

# DEATH HAS A DEEP VOICE

By Hal K. Wells



*Twenty-five hundred spectators stared aghast, as the sonorous voice of Rodney Blaine was suddenly cut short by death, at his new premiere. And Lt. Detective Burke had to change the murder-master's script before the stage was set for the next killing!*

**T**HE OFFICE of Manson Kahler, ace producer for the Stellar Studios, looked like a scenario writer's idea of what a bigshot movie producer's office should look like.

It was big enough to hold a basketball game in. The sumptuous furnishings were apparently a cross between early Egyptian and late Donald Duck. The stucco walls were decorated with tapestries, Persian prints, and

life-sized pictures of Arline Adair and Rodney Blaine, Stellar's two biggest box-office bets.

Ford J. Burke, detective lieutenant attached to the Hollywood station, sprawled his big frame uncomfortably in one of the smotheringly overstuffed chairs and studied the sheet of paper in his hand. It was one of six similar sheets. All bore messages made from cut-out newspaper words pasted upon cheap note-paper. The wording of each was identical—

The Hollywood Premiere of  
"JUNGLE DEATH"  
Will Be a Double Feature.  
The Second Production  
of the Evening  
Will Be  
"THE DEATH OF RODNEY BLAINE"

Burke lifted his eyes to where Manson Kahler's broad, squat figure was grotesquely hunched behind the enormous expanse of the marble-topped desk. Kahler's face was swarthy, with a strongly aquiline nose, piercing black eyes, and a high bald forehead that was perpetually filmed with a thin glaze of perspiration. In private life he was the husband of the languorous and luscious Arline Adair.

"When did Rodney Blaine get the first of these cheerful little notes?" Burke asked.

"Two weeks ago," Kahler answered. "Right after him and Arline and the rest of us got back from the 'Jungle Love' location trip down on the Orinoco. And what a headache that trip was! Go all the way to South America and spend a quarter of a million dollars just to shoot a jungle and a few monkeys. Pfoeey! For half as much we could have built a better jungle here on the lot and had twice as many monkeys!"

"How did Blaine get the notes?" Burke asked.

"All kinds of ways. The first one was on his dressing table. Another was pinned to the

steering-wheel of his car. In his make-up kit, he found one, and another in the pocket of his dressing-gown. The last one was under the napkin on his lunch tray."

"How come you waited till the very day of the premiere before calling us in?" Burke demanded.

"At first it was only a gag, we thought it," Kahler answered apologetically. "You know how things are on a movie lot—anything for a laugh."

"Ah, tell him the truth, Manny," Chet Lane broke in disgustedly. Lane, publicity man assigned to the Kahler unit, was a slender, nattily dressed chap in the early thirties, with a sallow, habitually bored face and eyes whose lids drooped sleepily behind heavy lenses.

"We didn't call the police in earlier, Burke," Lane said, "because we were trying to dodge publicity. Just about one more bum press break for Rodney Blaine and the Hayes office is going to toss Stellar's prize heel out on his neck—but permanently."

"You don't seem to like the guy," Burke said.

"I loathe the louse," Lane said bitterly, "and I've got plenty of company. There are a dozen people right here on the lot who would cheerfully cut the lug's throat."

"Chet exaggerates," Kahler protested. "Rodney don't get along so good with people sometimes, yes, but he is a nice boy. He has some enemies, but in pictures who don't? You got to expect it in this business."

"Bumping a guy off at his own premiere is a little more than should be expected in any business," Burke said. "Get me a seat right behind Blaine tonight. I'll have some other men scattered around the house."

**T**HE PREMIERE at the Maltese Theater that night was a far cry from the spectacular Hollywood displays back in the days before the little brown man's buck teeth were abruptly revealed as fangs. There were

no more searchlights lacing the sky, or crowds lining Hollywood Boulevard to watch the parade of arriving luminaries. The only remaining remnant of pre-war premier glory was inside the theater where twenty-five hundred more or less famous spectators gathered to see the initial showing of Stellar's jungle epic.

Rodney Blaine was in a seat in the tenth row. Burke sat just behind him. He had several plain-clothes officers stationed near the exits.

Blaine was as nearly scared to death as Burke had ever seen a man. His tanned face was pasty in its paleness, and his usually arrogant features were shriveled and drawn. His eyes roved around him in continuous and nervous search.

There were people around him whose presence should have made Stellar's Glamour Boy nervous, Burke admitted. Lane's statement that the star was hated by his co-workers had not been entirely exaggeration. Blaine's complete carelessness about women, and his utter and ruthless coldness in advancing his own career, had combined to produce enemies who had very good reason at least to wish him dead.

One was Chet Lane. Burke had found out the reason for Lane's admitted enmity. Lane had failed to satisfy Blaine's craving for publicity, and the star had made his usual demand that the offender be fired. Lane had already received his notice from Stellar.

Another was Nils Carther, moody and saturnine director who had handled the earlier sequences of "Jungle Love." A bitter argument with Blaine had resulted in the director's being demoted to assistant and seeing another man finish the picture and get screen credit.

Still another was Dave Fanning, tall, stoop-shouldered, sound engineer. Six months ago, one of Rodney Blaine's lurid love episodes in real life had ended with Fanning's wife in a sanitarium and Fanning in divorce

court.

**B**URKE saw very little of "Jungle Love." The few glimpses he got told him that Arline Adair spent most of the time in a garment that for covering qualities made a sarong look like an overcoat, and that Rodney Blaine was his usual jutting-jawed, deep-voiced self as he battled menaces that ranged from crocodiles to Aztec gods. Most of the time Burke kept his gaze rigidly fixed upon the back of Blaine's handsome neck.

He settled back in comparative relaxation when the film finally ended and the house lights came on. Blaine, too, seemed to relax and become mere nearly his usual confident self.

There was a delay of a few minutes. Then the royal purple curtains flowed back again, revealing the stage set for the invariable premiere program of personal appearances that some irreverent Hollywood some call "the olio"

The setting was apparently meant to be a corner of an Aztec temple. Fearsome feathered deities leered from brown stone walls. A stone altar filled most of the foreground. On its flat top a microphone stand was concealed in an elaborate metalwork design depicting the Aztec sun emblem, with a central golden disc surrounded by long, needle-thin rays. Fumes from braziers on either side of the altar rolled their pungent fragrance out into the theater.

Manson Kahler stood in the constricted space between the angled walls and the altar. He continually mopped his perspiring forehead with a large white handkerchief as he addressed the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, his reedy voice oddly distorted by the amplifiers, "it is now with a pride and pleasure that I present to you some of those people whose work made this colossal picture possible. First, the voluptuous darling of America, the vivid and exotic star who in 'Jungle Love' has added another stupendous success to her already

outstanding achievements—Arline Adair!”

Miss Adair, gorgeous in a scarlet evening gown that moulded her exquisitely curved figure like a shimmering sheath of silken flame, rose from her seat in the audience and climbed the short flight of plush covered stairs to the stage. Burke heard the whirr of a camera at his shoulder. He turned and saw a camera of the news-reel type set up in the aisle, focused upon the stage.

**T**HE CAMERAMAN was Perry Carlin. There was another chap, Burke thought grimly, who had ample reason to hate Rodney Blaine. Carlin had been Stellar’s top cameraman before he made the unforgivable error of not lighting Blaine to what the star considered the best advantage. When the vindictive star got through with him, Carlin was a broken, drink-sodden wreck, blearily stumbling through unimportant publicity jobs like the one he was now doing.

Arline Adair came to the microphone. Her little talk was the usual thing. She loved the audience in the theater. She loved all her other unseen fans in theaters all over the country. In fact, she apparently loved everybody.

A cynical wonder drifted through Burke’s mind as to whether the gorgeous Arline’s loves might possibly include Rodney Blaine. They had been thrown closely together for weeks on the jungle location trip, and after all Manson Kahler was at least twenty years older than his flamingly vivid young wife.

Arline finished her speech and returned to the audience. Manson Kahler mopped his glistening face with his huge handkerchief.

“And now, friends,” he said, “I call upon that great and talented young actor, that virile\_ and shining star in Stellar’s great galaxy, that very good friend of mine—Rodney Blaine!”

Blaine came lithely to his feet and started down the aisle. Burke felt a reluctant surge of admiration. Heel and ham the fellow might be, but he was a good enough actor to hide all trace of his fear as he strutted up the steps and

onto the stage.

Kahler stepped aside and Blaine came to the microphone. For a moment he stood there with his hands on the top of the altar, his dark eyes staring arrogantly out over the audience. Then he started talking.

“Friends and fellow workers of mine,” he began, his superb voice coming sonorous and deep over the amplifiers, “I am sure that I owe wh—”

It happened then. From somewhere in the shadowed air beyond the spotlight’s glaring circle, Death struck with a grim and grisly suddenness that caught Rodney Blaine squarely in the middle of a word!

His breath caught in a sobbing gasp. His features contorted into a frozen masque of stark agony. His hands shot frantically upward and clawed desperately at his throat. For a long tense moment he swayed there while the choking rattle in his throat poured from the amplifiers in hideous volume through the stunned silence of the audience.

Then the horrible flood of sound abruptly ceased as Kahler recovered from his first shock and leaped forward to switch the microphone off. Burke sprang to his feet and raced down the aisle as Kahler shouted for the curtain. The heavy folds surged together in Burke’s face as he sprinted up the steps. The last glimpse he had of the stage was of Rodney Blaine sagging in collapse and Manson Kahler springing forward to catch the star’s falling body.

When Burke stepped over the footlight there were three other men from the audience right at his heels. Two of them were Chet Lane and Nils Carther. The third was a ruddy-faced man whom Burke could not place at the moment.

It took them nearly a full minute of fumbling search before they finally found the central rift in the heavy curtain. Rodney Blaine’s body was sprawled motionless on the floor behind the altar. Manson Kahler was kneeling over him. He came dazedly to his

feet and faced them.

"Blaine's—Blaine's dead!" he said chokingly.

The ruddy-faced man started forward. Burke threw up a restraining hand.

"I'm a physician!" the other snapped impatiently. "Maybe I can do something for him."

Burke remembered him then. He was Dr. Orvelle, a prominent Beverly Hills doctor.

"Sorry, doctor," he apologized, "go right ahead."

Orvelle knelt beside Blaine's body for an examination. He had difficulty in seeing clearly. With the curtain blocking out the footlights, and the angled walls barring the wings, the only illumination was from scattered bulbs high in the flies. .

"Get some lights on," Burke ordered Kahler. "And have those walls moved back so we can get a little air and room in here. Those incense fumes are strong enough to choke a goat!"

The angled walls reached to the stage front on either side, barring all access from the wings. Kahler pounded on one of them and yelled instructions to the stage-hands beyond. Several more bulbs came on overhead. The walls split at their angle and were moved wide apart, revealing a wide expanse of stage floor and an intricate jumble of drops, ropes, and counter-weights in the shadowed flies far overhead.

A fussy little man with a gardenia in the lapel of his dinner jacket came hurrying from the wings. Behind him came Dave Fanning and Arline Adair. The star's usually pouting lips were tightly compressed, and her scarlet-nailed fingers picked nervously at the shimmering silk of her evening gown.

"I'm D. Lamborn, manager of the theater," the little man said importantly. "What is the trouble?"

Before Burke could answer, Orvelle rose from his examination of Blaine and turned to the manager.

"The trouble seems to be murder, Mr. Lamborn," he said quietly. "Rodney Blaine was shot in the throat with a poisoned dart. He died almost instantly. Here is the dart."

Burke took the tiny object from Orvelle's hand. It shouldn't have been removed before the medical examiner got there, but it was too late to do anything about that now. The dart was a tiny, fragile looking sliver of hardwood, a little over an inch long. Its needle-sharp point was bloodstained and smeared with some viscid substance that had the color and consistency of coal tar. Its other end had a very small tuft of feathers.

"That dart was deeply imbedded in the front of Blaine's throat an inch above his collar," Orvelle said. "It apparently entered a major artery. That was the reason the poison acted with such startling swiftness."

"What kind of poison?" Burke asked.

The physician shrugged his shoulders. "I couldn't say offhand. Possibly one of the South American snake toxins. It produced almost instant paralysis of the heart muscles."

"If the dart was in the front of Blaine's throat it must have come from somewhere in the audience," Burke said.

"That's impossible!" Chet Lane said skeptically. "How could anyone possibly aim about six feet of blowgun out there in the audience without being observed?"

"They wouldn't have to use a blowgun," Burke answered. "Any small compressed air weapon would do, even a pistol."

"No matter how small an air-gun was," Dave Fanning protested, "somebody would certainly spot it. Remember this thing happened in full view of twenty-five hundred people. There was even a camera getting pictures of it."

**B**URKE whistled softly. "I forgot all about Carlin and his camera," he said. "Fanning, maybe you've got something there. There might have been other things besides

film in that camera. Lamborn, suppose you send somebody out front to bring Carlin back here.”

Chet Lane snorted in disgust. “That drunken bum couldn’t hit the City Hall with a basketball at six feet!” he said. “What chance would he have of flipping a midget dart sixty feet into an area of exposed throat that couldn’t have been over a couple of inches in diameter?”

“Maybe he didn’t hit the bull’s-eye the first shot,” Burke said. “There might be one or two more of those darts laying around that he fired and missed.”

Burke started searching the floor. The rest of the group joined him. They were well spread out after a few moments and there was no one very near Burke when he saw a small splotch of something dark on the floor near where one of the temple back-walls had stood.

He stooped and picked it up. It was a small lump of black material that looked like burnt wood. He walked several feet farther backstage to get a better light from one of the overhead bulbs.

It was burnt wood all right, possibly a fragment that had fallen from one of the braziers when they were put in place, he thought. He was just upon the point of carelessly tossing the piece away when a faint noise made him look suddenly upward.

He caught a flashing glimpse of a bulky object hurtling straight down toward his head. His muscles reacted with the hair-trigger speed of a trained athlete. Death missed him, but by scant inches only. The hurtling object crashed into his shoulder with a force that sent him sprawling half dazed to the floor.

By the time the nearest of the others reached him, Burke had managed to shake the clouds from his whirling head and lurch to his feet. He looked down and saw that the falling object had been a heavy sandbag, with a long length of free rope trailing from it.

“Badly hurt, Burke?” Chet Lane asked.

“Nothing but a bum shoulder,” Burke

grunted. “But where in the hell did that overgrown bean-bag come from?”

“It came from the flies up there,” Lamborn explained. “It’s a counterweight.”

“The rope passed over a pulley up there and down to a piece of scenery here on the stage floor?” Burke asked.

“Yes, to one of those pieces over there in the wings.”

Burke examined the loose rope end. “No sign of it being cut,” he commented.

“Cut?” The little theater manager’s mouth gaped in dismay. “You surely don’t think it was anything but an accident! It must simply have become untied.”

“Maybe,” Burke grunted, “maybe not.”

He stared around him for a moment with eyes that were more than a little hostile. Small use in trying to check up now on whether any of the group had been near the rope when it was untied. Widely scattered as they had been over the big stage, anyone of them could have jerked the knot free without being observed.

There was the sound of approaching feet from the wings just then and the man Lamborn had sent out front returned, followed by Perry Carlin and Ed Reilly, one of the plain-clothes officers.

“He made a break for it, lieutenant,” Reilly said. ““Soon as whatever it was happened to Rodney Blaine this guy came bustin’ up the aisle with his camera. I stopped him at the door and when he got noisy I took him out in the lobby to try to quiet him down. All he’d do was mumble something about somebody tryin’ to steal his film.”

“CARLIN’S mind, it is not so good any more,” Kahler explained pityingly. “He has delusions of what you call persecution. But still we keep him for old times’ sake and give for him odd jobs of no real importance.”

“Let’s see your camera a minute, Carlin,” Burke requested.

“No!” Carlin shrilled vehemently. His

deep-set eyes blazed from a face so gaunt that it was like that of a skull. "You are going to steal my film. You can't do it!"

It took both Burke and Reilly finally to get the camera. The rest of the group crowded closely around as Burke examined the instrument. A moment later there was the hiss of several sharply drawn breaths.

"Something new has been added!" Chet Lane commented with sardonic humor.

"An air-gun mounted there just under the lens!" Carther exclaimed. "Aiming the camera would automatically aim the barrel of the gun."

Burke's thumb-nail flipped open the ingenious magazine mechanism of the cleverly concealed weapon. There was a small dart still unused in there, its long, sharp point thickly smeared with viscid black.

At the discovery of the gun in his camera, some final thread seemed to snap in Carlin's drink-ravaged brain. Burke tried to question him, but the only response he got was a bleak stare of utter vacancy.

"What's the difference whether he talks, Burke? Chet Lane asked impatiently. "You've got enough to put him away a dozen times over. What a honey of a setup he had!" There was a note of professional admiration in the publicity man's voice. "A whole squad of scenario writers couldn't have cooked up a sweeter murder plan!"

"Yes, that's the trouble," Burke said slowly. "It's almost too good a plan to come from a brain as foggy as Carlin's. Also, it doesn't explain who tried to erase me permanently with that sand-bag. Carlin was out in the lobby when that happened."

"You still think that that was no accident then," Lane said.

"Accidents don't happen quite that pat," Burke said. "Someone thought I had either found something or was about to find it. They got panicky and let that bag go at my skull."

He turned to Reilly. "Take Carlin down to the station and book him," he ordered. "Then

take the film from his camera over to the Consolidated lab on Sunset and have them do a rush job on developing it. There's no sound track on it so you should get a print in an hour or so. Bring it back up here and we'll run it on the theater machine. Maybe the camera saw something we missed."

"What about the audience out there in the theater, lieutenant?" Lamborn asked worriedly. "Surely you are not going to keep twenty-five hundred people here indefinitely."

"No point in keeping them," Burke said. "Go out front and tell them to go home. Clear out the ushers and stage-hands, too, while you're at it. Keep one operator to run the film when we get it back."

He turned to the rest of the group. "Dr. Orville, you're free to go any time you wish. Thanks for your help. As for the rest of you, I'm not exactly holding you or anything like that but I'd like to have you stick around a little longer."

Burke studied the stage thoughtfully for a moment, then walked over to where the ornately decorated microphone was securely screwed to the imitation stone top of the altar.

"Fanning, you're a sound man," he said. "Let's tear this gimcrack apart, just out of curiosity."

"Looking for more air-guns, lieutenant?" Chet Lane asked mockingly.

"I don't know what I'm looking for," Burke said candidly, "but this mike was within less than a yard of Blaine's throat when he got hit. It won't do any harm to take a good look at it."

**F**ANNING got tools from a backstage locker. He loosened the screws and lifted the gold sun emblem off. Burke picked the thing up and examined it closely while Fanning expertly dismantled the microphone itself.

"There you are, lieutenant," he said when he finished. "Just an ordinary mike. Nothing unusual about it as far as I can see."

“O. K.,” Burke said. “It was a thought, anyway. Put it back together again.”

After Fanning had reassembled the instrument, Burke cleared the stage for some routine work. A cameraman from homicide arrived and took the usual shots of the body and the setting. The medical examiner came. He agreed with Orvelle that the poison on the dart had probably been some little-known tropical toxin, but he ordered the body taken downtown for more thorough examination. Reporters crowded around the theater’s locked doors but were kept rigorously outside by a quite uncommunicative pair of plain-clothes men.

Burke herded his companions into the manager’s office where they could smoke and be comfortable while waiting for Carlin’s film. Tempers were beginning to wear a little thin when Reilly finally arrived with the print.

“Carlin may be whiskey simple,” Reilly said, “but he can still shoot plenty of camera. The lab said this stuff is clear as crystal.”

They had the second feature showing of the evening then, the brief and tragic film that the writer of the notes had warned would be titled “The Death of Rodney Blaine.” It was shown to a small tense group that seemed lost in the vast stretches of empty theater. The unaccustomed lack of sound accompaniment heightened the ghost-like tinge of the film as it flashed on the theater’s big screen.

Arline Adair spoke her brief piece with soundless lips and left the stage. Rodney Blaine came swaggering up the steps and behind the microphone. His lips moved in a few words. Then his face abruptly contorted and his hands lunged upward to claw wildly at his throat. Manson Kahler turned to shout for the curtain and as the drapes surged together the film came to an abrupt end.

Burke shook his head. There had been no sign of any dart flashing from the camera toward Blaine’s throat. Tiny as the dart was, however, Burke realized that it could have eluded the camera entirely. He ordered the

film run again.

This time he watched the scene on the stage itself. Halfway through the film Burke saw something that made his muscles suddenly tense. Things began to click into place in his mind. He had the film run once more to make sure.

“O. K.,” he said, “that does it. Come up on the stage, you folks. I think I’ve got something to show you. Hit the lights, will you, Lamborn?”

Burke went over to the altar. He looked down at the microphone and smiled in satisfaction at what he saw.

“See the rays of that sun emblem?” he said. “Every one of them as perfect as when it was made. But in the film we just saw, Blaine’s right sleeve caught for an instant in the emblem when he raised his hands to claw at his throat. It was for just a fraction of a second, so quick that apparently only the camera caught it. But in that brief instant one of the sun rays snapped cleanly off before Blaine’s sleeve tore free.”

Burke smiled thinly. “All we’ve got to do now is find the original mike with the broken ray. There wasn’t time enough to unfasten one mike and substitute the other. There must be a quick-change doodad of some kind built into the altar.”

He fumbled briefly with the artificial stone of the altar. Something clicked under his fingers. He pressed and the entire altar top pivoted silently on a central axis, the former bottom now becoming the top. Fastened to the former bottom surface was a sun-encased microphone exactly like the other except that there was one broken ray on this sun emblem. The wiring to the two microphones was in the axis of the central pivot, keeping the connections unbroken when the slab was turned.

**B**URKE tilted the slab again and searched the recess under it. He brought out the tiny bit of broken ray that had fallen into the

space, and a large crumpled white handkerchief. Burke investigated the cloth briefly, then grunted in satisfaction.

"A small bag of chemically treated charcoal sewed into it in the center," he said. "It made a fairly efficient gas mask, didn't it, Manny? You should have sewed the seams a little tighter, though. Then a piece of the charcoal wouldn't have leaked out for me to find on the floor a while ago."

Manson Kahler's swarthy face glistened with sweat. "I lost my head when I saw you pick the charcoal up," he said dazedly. "I released the sand-bag before I thought."

"Yes, that was a mistake," Burke agreed. "I'm reasonably bright, but I'd hardly have figured out a murder scheme as weirdly complicated as this one from just finding a bit of charcoal."

"Come on, Burke," Chet Lane said impatiently, "cut out the double talk and give!"

"Blaine wasn't shot with the dart when he started choking there on the stage," Burke said. "He was gassed. There were two reasons for the gassing. First, when Blaine naturally clawed at his throat everyone would assume that that was when the dart struck him. And in the second place he would be knocked out enough that Kahler could stab the dart into his throat in the brief interval between the curtain closing and our arrival on the stage."

"That was the critical period in his entire plan," Burke continued. "He had the wings blocked off with the angled temple walls. For approximately sixty seconds he was completely safe from observation. That gave him time enough to plant the dart in Blaine's throat, swing the altar slab over and substitute the normal mike for the doctored one, and ditch his handkerchief. The gas mask in the handkerchief probably wasn't really necessary. He just didn't want to take any chance of getting a stray whiff of the stuff that would start him choking. All trace of the gas

itself was absorbed in the lit brazier fumes by the time we got to the stage."

"But how did Manny release the gas from the mike?" Lane asked. "He wasn't within ten feet of it when Blaine started choking."

Burke turned to Kahler. "Want to tell us how it was fixed, Manny," he said, "or do we have to tear it apart?"

Kahler shrugged his shoulders wearily. "I'll tell you. Why not? The gas was in a cylinder hidden by the sun disc. There was a release mechanism that acted automatically when Blaine's voice waves struck it. Arline and I could safely speak into the mike for our voices were so different. Blaire's was a voice of an unusually deep pitch. As soon as he began speaking the gas was released in a jet straight into his mouth. It was chlorine and a faint trace of hydrocyanic, not enough to kill, just enough to strangle him and knock him out."

Kahler's glance shifted to Arline Adair. "You shouldn't have to ask me the motive, Burke," he said bitterly. "Ask her."

It wasn't necessary to ask Arline Adair. The answer was written in every line of her drawn face.

Burke shrugged his shoulders. "All right, Manny," he said. "Let's get going."

"No, no, Burke!" Kahler said tautly. "I'm not going to jail. I'm going somewhere else—and I'm not going alone!"

**H**IS hand came out from under his coat with a snub-nosed revolver in it. The group around him broke in panic, but Kahler was interested in only one of them. His face twisted with hate as he aimed the gun at Arline Adair.

She screamed hysterically and tried to run. The train of her evening gown tripped her. She plunged headlong, and the fall saved her life. Kahler's bullet passed over her head and into the canvas of a wall-drop beyond her.

Then Burke's gun was out. He fired

once. The revolver spun from Kahler's hand as Burke's slug blasted him from his feet.

Burke knelt over Kahler for a moment, then straightened up and returned his gun to its holster.

"Dead?" Chet Lane asked.

"No," Burke answered, "Just winged. He'll live long enough to play the leading role in the third and final feature of this little series. It will probably be titled, 'The Execution of Manson Kahler.'"