therefore, the guy in the topcoat and slouch hat was the dead dame's hubby—Pedro Ybarra, occupant of the place.

LIT a gasper, took a deep drag.

It began to look as if Bonnie Rafziger's suspicions were damned close to the mark. Ybarra was the murderer. He had shot his estranged frau through her dressing-bungalow window. But he hadn't been sure he'd croaked her. That's why he had followed Conchita Albanez to my apartment, later. He had mistaken her for Ysobel.

But when he jumped Conchita he had seen his error. He slugged me, lammed back to the Metrovox lot. And as soon as he got a chance, he swiped his wife's corpse.

He brought it to his home; was going to bury it in his cellar. But something must have changed his plans. Because he was gone—and so was the body.

I had to find him and nail him quick. But I didn't even know what the hell he looked like. He was a tall gink in a dark topcoat; that was all I had on him.

Then an idea crawled up my pants-leg, bit me under the hip pocket. Maybe I could find a picture of Pedro Ybarra in his dead wife's home. She might have kept a photograph of him among her effects. It was worth a try.

I sneaked up out of the cellar; left everything as I'd found it. I dashed out to my junk-pile, toed the starter. I aimed my radiator-ornament toward Beverly Hill.

Ten minutes later I was practicing some more burglary. This time I was unlocking the service entrance into the Villareal wren's rented house. Nobody was stirring. The lights were all doused; none of the servants seemed to be on deck. I found a staircase, sneaked up to the second floor. I located what looked like the main boudoir; tiptoed in.

There weren't any pictures on the walls or furniture. But I spotted an escritoire over beyond the ornate bed. I went to it; started pawing through the drawers.

I found plenty of miscellaneous junk, but no snapshots. There were some letters from Spain; several canceled bank-drafts for heavy lettuce, payable to some high mucky-muck in the Spanish government. And there was a copy of Ysobel's starring contract with Metrovox, calling for three productions—

I heard a sound. It came from behind me. It was a soft creak; like the whisper of a door-hinge.

There was a wall-mirror back of the desk. I glued my glims on

it without turning around; without indicating I'd heard anything. I kept my flash-beam covered with my palm; let out just enough light to see what was happening.

EVERYTHING was silent. I could even hear the tick of my wristwatch. In the mirror, I saw a closet door opening, an inch at a time. Somebody had been hiding in there; was about to come out!

I pretended to be pawing through the desk-drawers again. But I was watching that closet in the looking-glass. I saw a vague form stepping into the room, like a dark ghost. It was somebody in a long topcoat and a slouch hat with the brim pulled down. Somebody who was carrying what seemed to be a dress—

The figure came all the way out of the closet; started across the room toward a window. It was time for me to make my play. I spun around, yanked out my automatic. I said: "Grab high, rat!"

There came the hiss of a sharp, indrawn breath. Then there was a blur of movement. Something glittered in a flat arc toward me. It was a knife. It was sailing straight for my Adam's-apple.

I leaped sidewise. The blade twanged past my ear, thocked into the wall behind me. I squeezed my trigger. My rod barked: "*Chow-chow-chow!*" and three slugs fanned the gloom.

But I was off-balance because of the way I'd had to jump to miss that knife. My aim was lousy. The tall lug picked up a light chair, slammed it at my knees. It tangled me, tripped me. I went headlong; made a hell of a clatter. My

gat went skittering to the rug.

My flashlight was still on the desk where I'd left it. The beam reflected on the stiletto-thrower's pan as he leaped over me and belted toward the window. I got one fleeting gander at him. His skin was a dark olive-tan. He had a straight nose, sensitive lips, jet-black eyes.

Then, before I could unscramble myself from the chair, he was over the sill. The outer night gulped him like a raw oyster.

I kicked the chair away from me; scrambled to my gams. I snatched up my .32; raced to the window. There was a ladder against the outer wall. It led to the ground below. I started to lean out—

The room's lights snapped into life. From behind me a voice bleated: "Drop that gun! Put up your hands!"

CHAPTER XIV

The Interfering Butler

THE command sounded like business. I pivoted, let my roscoe fall on the rug again. I saw a pasty-faced egg in pajamas and dressing-gown covering me with an old-fashioned .44 six-shooter. The muzzle of that damned iron looked bigger than the mouth of a coast-defense cannon.

I said: "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm the butler. Keep your hands up. I always did want to shoot a burglar."

"You damned fool!" I yelled. "I'm no second-story man! I'm a private dick. The real burglar

just went down that ladder. He's making his lam while you're playing cowboy-and-Indian! Get wise to yourself, freak!"

"Oh, no," he snorted. "You can't fool me. I read all the true-crime magazines. Walk toward me and don't make any false moves."

He sounded like a character out of a dime novel. But his lamps had a dangerous gleam. I didn't cotton to the nervous way his fingers fluttered on the trigger of that miniature field-piece. He looked as if he'd like to play hero by exploring my ellybay with a couple of bullets. He was just about dumb enough to do it, too.

I started to rave. He shut me up with a threatening wave of his gat. He kept me covered; reached for the phone near the canopied bed. He uncradled it; dialed the operator. "Get me the police, please. Hurry."

I said: "You lousy dumbbell! I tell you I'm a detective. Here's my badge to prove it—"

"Keep your hands up in the air!" he bawled at the top of his lungs like a hungry calf. "You probably have another lethal weapon under your lapel!"

"Okay then, damn your eyes. But when you connect with police headquarters ask for Lieutenant Donaldson of the homicide squad. Tell him you've got Dan Turner. Understand? Dan Turner."

He blinked at me; spoke into the phone. "Police department? This is the butler at Miss Ysobel Villareal's home in Beverly Hills. I have captured a burglar who was in the act of feloniously rifling Miss Villareal's desk. I caught him—er—red-handed, I believe the

term to be. He claims his name is Turner. Dan Turner. Have you a Lieutenant Donaldson? This man claims to be acquainted with—"

HE PAUSED as if he'd been interrupted. He waited an instant. Then he said: "Are you there? What did you say? Oh. Am I now speaking to Lieutenant Donaldson? Well, this is the residence of Miss Ysobel Villareal in Beverly Hills. I have—er—fastened the grab on a burglar who claims his name is Dan Turner. Er—what, sir? You'll come right out to identify him? Yes, sir. Thank you very much, sir. Good-bye, sir." He hung up, looking puzzled.

I said: "Great creeping cripes—while you're holding me here, Miss Villareal's murderer is lamming to hellangone!"

His eyes widened. "*Murderer?*"

"Yeah. I might have nabbed him as he went down that damned ladder if you hadn't poked your silly-looking smeller into things. Aw-w, nuts!" I sat down in a chair, gnashed my teeth.

Dave Donaldson must have kicked the kidneys out of his official sedan. I heard him tearing taxpayers' rubber off his tires as he braked to a stop in the driveway. Then he came puffing and snorting into the boudoir. He took a squint at me. "Turner—for God's sake, what—"

The butler looked disappointed. "You identify this man, sir? He really is a detective instead of a burglar?"

"Sure he's a dick!" Dave roared. "Put away that artillery, you goofy ape!" He turned to me again. "What the hell happened?"

I said: "I almost caught our man. But he got away—thanks to Jeeves, here."

"You mean Verne Eastland?"

"No. Pedro Ybarra. Miss Villareal's hubby."

Dave said: "How the hell do you know?"

"I don't. Not for sure. But I saw the guy's pan. I could tab him if I ever spotted him again. And now we're going to find out if he really is Ybarra. Come on."

I dragged Dave down the stairs. "Where to?" he wanted to know.

"Dmitri Petronkin's house," I snapped.

CHAPTER XV

Corpus Delicti

PETRONKIN lived about two miles closer to Hollywood proper. I drove my heap; Donaldson followed in his. Pretty soon I was thumbing the Russian's bell.

Dmitri answered it himself. He was a good Soviet party-member, judging from the hammer-and-sickle flags draped on his walls—and the fact that he didn't believe in employing servants. He rubbed his sleepy glims. He said: "Why—Turner! And Lieutenant Donaldson—"

"Yeah," I said. "Toss some duds over your pajamas, Dmitri. I want you to do me a favor."

"A favor?"

I said: "Yeah. If you don't mind, I'd like you to go down to the studio with us."

"Why—what for, Turner?"

"I'd like to see the rushes of that scene you shot tonight on Sound Stage 3," I told him.

His face got dead-pan. "That is an odd request. Why are you interested?"

He was still trying to cover the fact that Ysobel Villareal had been croaked. I could see that. I said: "Look, Dmitri. Let's quit playing horse. I think I've got a hell of a hot lead, and I need your help."

"A lead? You are working on some case, Turner? A detective case?"

"Nuts!" Cut out the stalling. Hell, you're among friends. I've got to see those rushes, Dmitri."

He said: "It is very strange. But I will be glad to help you, of course. Wait. I will dress at once." He took his squat shape upstairs; came back in five minutes with all his togs on. "I am ready, Turner."

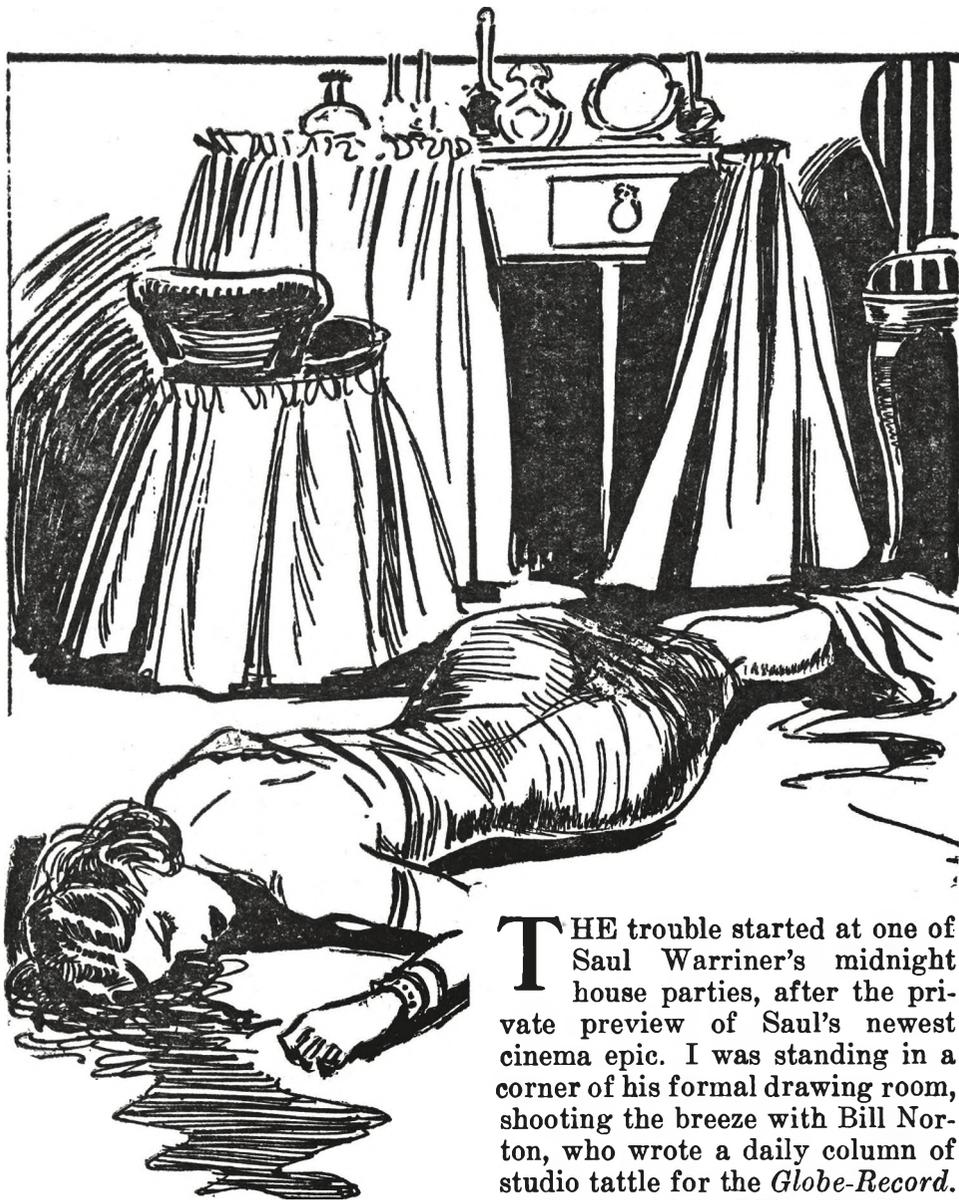
I left my chug-chariot parked at the curb. We all three piled into Donaldson's departmental sedan. A fog was drifting in from Santa Monica. Wispy tentacles of grey smoked around the street-lights, clung to the damp pavement. Dave drove. Pretty soon we were rolling through the Metrovox gates.

WE STOPPED in front of the main laboratory building. The lot looked dark, gloomy, deserted. Huge sound-stages loomed like black Zep-hangars, with the fog blurring their windowless outlines. Over to the left an open-air street set zig-zagged like a ghost town.

The only lights were those in the laboratory itself. The film-printing and developing department is just about the only division that works a twenty-four hour shift in most Hollywood studios. We ankleed in.

(Continued on page 102)

JUDAS JEWELS



The door splintered inward, and I almost sprawled over the body.

THE trouble started at one of Saul Warriner's midnight house parties, after the private preview of Saul's newest cinema epic. I was standing in a corner of his formal drawing room, shooting the breeze with Bill Norton, who wrote a daily column of studio tattle for the *Globe-Record*.

All of a sudden Bill said: "Seems as if you're being paged, Sherlock. See you later." And he strolled off into the crowd of guests.

He was right. I heard my name being called; piped Saul Warriner barging toward me through the crush. Saul looked more like a



Maybe she was telling the truth about the Gestapo, but Dan Turner was nobody's fool. Lovely woman though she was, hers was a case for the F.B.I—if she was leveling. But she had other inducements, and, with her, it was Dan, or nobody

happy pawnbroker than the president of Cosmovox Features. He was a roly-poly little slug with a perpetual grin on a puss as pudgy as an apple dumpling. You couldn't help liking him. Everybody in the picture industry was his pal.

"Hey, Turner," he called.

I wandered in his direction; noticed he had a black-haired cookie clinging to his arm. Trailing her was a stocky, foreign-looking guy

with a saber scar on his map and a conk as hairless as a boiled egg.

Presently Warriner reached me, poked me in the ribs with a stubby finger. He turned his apple dumpling smile on the regal brunette wren and said: "Vicki, may I present Dan Turner? He's the sharpest private dick in Hollywood."

I tried to dig up a modest blush.

He went on: "Dan, this is Cosmovox's sensational new star,

Vicki Vondrovna. And her business manager, Ivan Petrovich," he indicated the bald bozo.

I FASTENED the focus on the Vondrovna quail. She was by far the most coldly beautiful dish I'd ever piped. The décolletage of her evening gown dipped daringly to reveal the snowy perfection of her firm whatchacallems; her waist was slim, her hips sinuous. She was drenched in diamonds: a glittery tiara sparkling on her inky hair, great pear shaped stones in her ears, a rope of carved ice around her flawless throat.

"I have been wanting to meet you, Mr. Turner," she said in a voice that purred and had cat-fur on it. "I am worried about my gems. There have been threats—"

That was as far as she got. Without warning the whole damned stash was abruptly plunged into solid darkness. The Vondrovna dame screamed.

I grabbed for her, caught her. Maybe it was an accident that my mitt encountered something warm and yielding; or maybe it was my instinct. Anyhow it felt plenty nice. And she didn't make an effort to pull away.

Then, in the blackness, my free hand touched a set of nimble fingers fumbling at the diamond necklace around Vicki Vondrovna's neck.

I grabbed at the wrist belonging to those prying fingers. I twisted; heard a low-pitched, guttural grunt of pain and surprise. Then something hard, metallic, bashed against my knuckles. For an instant it felt as if I'd thrust my duke in a meat grinder. Numb-

ness made me lose my hold on that unseen wrist.

Everybody in the joint was shouting, milling around, bumping into one another. I held the Vondrovna cookie close to me, and the contact with her sinuous body sent tingles through my nooks and crannies. I didn't get full enjoyment out of it, though, because my right hand hurt like hell.

Presently the lights came on. The brunette chick pushed herself free of my embrace; adjusted the front of her gown. Alongside her, Ivan Petrovich was trembling like a wolf coughing pork chops. Pallor made the saber scar stand out like a rewed welt on his mush, and he was mopping sweat off his bald noggin with a silk handkerchief.

"Vicki! Your jewels—!" he choked.

She touched her throat. The necklace was still there, and so were the sparklers in her ears and hair. She said: "Thanks to Mr. Turner, they are safe—this time."

Saul Warriner's grin was missing and he pranced up and down like an animated hunk of biscuit dough. "Let me get to a phone!" he yodeled. "I got to call the police! Such a thing like this shouldn't even happen to a dog. And in my own house, too! What *schlemiel* turned off those lights?"

I said: "Take it easy, Saul. There's no use bleating it to the bulls. After all, you couldn't pin it on anybody. There's no evidence. Nothing was stolen."

The Vondrovna quail backed me up. "You are right, Mr. Turner. But I wonder if you would mind

escorting me home? Somehow I feel safer when you are near.”

THERE was a husky, alluring timbre to her tone that made me say yes in a hell of a hurry. It isn't every night in the month that a guy gets a chance to play body-guard for a delicious dish like Vicki Vondrovna. In fact, guarding a body like hers came under the heading of nice work if you could get it.

She sent the hairless Petrovich out to fetch her car. Apparently he was her general flunky as well as business manager, because he moved with the quick obedience of a well trained servant. Which struck me as a little peculiar, considering his military bearing. He wasn't the lackey type.

Still, though, a guy would have to be pretty damned stolid to refuse Vicki anything. One smile from her and your temperature started for the high brackets. That was the secret of her success in the galloping snapshots.

She'd made just one pic for Cosmovox, thus far; but the public was already raving about her. They were crazy over her low, throaty voice with its odd accent; goofy about the snaky, sinuous way she walked. Film reviewers blew their toppers trying to describe the insolent challenge in her mysterious, ophidian peepers; and there actually *was* something snakelike about those glims. She rarely blinked. She stared holes in you, attracting and repelling you at the same time.

On the screen she looked no more than twenty-five; but I figured she was easily ten years older

than this. Not that it mattered, of course. A chick's age never bothers me. It's the way she's stacked up that counts.

Presently we went out, got into the tonneau of her slinky Hispano limousine. Ivan Petrovich sat up front, drove, headed for the hills. None of us said anything. I've learned there are times when it pays to ask questions, and other times when it's better to keep your kisser zippered. This was one of the other times.

AFTER a while we drew up under the portico of Vicki's lavish wikiup. It stood alone on the crest of a knoll; you could look down, see the million lights of Los Angeles twinkling between Hollywood and the ocean. The brunette jane didn't seem very impressed, though. When I helped her out of her gaudy gocart, she dismissed the scenery as casually as she dismissed Petrovich.

“Call for me at six-thirty in the morning, Ivan. I am due at the studio by seven,” she purred.

He bowed, tooled the Hispano down the winding road. I said: “Look, kiddo. How the hell am I going to get back downtown now that you've sent your jalopy away!?”

“I will take you in the morning,” she said. And she steered me into her stash, upstairs to a softly lighted boudoir.

A copious assortment of spicy ideas started needling me as I took a hinge at my surroundings. I've spent the night in many a strange igloo, but this was the richest. And the Vondrovna wren made the furnishings seem drab by comparison.

Every move she made was poetry. When she walked, her muscles rippled under the clinging evening gown like a cat's—or a snake's. I fished us a gasper, torched it to cover my inward twitching.

She smiled at me. "You wonder why I have brought you here, Mr. Turner?"

I said: "I could make two guesses. One of them might be wrong, though."

"Not so wrong, perhaps," she purred. "I need your help. I am willing to pay for it."

I hung the fascinated glimpse on her as she went to a picture on the wall, pushed it aside. There was a circular steel door behind it; a wall safe with a time clock gadget attached to the dial. She stripped herself of her sparklers, put them in the vault, set the time clock for six the next morning.

"I wear my jewels tomorrow in an important scene," she told me, closing the safe. Then she drifted toward me. "You would not let me be robbed, would you?"

"Not if I could help it."

"Or k-killed," she said.

I goggled at her. "Who the hell would want to bump you?"

"The Gestapo," she said. "The Nazi secret police. They seek my diamonds . . . and they seek my life."

FOR a moment I thought she was kidding. I said: "Look. This is America, not Berlin. What are you feeding me?"

"The truth. Perhaps you will understand it better if I tell you that my real name is not Vicki Vondrovna and I am not a Russian. In Germany before Hitler

rose to power I was the Countess von Nordheim."

"Hunh?"

"My husband, Graf Wilhelm von Nordheim, was a high ranking naval officer. But he refused to conform to the Nazi creed; and he was placed in a concentration camp. I never saw him again. I think they . . . murdered him."

"What about yourself?" I asked her.

"I attempted to escape from Germany. My maid, Anna, betrayed me to the Gestapo. She did it because she wanted my jewels. So I was captured; and the Storm Troopers did things to me that were . . . not pleasant to remember."

I knew what she meant. And I couldn't blame the Storm Troopers much. She was damned desirable.

She said: "In the end I tricked them; got into Holland with my diamonds. Then, later, I came to this country and studied acting. For years I worked in obscure stock companies; and then I got my chance at Hollywood. But now I am in danger."

"Why?"

"So long as I remained in obscurity I was safe. But a movie star's face is public property. The Gestapo has identified me—and remember, America and Germany are now at war. Hitler's espionage agents are everywhere. They have been ordered to liquidate me and to steal my diamonds, sell them. The money would finance sabotage activities in the United States."

"And so—?"

"And so tonight they struck at me for the first time. I know they

She tried to kick, and then I really went to town with her.



will strike again—unless you find them first and destroy them!”

The whole damned story had a fishy smell to me. It was lurid, melodramatic, unbelievable; sounded like a publicity gag. The affair at Saul Warriner’s house party could easily have been a fake to suck me in. I could see the newspaper headlines: “*NAZIS SEEK VONDROVNA GEMS, DAN TURNER FOILS PLOT.*”

I hate to be taken for a sucker. And I don’t like phony publicity. I said: “Sorry, hon. I’m afraid

there’s nothing I can do for you.”

“I am willing to pay you whatever fee you ask.”

“Ix-nay. Try the F.B.I.” And I moseyed toward the door.

Her purring voice halted me. "Wait a minute."

I drew up short.

"Turn around," she said over a silken rustle.

I obeyed—and felt my tonsils backfiring. In that short instant she had done a strip-tease peel out of her evening gown. Now she posed before me, garnished in nothing but a pair of gossamer panties and a brassiere so thin you could have blown it to Omaha with one good puff.

SHE had the niftiest stems this side of a Vanities chorus, and her sleek thighs were the answer to a bachelor's daydreams. Farther northward there was a flat expanse of dimpled tummy, a slim waist that was almost boyish, and finally a pair of creamy breasts nearly too perfect to be real. They gave the diaphanous brassiere a terrific argument when she breathed hard—and she was breathing hard now.

"Look at me," she purred.

I said: "What the hell do you think I'm doing?"

"Do you find me . . . attractive?"

"Ask me the sixty-four dollar question," I growled. "I wish you'd put something on. I'm no wooden Indian."

She took a gliding, undulant step toward me. "You would not like to see a body like mine disfigured, cold, dead?"

I said: "Look, babe. Don't tempt me. You're fiddling around with dynamite."

"Go ahead and explode," she whispered, and slid her snaky arms about my brisket; pulled my

yap against her kisser. The succulent contact shot a jolt of voltage all the way down past my rubber heels. I felt like a guy floating in a balloon—without any ballast.

Her throbbing curves were flattened to my chest, warm, vibrant, almost irresistible. An elusive, expensive fragrance was wafted to my trumpet from her midnight hair. . . . My wayward impulses took a long lead off third base. . . .

And why not? I didn't believe the yarn she'd told me; but for certain considerations I was willing to string along. I'm as human as the next slob, after all. And if she was willing to pay the right kind of price, who cared about phony publicity headlines?

I whispered: "What the hell," and lifted her, toted her to the other side of the room. . . .

LATER she hung the gander on me with her enigmatic, unblinking glims. "Now will you help me, Dan?"

By this time I was down to earth again. I grunted: "Yeah—but it will cost you a couple of grand."

"You want money, as well as. . . ?"

"Sure, sister. I'm in this racket for the dough. And it's a tough racket, too. My reputation is going to take a kick in the teeth if this gag of yours is the malarkey. I have to protect myself in the clinches."

She stood up, slid into a negligee. "My danger is genuine; not malarkey, as you call it. Therefore I am willing to pay the fee

you demand." She turned, rang a bell.

Pretty soon the boudoir door opened and a jane entered. She was younger than Vicki; a plain sort of wren whose looks weren't improved by the horn-rimmed cheaters she wore. She had a cuddly figure, though, in spite of her severe duds.

Vicki said: "This is Betty Darrow, my secretary. Betty, make out a check for two thousand dollars, payable to Mr. Dan Turner."

"Yes, madame," the younger chick curtsied.

I stopped her as she went out. "While you're at it, call a taxi for me, baby."

She nodded, powdered. Vicki stared at me. "But I thought . . . I thought you were to stay and guard me?"

"I'd sooner start hunting these Gestapo agents of yours," I grinned. And I blew her a kiss, lammed.

Downstairs, the secretary handed me a voucher for two G's. I thanked her; decided she wouldn't be half bad if she took off her glasses and used a little makeup. I might even have made a pass at her, only presently a horn honked outside. That would be my taxi.

I ankled out, wondering how much of Vicki Vondrovna's story was bunk. There was one way I might check up on her. Bill Norton of the *Globe-Record* had been in Berlin around the time the Nazis got their first start, a foreign correspondent, the way I remembered it. Maybe he could tell me if there had ever been such a person as the Countess von Nordheim.

THE cab was waiting under the portico. I piled in. "*Globe-Record* office, downtown," I told the hacker.

He rolled the Yellow backward off the slanted driveway and twisted it around, shoved his gears in second—

Whereupon somebody opened the right-hand door, slid in beside me, jammed a roscoe against my liver. "Make a bleat and you wake up in the morgue," he whispered. His work was so cat-like and smooth that the driver up front probably didn't even realize I had company.

I stiffened, copped a hinge at the guy with the gat. His map was masked from glims to chin and he wore a light-weight top-coat, a battered fedora. Evidently he'd been waiting for me in the darkness outside Vicki's wigwam.

I said: "Okay. So you've got me. So what?"

"So you've twisted your last wrist," he growled gutturally.

Then I caught wise. "Oh. You're the slob that tried to glom Vicki Vondrovna's sparklers when the lights went out."

"That's right."

"What do you look like behind that mask?" I said.

"You'll never know."

"Why won't I?"

"Vicki thinks you'll protect her from now on. But you won't. There's not much protection in a corpse."

I said: "I'm not a corpse yet."

"You will be, soon. Just be patient."

I yawned. "While I'm waiting to be rubbed out, how's about letting me have a smoke? It's a priv-

ilege they usually grant to condemned guys."

"You'll do enough smoking in hell." Then he hesitated. "All right. Where's your deck?"

"In my coat pocket. The one near you."

He kept his cannon against me; used his free hand to dredge out my pack of pills. I took one, stuck it in my kisser—and blew a sharp breath through the king-size tube. It wasn't a regular cigarette. It was loaded with red pepper instead of tobacco. I always tote some of these phony gaspers with me in case of emergency. They've come in handy more than once.

And in the present instance I got results in a hurry. Stinging grains of pepper sprayed the guy's mask, got into his glims through the eye slits in the black cloth. Enough of the load connected to make him yelp, claw at his puss.

I grabbed for his gun; got it. I said: "If it's all a publicity gag, you've picked the wrong horse. And if it's on the level, I'm going to beat the bejoseph out of you before I run you down to the bastille." Then I yodeled to my hacker, told him to pull over.

He was already doing this. He'd heard the masked bozo's bleat of pain, and he'd twisted around to spot the heater in my duke. So now he screeched the cab to a stop. "Jeest, what goes on?" he gargled.

I hopped out. "You just look the other way, pal, while I bestow a load of lumps on this monkey." And I took aim at the masked blister. "You coming or shall I drag you?"

My whole attention was pinned on him. That was a mistake, be-

cause the cab driver pulled a fast one on me. He got into gear, souped his cylinders, shot his hack forward like a bat out of hell. He left me flat-footed.

I was so sore I tried to pop a pellet at his rear tires. But the confiscated cannon in my mitt was a German Luger and its safety latch was on. I couldn't find it and unlock it in time to do myself any good. Before I could fire, the Yellow was far out of range and traveling fast.

I swore. The Vondrovna wren had paid me two grand to catch whoever was after her sparklers. Maybe it had been a gag; maybe not. But anyhow I'd had my dukes on the guy who'd made the play at Saul Warriner's stash—and then I'd let him get away. Now I had the whole damned job to do over again; and it might not be so easy, next time.

I started hoofing out of the hills.

IT WAS almost an hour later when I reached a district where I could flag a cruising taxi. My bunions were barking and there were frayed places on my temper. But I finally had myself ferried downtown to the *Globe-Record* building.

Being a morning paper, its staff worked at night. I figured Bill Norton might still be on hand, grinding out his tattle column. And I was right. I limped to his desk. "Hi, Bill."

He quit jabbing at his typewriter with the usual reporter's one-fingered hunt-and-peck system; blinked up at me sleepily. A grin flashed across his pan, made him look almost boyish despite his

forty years and blue-shaven jowls. "Hello, Hawkshaw. What's cooking?"

"I am. I'm fried to a crisp. I just took a pushing around—and I don't like it. Look, Bill. Weren't you in Berlin as a correspondent or something, about the time the Nazis *putsched* into power?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Did you ever hear of Graf and Countess von Nordheim?"

He rubbed his chin and knuckled his glims thoughtfully; tapped his front teeth with a pencil. "I think so. Let's see. Nordheim. He was a naval officer, I believe. Married a girl from a prominent family, wealthy as the devil."

"They're the ones," I said. "What ever happened to them?"

"I don't imagine anybody knows for sure, except perhaps the Storm Troopers—and they don't talk. Nordheim went to a concentration camp if I remember correctly. They probably killed him. His wife was pretty young. I think she tried to get out of Germany but her maid put the finger on her."

"By damn!" I said. "So far, everything clicks in Vicki Vondrovna's story. It wasn't a publicity stunt, after all!"

"What story?"

I told him the yarn she'd fed me. Then I asked him: "While you were stationed in Berlin did you ever happen to see Countess von Nordheim? Could you identify her now as the Vondrovna cupcake?"

"No, I never met her over there. But what's the difference? It all seems to hang together; matches the known facts. And as for Nazi

agents being after her— Say, bigahd!"

I looked at him.

He yipped: "That bald coot with the scar on his face. Remember him?"

"Yeah. Her business manager. Ivan Petrovich."

"Business manager, hell! I've been trying to place him all evening and now I've got it. When I knew him in Berlin his name wasn't Petrovich. It was something else. *And he was a big shot in Hitler's secret police!*"

I twitched as if he'd touched me with a live wire. "Oh-oh! He was right behind Vicki tonight when the lights went off. He must have arranged that to happen. And he was the one who grabbed at her rocks in the dark! He'd probably waited a long time for a chance like that."

"Could be," Bill said.

I WENT on: "In which event, he may take another whack at it pretty quick because he knows I'm on the case. He might try for the sparklers when she opens the time lock of her safe at six in the morning."

"And you'll be ready for him?"

"Damned right," I rasped. "My ribs still ache where he massaged me with his Luger in that taxi. Funny I didn't tab him in spite of his mask."

"Maybe you were too busy figuring how to use your cigarette gadget." Bill pulled his old fashioned hunting-case turnip, the kind you carry your girl's picture in. "Jeeze. Three A.M. and I haven't got my column done yet!"

I swiped a hinge, verified the

time and took the hint. "Be seeing you," I said. "Thanks for the information." And I barged out of the building.

Norton had told me plenty; but there were a couple of things I was still curious about. And I had three hours before it would be six o'clock—which was the time I anticipated another attempt would be made to glom Vicki Vondrovna's ice.

So I got hold of a certain city official who owed me a favor; had him contact the head of the public library by phone. Presently, by special dispensation, I was in the big white library building; skimming through every book I could find that dealt with the pre-Nazi nobility in Germany.

It was nearly five o'clock in the morning when I finished my hunt. By that time I'd dug up a volume containing some group pictures dating back before the first world war. One showed Graf Wilhelm von Nordheim in naval uniform, a good looking bearded bozo with piercing glims and a strong jaw jutting through the spinach. His carriage was erect, military.

Then I ran across another photograph that shocked the custard out of me. It was an informal snapshot of the young Countess attended by her personal maid, the one who later betrayed her. And while I didn't know the Countess, I did recognize that maid. *She was the snaky dame I now knew as Vicki Vondrovna!*

ABRUPTLY the whole damned thing was clear to me. This black-haired Vondrovna witch had fed me a pack of lies and half-

truths. She wasn't the Countess. She was the female Judas who had turned her mistress over to Hitler's bully boys.

In all probability the betrayed young noblewoman had eventually been croaked by her captors. Meantime the maid swiped those sparklers and lammed to America; became an actress under the Vondrovna alias.

Later, Count von Nordheim must have escaped from a Nazi concentration camp and trailed her across the drink, hoping sooner or later to catch up with her and bump her for what she'd done. As for the diamonds, most likely the only reason he wanted them was because they'd belonged to his murdered wife.

Now, at long last, he had found Vicki here in Hollywood—although she didn't suspect his identity. Shaving off a mess of hair is a hell of a good disguise for a guy. Anyhow, he'd sent her some threats and she realized he was closing in on her. That was why she'd hired me for protection. She'd told me she was being hunted by the Gestapo; but in reality it was Nordheim on her trail.

Dawn was a dirty grey streak in the east when I lunged out of the library, nailed a Yellow and had myself wafted to Vicki Vondrovna's hilltop tepee. There was a fog blowing in from the ocean, and Los Angeles was just a hazy blur below as I thumbed the bell.

It was the secretary cookie, Betty Darrow, who let me in. I said: "Hi, hon. You look a lot prettier without your glasses." I could have added that her sheer nightie was likewise a damned

sight more attractive than her plain-jane daytime threads. She really had a figure.

A blush pinked her piquant puss and her swelling what-nots lifted lazily under the silk. "Thank you, sir."

I gave her a friendly pat. "How's about letting me go up to see Vicki? I think trouble's coming and I want to warn her; set a trap."

"But y-you can't go to her right now, Mr. Turner."

"Why not?"

Her blush deepened. "She's not alone."

I stiffened. "Don't tell me Petrovich is with her!"

The secretary shook her head. "No. The president of Cosmovox. Saul Warriner."

"The hell you mutter!" I said. "Well, that's happened before in Hollywood. When do you suppose he'll leave?"

"It's usually a little before six when he—er, I mean—"

"Okay. That's not long. I'll wait. And don't be embarrassed about spilling the secret. I won't broadcast it." I fished up a gasper, got it burning.

She protested: "I'm not worried about you telling. But you mustn't wait here. Mr. Warriner would be furious if anybody saw him—"

I tried to fashion a mental movie of the apple dumpling little studio mogul being furious. The scene wouldn't jell, though. "All right," I grinned. "Where shall I hide?"

"Would m-my room do?"

I said: "You bet!" and followed her silently upstairs. I got a wallop out of the way her hips moved in front of me.

HER boudoir was two doors down the hall from Vicki's. I took a gander. "Neat but nice. The bed comfortable?"

She didn't answer this directly. She just went to her bureau, produced a fifth of Vat 69. "Maybe you'd like a drink." She poured a snort, handed it to me.

I sniffed it—and tossed the skeep spang at her bosom. While she was gasping under the drenched nightie I fastened the clutch on her wrists, hauled her close to me. I snarled: "That Scotch is doped with chloral. What's the idea?"

She went pale around the borders. "Please, Mr. Turner! I—I don't know wh-what you mean. Let me g-go!"

"Like hell. In the first place, you lied to me about Vicki having Saul Warriner in her room. I know that's not so because Saul doesn't horse with his hired help. You were just trying to steer me away."

"You're hurting m-me!"

I grated: "Then, when I wouldn't powder, you were ready with another scheme. You had some drugged Scotch all ready for emergencies. You invited me up here to your boudoir, tried to spoon me a mickey. Why is it so damned important that I don't get to warn Vicki before six o'clock?"

She twisted and squirmed in my grasp. "You're insane!"

"Yeah. Crazy like a fox. I know what's cooking, cookie. You want your accomplice to have a free-hand to nab Vicki's baubles when she opens her safe at six."

"My God . . . zo . . ." she moaned. But I could see by the terror in

(Continued on page 119)

Dan hates to be a sucker. He pictured the headlines that would appear if he took the case. "Hollywood Super-Sleuth Hunts Kidnaped Dummy!" Yet it wasn't a gag. Gus may have been only a ventriloquist's prop, but the germs of murder lurked in his sawdust insides

IT GETS me sore to be mistaken for a sap in my own office. Especially by an overbearing skunk like Gus Tranchard. If his wife hadn't been with him, I might have popped him in the teeth, just for luck.

Maybe he was entitled to his conceit. He was radio's top ventriloquist; and Paratone was handing him five grand a week to star in a new musical opus with his famous dummy, Casey Jones. But he could have been twice as good and he'd still be flies in my oatmeal. For one thing, I didn't like the way he'd pulled strings to land his Paratone job. Hank Jepson, a younger and abler ventriloquist, had been scheduled for the role; and Tranchard had diddled him out of it.

I set fire to a gasper, blew smoke in his puss. I said: "Look. I'm Dan Turner, private dick. I'm not a press-agent. You're in the wrong office."

Tranchard's wife started to say something. She was a meek little blonde wren with shapely gams and a curvaceous chassis. She was a lot younger than her hubby.

He shut her up; slapped ten crisp centuries on my desk. "Does that look like a publicity gag?" Then he went to pieces. "I tell you Casey's been stolen—and I've got to get him back!"

"Why so much fuss over a dummy? You can buy another one," I said.

"Not another Casey Jones."

"Then tell it to the cops. I'm not

interested." I figured he was trying to horse me into a phoney newspaper buildup. I could picture the headlines: DAN TURNER, HOLLYWOOD SUPER-SLEUTH, HUNTS KIDNAPED DUMMY. Every wise guy in movietown would be giving me the needle.

Tranchard said: "I don't want to go to the police. They wouldn't help me. They'd think it was just a gag—"

"So do I," I said. "Excuse me while I close up shop and go home." I reached for my hat.

He picked up his lettuce. I hated to see those century notes go back into his wallet. But what the hell; I didn't want the columnists kidding my pants off.

IHAD a snifter and a snack at the Derby. Then I went home; found Tranchard's meek little blonde wife at the door of my apartment stash, waiting for me. She said: "Mr. Turner—" in a pleading voice.

She looked different. She'd dabbed rouge on her cheeks, lipstick on her rosebud kisser. Her curves seemed fuller, softer, as if maybe she'd discarded her brassiere. The low-cut front of her frock displayed a hell of a lot of delicious she-male scenery that I hadn't noticed in my office.

I took her into my hovel. "What's on your mind, baby?"

"P-please find Casey Jones!" She fastened herself to my arm. Maybe it was accidental, but soft,

DUMMY KILL



"I didn't! I didn't do it!" she whimpered.

warm flesh palpitated mighty damned close to the back of my mitt. She was warm and yielding through thin silk. "Gus w-wasn't trying to rib you. The dummy really was stolen today. I don't think you realize how m-much Casey means—"

She seemed sincere; almost desperate. There was something wistful about her that I liked. I said: "Just how much *does* Casey mean?"

"Everything! Without him, Gus would lose his self-confidence;

wouldn't be able to work. W-won't you help us, Mr. Turner? We'll pay you any fee within reason. . . ." She pressed against me.

I got a tingle out of her nearness. When I looked down and took a swivel at the pulsating whiteness of her gorgeous breasts, they seemed just the right size.

But it burned me to a crisp for her husband to send her to me with that kind of proposition. She didn't look like the type who'd bandy promiscuous kisses. She was demure and girlish in spite of the makeup she'd smeared on her pretty pan; and she must have loved Tranchard a hell of a lot, or she wouldn't have been in my wigwam at all.

I felt sorry for her. Tranchard was a heel, a louse, and a yuck. It was common gossip that he'd played around with a lot of frills. And that gave me an idea.

I patted the Tranchard doll. "What's your name, hon?"

"Betty. You m-may call me that if you want to, D-Dan. . . ."

I said: "Okay. Maybe I'm a sucker, but I'll try to find that damned dummy for you. Not for your old man, though. To me, he's a pain in the neck."

"Th-thank you!" she whispered. She slid her plump arms around my wishbone, fed me an unexpected smacker that generated steam all the way down to my insteps. She couldn't have fused herself closer to me unless she'd been flat-chested—which she wasn't, by a damned sight.

Presently I broke the clinch. "I don't ask that kind of pay," I said gently. Then I added: "But I *will*

take the grand your hubby offered me."

She forked over the cabbage; looked grateful that I hadn't wanted a bonus. . . .

I questioned her about the missing dummy. It had been stolen from Tranchard's dressing-room during the lunch hour. He hadn't told the studio moguls, though. He was afraid they'd tell him to get another one and work with it, so no time would be lost. He knew he couldn't make the grade with a substitute Casey Jones, so he'd pretended an attack of laryngitis. That would keep him off the soundstage for a day or two. Long enough, he figured, to recover the missing Casey.

When Betty Tranchard told me that, I realized it wasn't a publicity stunt after all. Otherwise the story would have been given to the papers. I said: "Got any idea who swiped the thing—or why?"

She shook her head. "N-no, unless someone's holding it for ransom. . . ."

That didn't add up right. It sounded wacky. But I didn't say so. I just steered the Tranchard cookie to the door, told her I'd phone her if I learned anything. She powdered.

I WAITED five minutes. Then I went down to my jalopy, drove over to Nora Norman's bungalow on Rampart.

Nora was a henna-pack redhead who happened to be playing a bit in Tranchard's Paratone pic. I'd heard rumors that the ventriloquist had given her a heavy play a while back, then ditched her for

a Bronx brunette with a spurious Mex accent and a chili-pepper brand of kisses.

Nora was a pal of mine. We'd been on parties together. She let me in and said: "Shiver my barnacles if it isn't old Handsome Dan, the Demon Dick!"

"Hiya, toots. Long time no gander," I grinned.

She was wearing something nifty in the way of pajamas. Her curves were plenty come-hitherish. "That's your fault, Sherlock. Or did you lose my phone-number?"

"No. I just didn't want to butt in," I said.

"Butt in on what?"

"Your big romance with Gus Tranchard."

She pouted. "That zero!"

I pulled her down on the davenport with me. "He slip you the ozone?"

"Yeah. Then he tried to toss me out of his picture and give my bit to his new sweetie. But it didn't work." She snuggled up to me. "Damn all ventriloquists, anyhow."

"All of 'em?" I said.

"Sure. I prefer detectives." She tempted me with her lips.

After I'd kissed her a couple of times, I said: "What's your grudge against Hank Jepson?"

She stared at me. "How did you know I had one?"

"You said damn *all* ventriloquists. Jepson's the only other one in Hollywood."

"Wise guy," she laughed. She wouldn't say any more; but that was plenty. I could gather that Jepson, too, had done her dirt of some sort.

I put an arm around her waist.

"Tranchard's dummy was glommed today," I said casually. "I wonder if you could tell me anything about it."

She straightened up quickly; re-fastened the front of her jacket. "Are you accusing me of swiping Casey Jones? Is that why you came here?" she said sharply. Her glims narrowed to slits of green.

I ran my hands over her shoulders, soothingly. "Don't get huffy, sweetness. After all, you hate Tranchard's tripes. Kidnaping his dummy would be one way of getting even with him. And you were on the set today."

She said: "Nuts! I wouldn't touch the damned thing. Why don't you search Hank Jepson's flat? He despises Tranchard more than I do. Tranchard oozed him out of Paratone."

"That's an idea," I said. "Want to come along?"

"I'd love it." She went into her bedroom to get dressed. She left the door ajar. I watched in her bureau mirror as she peeled out of the clinging pajamas. But she turned her back to the glass just when I was about to get a hinge at some damned lovely hills and valleys.

She wriggled into a dress; came out to me. "Let's go," she said. Her peepers held a glint of anticipation.

WE WENT down to my bucket; wheeled over to the Jepson guy's apartment on Melrose. I knocked.

Nobody answered.

Nora said: "Why don't you pick the lock, Philo?"

I did, with a master key from

the ring I always carry in case of emergency. I snapped on my pencil-flashlight; squirted the beam into the room.

I said: "What the hell—!"

Hank Jepson was sprawled near a mahogany table, his arms and legs twisted in grotesque angles. Ketchup had dripped down over his map, masking it with a red, gooey smear. His noggin was bashed in.

He was as dead as Confucius.

And Gus Tranchard's missing dummy, Casey Jones, lay in the middle of the rug with a knowing grin on its stupid, vapid wooden puss.

Nora Norman started to scream blue murder. I jerked her over the threshold into the apartment, kicked the door shut, clapped a palm over her kisser. I bounced her into an overstuffed chair; lighted the bridge-lamp behind her. Then I grabbed her by the shoulders, shook her until her teeth clicked like dominoes.

I said: "Why did you bump him?"

"I didn't! I didn't! *I didn't!*" she sobbed. Her breasts bounced up and down with her staccato breathing.

"The hell you didn't," I said. "You swiped Gus Tranchard's dummy from his dressing-room on the Paratone lot today. When he hired me to trace it, I thought of you. You were sore at him for the way he'd treated you. It was logical for you to glom the dummy. You knew its loss would throw Tranchard into the jittering meemies."

"No—no—!" she moaned.

I said: "I got hep when I first

called on you. I asked you about the dummy, remember? And you weren't a damned bit surprised to learn it had disappeared. In fact, you almost admitted you knew it had been stolen. That was a dead give-away."

"P-please—!"

"Then you tried to shift the blame onto Hank Jepson. You were too damned emphatic about that. And too anxious to help me find the thing in Hank's rooms. Why? Because you knew it was here. And how could you know—unless you were in on the steal?"

"Oh, God. . . !"

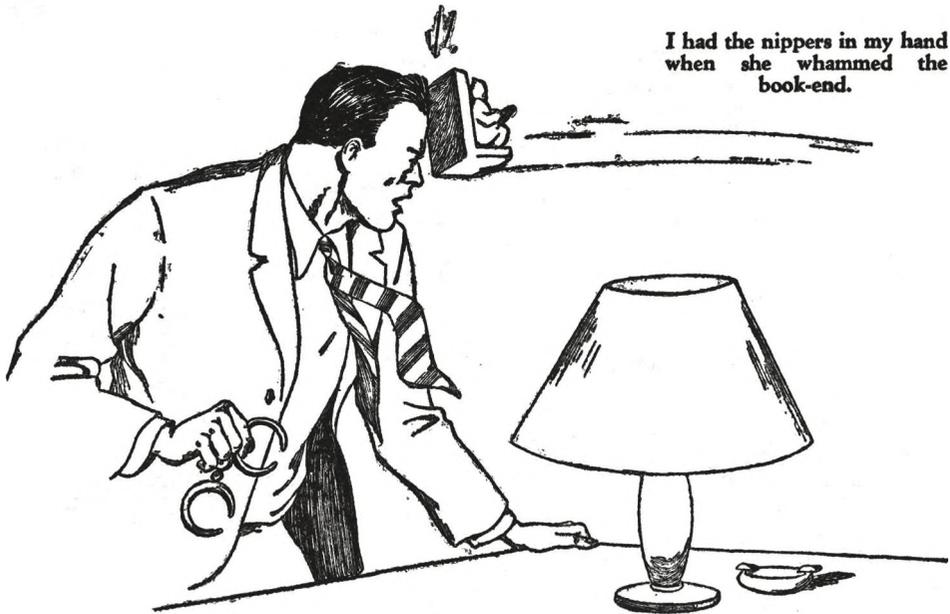
I said: "The way I dope it, you figured to get even with Tranchard and Jepson because you were peeved at both of them. Tranchard would suffer because of the loss. Then Jepson would be in dutch when it was found in his igloo. He'd be accused of thefting his rival's dummy for a grudge-motive."

"Dan—listen to me! I—"

I said: "Jepson probably walked in on you as you were planting the thing in his room. He made a grab for you. So you conked him."

NORA stood up, faced me. She was wabby on her pins. "Dan, for God's sake let me explain! I admit everything you say—except the m-murder. It's true I took the dummy out of Tranchard's dressing-room because of the way he'd ditched me. And it's true I brought the hideous little thing here to Hank's flat—because he threw me over in favor of another w-woman. I was t-tired of being handed the run-around by ventriloquists. . . ."

"So that was the motive," I said



I had the nippers in my hand when she whammed the book-end.

softly. "Jepson ran out on you, too. Who was the other jane he fell for?"

"Gus Tranchard's wife," Nora made a bitter mouth.

That surprised me. "The hell you gargle!"

"Y-yes! But even so, I didn't k-kill Hank! Would I have c-come here with you if I'd been guilty of a th-thing like that? I j-just wanted to see you find the dummy in his possession. . . ."

I said: "Nuts. A murderer always returns to the scene of the crime." I pulled out my bracelets. "Sorry, sweetheart. I hate to do this. Stick out your lunch-hooks."

She backed away from me. Before I could catch her, she picked up a brass book-end from the table alongside the defunct ventriloquist's gory remnants. She whammed the book-end at me.

It was a lucky throw. The damned thing clipped me on the

chin, put me down for a ten-count. When I came to, Nora was gone. And I was handcuffed to the murdered bozo with my own nippers!

When I reached up to rub my bruised jaw, Jepson's carcass stirred; his stiff hand came up along with mine. That wasn't pleasant. For a couple of seconds I thought I was going to heave my cookies.

Then I calmed my nerves with a gasper; started searching through my pockets. My keys were gone. Nora had taken them so I wouldn't be able to unlock myself. A smart quail, that red-head. I cursed her good and plenty, but there was small satisfaction in that.

I studied the nippers, trying to figure some way of getting loose from my deceased companion. There wasn't any. But I did notice three deep, parallel scratches on the palm of his mitt. Those scratches had a funny appearance.

I put the focus on them again. I said: "I'll be damned!"

I'm no toxicologist; but I've got a think-tank, and sometimes it works. This was one of the times. I took a swivel at the edge of the table above me. There were some hairs clinging to the sharp corner, and traces of blood. . . .

I began to understand Jepson's grotesque position; the awkward flex of his arms and legs, the twisted rigidity of his body. It was as if death had frozen him in the middle of a convulsive spasm. And that spelled plenty.

THERE was a phone on the table.

I reached up, got it, dialed my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad. I said: "This is Turner—and I'm chained to a cadaver. Flag your pants out here with some handcuff-keys, quick." I told him the address; hung up before he could pump a lot of questions at me.

While I waited, I inched over to Casey Jones; gave it a careful frisk with my free duke. I found what I was looking for. Through an opening in the dummy's back I could reach the wooden stick that operated its head. There were three needle-points sticking out of that handle—

The apartment door smacked open. Dave Donaldson lumbered toward me, took one look and said: "Goddlemighty—!"

"Hurry up and get me loose from this graveyard customer," I said. And while he was unlocking me, I told him everything that had happened.

He said: "Cripes! That Nora Norman cupcake did it, all right.

Just the way you accused her. I'll put out a bleat—" He reached for the phone.

"Wait," I said. "She didn't bash this guy."

"What the hell do you mean? You just said—?"

"I told you how I tried to hang it on her, yes. But I was wrong. This Jepson jerk wasn't killed by a bump on the conk. He was already dead when that happened to him. Or dying, anyhow. His noggin hit the corner of the table as he fell. That's what opened his cranium. Take a hinge for yourself. You'll see where he bounced off the woodwork."

Dave squinted. "You're right! Then how in God's name did he get croaked?"

"The dummy creamed him," I said.

Donaldson stared at me as if he thought I'd lost all my marbles. "What are you dishing me, Sherlock?"

I said: "I'm not screwy. Look." I picked up Casey Jones, opened up his back, showed Dave the three little needles sticking from the wooden handle, point outward. Then I showed him the three scratches on Jepson's palm. "Poison," I said. "Curare or aconitine—one of the alkaloids, anyhow. A post-mortem will name it."

"You mean—?"

"Yeah," I said. "He found the dummy here in his stash where Nora Norman had planted it. He picked it up, tried to work it. That was natural enough, since he was a ventriloquist himself. The needles scratched him. The alkaloid sent him into a convulsion. He dropped Casey Jones, jerked around, went

rigid—and fell, hitting his scone on the table as he went down.”

Dave snatched at the phone; called headquarters. “Spread the net for a frill named Nora Norman!” he yowled. “Red hair, swell figure, green eyes—” He described her. Then he said: “For murder. Yeah!” Hanging up, he turned back to me. “The whole thing’s plain. The Norman wren wanted to bump Jepson. So she swiped Tranchard’s dummy and planted it here—after putting those poisoned needles on the handle. She knew Jepson would be curious enough to try and operat the gadget; knew he’d scratch himself and die!”

I said: “There’s something I forgot to tell you. Maybe it’ll change your theory.”

“Yeah? What?”

“This Jepson bozo was waltzing around with Gus Tranchard’s wife,” I said.

Donaldson turned a lovely purple. “Are you leveling?”

I nodded.

He roared: “Prove it!”

WELL, all I had was Nora’s word; and she wasn’t around now to back me up. But somehow I’d believed what she had told me. Moreover, I didn’t think she was guilty of poisoning the Jepson jerk. Had she been the killer, she’d have destroyed the evidence against herself while I was unconscious and handcuffed to the corpse. She’d have pulled those poisoned needles out of the dummy before lamming.

On a hunch, I went into Jepson’s bedroom; rummaged around. I couldn’t find any photographs or letters. But in his closet I ran

across one of the thinnest night-gowns I ever saw. It was all peek-a-boo lace and gauzy silk; it looked like a first night at Niagara Falls. And it had the initials B. T. embroidered on it.

I said: “B. T.—Betty Tranchard.”

“But why the hell would Mrs. Tranchard croak Jepson if she was running around with him?” Dave said.

“She wouldn’t.”

He blinked. “By God—I get it! Tranchard found out what was going on. He put the needles in the dummy, then hired Nora Norman to plant it here in Jepson’s joint! Come on—let’s go put the arm on him!”

I said: “Nix, Dave. You’d never pin it on him that way. He’d deny knowledge of the poison. He’d stick to his story that Casey Jones was stolen out of his dressing-room. Then where would you be?”

“I’ll get that Norman quail to turn state’s evidence!” Dave snorted.

“If you catch her,” I said. Then an idea sneaked up my leg, bit me under the hip pocket. I said: “Maybe we can set a trap. It’s worth a try. Let’s go.” I picked up the dummy; went out. Dave trailed me.

“Where to?” he growled.

I said: “My stash,” and climbed into my rambling wreck. Donaldson followed in his official bucket. Ten minutes later we walked into my apartment. I laid Casey Jones on the floor; grabbed my phone. I dialed the Tranchard house out near Beverly; motioned for Dave to listen in on my bedroom extension.

I got the ventriloquist on the line. "This is Dan Turner," I said. "I've got Casey Jones here in my apartment."

I heard a click and a gasp. "You what—?"

"Yeah," I said. "I burgled Hank Jepson's flat while he was out. The dummy was there, so I grabbed it."

Tranchard choked: "Jepson—? The dirty rat! Why the hell didn't you wait for him and arrest him?"

"That's up to you," I said. "You can swear out a warrant if you feel like it. My job's done. If you want your dummy, come and get it." I hung up.

Dave Donaldson was purple again. "You damned blockhead, what the hell good will that do? Maybe the Norman wren has already phoned him, warned him—"

"I don't think so. And besides, I didn't spill about Jepson being dead, did I?" I grinned. "Keep your shirt on."

"What are you going to do?"

I said: "You'll see," and poured myself a healthy blast of Vat 69. I needed it to kill the taste of my next move. I went into the bathroom, got a piece of soap, chewed it until I was foaming at the kisser.

I stretched myself on the floor alongside Casey Jones. I told Dave to unlock my front door. He did. "Now hide in the bedroom," I said.

He stared down at me. "I savvy," he said. "You want Tranchard to walk in and think the dummy croaked you. He'll be scared sweatless. He'll make a dig for those poisoned needles to jerk 'em out and get rid of them. His

knowledge of the needles will be an admission of guilt. Huh?"

I said: "What else would you need, you dope? Now hide—and stay hidden until I yell for you." I closed my glims, twisted myself into a pretzel, lay still.

THE minutes crept past like snails. I ached in every cranny. The soapsuds in my mush tasted terrible on top of that swig of Scotch. And then—

My door opened. I kept my peepers glued shut. I heard footfalls. Somebody said: "My God—!" and I felt the dummy being pulled away from me.

I counted ten. Then I opened my optics yanked out the .32 automatic I always carry in a shoulderholster. I said: "*The jig's up, Mrs. Betty Tranchard!*"

She dropped Casey Jones as if it had been red-hot. In her hand she held the control-stick with the poisoned needles thrusting out of it. She gasped: "Oh-h-h—!"

I said: "I heard the click of your extension phone as you listened when I called your hubby. I suppose you persuaded him that you ought to be the one to come and get the dummy, since you'd hired me."

"Wh-what of it?" she faltered. "And why were you pretending to—"

"Don't try to kid me," I said. "You know what it's all about. You thought I was a goner. That's why you were taking the needles out of the dummy."

She said: "N-needles. . . ?"

"Sure. The poisoned ones."

All the color leaked out of her pan. "I—I—"

I said: "You hated your husband because he treated you lousy and ran around with other dames. Also, you fell in love with another man, Hank Jepson. *You decided to make a widow of yourself by poisoning your old man. That's why you put the needles in Casey Jones.*

"But things went haywire with your plans. Nora Norman swiped the dummy. And that worried hell out of you. Suppose the thief discovered the poisoned needles? Suppose an innocent guy got croaked?"

"You had to get Casey Jones back before that happened. You were more anxious than your husband—and for a better reason. You even offered me a lot more than money . . . if I'd work on the case for you. And now you're sunk.

She lifted her chin. "Why am I sunk?" she flashed. "After all, I *didn't* murder my husband. You admit my scheme missed fire. So what have you got on me?"

I said: "Plenty. That dummy

got planted in Hank Jepson's tepee. You heard me. Jepson—the bozo you were in love with."

She started to sag. "My God! Hank—is he—?"

"He's defunct," I said. "You killed him."

She screamed. Then she tore open the front of her dress. Her breasts spilled out into full view. They were like two soft domes of satin-covered jelly.

She made long scratches on them with the poisoned needles before I could stop her.

I yelled: "Dave—for God's sake—!" and he came batting hell-for-leather out of my bedroom. But he was too late, the same as I was. Betty Tranchard was already on the floor. Her death-convulsions weren't nice to look at.

Dave said: "Jeest," he turned away.

I didn't blame him. I went on a three-day binge myself, to wipe out the memory. But before I started, I found Nora Norman. She went on the binge with me.



TELEPHONE

SOMEBODY poked a roscoe against my spine and said: "This is a stick-up, pal. Make a yep and I'll start blasting."

The voice was edged with hysteria. And when a man sounds hysterical, he's damned dangerous. I've been a private dick long enough to learn that much.

So I froze.

Alongside me, Sugar Taggart jerked her hand away from my arm. Before I could stop her, she was pelting hellity blip through the night. She aimed her shapely blonde self back toward Hollywood Boulevard, her slender ankles twinkling as she ran.

She came plunging at me with her sticker. I had to pull the trigger . . . and my gun jammed!



Even a hard-boiled detective is willing to help an actor who's down on his luck. Turner can even forgive a stick-up . . . but murder is hard to overlook

TANGLE

It was a little past eleven-thirty. The Taggart cutie and I had been to a preview at Grauman's Chinese, and I had just talked her into going up to my stash for a snifter of Vat 69 and maybe a few kisses, after the show. It was the first time I'd ever been out with her, and I was looking forward to a large night.

My bucket was parked around on Yucca, behind the theater. The tree-lined street was darker than the inside of an eight-ball, and I'd just started to unlock the jalopy's door when this hold-up happened.

As Sugar darted away, I made a grab for her—and missed. I swore under my breath. She was inviting a bullet.

Behind me, the sharp banana with the roscoe said: "Let her go. I don't bump dames. All I want is your dough. Turn around and shell out."

I obeyed. But I did it a damned



sight faster than he expected. I pivoted like a top; swatted his heater aside. Then I planted a load of knuckles under his kisser; coked him with everything I had.

His shoulders slammed up against the side of my coupe; almost dented the metal. He started to sag; dropped his rod.

I caught it, stuffed it into my pocket and braced myself to feed him another good dose of fist. Then I pulled the punch as I got my first full gander at his pan.

"Len Kilbane!" I gasped.

He was a puny, runt-sized bozo with an undernourished look. His clothes were seedy, threadbare; his shoes shapeless and broken. He needed a haircut and a shave; looked like a starved ghost. But I recognized him just the same.

In the old days Kilbane had been a Hollywood biggie; an ace character for Technivox. He'd dragged down fantastic scads of geetus for his uncanny mimicry on the screen; but a dame took him to the cleaners, put him on the greased skids.

The quail in question was Francine Fowler. She was only a bit-player when Kilbane married her, but his jack and his influence made her a top-flight star. Then, after she got what she wanted out of him, she gave him the gate. Whiskey finished him off. He'd hit bottom; dropped out of sight after the divorce. And now, here he was trying to pull a Jesse James on one of his oldtime cronies.

He blinked off the effects of my poke. His bleary peepers focused on me. "D-Dan Turner. . . !"

I grabbed his lapels; held him upright. "What the hell's the idea, Len?"

He looked away. "Sorry, Sherlock. I didn't know it was you, or I wouldn't have. . ." His voice trailed off and he rubbed his bruised jaw. "Go ahead and hand me to a cop. Get it over with."

I said: "I'm not handing you over to anybody until you do some explaining. I don't rat on my friends."

He grinned crookedly, ruefully. "That blonde wren you were with probably won't agree with you. I'll bet she's on her way back here with a bull right now." Then he shook his head. "I'd just as soon go to jail. At least they'd feed me. I'm . . . hungry. And broke. God . . . you don't think I'd have tried a stick-up if I hadn't been desperate?"

There was hopelessness scrawled on his map; defeat in his voice. I felt damned sorry for him. He'd always been a right guy. I shoved him into my chariot; slid my alexander under the steering-wheel. I said: "If Sugar brings a cop, they won't find anybody." And I kicked my starter.

UP IN my apartment stash I rustled some stuff from the refrigerator. While Kilbane was eating, I said: "So you've been scraping bottom, eh?"

He nodded, his yap full of sandwich.

"Why didn't you hunt up some of your old pals?" I asked him. "Or maybe Francine Fowler would have kicked through with enough to keep you from starving."

He choked. "Francine — damn her eyes! She did this to me. She put me where I am. She got all my dough in that divorce settlement;

and then she laughed when I was in the gutter! I—I tried to get her on the phone just the other day. Tried to see her. And she gave me the bird. I ought to kill her!”

I didn't blame him for being bitter and I started to say so. But just then my phone rang. I answered it. “Turner talking.”

A low, husky she-male voice drifted over the wire. “Mr. T-Turner, this is Francine Fowler. I—I'm in terrible trouble. Can you come right out to my house? I'll p-pay you well—”

I almost swallowed my bridge-work. Here was a hell of a funny coincidence. Len Kilbane was in my kitchen—and his ex-wife was on my phone! I said: “What's on your mind, baby? Can't you spill it over the wire?”

“N-no. But it's—it's t-terribly important. I'll pay you any fee you ask—”

I made up my mind in a hurry. If she was in a jam, I'd try to help her; and I'd soak her a stiff price. Then I'd turn the jack over to the guy she'd ruined; maybe it would give him a fresh start. “Okay, sister. I'll be right out to your joint.”

I rang off; made for the kitchen. To Kilbane I said: “Make yourself at home. I've got a hurry call. Grab a shave and a shower; bunk in my bed. You'll find clean pajamas in the bureau. If a wren named Sugar Taggart phones me, tell her I'll see her tomorrow. So-long.”

I went out.

THE FOWLER cupcake's palatial dugout was just this side of

Beverly. I parked in her driveway; rang the front bell.

A nifty French maid opened up. She was wearing a kimono and not much else. She looked nervous.

“*Oui, Monsiuer?*”

“I want to see Miss Fowler.”

“She—she is not in.”

“That's damned peculiar,” I said. “I just talked to her on the phone.”

The Gallic cookie stared at me. “Are you Dan Turner, the private detective?”

“Yeah.”

“*Mademoiselle* Fowler is on her way to your apartment. She departed immediately after talking to you.”

That didn't add up right; because Francine had specifically asked me to come to her tepee. I said “You're a liar, Frenchie.” Then I grabbed the maid and shook hell out of her. I admit I drew a thump out of piping her cute little bon-bons bobbing up and down under the loose kimona.

She tried to get away from me. “*Mais*—but I am telling you the truth! My mistress went to your apartment. You can telephone to *Monsieur* Doremus and ask him.”

“Doremus?” I said. “You mean Paul Doremus? Miss Fowler's director?”

“*Oui.*”

“What the hell's he got to do with it?”

“He was here. He and *Mademoiselle* were quarreling when—”

I said: “She was fighting with Doremus? And then she phoned me?”

The maid's dark glims widened. “But no! She did not telephone to you. *You* telephoned to *her*. And

then she left to go to your apartment. *Monsieur* Doremus went home."

A sudden hunch bit me under the hip-pocket. "What makes you think I phoned Miss Fowler?"

"Because I, myself, received your call."

I gave her a shove that almost put her on her elbows. Then I turned; sprinted for my go-buggy. I smelled trouble. Maybe murder trouble.

I kicked the glands out of my motor; headed for my own apartment igloo. I made it in eight minutes flat, went hurtling through the lobby, dashed upstairs to the third floor. I barged toward my door—

Great cripes!" I whispered.

There was a jessie sprawled in the corridor, right in front of my stash; a gorgeous, fur-coated doll with midnight hair and a shape like nobody's business. She was on her back, staring up at the ceiling without seeing it.

Her throat was cut. She was as dead as a pickled eel. She was Francine Fowler.

MY ELLY-BAY churned when I put the focus on her. The expensive fur coat had come open when she hit the carpet; and there wasn't anything else on her delicious curves except whisper-thin underthings. Her stems were absolutely scrumptious; her watch-callems were snowy mounds of perfection. But her throat . . . well, when I took a swivel at the gaping wound that had almost decapitated her, I felt like popping my cookies.

I leaped over her remainders; smashed my door open and went

thundering into my living-room. I yelled: "Kilbane—Len!"

The little guy didn't answer. I wasn't expecting him to. He wasn't there. He had lammed.

I grabbed up my phone; dialed my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad. "This is Dan Turner and I'm up to my adenoids in a murder mess."

"What, again?" Dave snarled wearily.

"Yeah." I told him what had happened. Then I said: "Toss out the dragnet for Len Kilbane. He's your apple."

"How come he is?"

"Don't be a chump. The whole thing was a set-up. Kilbane wanted to croak Francine because of the way she'd made a bum of him. But he couldn't get close to her. She wouldn't see him."

"Okay. Go on."

"So he faked a stick-up on me, knowing I'd get sympathetic and invite him to my joint. Meanwhile, he had some quail call me up from outside, imitating the Fowler doll's voice. I fell for it; went out to her wikiup."

Dave said: "How do you know it was a fake call?"

"Because the French maid as much as told me so. Now look: The minute I left Kilbane alone in my stash, he got busy. Remember, he used to be a character actor; a mimic. Okay; so he phoned out to his ex-wife's joint, impersonated me. He persuaded her to come to my apartment. When she arrived, he carved hell out of her and took a powder."

"I get it!" Donaldson grunted. "A phony call took you out of the road. Another phony message

brought the Fowler dame to your place so she could be beefed. I'll get on the job right away. Wait for me."

I hung up. But I wasn't three feet from my telephone when it jingled. I answered it. "Yeah?"

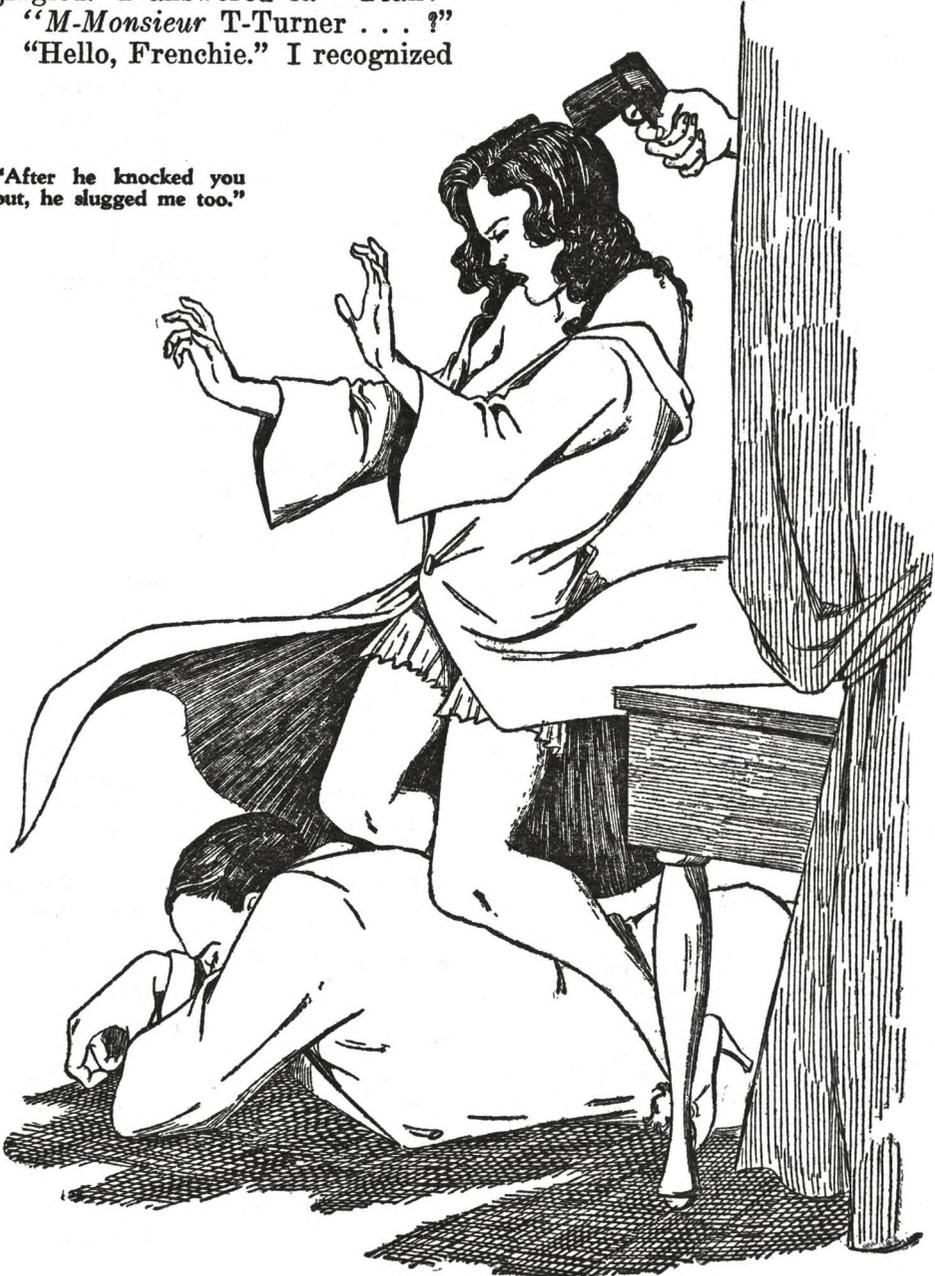
"M-Monsieur T-Turner . . . ?"

"Hello, Frenchie." I recognized

the maid's voice. "What's on your mind?"

"I—I am frightened! There is someone at the door. It is *Monsieur Doremus*. He looks dangerous! I am afraid to admit him . . . Please

"After he knocked you out, he slugged me too."



come and help me. . . !” Her voice sank to a whisper. “*He has a gun!*”

That stiffened me. “Hold everything. I’m on my way.” I slammed out of my stash, went down to my chariot, goosed it toward Beverly.

I SLICED a minute off my previous record; went plunging up to the front door of the defunct Fowler Jane’s ornate hovel. It was closed, locked. But a front window was wide open. Its glass pane had been kicked in.

And from inside the house, a she-male scream sounded.

I said: “What the hell—!” and hurled myself through that busted sash. I larruped upstairs; saw an open doorway leading into a boudoir. The French cupcake was stretched out across the bed with a bozo straddling her. I recognized him. He was Paul Doremus, the Technivox director. He had his mitts around Frenchie’s throat and he was choking the bejoseph out of her. “This is just a sample of what I’ll do to you if you—”

I went walloping at him. But I tripped over a rug before I was half-way across the room. The noise gave me away. Doremus heard me; straightened up. As he came at me, he yanked a nickel-plated heater from his pocket.

I made a snatch for my own .32 in the shoulder-holster where I always carry it. But I was off-balance from tripping over that damned rug. Before I could protect myself, Doremus slugged me on the noggin with the butt of his rod.

The floor came up and punched me in the beezer. A million canaries

started chirping in my ears; then everything went blooey.

WHEN I came out of my trance, Doremus was gone. The little French nifty had my head pilloved in her lap. “*Monsieur Turner—oh, Mon Dieu—Mon Dieu—!*”

Her mussed midnight hair cascaded in spun strands of blackness over her shoulders; emphasized the smooth ivory of her skin. In her struggles with Doremus, her kimona had been torn to hellangone and my blood began to sizzle—even though I had a knot bigger than a watermelon on the back of my aching conk.

I got plenty of belt out of feeling her cool fingers stroking my forehead. I’d have enjoyed staying right there and letting nature take its course. But there were other things to do. So I stirred; staggered to my gams.

Frenchie said: “Oh-h-h . . . then you are n-not dead. . . !”

I grinned; pulled her close to me. “No, not yet. Did Doremus get away?”

“*Oui*. He slugged me too—but not hard enough to knock me out.” She fingered the back of her head tenderly. “I saw him leave then. It was at least f-five minutes ago. . .”

I said: “Okay. He’ll be nabbed. Don’t worry. I’ll see to it myself.”

She fingered the bruises on her white throat. I could see her what-nots rising and falling faster than normal. “But why did *M-Monsieur Doremus* attack me?”

“That’s easy. He was trying to scare you. He wanted you to keep your kisser buttoned about the

fight he had with Miss Fowler tonight."

She nodded; trembled against me. "*Oui*; he t-told me not to mention the quarrel. But—"

I broke in. "Listen, baby. Doremus was Francine's boy friend, wasn't he?"

"How—how did you know that?"

"He was with her tonight. They had a scrap. Then she left in a hurry, to go to my place. All she wore was a fur coat over her undies. So she and Doremus must have been plenty thick or she wouldn't have been entertaining him in that kind of rig."

Frenchie blushed. "They were . . . sweethearts."

"Okay. So she went to my stash. Doremus must have followed her. He discovered she'd been butched. And now he's afraid he'll be accused of the kill. That's why he doesn't want anybody to know of his quarrel with her."

The maid went white. "*Made-moiselle* . . . murdered?"

I held her to keep her from caving; my fingers accidentally sank into pliant softness. "Take it easy," I whispered. I patted her; tried to soothe her.

But my patting had the opposite effect on my own arterial system. When my fingers brushed against silken skin, tingles began to zip up and down my spine. The next thing I knew, I hauled her around so that she was facing me.

I kissed her so hard my toenails jabbed holes in my sox. She wrapped her arms around my neck, mashed herself up against me. "Protect me, *Monsieur Turner*. . . !" she whispered. "D-don't

let anything . . . happen to me. . ."

I said: "Nothing but nice things, hon."

PRETTY soon I switched on a light, went over to the phone; dialed my own flat. I figured maybe Dave Donaldson would still be there, cleaning up the mess.

He was. "Well, what is it?"

"This is Turner. I want—"

His roar almost melted the wire. "What the hell was the idea, running out on me before I could get here? I thought you were going to guard the Fowler dame's corpse—"

I broke in: "Did anything happen to it?"

"No, but—"

"Then pipe down," I told him. "Now look. I want you to do me a favor. Send a flatfoot out here to the Fowler wigwam to keep an eye on this French maid. She's in danger."

"Oh, yeah? What kind of danger?"

"Plenty. Paul Doremus tried to throttle the custard out of her a while ago. And he conked me while he was at it."

Dave said: "Paul Doremus? The Technitone director? You must be dippy. A guy like Doremus wouldn't—"

"Wait," I said. "Doremus was Francine Fowler's sweetie. And he had a helluva row with her tonight, before she was croaked. The maid overheard the fracas. So now he's afraid he might be accused of the killing. And he tried to scare the maid into keeping quiet about that fight."

Dave snarled: "You ought to be writing stories, Sherlock. You're so good at reconstructing things.

And how the hell did Doremus know Francine had been bumped? The headlines aren't out yet."

"He probably followed her to my igloo," I said. "Then when he went upstairs and saw her gory remnants, he took a powder. He was scared spitless. Maybe he even caught a swivel at the murder being done."

"Horse-apples!" Donaldson rumbled sarcastically. "You been hitting the pipe. If you think I'm going to furnish a bodyguard for your French cutie, you're all wet. And I'm not going to pester Doremus, either. He packs a lot of weight in politics. I should do you a favor after you ran out on me! Go to hell!" He started to slam up in my ear. Then he added: "You had a phone-call a while ago. Some frill named Sugar Taggart. She said for you to call her right back. She sounded jittery. You and your dames!" He broke the connection.

I swore into the dead transmitter. Then I calmed down a little. So Sugar Taggart had phoned me. I could imagine what she wanted. She hadn't seen me since that attempted stick-up on Yucca street behind Grauman's Chinese. She was probably worried about me.

I dialed her apartment. "Hi, babe. This is Dan."

"Oh-h-h . . . thank God you called! I—I've got to see you right away!"

It struck me funny that she didn't ask how I'd made out in the hold-up. I said: "Let's make it tomorrow. I'm tired." I took a reminiscent gander across the room at the French cutie.

But Sugar wailed: "No! Not

tomorrow. Tonight! You've got to come!"

There was something strained and harsh about her voice. "Why?" I asked her.

"It—it's about Francine Fowler and Len Kilbane. . ."

I almost dropped the phone. I yelled: "What the hell—!" But the line was dead. The Taggart nifty had hung up on me.

I grabbed the maid's arm, pulled her over to a closet, found a top-coat and slid her into it. "Come on," I clipped out. "Donaldson won't guard you, so I guess it's up to me. Let's go."

"Wh-where?"

I didn't answer. I just hauled her downstairs, boosted her into my bucket and aimed my wheels toward Sugar Taggart's apartment on Franklin.

AS I drove, my think-tank was full of questions. What the hell did Sugar know about Francine Fowler and Len Kilbane? Was she aware of the bump-off that had been pulled in my corridor? Did she have any dope on Kilbane's present whereabouts?

I set fire to a gasper; tried to fish some explanation out of the smoke. But my noggin wasn't a crystal ball. It felt more like a chunk of solid cement.

Presently I parked in front of Sugar's apartment; turned to the French baby. "Stay here in the car. I'll be back soon."

She nodded. "Please hurry. . ."

I went into the building; knocked on the Taggart chick's door. She opened up. "C-come in, Dan."

She was wearing a negligee

three degrees thinner than morning mist. I could see through it—and there was a lot to look at. She owned a few curves that could charge any guy's batteries. Including mine.

I said: "What have you got to tell me, kiddo?"

She glided toward me; ran her hands nervously through her golden hair. "Len didn't m-murder Francine," she whispered.

I grabbed her, pulled her toward me. "What the hell do *you* know about it?"

"P-plenty. I love Len Kilbane. I love him more than he ever loved that Fowler witch!" Droplets of brine came into her lamps. She twisted her arms around my neck; gave my chest a cushiony hint of her pouting breasts. It was quite a treat. "You've got to save Len from being accused. . . !"

"Wait a minute!" I grated. "Let's get this straight. You're in love with him?"

She nodded.

"Did you know he was the stick-up guy tonight?"

"Yes." Words gushed out of her kisser in a frantic torrent. "It was a put-up job. He wanted to see his ex-wife; try to get some money from her. His own money, that she had taken away from him. . ."

I said: "So you were the one who phoned me! You pretended you were Francine in order to get me out of the way!"

"Y-yes. Then Len called Francine; imitated your voice. He lured her to your flat. But he didn't stab her! She was killed in the corridor before she knocked on your door! He heard a sound, and when he

looked out, he saw what had happened. He ran away. . ."

"How do you know?"

"He t-told me."

I said: "So you've seen him since the bump-off, eh?"

She admitted this.

"Where is he now?" I growled.

"I—I won't tell you. But you *will* do something for him, w-won't you? I—I'll give you . . . anything . . . if you'll. . ." She clamped her lips on mine and fed me the business.

I got a tingle out of it. After all, I'm as human as the next man. I could feel steam generating in my tonsils, and my blood was full of red-hot needles. For the second time that night, I felt myself slipping—and I didn't bother to throw out the anchors.

SOMETHING brought me back to alertness. It was a soft, creaky footfall just outside the door of Sugar's flat. Somebody was out in the hallway . . . maybe listening. . .

I started toward the door. Sugar stopped me. "You—you'll help Len?"

"Yeah. I'll help him."

"And you don't really think he m-murdered Francine?"

I said: "I'm pretty sure he didn't, after what you just told me. I believe you're leveling." I meant it, too. I added: "In fact, I think I'll have the real killer under glass before morning. I've got an angle." I pitched my voice loud enough to reach the corridor, through the door.

Sugar's azure peepers glistened with hope. "An angle. . . ?"

I nodded. "Paul Doremus—the

Fowler doll's director. And her sweetie. Either he cooled her, or he saw it being done. He had a fight with her tonight. Then he followed her to my joint. He's trying to cover himself—but I'll make him whistle."

"Oh-h-h . . . th-thank you, Dan!" The blonde lovely put her arms around me again; gave me another taste of her lips. Then I shoved her away. I went out.

I went down to my jalopy. The French maid wasn't in it. She had scrambled.

That didn't surprise me much. I'd been expecting it. But what I didn't expect was the automatic that said: "*Chow-chow!*" from the alley alongside Sugar Taggart's apartment building. A slug bashed into my chest on the left side and I went down as if I'd been maced by a sledgehammer.

And I stayed down. I didn't move. For an instant, I thought I was defunct. My arms and legs were paralyzed. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even blink.

A harness copper came racing toward me, drawn by the shots. He leaned over me and yelled: "Jeest—it's Dan Turner." Then he whistled at a passing sedan. "Hey—help me get this guy to a hospital!"

The black chariot stopped and a bulky bozo got out. I saw his pan, tabbed him. He was Dave Donaldson! He took one swivel at me and groaned: "Cripes! Dan—speak to me, pal! To think I bawled you out a while ago and now you're going to hell—!"

I wanted to grin. Tears were in his glims as big as gallstones as he lifted me into his official char-

iot; propped me on the front seat. He slid in alongside me; left that harness copper at the curb. He snarled: "Look for the stinking rat that did this to my best friend!" Then he gunned the tripes out of his motor.

We whisked around the corner on two wheels and a screech. I stirred, gasped: "Nix on the . . . hospital, you dope! I'm . . . okay; the slug . . . hit my shoulder-holstered . . . roscoe. I'll be all . . . right when I get . . . my breath. . ."

He turned beet red. "You stinking jerk! I ought to give you a load of lumps for pulling a trick like that! Why, you dirty—"

I said: "Stow it. Head for Paul Doremus' place out on Wilshire—and step on the gas! Maybe we're already too late!" When he hesitated, I punched him on the arm. "Get going, lunkhead! I'm taking you to Francine Fowler's murderer!"

"Kilbane. . . ?" he gasped. And he mashed his grogan down on the throttle.

I MADE him park a block from the Technitone director's gaudy tepee. Then we went pelting silently toward the house; kept to the shadows.

All of a sudden I pointed. "Look!"

Dave squinted. "Your chariot!" he whispered.

He was right. My coupe was in front of the Doremus place. Somebody had driven it there; had reached the residence ahead of us during the brief period when Donaldson thought I was croaking.

I said: "Get going!" and broke into a run. He wheezed along at

my heels. We gained the terrace. I saw an open casement window; dived through it. I heard a wet, gurgling groan from upstairs. My gullet tightened. I was too late!

I found the staircase; took the steps three at a time. I yanked out my equalizer as I plunged into a lighted front bedroom; piped Paul Doremus on the bed. His throat was cut. Red ink was spurt- ing like a fountain.

I yelled: "*Stick 'em up, Sugar Taggart!*" at the dame who was wiping her shiv on the pillows.

She turned, sprang at me with her toad-sticker glittering.

I pulled by trigger. Nothing happened. My rod was jammed. It had been broken by the slug that smacked into it a few minutes ago.

The Taggart dame was almost on me. I tried to duck. And then, from the doorway, Dave Donald- son cut loose.

HIS service .38 roared: "Ka- Chow!" and a slug tore into the blonde quail; kicked her to the floor. She screeched; started coughing up scarlet soapsuds.

I said: "You loved Len Kilbane; helped him lure his ex-wife to my stash. All he wanted was dough. But you were scared he might fall for her again; so you ambushed her in the corridor before she could knock on the door. You beefed her.

"Later you realized you had placed Len in a hell of a spot. He'd be pinched for the croaking. So you phoned me to come see you, hoping to pump me as to how much of a case we had against Len."

"You . . . knew?" she whispered.

"I suspected you, is all. I didn't have any proof, though. It was just a hunch, based on your anx- iety to clear Kilbane and your own possible motive for cooling Fran- cine. So I set a trap for you to bring you out in the open. I told you Paul Doremus had witnessed the killing—which was a lie. Be- cause if Doremus had really seen it, he would have belched to the cops in order to keep his own skirts clear.

"Anyhow, I figured if you were guilty you would try to shut Dore- mus up—permanently. And I planned to be here in time to nab you before you could croak him. But you messed up my campaign when you shot at me from your apartment window."

"I . . . wish I'd . . . blown your lousy . . . head . . . off!"

I said: "But you didn't. You merely put me out of action for a while; just long enough to make me get here too late to save Dore- mus. You even used my own ja- lopy for transportation. Which wouldn't have happened if the French maid had obeyed orders and stayed in the coupe.

"Instead, Frenchie must have got tired waiting for me; must have come to your apartment door, eavesdropped when I was fling- ing a little woo at you. She was the one I heard outside the portal—and then, jealous of me, she lammed. That made my bucket available to you.

"You drove here to the Doremus stash, carved the guy. But we've caught you with the goods, and now you're washed up. Want to

(Continued on page 125)

DEATH'S DARK STAR

THE night was dark, foggy. I cut my ignition, switched off the headlights, drifted my bucket past the little whitewashed cottage on the outskirts of Westwood.

There were no signs of life in the darkened wikiup; but I knew Kane Fewster, the Parametro production chief, was in there. I'd spent the entire day hunting him; and now I had him located. He was hiding from something—or somebody.

I parked, sneaked to the back door of the stash, started to jimmy my way in. But this wasn't necessary; the portal was already unlatched. I ankleed over the threshold into an unlighted kitchenette; chanced a quick glimmer of my pocket torch. There was a short hallway ahead, and I made for it.

Whereupon, from a bedroom, somebody's roscoe bellowed: "*Kachow!*" and a lead pellet split the ozone past my noggin. Then a man's voice, labored, hysterical, yeped: "If you come another step I'll kill you!"

I took a nose dive to the corridor floor. The whole situation was crazier than hailstones at the equator. This Kane Fewster guy had vanished from the Parametro lot a week before; hadn't been seen since. His best friends were Jose Cordova, former star in silent pix, and Cordova's wife Nelia, at present a Parametro ingenue. Jose and Nelia had hired me to find Few-

ster, see what the hell was wrong with him.

And now that I'd discovered the bozo, he was squirting slugs at me. Why?

I roared: "Hold everything, dammit! I'm not after your gore. I'm Dan Turner, private gumshoe. How about a flag of truce?"

My tone must have convinced the studio biggie that I was leveling, because a light clicked on and there was no more gun thunder. I put the focus on that bedroom doorway.

Fewster was standing there, dressed in pajamas, with a smoking gat in his mitt and stark terror in his peepers. He was a good looking lug, but fear had twisted his pan into an ugly grimace that wasn't nice to see.

"So you're Dan Turner," he said harshly. "I've heard of you. Who the hell sent you after me?"

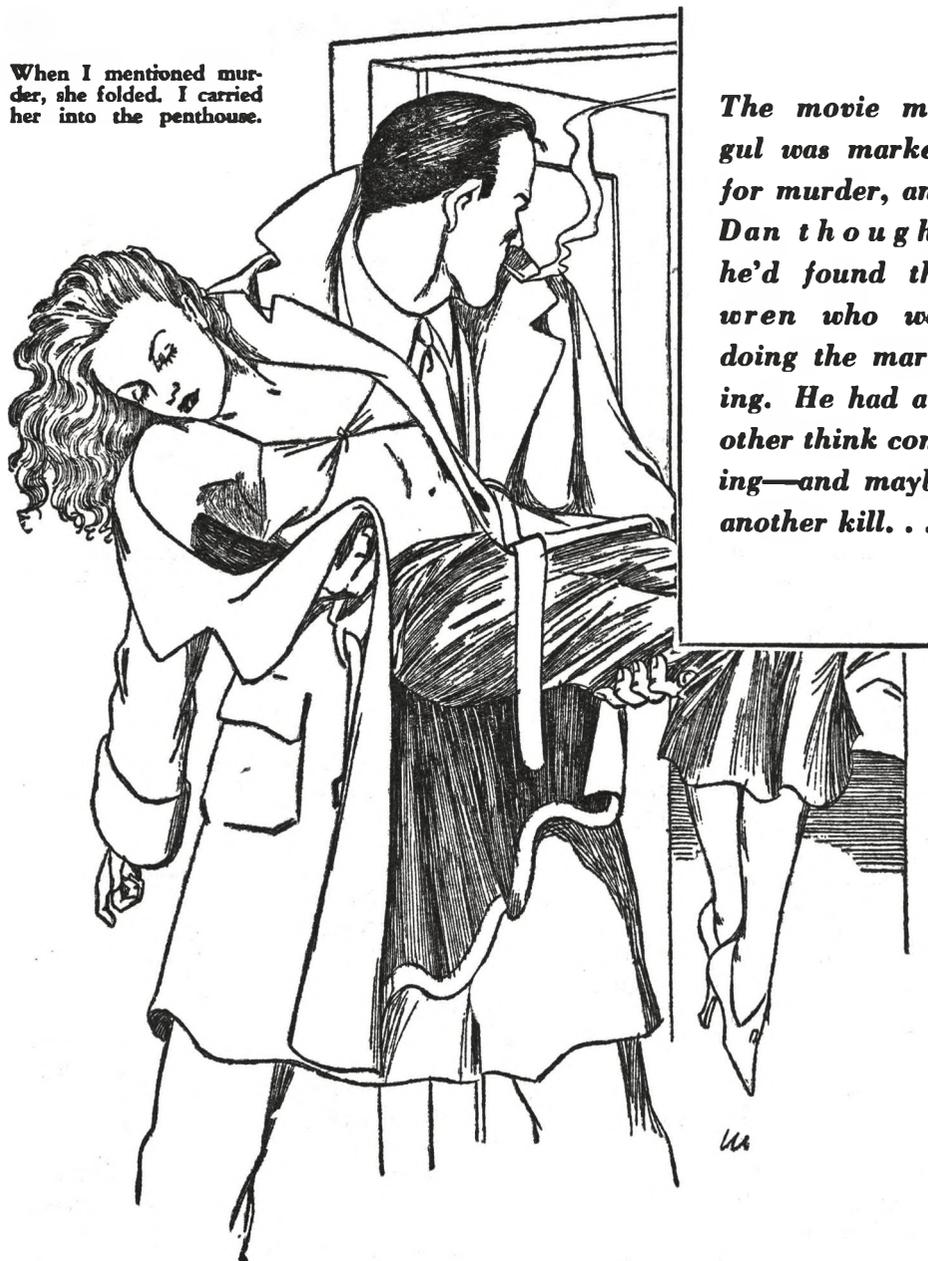
"Jose and Nelia Cordova. They're worried. They slipped me a grand to dig you up."

"Cordova? The jackass!" Fewster rasped. "Why can't people let me alone?"

"Because they're your friends," I told him. "They figured you were in trouble of some sort, and they wanted to help." I followed him into the bedroom and my sniffer detected traces of expensive she-male perfume. But I didn't see a dame anywhere around.

I said: "What's nibbling on you,

When I mentioned murder, she folded. I carried her into the penthouse.



The movie mogul was marked for murder, and Dan thought he'd found the wren who was doing the marking. He had another think coming—and maybe another kill. . . .

pal? Why did you pull the vanishing act?"

He sat on the covers, slid his roscoe under the counterpane. "I'm on the spot!" he whispered through his distorted kisser. "I'm marked for murder!"

"You *what?*"

"It's true. Butch Gorham is after me."

I FISHED out a gasper, set fire to it. Butch Gorham was Hollywood's best-known bookie. He handled most of the race track betting for the cinema colony; seemed to have a charmed career.

The law never knocked him over, although plenty of lesser gamblers got rapped now and then.

I said: "What has Gorham got against you?"

Fewster shuddered. He didn't look much like a movie mogul just then. In his climb from studio electrician and sound technician to production chief he had acquired a copious quantity of high-hattishness; but it was all gone now. He was just a damned scared hombre.

"I owe Gorham more than fifty thousand dollars," he told me. "And I can't pay off. I'm broke. He's bled me white."

"Fifty grand? That's important geetus! You must have guessed wrong on a hell of a lot of horses."

"I—I did," Fewster sounded almost evasive. "And now Gorham's after me. That's why I'm hiding. But he'll find me sooner or later, the same as you did. And he'll kill me. . . ."

I couldn't blame the poor guy for having the creeping meemies. Butch Gorham was rumored to be bad medicine on welchers. Several recent croakings had pointed in his direction, although nothing definite had been pinned on him. He ruled the underworld roost, though; and he had plenty of triggermen on his payroll, according to the gossip.

I said: "Look, chum. Hiding out isn't going to get you anywhere."

"I realize that."

"Then why not let me handle the matter for you?" I suggested. "My fees are reasonable. For a grand I'll go see Gorham, put the pressure on him."

"You th-think it would do any good?"

I said: "Sure," although I really wasn't so damned positive. Still, I might be able to work a few angles; and the main thing was to talk myself into a fee from Fewster. After all, I'm in this racket for the dough. I'm trying to save up a retirement fund before some sharp apple takes my measurements for a wooden overcoat.

Fewster looked at me. "I don't think you could scare Butch Gorham into laying off me. I don't think anybody could."

I started to argue the question; but before I got the words formed I piped something that startled the curds out of me. I yodeled: "What the hell—!"

Fewster jumped as if I'd jabbed him with a darning needle. I jumped, too—straight toward the bedroom window.

The shade was drawn down. But there was a two inch crack at the bottom, where the sash was raised for ventilation. And I'd tabbed a pair of bright blue glims peering into the room. They seemed feminine, somehow.

I hit the pane with my shoulder. Glass crashed outward in a sharp, tinkling shower. I went head first over the sill, landed on all fours in a geranium bed with my trumpet ploughing up fertilizer. Then I got up on my gams, started running.

TOWARD the front of the tepee a pair of slim silken ankles twinkled through the fog. I goosed myself into high gear, took out after the lamming wren.

Presently I overhauled her in the

middle of a vacant lot that adjoined the bungalow. I made a flying tackle, wrapped my arms around her thighs and hips. She went down with me, and I mashed the bejaspers out of her with my hundred and ninety pounds of beef.

She squirmed, struggled, managed to twist around until she was on her back. This gave me a swivel at her lineaments; and they were worth seeing. She was a gorgeous brunette tomato, alluringly young and delightfully fragrant. Her black hair was mussed and her dark glims blazed into mine, angry, frantic, shooting sparks.

She panted: "Let me up—you're crushing me—"

"I'll flatten you like buckwheat cakes if you don't calm down," I grunted. I was drawing a terrific wallop out of pressing her to the ground. Her skirt had scooted up past her knees, revealing stems that were long, tapered, delicious. The view made me bubble like an overcharged battery.

She tried to slam me with her little fists. That made me sore. I pinioned her wrists with one mitt; slapped her across the features with my free palm. I growled: "Be good or I'll belabor the French pastry out of you."

For an instant she got quiet. Then she came to life again in an unexpected way. She twisted her arms loose, wrapped them around my neck. She parted her succulent crimson lips, clamped them to my yap and fed me a kiss ten degrees hotter than molten lava. I felt steam trickling all the way down to my shoestrings.

"Please. . . !" she whispered.

"I'll make it w-worth your while to let me g-go!"

APPARENTLY she considered her freedom to be worth quite a price. Her bouncy bon-bons were taut against my chest; and I could see their creamy upper slopes through the frock's torn bodice, sweet enough to make you forget your hymn book. Her brassiere didn't amount to a damn in the way of concealment.

In a boudoir I might have lost my self control. But I had something else on my mind in this vacant lot. I hauled her upright and rasped: "I'm bribe-proof tonight, sister. Now what was the idea, peeping into that bungalow?"

"All right, I—I'll tell you," she caved in. "Here, this is the best way to explain it. Let me sh-show you something." Then she opened her handbag, rummaged in it.

Her ostensible surrender caught me with my trousers at half mast. I had no idea what she was going to dredge out of the little purse; but I certainly didn't expect it to be a .28 caliber nickel-plated gat.

That was what it turned out to be, however; and she jammed it into my brisket. "If you don't let me go, I'll shoot you!" she whispered.

Then she turned, ran.

I made a grab at her, caught the yoke of her dress as she pulled away. The silk tore; exposed her perfect back. She pivoted, maced me over the noggin with the barrel of the roscoe.

Pain played leap-frog through my grey matter. I stumbled, lurched off-balance. She swatted

me again and I went down for the count.

For maybe half a minute, everything was blacker than the inside of an eight ball. Then I snapped out of it—just as a shot sounded from the direction of Kane Fewster's cottage hideout.

The spanking report was followed by a masculine outcry, raw, ugly. That spelled trouble; bad trouble. I scrambled to my dogs, staggered toward the little white-washed wigwam. I gained the busted window and plunged in over the sill.

Then I gasped: "What the hell—!"

The Fewster guy was sprawled on the floor with a bullet hole in his dream-box and ketchup leaking out of the puncture. He was deader than steamed clams.

To make the setup messier, there was another bozo crouched over in a far corner. I took a gander at him, tabbed his swarthy Latin puss and chiseled profile. He was my Spanish client, Jose Cordova—the one who'd hired me to locate Fewster!

CORDOVA still looked like a matinee idol even though he'd been off the screen several years. Once upon a time he'd been a top ranking star; but the talkies had scuttled his acting career. The early, imperfect microphones had recorded his resonant voice in the falsetto register, and he'd been laughed out of the galloping snapshots—thereby costing the Parametro studio almost half a million clackers to pay off his long term contract.

Seeing him here in this bedroom

shocked the tripe out of me. I bleeped: "I thought you were home!"

He gulped like a guy eating oysters. "When—when you phoned me a while ago and told me Fewster's hiding place, I decided to come along and find out why he had vaneeshed. The back door was open and I walked een. Then I heard a shot. . . ."

I caught him by the lapels, shook him until his uppers and lowers rattled like dice in a wash-tub. "Are you sure you didn't fire that shot yourself?"

He sagged. His olive complexion turned a billious green. "*Por Dios*, no! Why would I keel my best friend?"

His voice rang true. I believed him. I said: "You stay right here, see?" and turned, vaulted out the window again. The person I wanted was that brunette cupcake who'd maced me with her roscoe.

She was gone, though. Away off, I heard the snarl of a high powered motor; the whine of gears and the soprano shriek of tortured tires hitting a curve. Then silence.

I swore, went back to the bedroom. "Okay, Jose. I'm getting you the hell out of here."

"Before you call the police?"

"Yeah. Otherwise you might be suspected of the bump."

"But I deedn't do eet, I tell you!"

I said: "That's why I'm protecting your interests. After all, you're my client. Come on, we'll try to fix you an alibi." And I snapped off the lights, steered the former star out to my bucket. We headed

for his lavish shanty near Beverly.

Presently I parked in front of his tepee and we went inside. Jose stumbled to a sideboard, poured himself a stiff slug of red-eye. I left him and went racing upstairs to the second floor; located his wife's boudoir. I barged in without knocking.

An orchid shaded lamp glowed with sudden light and Nelia Cordova sat up in bed, fastened the startled focus on me. "Who—what—why, Mr. Turner—Dan!"

I glued my glims on her fragile blonde loveliness. The covers had skidded south from her velvety shoulders, and I gandered plenty of delishful epidermis. Nelia had the face of an angel, the curves of a scenic railway. Her golden hair had a tendency to cascade over one azure eye, her kisser was crimson and sultry.

I said: "Listen, hon. Snap yourself wide awake. I want to slip you some important instructions."

"Instructions?" Then she added: "Where's Jose?"

"Downstairs. Now pay attention. If anybody asks you, you're to say he was home all evening. He wasn't out with me. He wasn't anywhere. Got it?"

She glided out of bed. I caught a brief twinkle of bare legs before the nightgown draped them. She came toward me. "Why do you tell me this? What's happened?"

"Plenty. We found Kane Fewster. And then he got browned."

THE next thing I knew, Nelia was in my arms. She pressed herself close to me, trembled like



I said, "Yeah, honey, I know you killed Fewster."

a kitten coughing beef seeds in a cyclone. "Fewster m-murdered? And you think the police w-will suspect Jose?"

"It's possible," I said. "That is, if they find out he was there at the time."

"But—but my God, nobody could accuse Jose of a thing like that! He wouldn't—"

"That's my opinion, too. But it's best to play safe."

"Yes. Of course. And yet . . . suppose they *do* accuse him?"

"He'll be safe if you give him an alibi."

"But suppose somebody saw him?"

I said: "That would be bad."

"Dan, listen to me," she whimpered. "Do you know who really k-killed Fewster?"

"No."

"Then you've got to find out! You must! You've got to clear Jose—for me! I'll d-do anything—"

I had a terrific yen to plant my kisser on hers. After all, I'm as human as the next guy; and when I felt her warm softness clinging to me I got full of tingling notions. I kept my balance, though. It would never do to take advantage of her while her hubby was around. He might ankle in, see what was happening.

So I just said: "Okay, sweet suff. I'll get on the job." And I turned, went out of the boudoir, clumped downstairs.

Cordova was still soaking up rye. I buttonholed him. "Look. You keep your trap clamped, see? And remember, you haven't been outdoors all night. I'll let you know if I discover anything." Then I beat it to my rambling wreck.

I drove to a druggery, put through a call to my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad. When he answered I said: "How would you like to hear about a croaking?"

"Huh? What? Say, who the hell is this?"

"Dan Turner. And the deceased citizen is Kane Fewster, the Parametro mogul."

"No!"

"Yeah. And I'm trying to trail the killer for you." Then I gave Dave the address of the bungalow where he'd find Fewster's remainders; after which I rang off, went back to my bucket and started moving again.

There was just one obvious angle to work on. That was Butch Gorham, the bookie. He'd made threats against Fewster, strong enough to drive the guy into hiding. So I decided to put the clamps on this Gorham mug; maybe scare a confession out of him if I went at it properly.

I hunted up an all-night crap game I happened to know about; dropped ten bucks on one pass of the dice. Then I asked one of the players a question, got the information I wanted. Butch Gorham lived in a pent-house apartment on Wilshire.

I drove there.

IT WAS past midnight when I knuckled the portal of the swanky layout. Nothing happened for a pair of minutes. Then the door opened and a brunette cutie stared out at me.

I said: "What the hell!" and damn near swallowed my bridge-work. She was the wren I had chased across that vacant lot next to Kane Fewster's cottage hide-out!

As soon as I got over the shock, I noticed that she was embellished in a set of pajamas three degrees thinner than a cobweb; looked as if she'd been catching up on her beauty sleep. I could tab her ivory charms gleaming through the lace-work, even more intriguing than they'd seemed during our recent

wrestling match in the open air.

Her lush tidbits surged frantically when she put the focus on me; threatened to split the restraining gossamer that covered them. Her mouth made a red O of surprise.

I was plenty started myself. I didn't show it, though. I just yanked out the .32 automatic I always carry in a shoulder holster; jabbed it against her flat tummy. "Hi, toots," I said. "How would you like your tripes tunneled?"

She sagged, started to fold. I caught her, inhaled a whiff of her perfume. It was the same fragrance I'd noticed in Fewster's bungalow a little earlier, before he got joined to his ancestors.

I carried the black-haired doll into the pent-house, kicked the door shut. Then I stretched her on a divan in the living room, leaned over her. "You weren't expecting me, eh?"

"N-no! How d-did you find—"

"Never mind how I traced you," I growled. There was no point in letting her know it had been strictly accidental. "What are you doing here in Gorham's igloo?"

"I—I live here. Butch and I—"

"Oh, a love nest. Okay. Trot him out."

"He's not here. He left this afternoon on a business trip to San Francisco."

I dragged her with me while I made a fast frisk of the elaborate flat. Sure enough, Gorham wasn't there. I ankled the brunette chick back to the davenport. "I had to be sure you weren't feeding me a load of malarkey," I said.

She eyed me. "Wh-what do you want with Butch?"

"Maybe I wanted to pay him interest for that swat over the dome you gave me with your rod," I said. "And on the other hand, maybe I want to pinch him for murder."

Her dark glims bugged out and she seemed genuinely flabbergasted. "Murder—?"

"Yeah. As if you didn't know he creamed Kane Fewster a while ago."

SHE appeared on the verge of swooning. Her puss went palid and she made choking noises in her throat. "Fewster . . . d-dead? I don't believe you! He w-was alive wh-when I left his c-cottage. And even if he did get k-killed afterward, Butch couldn't have done it!"

"All right, babe. Keep on fronting for your bookie boy-friend and your asterisk will wind up in the bastille."

"No! Not th-that!"

I shrugged. "Wait and see."

"But I tell you Butch is up north! I can prove it. There's plenty of w-witnesses."

Maybe she was leveling. I said: "Then perhaps you plugged Fewster yourself," and whisked out my nippers, made a pass at her wrists.

She wailed: "Please—you mustn't arrest me! My name would be in the papers. They'd print my p-picture—"

"So what?"

"I've got a family back east. They think I'm in the movies. They don't know I'm the same as m-married to a gambler. . . ."

"Too bad, baby. You should have thought of all this before you drilled the guy."

"But I didn't! You've got to believe me!" And she wrapped herself around me like hot string; fused herself to my wishbone and quivered to beat hell.

She had plenty to quiver with, too. I enjoyed the sensation. But I held myself in check. "You were in Fewster's bungalow tonight. I sniffed your perfume in the joint. And when I chased you across the vacant lot you slugged me with your gat. What was the idea?"

"I admit I w-was there. But not to sh-shoot him." Her lips were tremulous and the front of her pajama jacket bulged as she squeezed up against me.

A hunch sneaked up on me. I had this brunette quail on the run; she was scared spitless. Maybe I could wangle some information out of her if I pretended to play my cards her way. I pocketed my bracelets, slipped an arm around her cuddly waist. "I hate to think of you as a killer, sweet stuff," I said. "No jane as lovely as you should be in a fix like this."

SHE sighed, almost gasped with relief. I could read her mind like a book. She figured she had me going—and she pressed what she thought was her advantage. She pulled my head down, fed me her ripe kisser. The high voltage contact jolted me like a snort of Vat 69.

I returned the compliment, dished her as good as she sent. I ran my mitts through her midnight hair, caressed her creamy shoulders. At first I was just try-

ing to gain her confidence—but presently my campaign backfired. Her sultry ardor stoked my boilers further than I intended.

Later she said: "You won't arrest me, will you?"

"Maybe not. It all depends."

"Depends on what?" she whispered.

"On whether you come clean with me."

"What d-do you want to know?"

"Everything," I said. "In the first place, why were you in Fewster's hideout tonight?"

"Butch sent me. I—I should have gone there last night instead of tonight, but I put it off."

"Ah. Now we're getting somewhere," I rasped. "It's just as I thought. Fewster owed your boyfriend fifty G's and was ducking the debt."

"Yes."

"Then, somehow, you learned where the guy was hiding. You went there to put the finger on him, have him bumped."

She wailed: "No! All I did was p-plant a threatening letter where Fewster would find it!"

"A demand for the fifty grand?"

"That's right."

"How did you get inside the stash?"

"The back door. I picked the lock."

This made sense. It explained why the back door had been unlatched when I went to the little wigwam. I said: "Then you must have been hiding inside when I arrived."

She nodded. "I heard you come in; heard Fewster sh-shoot at you. Then, later, while you were talking with him, I slipped out

through the front door and started to run across the vacant lot toward my car. But you crashed out through the window and c-came after me. . . ."

"And you didn't peep in that window at any time?"

"No!"

"Or trigger a pill at Fewster?"

"No!"

"You didn't have one of Butch Gorham's gunsels with you to do the actual shooting?"

"No. I was alone. I swear it!"

I said: "Okay. For the present, we'll assume you're telling the truth. You delivered this threatening note to Fewster's cottage, then lammed. The note was to scare him into paying off a gambling debt he owed Butch."

SHE nodded but wouldn't meet my gaze. A furtive expression crossed her puss, insincere, evasive. I sensed that I'd reached the one weak spot in an otherwise truthful story.

I grabbed a handful of curves. "Don't hold out on me, kiddo. Talk or I'll pinch a cancer on you."

"Please . . . you're hurting me!" She drew a quavery breath and added: "All right. I'll come clean. The fifty thousand dollars wasn't a gambling debt."

"Then what the hell was it?"

"A shakedown payment that was past due."

I yeped: "Shakedown? You mean Butch Gorham was blackmailing the Fewster bozo?"

"Y-yes."

"So that's what Fewster meant when he told me Gorham had bled him white!" I muttered. "How long has it been going on?"

"Quite a while. I don't know exactly."

"And what did Butch have on the guy?"

"Plenty. He knew all about the dirty trick Fewster played on Jose Cordova."

This damned near floored me. "What dirty trick?"

She whispered: "It was when talkies first came in. Fewster was just an electrician for Parametro in those days."

"Yeah," I said. "Being a juicer was what got him into sound recording work. Later he bounced to the top of the heap, became studio production chief and went high hat. So what?"

"So he secretly hated Jose Cordova, who was one of the biggest stars on the Parametro lot at that time."

"Fewster hated Jose Cordova? Why?" I gargled.

"Because they were both in love with the same girl—and she married Cordova. It made Fewster sore, and so—"

All of a sudden the whole thing dawned on me; I had the answer to my riddle. I said: "I get it. Fewster handled the microphones on Jose's first talkie; adjusted the recording equipment to make the Latin bozo's voice sound falsetto!"

"Yes."

"In other words, Fewster wrecked Cordova's career out of jealous spite—and then kept pretending to be his friend all through the years."

The brunette cupcake nodded.

I could reconstruct the rest of it without much trouble. To begin with, the Parametro stockholders had lost a fortune when

Jose Cordova was forced to retire. And if they'd ever found out it was Fewster's fault they would have fired him from his executive berth, blackballed him out of Hollywood for ruining their dark Latin star.

With this possibility dangling over him, no wonder Fewster had paid hush money to Butch Gorham until he was flat broke. In brief, Fewster's stinking scheme had backfired on him—thanks to Butch horning into the picture. By wrecking Cordova's career, Fewster had also smashed his own.

And finally he had paid off with his life!

Which was the one part that didn't quite fit. I looked down at the brunette wren and said: "What about the threatening note you planted in Fewster's hideout?"

"It w-warned him to kick through with the cash, or else Butch would tell Jose Cordova the whole story."

"And you were supposed to deliver the letter last night instead of tonight?"

"Y-yes."

"Then Fewster never got the message in time. He probably was unable to pay the dough in any case; but when he failed to come across, I'll bet Butch carried out his threat!"

She blinked at me. "Wh-what do you mean?" Her glims looked bewildered through a stray lock of raven hair.

And then the last hunk of jig-saw puzzle fell into place. "I mean Butch spilled to Jose Cordova, then beat it out of town before the fireworks began!" I said. And

I pelted out of the penthouse with my hip pockets dipping sand.

DOWNSTAIRS, I piled into my chariot; sent it roaring toward the Cordova igloo. When I got there I didn't bother to ring the bell. I wanted the advantage of surprise. So I fished out my set of master keys, found one that worked the lock. I lunged inside, arrowed upstairs, hurtled my heft into the Cordova hombre's bedroom.

He jerked erect from his pillow. I drew my roscoe, thrust it in his yap and snarled: "The jig's up, pal. Stick out your fins for the nippers."

"Wh-what ees thees—?"

"I'm nabbing you for cooling Kane Fewster," I said.

His swarthy complexion turned green around the fringes and he shrank back. "*Madre de Dois*, no!"

"Don't deny it," I snapped. "You received a message yesterday telling you how Fewster had jinxed your career in the howling tintypes. That's why you hired me to find him when he went into hiding. You wanted to burn him down."

Cordova stared at me as if I were a mind reader. "*Si, Senor* Turner. I admeet I had found out how Fewster wrecked me. I weel even admeet I wanted to keel heem. Bot I deedn't get to do eet."

"Oh, no?"

"No! I walked eento hees cottage about the time you crashed out through the weindow. I confronted heem—"

"And drilled him," I said.

"Eet ees not so! He yanked a peestol from under hees pillow, pointed eet at me. Jus' then a shot sounded from somewhere and . . . he fell dead."

I said: "If you can make a jury swallow that, you're a wonder."

And then somebody came flurrying at me from the adjoining room. It was Nelia Cordova, the Latin guy's wife. Her hair was flying in a golden cascade, her blue glims were hysterical behind the yellow curls, and her voice was a keening bleat.

"You let Jose alone! He didn't kill Fewster. *I did!*"

I said calmly: "Yeah, honey. I know you did. And I figured I'd jolt you into confessing if I accused your hubby."

She sagged. "You . . . knew I was g-guilty?"

"Sure. You were probably listening in on an extension phone when I called Jose tonight and told him I had located Fewster. You eavesdropped when I gave the address of Fewster's hideout in Westwood.

"You knew Jose would go there for a showdown. So you sneaked out ahead of him without his knowledge. You drove to the Westwood cottage, reached it a little before Jose arrived. *It was you I saw peeping in the window as I talked to Fewster.*"

"You . . . recognized me?"

"Not at the time," I admitted. "I knew the glims were shemale, but I didn't stop to think why. When I dived over the sill, I must have missed you in the shadows. By mistake, I chased after a brunette jane who happened to be there for another reason. I col-

lared her, thought she was the one I wanted. I was too stupid to realize that her optics were dark, whereas the ones I'd seen at the window had been blue.

"Anyhow, I wasted considerable time with her; got conked groggy for my pains. While that was taking place, you went to the window again; looked in. You saw Fewster pull a gun, aim it at your hubby. So you shot first. You did it to save Jose from getting bumped. Then you lammed, came home."

Her shoulders drooped. "Y-yes. That's the way it happened. But I c-can't understand how you found out. . . ."

I SAID: "Luck, mainly. And memory. I was talking to that same brunette cupcake a while ago, and a strand of her black hair accidentally fell over one glim. That was my tip-off. It joggled my grey matter; made me recall that you wear your yellow hair over one eye all the time.

"And then I realized why I had known those blue peepers were shemale, back at Kane Fewster's window. *I remembered that they had peered through a strand of golden hair.* And that put the finger on you."

Jose Cordova got up, put his arms around her. "You k-keeled Fewster to save my life?"

She nodded, choked.

He turned to me. "I weel take the rap, *Senor* Turner. I weel not let you arrest Nelia."

"Nuts," I grinned in his pearly bicuspid. "Reconstructing a crime is one thing. Proving it is some-

(Continued on page 127)

HOMICIDE

CHAPTER I

Warning Bullet

SOMETHING went *spang!* against my jalopy's windshield and a spiderweb of cracks circled the safety glass. It made a beautiful design, but I was in no mood to appreciate it.

I said: "What the hell—!" and jammed on the brakes, hurled myself out into the night to find the bozo who'd fired that slug. I didn't see anybody. This section of Hollywood seemed as dead as a Jap's conscience.

My strap watch showed quarter to eleven, and I noticed I'd stopped almost directly in front of Otto Kortzinger's elaborate two-story tepee. Which was just dandy, because he was the guy I was coming to visit.

Kortzinger was a former big-shot director for Pinnacle Pix, now considerably down in his luck. It had been less than thirty minutes ago when he'd phoned me at my apartment stash, begged me to call on him right away. His voice had sounded harried, haunted.

"I'm in drouble, Mr. Turner. Bad drouble. I need a brivate investigator!" he'd said in his guttural Teutonic accent. "You must help me—"

For an instant I'd been on the verge of refusing him. I didn't have much use for him, although I couldn't put my finger on any particular reason. There are some people you dislike on sight, without knowing why. And Kortzinger

just happened to rub my fur the wrong way.

But after all, I'm in the snooping racket for all the dough I can make. I'm trying to save up enough geetus to retire on before some wise disciple writes my name and address on a bullet. So when Kortzinger promised me a hundred bucks retainer, cash in advance, I'd agreed to drag my bunions over to his wikiup; listen to his woes.

Now I was on the job—to be greeted by a pistol pellet on my windshield.

Judging by the angle of the slug's impact, I had a sneaking hunch it had been triggered from somewhere close to Kortzinger's joint; maybe from one of the windows. I clenched my dukes, made for his front porch, thumbed the bell.

NOTHING happened for a while. Then all of a sudden the door jerked inward and a little old lady hung the jittery focus on me. She was short, grey-haired, dumpy, with a wrinkled puss and a kindly expression. Right now, though, she seemed to be wrestling with a Grade-A case of the inward meemies. Her map was the color of adulterated milk, her glims bulged, and she had a Luger automatic in her wavering right mitt.

Moreover, she was aiming the rod at my elly-bay.

I stiffened, twitched. I don't like folks to point hardware at me; you never know when an accident might happen. And besides, I'd been invited to come here. It was

HAUNT . . .



In the light of the moon she made a picture of flaming fury—but there was fright in her eyes, too.

Vesta was dead. Months ago she'd been electrocuted in her bathtub. Yet every time Kortzinger projected a few reels of his latest film, Vesta came back to accuse him of murder! Dan saw it with his own eyes! And his entry in the case was the signal to touch off a new wave of hate and death!

bad enough to have my windshield ruined; but when I found myself peering into the wrong end of this miniature cannon I got damned peevish.

The old jane started jabbering at me. I couldn't savvy a single mouthful of it, but I tabbed her finger tightening on the Luger's trigger. That spelled danger in any language. I knew I had to do something in a hell of a hurry if I didn't want a tunnel in my favorite tripe.

So I took a chance and yelled: "Hey—look out! Behind you!" The gag had whiskers a yard long; but it worked. She started to turn around. I made a lunge at the roscoe, twisted it out of her gnarled mitt.

She shrank away from me, whimpering. Just then I heard foot-falls inside the igloo, and a chunky bozo with close-cropped hair and a map like a full moon came belting forward from one of the rear rooms.

He was Otto Kortzinger, and he was saying: "What's this? What's this?"

"Take it easy, chum," I growled. "I'm Dan Turner. And it's impolite to greet visitors with a gat."

He glued an irate glare on the old dame, barked a guttural question at her. She answered in the same tongue, as if explaining something.

Then Kortzinger turned to me again. "I am very sorry, Mr. Turner. This is Mrs. Hasdorf, my housekeeper. She has been in my family for years; long before I ever came from Vienna to Hollywood. She thought you were an enemy,

and she was trying to protect me from you."

The wrinkled little woman grabbed my hand, clung to it, choked out something I couldn't understand. But I gathered that she was apologizing to me.

I patted her shoulder. "That's okay, lady. Skip it. I don't hold grudges."

She turned, powdered to the rear part of the stash. As soon as she was gone, Kortzinger gestured me inside.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr. Turner. I think it is only fair to warn you, though, that if you work for me there is a possibility of danger."

I said: "Yeah. Somebody already tried to pump a pill into me. It happened as I parked a minute ago."

"But I—I didn't hear a shot!"

"The gat was silenced, probably," I said.

His round pan got pasty. "Gott!" he whispered; and a furtive expression came into his glims. Somehow he reminded me of a weasel—or a cornered rat.

Then he reached out, grabbed my arm. "Come upstairs, please. I will show you what is frightening me."

"Such as?"

"I am being haunted," he said. And he shuddered like a dog coughing soup-bones.

CHAPTER II

Cinema Specter

THE weird quality of his voice put goose pimples on my spine big enough to hang your hat on. Not that I believe in

ghosts—but apparently Kortzinger did. And I began to wonder if I was dealing with a guy who'd lost his mental marbles.

As I trailed him upstairs to the second floor, my mind went over his history, as much as I knew of it. He had been in Hollywood ever since Hitler's Gestapo ran him out of his native Austria. In that time he'd become an ace director for Pinnacle Pix. Then, five or six months ago, tragedy and tough luck had begun roosting on his doorstep.

First his wife, a gorgeous blonde cupcake named Vesta Vardon, had died under shocking circumstances; and that isn't intended as a pun, either. She'd been a Pinnacle contract actress, a potential star; but while taking a bath, an electric heater had accidentally fallen into her tub. There'd been a short circuit, and she got jolted to glory.

After this, Kortzinger had gone plumb to hell in a handbasket. He'd started hitting the bottle, neglecting his work. He turned out three stinkers in a row for Pinnacle. They should have been box office smashes with the right kind of direction; but Kortzinger had loused them up by his drunken carelessness. So the studio dropped his option, and he hadn't worked for quite a while—until recently.

Within the past thirty days a quickie outfit had hired the guy to direct an opus for them, a "B" pic with only one decent name in the cast. He was supposed to be working on it now; and it might earn him a fresh toe-hold on success if he did a good job. Perhaps he would. At least he seemed to be on

the water wagon; or anyhow I hadn't smelled any skee on his breath, thus far.

WE REACHED the second floor corridor and he guided me to a den paneled in fumed oak. I piped a small, silvered screen set up at the far end of the room. Against the opposite wall I saw a movie projector, threaded with standard film, and ready to be switched on.

Kortzinger said: "I always look at the 'rushes' of my productions here in the brivacy of my home. When the day's scenes have been shot, I have the negatives developed and brints made so that I may see the results by myself."

I nodded. "So what?" I asked him. "Where does this haunting business come in?"

His little rat-like peepers darted around the room. "I will show you." He snapped off the room's lights, flipped a button on the projector. A square of brilliance flickered on the silvered screen on the far wall; then a movie scene splashed into view.

It was a medium closeup of Lisbeth Lancaster, the voluptuous brunette star who was playing the lead in Kortzinger's quickie—the only member of his whole damned cast whose name was familiar to the general public. She was going through her emotional paces in a solo scene, delivering a line of dialogue in her husky contralto.

And then, as the reel unwound, I drew a sharp breath; felt the short hairs rising at the nape of my neck. I whispered out a startled: "What the hell—!"

Something was happening on

the screen in front of me; something fantastic, screwy. Lisbeth Lancaster was fading off in a shimmering blur, like a lap-dissolve shot. Her voice, too, was losing itself under the superimposition of another voice which kept getting stronger, clearer.

That same change was taking place visually as well as audibly. As the new voice swelled, a different face was swimming into sharp focus. This new wren was fragile, ethereal; a yellow-haired doll with glims like stars.

I tabbed her. She was the late Vesta Vardon—Kortzinger's wife, who'd been electrocuted in her bathtub several months ago!

Her gorgeous image drew distinct on the screen. She seemed to be staring straight at you, her glims accusing. Then, like a weird climax, came the words:

"You . . . murdered . . . me!"

The remark seemed to be tossed straight at my teeth, and I jumped as if a wasp had used me for a pinchusion. Abruptly the blonde Vardon cutie's puss vanished from the picture and I saw Lisbeth Lancaster back in the scene, calmly delivering her dialogue like a serene black-haired goddess. Her lines could have been so much double-talk as far as I was concerned. I wasn't even listening. I was too damned shocked.

KORTZINGER switched off the projecting machine, killed the sound apparatus, turned on the room's lights. His round map appeared almost green under beads of sweat, and his glassy optics stuck out like doorknobs.

"Now you know why I say I am

haunted!" he choked.

I stuck a match in my kisser, tried to light it with a gasper. Then I recovered my control. "How long has this thing been going on, for God's sake?"

"Every night for a week! Each time I bring the day's rushes home to my brivate brojector, it happens. My dead wife's face appears, accuses me. It is driving me insane, Mr. Turner! Something must be done—"

"Keep your shirt on," I said. "This looks like a rib to me. There are several ways it could be worked, and none of them supernatural. Your cameraman might be faking with a double exposure, filming somebody who resembles your wife before photographing the scenes you direct."

"Impossible. It was Vesta we saw. You think I would not recognize her?"

"Then maybe somebody in the studio developing room is superimposing an old shot of her onto this new footage. Some film editor or cutter."

"I have thought of that, and I have checked up—"

That was as far as he got. From the doorway behind me, a silenced roscoe sneezed: "*Pee-yowpl!*" and I felt a lead slug pluck at my sleeve; heard it spank into the wall behind me.

CHAPTER III

Death in the Doorway

THE bullet chewed splinters out of the paneling. One flew across my mush, raked a furrow. It stung to beat hell and I

could feel a trickle of gravy running down my chin.

In my fist I still had the Luger automatic that I'd taken away from Kortzinger's wrinkled housekeeper, Mrs. Has-



The roof caved in on my cranium. A pile driver wouldn't have been more effective.

dorf. I hefted the heater, pivoted, took a flying dive at the doorway.

The second floor hall was dark,

but I thought I caught a flash of something shimmery at the far end, in the shadows. I yodeled:

"Freeze back there, whoever you are! Make another move and I'll deal you a deck of lead!"

The blurry figure paid no attention to me; kept on going. I saw it vanish over the threshold of an unlighted room; and just as it disappeared I squeezed the Luger's trigger.

Nothing happened, though, because the damned gat was empty. In fact, as I hurled myself forward, I took a sniff at the muzzle and there wasn't a trace of burned cordite.

This told me one thing. It proved that Mrs. Hasdorf hadn't been the party who fired a shot at my windshield when I first arrived. I dropped the Luger; dragged out my own .32 automatic from the shoulder holster where I always carry it. Then I gained the doorway through which the blurry shape had just lammed. I catapulted into a bedroom.

There was an open casement window across from me; and I detected faint scrambling sounds outside. I also heard what seemed to be faint she-male moans of fright. I leaped to the window, peered outward and down.

The side of Kortzinger's wikiup supported a wooden lattice or trellis covered with rambler rose vines. There was a quail clinging to the trellis, just below my reach—a jane in a shimmery silk dress of some dark color. She was the blurred shape I had been chasing; and she'd evidently tried to escape by going out the window, down the lattice-work.

She was in a hell of a predicament now, however. Freakishly enough, the bottom of her frock

had somehow got snagged and tangled in the thorny rose vines as she descended—and the entire damned garment was up over her noggin, trapping her. I saw why her moans had sounded muffled.

I could pipe plenty of other things, too. Apparently she couldn't wriggle free of the enveloping material, couldn't go either up or down. And from the neck south she was as nude as a picked goose except for thin glove silk panties and a wisp of brassiere, its uplift cups crammed with scenery.

HER map was obscured by the reversed skirt, of course. But I didn't need to put the focus on her features to know she was something extra special in the way of yumph. Her kicking stems were tapered, nifty; and the way her hips filled out the skin-tight scanties made me feel nine years younger.

Her whole weight was hanging by her fingers, and the raised position of her arms caused her whatchacallems to pout out like taut domes, quivering, delishful. For an instant I got so interested in feasting my optics on them that I forgot to look anywhere else.

Then, presently, I noticed she was losing her grip with her left hand; and when I stared closer I tabbed the answer. She had a gat in that mitt; a small automatic with a bulb-shaped gadget on its snout and smoke curling out of the muzzle. In other words, a silenced rod that had just been fired!

I reached down, tried to grab her; but she was too far below the sill. And I didn't want to climb

down the trellis myself; it might not support an extra hundred and ninety pounds.

So I said: "Kiddo, you're caught. And you'd better hang on tight or you'll drop twenty feet and shatter your pretty chrysanthemum."

"D-do something . . . quick!" she begged.

"Yeah," I said. "If you can hold out another half a minute everything will be okay. I'll dash downstairs and outside; stand under you to break your fall when you let go. Catch?"

"I c-catch. But hurry . . . !" She was almost in tears.

I whirled, left the window, raced out of the room and down the staircase.

And then, just as I catapulted out onto the front porch, I caromed into somebody.

We came together with a hell of a thud; bounced apart. He was a tall, red-haired bozo with a freckled puss and a boyish grin that came back to his kisser as soon as he got a gander at me.

"For the love of mud, Sherlock—what's your hurry?" he rubbed himself where I'd smacked against him.

I recovered my own balance, stared, tabbed him. He was Lew Cuneo, a quickie producer from Poverty Row; the guy Ottó Kortzinger was now working for. He was a hell of a swell egg, too. I'd known him a long time, although I hadn't encountered him in quite a while.

I said: "Hi, Lew. Pardon me while I give you the brush-off. Somebody's waiting for me to get her out of a nasty jam." And I

shoved past him, dashed around to the side of the house where that wren was hanging to the wooden trellis.

That is, I thought she was hanging there. But when I looked up, I saw I was wrong. The jane was gone!

HER dress was still stuck to the thorns, which meant she must have managed to yank herself out of it and climb down to safety. By the same token, she couldn't have got very far away in the short time it had taken me to dash downstairs and outdoors. So I started prowling the grounds for her. After all, I figured it ought to be easy to find a cookie who wasn't wearing anything but step-ins and brassiere.

I hauled out my pencil flashlight, started brooming the bushes, spraying the garden with illumination. No dice. My undressed doll wasn't anywhere in view. I swore, started making wider circles. And then I heard a sound that froze my nooks and crannies.

It was a gunshot from inside the Kortzinger igloo.

I pivoted, sprinted for the front porch, hurtled my heft at the open doorway. And as I blammed across the threshold I tripped over something soft, yielding.

It was the sprawled remnants of red-haired Lew Cuneo, the quickie producer. He was flat on his freckled mush, and chili sauce was leaking out of a hole in the back of his conk. I didn't need to feel his pulse.

One hinge at that tunnel in his noggin told me he was as dead as clam chowder.

CHAPTER IV

Murder Motive?

EVEN as I stood there staring at the defunct guy, Otto Kortzinger came belting downstairs, hellity-blip. "Turner—I heard a shot—" Then he saw Lew Cuneo's carcass and rocked back on his heels. "*Gott!*" he strangled.

I nailed him. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Upstairs in the den."

"Ever since I raced out to see who slapped a silenced slug at us?"

"Yes. I was afraid to follow you. But just now, when this loud report sounded, I summoned my courage and decided to come down . . ."

He seemed to be leveling. And it didn't make sense to suspect him of cooling Cuneo, the bozo who was helping him make a new start in the galloping snapshots.

I started to ask him where his phone was, so I could call police headquarters and report the croaking to my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad. Before I could speak, though, I heard a motor being gunned to hellangone in the outer night. And I recognized the clattery sound.

It was my own jalopy!

I said: "Hey, dammit—!" and blipped out to the porch with my coat-tails dipping gravel; spurted across the front lawn as hard as I could pelt. I gained the sidewalk just as my rambling wreckage got under way at the curb.

At the risk of taking a header and peeling all the bark off my puss against the asphalt street, I

made a power-dive; caught my fingers around the rear bumper. Another lunge put me precariously on the curved turtle-deck as the car whoosed around the corner of the next intersection on two wheels and a prayer, its tires wailing soprano.

That was no way to treat rubber in wartime. I swore, managed to cop a swivel through the rear window. A jane was doing this wild-eyed driving; the same quail who'd clung to Kortzinger's trellis a while ago. I tabbed her because she was practically peeled to the buff—barring the wispy brassiere and panties. There couldn't possibly be two undressed dolls barging around the neighborhood. This was definitely my chicken.

She was a brunette dish, I now noticed. Her hair was like tumbled strands of spun coal against the creamy whiteness of her shoulders; and presently I caught a peep at her puss in the rear view mirror. Her lovely lineaments startled the bejaspers out of me.

She was the leading lady of Kortzinger's new quickie, Lisbeth Lancaster!

BY DINT of some terrific acrobatic contortions I contrived to scramble my poundage onto the coupe's left running board as Lisbeth notched her speed upward. Apparently she wasn't aware I'd come aboard; because when I presently reached the window on her side and shoved my map in close to her, she almost jumped out of her step-ins.

"My God—!" she said when she tabbed me. She jerked at the wheel;

damned near sent us up a telegraph pole.

I grabbed the tiller, straightened it. Then I jammed my roscoe against her brisket and said: "Slow down and don't try anything rash, sweet stuff. Otherwise I'm liable to forget myself and blow your kidneys to Pasadena."

"Oh-h-h . . . !" she moaned. Then she pulled over, stopped. We were on a side street where there was no traffic at that late hour; even the surrounding houses were darkened, silent. That meant I wouldn't be disturbed when I started doing a little detective work of my own personal kind.

I slid in alongside the Lancaster lovely, fastened the icy clutch on her velvety shoulders, twisted her around to face me. "Now then," I grunted.

"Now th-then, what?"

"Don't pull the innocent stuff. I want to know why you popped a silenced pellet at my windshield when I came to Kortzinger's igloo?"

Her silence defied me.

I said: "And why, later, did you spank another slug at me in his den?"

"Try and f-find out."

I told her that would be a pleasure, and hauled her closer to me. "You'll talk or wish you had," I said.

"What are you g-going to do?"

"Kiss you until your toenails crackle," I answered, and proceeded to give her a demonstration.

She struggled, tried to avert her tremulous mouth. I found it, though, and I spooned her a sample of what I had in mind. It



One moment she'd been quiet in the tub. The next minute, jolted to glory.

wasn't any story-book kiss, either. I put steam in it.

She gasped. I tabbed her tempting breastworks swelling, moving in undulant surges against the restraining brassiere. "No . . . please . . . you mustn't . . . you *can't* . . ."

"You'd be surprised at the things that can be done in a j-alopy," I said. "I had this seat made special. The back tilts down, makes like a sofa."

"Please . . . you wouldn't d-dare . . . !" she moaned.

"That's what you think." I fumbled for the latch that would let the seat-back down. "You're going to spill or take the consequences."

She sighed, got a resigned smile on her yap. "Well, if you insist," she whispered; and went limp, unresisting in my embrace. It was like hitting the jackpot with your second nickel.

Her willingness stopped me cold. Up until then, I'd been enjoying myself; it's nice to be able to mix pleasure and business. Particularly when the pleasure will present-

ly get you the business you're after—which, in my case, was information.

But I realized, now, that she didn't intend to belch what I needed to know. Therefore I couldn't afford to waste any more time pitching pash at her. Much as I regretted the decision, I relinquished my hold on her; edged away.

SHE said: "I didn't think you'd go through with it."

"Smart dame, aren't you?" I growled.

"Smart enough to outfox a cheap two-bit flatfoot."

I don't take talk like that from anybody. I opened my palm, whapped her across the mush. "This is my latest system, sister," I said. "You spill or I beat vanilla crumpets out of you."

"Help yourself. You'll regret it, though. The minute I get away from you I'm going to report this to the police. Attempted assault. Mayhem. Physical torture. And any other accusation I'm able to think of."

I said: "Don't forget murder. *That's* the charge I'm going to pin on you."

She jerked erect. "Murder? On m-me . . . ?"

"Yeah. You might have got by with squeezing a couple of lead tokens at me—as long as they missed. But when you browned Lew Cuneo you bought yourself a ticket to the gas house."

"Cuneo . . . d-dead?" she yeped. All the defiance leaked out of her. "You're k-kidding!"

"Come back and take a hinge at his remnants in Kortzinger's doorway. A corpse is no practical joke."

"But—but—"

I said: "And a half minute after he joined the angels, you tried to powder in my bucket. How do you suppose that's going to smell to a jury?"

An instant ago she'd been calm, sure of herself. Now there was panic scrawled all over her pretty pan. "Listen, Mr. Turner . . . I want to tell you something. Everything . . . !"

"Oh. A confession, eh?"

"Y-yes. I don't mean a confession that I k-killed Lew Cuneo. I didn't do that. But those other things . . . shooting at you, and stealing your car. . . . I can explain them. Then maybe you'll help me send Otto Kortzinger to the lethal chamber."

"Why Kortzinger?"

"Because he's a murderer. His wife's death wasn't accidental, a few m-months ago. *He deliberately killed her!*"

CHAPTER V

Bop On the Conk

I FASTENED the stupefied focus on the undressed Lancaster lassie. "What the hell—?" I yodeled.

Her breasts were surging under the thin brassiere and a blurt of words came out of her trap like oil from a Texas gusher. "This is how it happened," she panted. "In the first place, Vesta Vardon was my best friend. We were roommates before sh-she married Kortzinger. I loved her more than if she'd been my sister. She was my pal."

"Okay. You can skip the preliminaries."

"No I can't. I want you to understand how well I knew her. Including her personal ways, her daily habits and her private life."

"I'll take it for granted. Get to the point."

"Well, I happen to know she had a deathly fear of electric heaters in her bathroom. She wouldn't allow one to be turned on when she was bathing. Yet she was killed by just such a heater falling into her tub while it was connected."

I said: "Are you trying to—"

"I mean it doesn't make sense. You know it doesn't."

"So you think Kortzinger did the job, hunh?"

"I do. Would she allow anybody else except her husband to come in the room when she was taking a bath?"

"That depends on the kind of quail she was," I said.

Lisbeth gave me a dirty look. "Vesta was straight."

"Why would Kortzinger bump her, then?"

"For the same reason he murdered Lew Cuneo just now."

I said: "You're off your chump, kiddo. The one guy in all the world Kortzinger *wouldn't* bump was Cuneo. Hell, Lew was helping him get back on his feet. That's screwy talk."

"Not so screwy when you know the details," she reported. "I think you'll change your mind when I tell you Lew Cuneo was in love with Vesta."

"What?"

"Yes. He loved her long before she married Kortzinger, and he kept on loving her afterward. Un-

derstand, she never did anything . . . wrong. I've already told you she was straight."

"Yeah, you told me."

"But Kortzinger was jealous. He suspected her of being unfaithful to him. That was his motive for killing her and making it look like an accident. It was also his motive for killing Cuneo tonight."

I DUG a gasper from my crumpled pack, set fire to it, shook my head. "Ix-nay, babe. The guy's scared green by that phantom picture bobbing up in his movie rushes. But he doesn't act like a murderer."

"Do murderers have a certain way of acting?" she flipped at me tartly.

I said: "If Kortzinger had been planning to cream somebody, he wouldn't have phoned me to come to his stash. He wouldn't have wanted a witness." I nailed her by the wrists. "I'm afraid you've been dishing me a load of fertilizer, hon. You're trying to steer suspicion away from yourself."

She squirmed, whimpered in her throat. "Take a look at m-my gun. You'll find only two shots gone out of it. One was when I fired at your windshield. The other was when I sh-shot at you in Kortzinger's den."

Her roscoe was stuck in the waistband of her sheer panties. I lifted it. My mitt brushed against warm, smooth skin in the process; and I got a hell of a wallop out of the thrilling contact.

She said: "Since I fired only the two shots, it's obvious I couldn't have killed Cuneo."

I was forced to admit she had

something there. Moreover, her automatic had a silencer screwed on its muzzle, whereas at the time Cuneo got cooled the report had been loud, sharp. So the death-slug hadn't come out of this cannon.

To make sure, I checked on its chamber and clip. Only two shells were missing. "Okay," I grunted. "This would seem to put you in the clear, temporarily."

"Th-thanks."

"But it also shows you triggered two pills at me."

"I've owned up to that. I wanted to scare you away. I didn't want you to take Kortzinger's case. I'd found out he was going to hire a private detective, and—"

I said: "Hold on. Go slower. Why should you object to him hiring a snoop?"

"Because of the phantom picture of Vesta in those 'rushes.' They're part of a plan Lew Cuneo and I cooked up to frighten Kortzinger into confessing he murdered her."

I choked on a lungful of smoke. "You and Cuneo were behind those double exposures?"

"Yes. Kortzinger s-sort of believes in ghosts, spirits. We wanted him to think Vesta was coming back from the grave, haunting him."

"But why would Lew enter into a stunt like that?"

"I've told you he loved Vesta. So much that he even went to her several times, begged her to d-divorce Kortzinger and marry him. Naturally he was willing to help me in any c-campaign that might bring her m-murderer to justice."

Something clicked, meshed in my

think-tank. I said: "Bigahd, I've got the answer!"

"Wh-what answer?"

"Tell you later, sweet stuff. Now look. I've got a topcoat in the back deck. You can wear it. I'm going to ditch you where you can pick up a taxi. I want you to go home, stay there until I contact you. Savvy?"

She nodded.

I GOT the topcoat, helped her into it, let my mitts go briefly hither and yon as I shut out the scenery. Then I drove her to a cab stand, slipped her some dough for the fare. The last I saw of her was the wistful little smile she gave me through the taxi window. There was hope in that smile, and maybe a promise of future reward. . . .

Needles of anticipation pricked me as I headed my radiator ornament back toward Otto Kortzinger's igloo. When a cookie as delicious as Lisbeth Lancaster wants to hand out rewards, I'm just the guy that can take them!

I FOUND Dave Donaldson and a covey of his homicide heroes on the job when I arrived. Apparently the moon-faced Viennese director had put in a bleat to headquarters without being told. I ankleed inside, saw Dave quizzing Kortzinger and the wrinkled old housekeeper.

He didn't seem to be getting very far, though. He spotted me, whirled around. "Ah. So you decided to come back, eh, Sherlock? Where the hell have you been?"

"Out chasing butterflies," I said.

He lifted a sarcastic lip. "From the rouge on your kisser, I'd say you found one. What do you know about this mess?"

"Very little, yet. Give me time." I turned to the housekeeper. "Mind if I go upstairs, Mrs. Hasdorf? I want another swivel at the window that Jane climbed out of."

She looked helplessly at Kortzinger. He said: "Help yourself, Turner. But . . . but *Gott*, I hope you find something. . . ."

I barged up to the second floor. But I didn't go near the sill over which Lisbeth Lancaster had powdered. Instead, I drew my pencil flashlight; triggered a beam around the bedroom. Presently I located what I'd hoped to find: an old-fashioned tin trunk with metal slats. It was stowed away in a closet, and it was unlocked.

I lifted its lid, frisked the interior without exactly knowing what I was looking for—except in a general way. And then, just as I came across a battered photograph album and started thumbing through it, the roof caved in on my cranium.

CHAPTER VI

Killer's Finish

WHATEVER IT was that maced me, it felt like a pile-driver. A million Klieg lights blazed through my grey matter and I pitched forward; buried my schnozzle in the trunk.

I wasn't unconscious more than three or four seconds, though. That's what comes of having a cast iron conk. They're handy things to own in the private gumshoe racket.

Even so, when I got back on my feet and took a blurry gander, that photograph album was gone and there was nobody in the room with

me. My assailant had pulled a fast fade-out.

I staggered into the upper hallway with my gams feeling as limber as boiled noodles. And then I piped Otto Kortzinger standing at the head of the staircase with a funny expression on his full-moon pan.

"I was beginning to worry about you, Turner," he said.

I told him I was okay. "Come on downstairs, pal. I want to see Lieutenant Donaldson."

We barged down to where Dave was still going around in circles. He greeted me with: "Find anything, fireball?"

"Yeah, I think I've got your case solved for you."

"Ah. The genius at work. All right, let's have it."

I said: "Whoever browned Lew Cuneo is the same one that murdered Vesta Vardon a few months ago."

"Vesta Vardon—"

"Kortzinger's wife," I flipped a glance at the director.

This brought a guttural yelp from Kortzinger's kisser. "But what are you talking about, Turner? Vesta's death was an accident. Haf you gone crazy?"

"Somebody else asked me that a while back," I growled. "The answer is no. I'm saying your frau was deliberately knocked off with that electric heater."

"*Gott!* Who would—"

I turned to Dave Donaldson. "Listen, my brilliant friend. In thirty minutes I'll tell you the murderer's name. Just as soon as I've had a chance to ask Lisbeth Lancaster one question."

He gave me a double-take. "Hunh?"

"You heard me. Come on. Run me downtown to pick up a certain bit of evidence. Then we'll go see the Lancaster chick at her apartment stash."

He mumbled, but he complied. We bounced out to his official bucket; headed for Wilshire. Two blocks past LaBrea I said: "All right, slow down. Here's the Gayboy Arms where Lisbeth lives."

"But you told me you wanted to go downtown first to pick up a bit of evidence."

"A stall," I said. "Come on, get the rag out."

WE BARGED into the Gayboy, took an elevator up to the penthouse on the roof of the left turret where the brunette cupcake had her scrumptious quarters. I rang the bell.

A Chinese maid opened up. I gave her a smell of my roscoe and said: "Don't make a sound, sweetheart, or you'll be shaking hands with Confucius."

She paled under her ivory complexion. "Wh-what—?"

"Where's Miss Lancaster?"

"In—in bed."

"Alone?"

"Certainly!"

I looked at Donaldson. "Guard Miss Asia, here, while I go boudoir-prowling." Then I hot-footed toward the rear of the apartment, saw a door, opened it without knocking.

There was a dim night light burning and the room was heavy with expensive perfume. The Lancaster doll was in bed, asleep. Her tumbled hair made like ink-splotch-

es against the whiteness of the pillow, and one shoulder strap of her fragile nightie had taken a hell of an interesting lead off first base. You could see the upper slope of a domed breast, stirring rhythmically as she breathed. It was damned nice.

I didn't have time to enjoy it, though. A French casement window was already being pushed inward, slowly, at the far side of the room. Then an automatic's muzzle poked through the aperture; trained itself on the sleeping cookie.

I jumped like a stone out of a slingshot; landed on the bed with force enough to smack Lisbeth Lancaster out from under her covers. She wailed, rolled on the floor out of gun-range. Her yielding figure cushioned me as I tumbled on top of her.

A cannon sneezed: "*Chow-chow!*" and a pair of slugs cut the ozone where my noggin had been an instant ago; where the Lancaster cutie's conk had likewise reposed. The bullets tore into the pillow.

Then I was on my gams, churning them like pistons. I catapulted at the casement, landed outside on the rooftop terrace. I tabbed a running form; smashed into it.

"*Gott—!*" my captive yeepped insanely. Then Dave Donaldson came charging out on the terrace with his flashlight stabbing the darkness. He squirted illumination on my prisoner's wrinkled puss.

"I'll be go to hell!" he gasped. "It's Mrs. Hasdorf—Otto Kortzinger's housekeeper!"

I said: "Not only his housekeeper. Unless I'm damned badly mistaken, she's also his mother."

The little old dame moaned, stirred feebly. "*Ja*, his mutter. Ashamed of me he was because Cherman I am, *und* because I cannot the goot English speak. But how did you—?"

"I suspected it for several reasons," I told her. "From the way you acted, you seemed more than a servant. You were too interested in the guy's welfare. No mere housekeeper would greet visitors with a gat to protect her employer."

"That was a mistake," she sighed.

"Yeah. Then I made sure when I checked that snapshot album in your trunk. I spotted some pix of you as a young woman holding a brat in your arms. Later pictures showed the brat growing up to be Kortzinger. Just as I found that particular photograph, though, you sneaked up and bashed me."

"You knew . . . then?"

"I had most of the details doped; but I had to trap you if I wanted to prove it. I realized your son had been a heel. He had abused his wife, accused her of infidelity. He had forced you, his old lady, to the status of a servant. In spite of this, you'd remained loyal to him."

"Why not? He . . . is my son."

"That's why you bumped your daughter-in-law," I said. "You had heard her former boy friend, Lew Cuneo, trying to persuade her to get a divorce. Sooner than let this happen, you went into the bathroom while she was in her tub. Naturally she didn't mind you seeing her naked. You plugged in the electric heater, dropped it into the water, killed her."

"She deserved it. She was a . . . no good."

I SHOOK my head. "Wrong. She was straight. You croaked an innocent jane. And tonight, when Cuneo showed up, you browned him with the very rod you've got in your mitt now. It was probably the first time you'd seen him since the days when he had tried to argue Vesta into getting a divorce. But you recognized him as the guy you believed had despoiled your son's home. So that made two innocent people you rubbed out."

"You say . . . there was nothing wrong . . . between them?"

"That's right. And so I trapped you. In your presence, I said I was coming here to ask Lisbeth Lancaster a question that would clear up the case. You got scared Lisbeth might have witnessed the shooting of Cuneo. So you came here to shut her up, just as I figured you would."

"I thought . . . I would have time . . ."

"Yeah. But I didn't go downtown first. I came straight here and waited for you. Now you'll spend the rest of your days in the jug—unless they decide to gas you."

"*Nein*—no!" she yeped. Then, with unexpected strength, she got away from me; pelted to the parapet. She hurled herself over the brink before I could stop her.

It was twelve stories to the street. I hated to think what she was going to look like when she landed. The morgue attendants would be scraping her up with a trowel.

Dave Donaldson said: "Jeest, I think I'm going to spew my spumoni!"

I didn't blame him.

Four Minutes Past Nine

[Continued from page 39]

The air was full of a sharp chemical smell, the whirr of drying-machinery. Petronkin rang a buzzer. A technician came out. "Yes, Mr. Petronkin?"

"I'd like the rushes I made tonight, please. And someone to run them through a projector."

The technician said: "I'll do it for you, sir." He went back through a heavy door; returned pretty quick with a flat, round can. "I already had the sound-track printed on the reel, Mr. Petronkin. But I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

"Why?"

"Something happened to it." The technician led us to a side door. "Will you want a screen projection, sir? Or do you just want to look at it through the movieola?"

I butted in before Dmitri could answer. I said: "A screen projection, cousin." Because that was the only way we could all take a gander at the rushes at the same time. The movieola is an outfit that looks like an old fashioned penny arcade peep-show gadget. It's mainly used by cutters, editors. Strips of film are fed through it slowly; sound comes out of a tinny horn. Just one person at a time can squint through the contraption.

The technician nodded. We waltzed into a tiny projection room. He threaded his positive into the projector; switched in his arcs and juiced his sound-equipment.

A pint-sized screen blooped into

life. I said: "Listen, Dmitri. I want you to point out a bit-player named Pedro Ybarra."

The Russian nodded. I watched the silversheet. An empty set swam into view. It represented a living-room interior. A kid walked before the lens; held up a slate lettered:

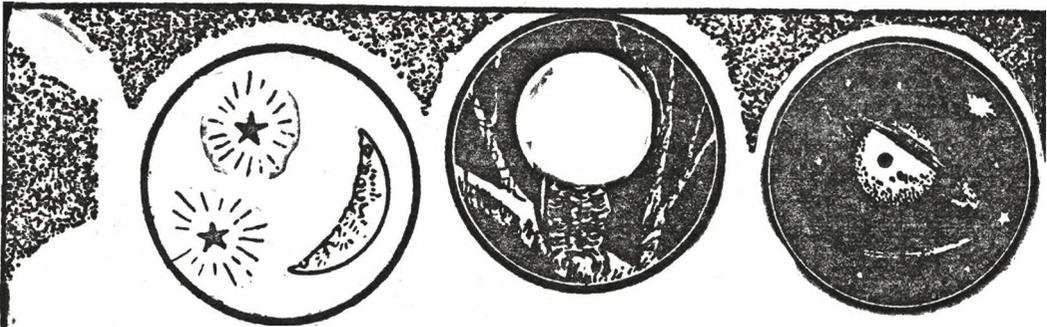
PETRONKIN PROD. No. 1263
METROVOX
SCENE 69
TAKE 1

Then there was a cut—a blank white space. The living-room flashed on again. This time there were actors on the set. Two frails and two guys.

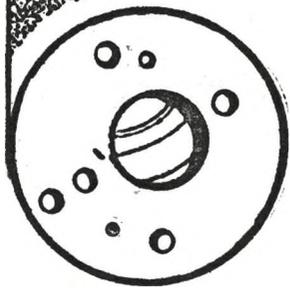
Neither of the two men was the one I was looking for. I glued my peepers on the picture. One of the guys started to speak a couple of lines. Then something silly happened.

INSTEAD of words coming out of the actor's kisser, a soprano voice squeaked the last bars of "My Old Kentucky Home!" And then another voice said: "This is Station KFQZ, Hollywood. The twenty-four hour station of the movie capital. For her next selection, Madame Hortha will render . . . aw-w-r-rk . . . sp-t-t-t . . . fz-z-z . . ."

The picture stopped. The technician looked sheepishly at Petronkin. "That's what I meant, sir. There must have been some unusual atmospheric condition to-

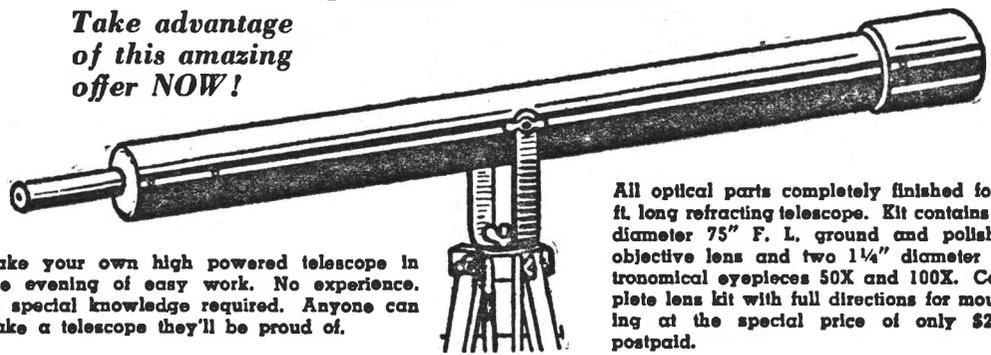


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night when you were shooting the scene—that, and a leaky sound cable. Station KFQZ is just two blocks from here. Our sound-track picked up a fragment of their broadcast.”

I said: “The hell with that, cousin. Roll the picture. Make it snappy.”

He started the works going again. Once more the screen showed the living-room interior. The dialogue was clear, now. An off-stage door opened. Someone stepped onto the set—

He was tall, Latin-looking. He had dark skin, a straight beazer, black eyes, sensitive lips. I put the focus on him. I stiffened.

It was the gazabo who had tried to toss a knife down my gullet a while back, in Ysobel Villareal's boudoir!

I felt Petronkin pinching a blue spot on my arm. He said: “Turner—that is Pedro Ybarra.”

I yelled: “I thought so! He's the blister! Damn it to hell—now we're getting some place!”

The technician stopped his machine; stared at me. So did Donaldson and the Russian. Dave said: “Have you gone batty, Dan?”

“Like hell!” I yelled. I'll admit I was plenty worked up. I said: “Everything's clear now. Pedro Ybarra shot his wife. Later he hauled the corpse away—”

Petronkin's eyes widened. “Ybarra—shot *his wife*? You mean—Ysobel Villareal?”

“Sure. She was secretly married to him. He's the guy in the dark topcoat and slouch hat; the one that tied you up, Dmitri.”

The Russian said: “But—but he couldn't have shot Isobel! It's im-

possible. He was on the set at nine o'clock, when I assembled the company and started shooting. The picture proves it. His scene did not end until five or six minutes later. That was when I telephoned to Ysobel's dressing-bungalow. By that time, she had been killed. How could Ybarra have been in two places at once?”

DAVE DONALDSON'S heavy jaw started to shove forward like the prow of an army tank. He said: “So! You admit Miss Villareal was bumped, do you? You fed me a wagonload of lies, eh? You tried to tell me she hadn't been croaked. You damned lying—”

I waved him down. “Stow it, Dave. Let's not get into that now. The main thing is, Dmitri's right. Ybarra couldn't have shot his wife. But by God, he's the key to the riddle just the same!”

“What do you mean?”

I said: “Use your noggin. We wouldn't be able to prove the Villareal wren had been bumped unless we had her corpse. Would we?”

“No. Certainly not.”

“Okay. So what? So we've got to have the corpus delicti. Now look. We know she was cooled off. We also know her husband carted the body away, later—after sapping Dmitri, here, and tying him to a chair in that dressing-bungalow.”

Dave said: “How the hell do you know Ybarra did that?”

“Because I found bloody towels in Ybarra's cottage tonight. And I found Ysobel's green dress; the one she was wearing when she was drilled. That proves he took the corpse to his home.”

"The hell you utter!" Dave choked.

I said: "Yeah. I also found a pick and shovel in his basement. Then, later, I found him in Ysobel's boudoir closet—at her house in Beverly. He was swiping one of her dresses. A black one. He tried to open my throat with a shiv. Then he got away."

Dave shook his head. He looked foggy. "I don't get it."

I said: "Nuts. It's as plain as that wart on your chin. Ybarra figured on burying his wife in his basement. But he wanted her dressed in black. You know how spicks feel about such things. That's why he glommed a black frock out of her boudoir. And she's probably planted in his basement right now. Okay. We'll dig her up. Then we'll have our corpus delicti. We'll have a case to work on. Come on—we've got a job on our hands."

We started for the door. I turned to Petronkin. "Dmitri, you won't mind taking a taxi home, will you?"

"No. Certainly not."

Dave scowled at him. "I'll be seeing you later," he rasped threateningly.

The Russian answered with a fatalistic shrug.

CHAPTER XVI

Broken Alibi

I DRAGGED Donaldson out to his sedan. We tumbled in. My brains felt addled. I'd promised Bonnie Rafziger to do what I could toward clearing Eastland. And for a while, I'd thought every-

thing was fixed. I thought I had Pedro Ybarra dead to rights.

But that was all knocked into a cocked hat now. Because Ybarra had an iron-clad alibi. That movie rush protected him like a pair of iron pants. He'd been on Sound Stage 3 while Ysobel was getting the works. He was doing his stuff before the cameras at the moment she was drilled.

That made it tough. We'd probably find Ysobel's corpse in Pedro's cellar; I felt positive of that. But we couldn't pin anything on him.

And then, just as Dave drove through the studio gates and hit the street, a theory slugged me in the teeth. I said: "What the hell—?"

"Now what's biting you?" Donaldson growled. "And where the hell is this Ybarra bozo's house?"

I said: "Never mind. We're not going there just yet."

He stared at me; almost ran his front wheels into a fire-plug. "What—?"

"Yeah. Head for Station KFQZ. Step on it, for cripes' sake!"

He tickled his engine. We did the two blocks in about three seconds flat; squealed to a stop in front of the radio station. I bounced out. Dave was at my heels. I went pelting into the building.

The reception-room door was locked. It was close to three o'clock in the morning; nobody was in the studio except one announcer and an engineer. Through the glass door I could see the announcer playing phonograph records, yawning. I pounded on the glass.

He didn't hear me. He was in a soundproof chamber. I hauled out

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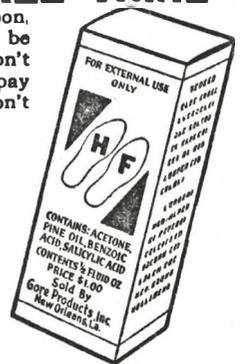
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my roscoe, reversed it. I slapped the butt through the glass door. There was a hell of a tinkling clatter.

I reached in, unlocked the door. And then the studio engineer came bouncing out of his control-room. He was cursing like a mule-skinner. "What the hell do you think you're doing, you drunken—"

I flashed my badge. "Stow it, buddy. We want information."

He cooled down in a hurry. "Oh—er—excuse me, officer. I didn't know—"

"Sure you didn't. Forget it. Charge the glass to the police department. Now listen. Have you got a chart showing your schedule of broadcasts tonight?"

He said: "Why—yes."

"Drag it out."

He fumbled in a file; came up with a thin sheaf of paper. He looked at me. So did Donaldson.

I said: "You had a screeching dame named Madame Hortha warbling over your mike around nine o'clock, didn't you?"

"Yes sir."

"What time was she singing 'My Old Kentucky Home'?"

He looked at his wad of paper. "Her program went on after the nine o'clock newscast. The newscast is supposed to go five minutes, but it ran over a little. Madame Hortha hit the air at six minutes past nine. 'Kentuck

I said: "Don't you get it, flat-head?"

"No."

"WELL, then, look. Ysobel Vilaréal was croaked at four minutes past nine. We know that, because one of the silenced bullets smashed her dressing-table clock; stopped the hands at that minute. The clock was busted in such a way that nobody could have tampered with it or moved the hands afterward."

"Yeah? So what?"

"Now get this," I said. "Madame Hortha sang 'My Old Kentucky Home' over radio station KFQZ at precisely eleven minutes past nine."

"I've got ears. I heard what the guy said."

"All right. A leaky Metrovox sound-cable picked up the broadcast; recorded it on the soundtrack of the scene Dmitri Petronkin was shooting on Sound Stage 3."

Dave said: "I know. Come to the point."

"So Petronkin wasn't shooting that scene at nine o'clock sharp, as he thought. He was shooting it ten or eleven minutes later, you sap!" I yelled.

He blinked. "Cripes—I get it! The sound-stage clock must have been eight or +

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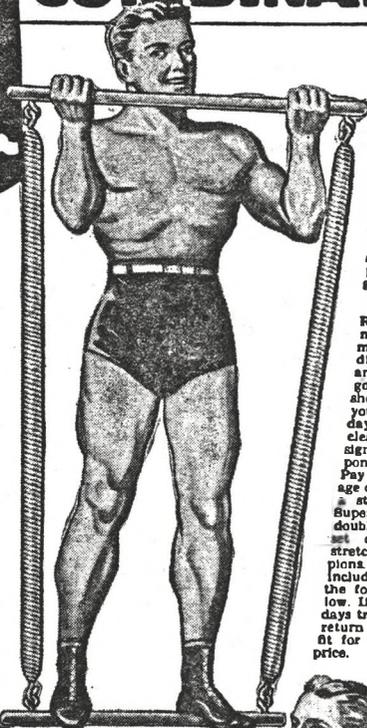
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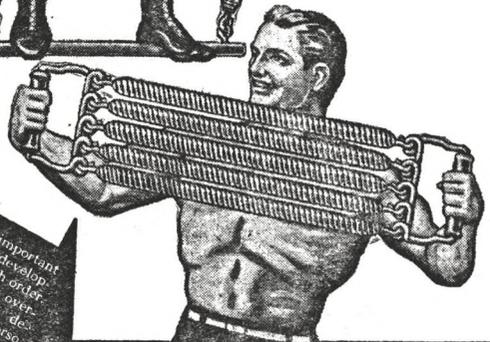
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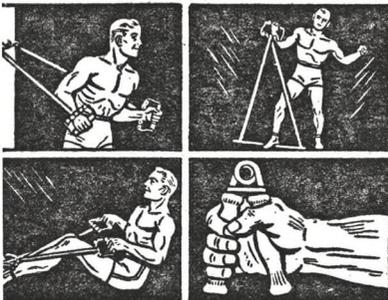
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real bimbo at four minutes past nine—and still get onto the soundstage to appear in that particular scene!”

I said: “Bright boy. Step on the gas. We’re headed for Pedro Ybarra’s stash right now!” And I told him the address.

CHAPTER XVII

The Girl in the Window

HE GOOSED his cylinders. We went away from there in a cloud of shavings. We flipped past three arterial stop-signs and a pair of traffic-lights that winked red. We blammed around corners on two wheels and a prayer; almost knocked a street-flushing truck into San Bernardino county.

I told Dave to slow down when we hit Gower Street. He did. He cut his ignition; coasted to the curb a half-block away from Ybarra’s bungalow. “Let’s go!” he growled.

We popped to the sidewalk; started running on tiptoes. The fog was thicker now. It was a thick, sticky veil that drifted and eddied like a convention of restless ghosts.

I loosened my .32 in its shoulder-holster. We were getting close to the cottage. I gripped Donaldson’s elbow; flagged him down to a creep. I whispered: “Look!”

There was a car parked in front of the Ybarra joint. It was a cheap little old roadster, battered and dingy. I didn’t know whether it spelled anything or not. But I wasn’t taking chances. I hauled Dave into the misty shadows. The roadster was empty. And then—

I saw a movement at the side of Ybarra’s cottage. A shapeless form was crawling through an open window; entering the pitch-black house. There was a twinkle of slender ankles. . . .

I catapulted forward; made a wild grab. My fingers closed around shapely calves. I tugged. A dame came sagging back into my arms. She gasped. She had a pearl-handled roscoe in her right mitt.

It was the red-haired Bonnie Rafziger.

CHAPTER XVIII

Donaldson to the Rescue

SHE started to let out a bleat. Her gun swung around toward my belly as she squirmed in my grasp. My hands were wrist-deep in soft, yielding flesh—

I popped her.

I had to do it. I didn’t want any noise coming out of her trap. If she shrilled a warning, Dave and I were sunk deeper than whale-pebbles—and they’re on the bottom of the ocean.

My fist bounced off her cute little jaw. She sagged. The gat dropped out of her limp fist. I caught it to keep it from making a sound on the pavement; stuffed it in my pocket.

Her curvesome body was inert in my arms. Her coat and her skirt were up past her garters, where I’d hauled her back by the ankles from that open window. Her white, firm thighs gleamed through the fog. The topcoat was open, and the front of her dress had snagged on a splinter. I could see swelling gorgeousness straining at the mesh

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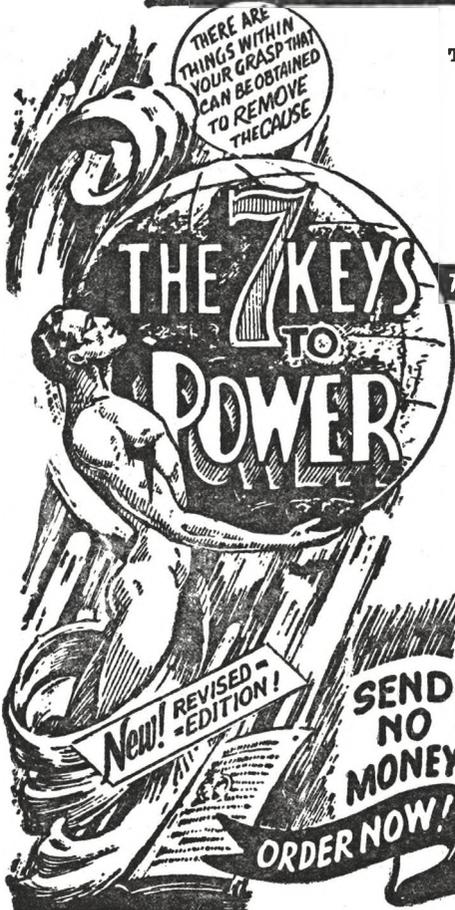
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put on the pressure. He threw the hooks into me.

I tried to get away. No soap. Everything was getting fuzzy in front of my eyes. I jerked a knee spasmodically into his groin; he didn't even notice it. He was all muscle and sinew. My tongue was sticking out of my face like a chunk of sausage. My ears roared. My chest was about to explode.

And then Dave Donaldson sailed down the steps. He tapped Petronkin over the conk with his roscoe. The Russian's hands relaxed on my windpipe. I sucked in air—great, sobbing gulps of it.

Dave twisted his fingers in the director's collar; jerked him backward off me. She shoved his service .38 into the Russian's burly chest and said: "Will you be good or shall I blast you?—Why, cripes almighty! It's Petronkin!"

I said: "So I noticed. And there's Pedro Ybarra over in the corner. What's left of the poor devil.

CHAPTER XIX

The Last Link

DONALDSON stared. "What the hell is this all about?"

I managed to get on my pins; look around. The little basement was lighted from the glow of two big candles on a shelf. Just

the candles, the earth floor was soft and spaded. There was a long, narrow mound—like a grave.

Pedro Ybarra was sprawled face-downward over the mound. He was coughing away deep in his lungs. Blood drooled from his lips, stained the brown earth under his pan. Racking tremors quivered

him. It wasn't nice to look at.

I staggered over to him; turned him over on his back. I held his head. There were two bullet-holes in the front of his shirt. Crimson was pouring from the wounds; spreading wetly over the shirt-front. His glassy glims looked up at me.

He whispered: "*Señor . . .* I am . . . sorree . . . I strock you . . . in your . . . hallway . . . tonight. . . ."

I said: "Forget it, fella. Take it easy. Don't try to talk. Save your strength. Just nod when I ask you questions. Understand?"

He nodded weakly.

"You were married to Ysobel Villareal, weren't you? You married her in Spain; came to America with her. But she insisted on keeping it a secret. She thought it might hurt her film career if people knew she had a husband. Right?"

He nodded again; coughed up blood.

I said: "Then she met Verne Eastland; fell for him. She tried to ditch you for him."

"*S-si, señor. . .*" He was sinking pretty damned fast. Pretty soon he'd be slipping his moorings. I fished out a gasper, set fire to it. I put it between his lips. He drew in smoke. It seemed to ease him.

I said: "Tonight, when Petronkin dismissed the cast from Sound Stage 3 without saying why, you went outside the studio gates. You waited for Ysobel to show up. You wanted another talk with her."

His head moved a little.

"Then you thought you saw her coming out. It was a woman in a green dress. You followed her to my apartment. When she rapped on my door, you went crazy jealous

Missing Page

Missing Page

dressing-bungalow. You bumped her with your silenced playtoy. But first you were damned careful to put one slug through the face of her dressing-table clock — to show what time the murder took place.

A LITTLE later, from the sound-stage, you telephoned over to her bungalow; pretended not to know she was dead. You acted plenty shocked when Conchita Albanez told you what had happened.

“Then you laid plans. You sent Conchita after me. You thought you could bribe me with five gees to help you do away with Ysobel’s carcass. You gave me a logical reason when you said you wanted to save your job.

“Luck seemed to be with you. First, there was Ybarra’s attack on Conchita at my stash. That pointed suspicion away from you. Then Verne Eastland listened at the dressing-bungalow window. Both Ybarra and Eastland wore dark topcoats, slouch hats. That loused up the parade in swell style.

“But you weren’t expecting to get biffed and tied up. It surprised hell out of you when somebody carted Ysobel’s body away. You were worried—although you put up a neat act to Lieutenant Donaldson.

“After we left you, you thought things over; decided you had to do some more killing. Conchita had seen Ysobel’s corpse. So had I. You wanted us out of the way so we wouldn’t spill our entrails. That’s why you came to Conchita’s apartment, gunned her down. You tried to blast me, too; but you missed.”

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I stopped long enough to light a pill. Petronkin just looked at me and smiled. "A very clever fellow!" he said silkily.

"Yeah. And when I showed up at your house, asked you to go to the studio with me to see those rushes, you were startled. You thought you had bumped me—and there I was, large as life. You had to go to Metrovox with me to keep up a front.

"I'd suspected you for quite a while. But you had an alibi. So did Ybarra—apparently. You went to bat for him plenty strong—because his alibi was yours. Then I laid a little trap for you. I told you how I'd figured out that Ybarra was the one who took Ysobel's corpse. I had a hunch that you'd come here to his house if you really were the guilty guy. You'd want to blast Ybarra, bury him along with his wife. That would leave just me to be taken care of—and you figured on laying for me right here.

"I made one wrong guess. I thought I could get here before you did. You beat me. I arrived just in time to see you putting the heat to Ybarra. And that's that."

He said: "No, my friend. You have not told of my motive for killing Ysobel."

I blew smoke in his pan. "I know that, too, smart guy. Ysobel Villareal was a Spaniard. She was also a Nazi sympathizer. She was sending thick chunks of her Hollywood geetus overseas to a member of the Franco government who was using it to further Nazi schemes. I saw her canceled drafts in her boudoir desk. That was my first tip-off to the truth. You're a Russian. Your people are going all-out against

the Nazis. Maybe some big shot in your country instructed you to bump Ysobel—the execution of a dangerous enemy in war-time. Or maybe you thought it up out of your own noggin. Either way, it doesn't matter a damn. You'll hang."

He said: "No, my friend. A while ago I bit into a glass capsule of poison which I always carry in my mouth—for emergencies. You may have heard it crunch between my teeth. The poison is already in my veins, Turner. I will not hang."

DAVE DONALDSON leaped at him. "No!" he yelled. "No jury would convict you under the circumstances. Anybody who removes a Fifth Columnist, a Nazi. . . ."

But he was too late.

I shrugged, went up the steps and out into the fog. I ankled around to where I'd left Bonnie Rafziger trussed like a Christmas turkey.

She was conscious. Her eyes were wild. I unlocked her cuffs, took the gag from between her red lips. I said: "Everything's okay, baby. It's all over. I caught the killer. And it wasn't Verne Eastland. It was Petronkin."

She swayed toward me. Her coat fell open. I could see white loveliness through the torn front of her dress. "And—and I didn't trust you. . . !" she whispered. "I didn't th-think you'd help me! That's why I came here myself—hoping I could g-get something on Ybarra—"

I put an arm around her; felt the warm yielding flesh of her under my fingers. I said: "If you'll come up to my apartment for a

snifter, I'll gladly accept your apology."

She smiled; gave me a kiss that sizzled. She whispered: "Let's go. . . ."

Sure she was in love with Verne Eastland. But could I help it if

she wanted to show me her gratitude?

And I've still got the two diamond earrings I took away from Conchita Albanez. So I didn't do so badly. What the hell. Who said pleasure won't mix with business?

Judas Jewels

[Continued from page 51]

her glims that I'd hit the target plumb center. All of a sudden she started to kick at my shins; tried to fasten her uppers and lowers on the hand I was using to pinion her wrists.

I wrestled with her. During the fracas her nightie got torn to hellangone; hung open from neck to Nantucket. She was so gorgeous, so thoroughly she-male, that I hated like hell to slug her.

But I had to. There was no other way out.

I made a loose fist, popped her on the button. Her peepers walled back and her noggin lolled sideways. Then her game buckled and she sagged in my arms like a tired doll.

"Sorry, hon," I said, knowing she was too unconscious to hear it. Then I dumped her on the bed, tore a sheet into twisted strips, trussed her like a Christmas goose. I jammed a gag in her tempting kisser for good measure.

THEN I barged up the hallway toward Vicki Vondrovna's door; started to knock. I didn't do it, though. This was because I piped a dark stain that had seeped

out from under the portal to thick-en and dry brownly on the corridor carpet.

I whispered: "What the hell—!" and gathered my hundred and ninety pounds of heft; catapulted at the woodwork. It splintered inward and I hurtled over the threshold; froze.

The brunette Vondrovna cupcake lay sprawled on the rug, her raven hair mussed, her nightgown in tatters. Somebody had used a razor on her gullet, drained all her gravy. She was deader than prohibition.

I forced myself to touch her, although the contact with her oysterish flesh made me feel like popping my parsnips. Judging by her frigid condition, I guessed she must have been defunct quite some time.

For an instant I wondered if the secretaray quail had beefed Vicki. Then I realized she didn't fit into the picture at all—or anyhow, not as far as the bump-off was concerned. This was a man's doing; and I knew the man.

I looked at my strap watch. It showed five minutes to six. I stepped over Vicki's remainders; crouched behind a screen in the far

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corner of the boudoir. And I yanked out the .32 automatic I always carry in a shoulder holster.

Presently, downstairs, a click sounded against the silence of the stash. That was the front door being keyed open. Then I heard catlike footfalls on the staircase.

I tensed.

A guy came into the room. He was calm, stocky, carried himself with a military air. He went to the wall safe just as its clock pointed to six, releasing the dial.

He began fiddling with the time lock combination. I ankled out of my concealment and said casually: "Lift the fins, my tattle-columnist friend. Shall I call you Bill Norton or use your real monicker—*Graf von Nordheim?*"

A strangled gasp came out of his kisser as he pivoted. "You . . . you . . . know me . . . ?"

"Yeah. And I'm pinching you for committing killery on this Vondrovna she-male."

He blinked redly; gulped. You could hear a crunching noise, like teeth grinding together. "How did you . . . guess, Turner?"

I said: "You gave yourself away when I talked to you in the *Globe-Record* office."

"That's right. I had grabbed somebody's wrist in the dark at Saul Warriner's shindig. And when I saw you at your newspaper desk you were typing with the usual reporter's hunt-and-peck system—but only with one hand. Which meant your other mitt was sore, out of commission."

"That's . . . no proof!"

"It put me on the track, though,"

I said. "Your glims were my sec-

ond tip-off. They were red, just as they are now; and you kept rubbing them when you pretended to be thinking. You covered the gesture by stroking your chin and tapping your teeth with a pencil, but that didn't fool me. I knew it was pepper from my phony gasper that had inflamed your peepers."

He said: "So you knew . . . I was the one who . . . got in . . . your . . . taxi?"

"Sure. You clinched it by mentioning my cigarette gadget—although I hadn't told you about it. So how could you have known, unless you were the masked bozo?"

"Go . . . on."

I shrugged. "I also noticed a girl's picture in your hunting-case watch. It was a snapshot of Betty Darrow—Vicki Vondrovna's secretary. That told me you had a stooge planted here in Vicki's wikipup. Then you tried to throw suspicion on Ivan Petrovich by saying he was a member of the Gestapo. I knew this was a lie because I had your number by that time.

"So then I went to the public library; found a photo of Graf von Nordheim back in the old Berlin days. He wore a beard. Mentally I shaved the foliage and recognized you. Wilhelm von Nordheim and Bill Norton; the names even sound alike. You weren't a correspondent in Germany; you were a naval officer."

H HE SWAYED. "And do you know why I . . . killed this woman?"

"Sure. She was the maid who betrayed your wife. But I wasn't

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hep to that when I talked to you at your desk, before going to the library. At that time I thought you really might be a Gestapo agent after Vicki's rocks.

"So I set a trap for you; told you the time-lock on her safe was set for six in the morning. That was where I went haywire. I figured you would come to glom the sparklers at six; but I didn't suspect you might make an earlier trip to beef the bimbo."

His kisser twisted. "I am a little . . . surprised that you were hiding . . . here to catch . . . me."

"Yeah," I said. "You probably phoned your secretary stooge to sidetrack me. But I was prepared for that. I put her out of the picture."

He took a lurching step toward me. "You must let her . . . go, Turner! She had nothing to do with the murder; does not know I planned to . . . kill the Vondrovna woman. It's true I planted her here to keep me . . . in touch with Vicki's movements. But I can't let you . . . drag her into it. She's innocent. She's . . . my sister."

Somehow I sensed that he was leveling. "You'll take the entire rap?" I asked him.

He smiled crookedly. "I already have. I broke . . . a capsule of poison between my teeth . . . a moment ago. It is . . . taking . . . effect. . ." Then he doubled over, fell on his smeller.

He was a dead pigeon.

Maybe it was better that way. He was a murderer, but he had merely croaked a female snake.

I ankled to that other bedroom, untied the secretary whose name

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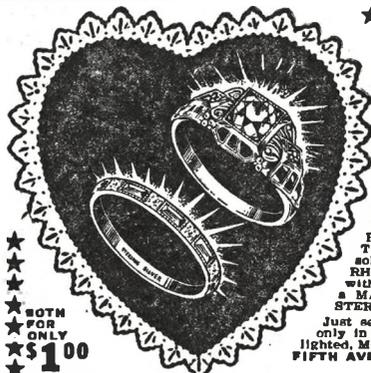
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was not Betty Darrow. She was conscious by now. "Put on a coat, hon," I said. "You're getting out of here while we've still got time." I didn't explain why. She'd learn, soon enough.

It was twenty past six when we started anking down the hill. At six-thirty the bald Ivan Petrovich would show up with the Hispano limousine, find Vicki Vondrovna defunct with her murderer's corpse for company. Which was okay by me. For once, somebody else could phone for my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad!

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Telephone Tangle

[Continued from page 73]

make a clean breast of it?"

"I . . . may as . . . well . . ." she whispered. But she slipped her moorings before she could add anything to the confession.

I turned to Donaldson. "That ties it up, chum. So now I'll leave you to mop up the ketchup and turn the heat off Len Kilbane."

"Where the hell are *you* going?" he growled.

"Out to get a snort of Scotch and hunt for Frenchie," I said. "She probably needs pacifying."

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Death's Dark Star

[Continued from page 85]

thing else again. Hell, pal, I haven't got a shred of evidence against your frau—except her confession. You overheard that; but you can't be compelled to testify. You're her husband."

The blonde cutie stared at me. "You—you don't intend t-to arrest me?"

I set fire to a gasper. "I don't pinch rat-killers, sweet stuff. And

Kane Fewster was a rat. You had plenty of motive for cooling him. Me, I don't know from nothing." And I blew her a kiss, ankled out.

I drove to a night-owl hashery, phoned Dave Donaldson, told him I was off the case. After all, unsolved murders are his worry, not mine. And Fewster's croaking is still unsolved—officially.

What the hell?



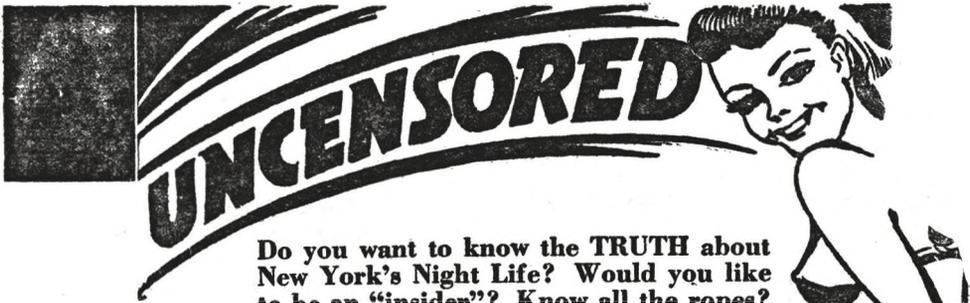
'I TALKED WITH GOD'

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and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and now—?—Well, I am President of the News Review Publishing Company, which corporation publishes the largest circulating afternoon daily in north Idaho. I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac mousine. I own my own home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking

with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, 45-M, Moscow, Idaho, and full pay for this strange Teaching will be sent you of charge. But write now—while the mood. It only costs one cent to try and this might easily be the most one cent you have ever spent. It's unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't say it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1934, F. B. Robinson.



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