

STOCK SHOT

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

*As much as he disapproves of murder, Dan Turner hates blackmail even more. And as much as he loves a client who puts cash on the line, Dan's common sense tells him there's little percentage in trying to cover up for a killer. All of these factors, and more, confront him in *The Case of the Millionaire Producer with the Puritanical Sweetheart*.*



"Keep your dukes still, chum. This thing don't shoot marshmallows."

MAKING the last inclined turn in second gear, I lamped Ziggy Cranston's opulent igloo perched on the hilltop like a huge fondant decoration crowning a wedding cake. Late afternoon sunshine slanted against its westward windows, turning them to so many rectangles of glowing gold—which, after all, was pretty much in keeping with Cranston's grabby character. Everything he owned became golden, sooner or later; it was a Hollywood tradition. Now that I was going to do a job for him, maybe some of his dough would rub off on me. I hoped so.

I bent my rudder to the right, rolled along a private driveway as wide as Wilshire Boulevard, and parked my jalopy under a porte-cochere roomy enough to shelter a double-decker Greyhound bus, which gives you some idea as to the size of the residence itself. The joint's massive dimensions awed me as I disembarked and ankled toward its front portal.

Then, abruptly, my awe turned to ire.

From somewhere on the rear grounds a guy in shiny black patent leather puttees and sky-blue chauffeur's livery barged into view, opened the door of my bucket, and calmly installed himself behind the steering wheel as if it belonged to him. He was an undersized ginzo whose upper lip was embellished by a mustache waxed to sharp points, and his supercilious manner scorched me to a crisp. It was bad enough for him to crawl into my chariot without an invitation, but when he sneered at the paint job it made me indignant as hell.

I moved off the porch, favored the liveried lug with a dark scowl and said: "Ix-nay, dizzy. Fade."

"*Pardonnez-moi, monsieur?*"

"You heard me," I said. "Scrammezvous. Removez the seat of your britches from l'upholstery de la coupe. In other words, powder before warfare commences."

"But *Monsieur* Turner, I—"

I fastened the frosty focus on him. "Who are you?"

"Antoine, sir."

"Just plain Antoine? No family tree?"

"Antoine Leblanc, sir. Monsieur Cranston's chauffeur."

"And how do you know my name?"

He shrugged. "Monsieur Cranston informed me that he expected Dan Turner, the noted private detective. He instructed me to extend the usual courtesies."

"Hm-m-m," I said. "And does the Cranston hospitality include glomming a guest's go-cart?"

"I was merely going to drive it to the rear, *monsieur*, so I could wipe the dust from it."

I said: "Don't bother. That dust is all that holds the fenders on. Scram, chum."

"*Oui, monsieur.*" He got out. "Merci." Then his Paris accent faded like a lap dissolve shot. "Pretty tough dick, huh? Remind me to hate your guts some day when I've got a minute to spare." And he sauntered away, swaggering.

His sudden switch from phony French to colloquial American startled the bejoseph out of me; I couldn't even fish up a nice dirty insult to hurl after him. By the time my astonishment wore off, he was long gone and I decided it would be a waste of time to chase him. Instead, I thumbed the Cranston bell-push and was presently conducted by a pompous footman to the presence of Ziggy Cranston himself.

THIS was quite a presence. You crossed a reception hall two feet smaller than the Taj Mahal, descended three broad steps, and found yourself in a sunken chamber paneled in fumed oak, lined with deep shelves containing a fortune in symphonic record albums. A Capehart automatic player the size of a giant's juke box filled one corner, knocking itself out with

something sad by Tschaikowski, and the master of the mansion sat dolefully listening to the plaintive strains with tears in his soft brown optics as big as horse chestnuts.

“Hi, Ziggy,” I said.

He bounced out of his chair, switched off the music, greeted me with an unhappy handshake. “Thanks for coming, Sherlock. Have a drink?” He poured me a brimming beaker of Vat 69. “I’m in one hell of a jam.”

That was obvious; otherwise he wouldn’t have sent for a private snoop. To gander him, though, you wouldn’t have thought anything on earth could give him the fantods. His tallness topped my own six feet plus by at least an inch, his mush was rugged with excellent health and he had the heft of a professional wrestler beneath an outfit of tweeds as trimly tailored as the paint on a battleship.

Those imported threads had probably nicked him a good three centuries, maybe more; but he could afford it. He had the Midas touch that made a profit from everything he owned, including the controlling interest in Masterpiece Pix, an insignificant studio whose majority stock he had recently acquired at a thundering bargain. Since his buying that control, the shabby outfit had miraculously produced three click hits in a row; and now cash was rolling into the company’s coffers faster than a flock of auditors could count it. In short, Masterpiece was headed for Hollywood’s major brackets without a stroke of personal effort on Ziggy’s part; another example of the fabulous Cranston luck.

I tossed down my tippie, set fire to a gasper, peered at him through the fumes. “What kind of jam are you in?”

“Romantic and financial,” he answered dolorously.

I grinned. “Romance and finance. The inevitable combination.”

“Don’t be cynical at a time like now. I’m in hot water up to here.” He hesitated. “You know Sylvia Duane?”

“I’ve piped her on the screen in quickie westerns.”

“Then you know how beautiful she is,” he said. “You can understand why I’m in love with her, why I want to marry her.” He took a snapshot out of his wallet and regarded it fondly. “She’s what I’ve been waiting for all my life.”

I HAD to admit the jessie was mighty idelishful. In the snapshot she was garbed in cowgirl regalia: a Stetson riding her brunette tresses, a silk shirt and buckskin jacket festooning her more obvious contours, an abbreviated riding skirt flippantly embellishing the rest of her. Even in tooled leather boots you could see she sported a pair of shapely shafts that belonged in sheer two-thread nylons. Her map, though, was just like scores you’ll find around the movie lot—pretty but expressionless. She had a deadpan look, as if she might be afraid to smile for fear she’d crack her makeup.

“Very nice indeed,” I said, copping a furtive hinge at Ziggy’s billfold. It was stuffed with lettuce. “That’s something to dream about,” I added, referring to the dough.

He thought I meant the Duane doll. “Yes. But my dream may never come true—unless you help me.”

“Hey, wait,” I said. “My name’s Dan Turner, not Dan Cupid.”

“Will you stop clowning? This is serious. Sylvia’s a very serious person. Sedate and prim and—”

I said: “Sort of a Puritan maid?”

“Well, yes, sort of. I mean she’d drop me quick if she ever so much as suspected

me of—of, well, playing around with other women.”

“Do you, Ziggy?”

“Do I what?”

“Play around with other women?”

He made an indignant mouth. “Hell, no. At least not since I got engaged to Sylvia a few months ago.”

“Then she’s got no reason to suspect you,” I said. “So what are you worrying about?”

“Blackmail,” he whispered. “A lousy stinking shakedown. I’m being—” Then his words choked off, lost in the sudden shattering crash of nearby window-glass. This tinkling uproar, was emphasized by an accompaniment of shouts, oaths, and blows; a thwack-thud-thwack of knuckles massaging flesh.

Ziggy Cranston turned green around the fringes; blinked foggily at me. His kisser sagged open but no sounds came out. Meantime I tabbed the general direction of the fracas, which was evidently just beyond a closed door leading out of this sunken music room. I started sprinting.

WHEN I hit the door and jounced it open, I saw that it gave access to a massive solarium, a kind of inside hothouse devoted to wicker furniture and various forms of plant life growing from potted earth. The roof and three walls were of clear glass arranged in huge squares, and one of these panes had been bashed to fragments by a human projectile wearing a truculent expression and a suit of shabby blue serge. The guy was a sawed-off, chunky party with a burden in his arms.

The burden was Ziggy Cranston’s chauffeur, Antoine Leblanc—the one with the phony Paris accent. Antoine had apparently tried to keep the shabby citizen from entering the premises and had got knocked cockeyed for his pains; now he was being carried like a slumbering infant.

Barring a nasty bruise on his jawbone he looked as peaceful as an iced herring.

“Hey,” I said to the bozo who toted him.

“Are you addressing me, sir?”

I said: “Yeah. What takes place?”

“Nothing of any importance—yet,” the chunky monkey said in refrigerated accents. “This misguided soul made the mistake of attempting to prevent my entrance into the house. I had to show him the error of his ways.”

I stared. “What did you teach him with, a baseball bat?”

“Not at all. He was a sucker for a left hook. I then employed him as a battering ram to break one of the windows.” He surveyed me sourly. “What business is it of yours?”

“Maybe I’ll make it my business,” I said. “I don’t like your way of talking.”

“Ah?”

“You sound like a college diploma that took a transfusion of gangster plasma by mistake. If you—”

He scowled. “Quiet, lackey. Take me to your master.”

“My master?” I hung the flabbergasted focus on him.

“Yes. Ziggy Cranston.” Then I caught hep; the guy thought I was one of the servants attached to Ziggy’s domestic staff. This galled me. I said: “Now wait a minute. Let’s understand each other.”

“There’s nothing to understand, my man. Announce me to Cranston, instantly. Tell him Wilbert Winslow wishes to see him. Tell him I’m tired being evaded.”

“Wilbert Winslow—?” I yeepped. “Cripes, you used to own Masterpiece Pix, didn’t you? You went so deep in the red you had to let the sheriff sell you out for peanuts. I remember now.”

He favored me with a somber frown. “Flunkies are not supposed to remember. They should be seen and not heard.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Only I’m not a gunky, I’m a private dick.” I advanced on him. “I carry a badge and so forth. I’m empowered to make arrests, just like a cop.”

“You don’t tell me.”

I growled: “Consider yourself pinched, brother. Breaking and entering, assault and bashery, destruction of property, malicious mischief—”

“And resisting an officer,” he said. “Don’t forget that. Provided you really are an officer.” Then he hefted Antoine Leblanc high in the air and hurled him at me.

I wasn’t expecting it; didn’t have time to get set. The senseless chauffeur sailed in a straight line, arms and legs flopping crazily. The top of his noggin bopped me on the profile before I could duck.

All my fuses blew out and I went bye-bye.

CHAPTER II

Ka-Chow!

THERE were voices in the adjoining music room when I snapped out of my trance. One belonged to Ziggy Cranston and the second conversationalist was that chunky Winslow character; I’d have recognized his cultured syllables anywhere.

Winslow was saying: “You cheated me, Cranston. You waited until I was financially insolvent and then forced me to sell you my studio.”

“That’s c-crazy,” Ziggy answered. “And besides—”

“Don’t interrupt me. Had you allowed me to retain control of Masterpiece just a few more weeks, certain productions would have been completed and released; productions which subsequently proved immensely profitable. I should have had that profit, not you. It wasn’t fair.”

I couldn’t see Ziggy from where I was sprawled in the solarium, but his voice had

a resentful pout. “Fair! I paid every dime your lousy outfit was worth. Sure, things turned out in my favor. But can I help it if you couldn’t hang on long enough to get over the hump? I took a gamble and won, is all.”

“You knew I had three hits coming up.”

Ziggy howled: “That’s not so! Dammit, nobody knew those cheap-budget turkeys would click like they did. Even you didn’t know it or you’d have made a bigger effort to retain control.”

“I still think I’m entitled to—”

“And I think you’re nuts!” Ziggy said bitterly. “Judas Priest, the way you’ve been hounding me lately it’s a wonder I don’t hire somebody to knock you off!”

Winslow’s tone dropped a notch. “Threats, Mr. Cranston?”

“Who’s got a better right to make threats, especially against a blackmailer?”

You could hear the Winslow guy drawing a sharp breath. “Blackmailer? What do you mean by that?”

“As if you didn’t know. As if you weren’t the one who swiped that stock shot from the Masterpiece film library. As if you aren’t holding it over my head, trying to break up my wedding plans. You dirty heel,” Ziggy tacked onto his tirade. “By rights I ought to break your scummy neck.”

“Try it,” Winslow invited coldly.

I rolled over on the floor of the indoor greenhouse and said to Antoine Leblanc: “Wake up, Frenchy. Something tells me we may be needed. That Winslow citizen is no setup for Ziggy to tackle. You and I both found that out the hard way.”

The chauffeur didn’t answer me. He wasn’t there. He’d awakened from his swoon while I was still in dreamland, and now he was gone; probably to repair his bruises and contusions. This left me to handle the situation all alone, and I wasn’t sure I was going to enjoy it.

I SCRAMBLED upright, made for the door of the music room. As I staggered over the threshold, I lamped Ziggy Cranston advancing on his chunky caller, who stood spraddle-legged with a bleak look of anticipation on his puss. Mayhem was in the making and it had a short fuse.

"Ix-nay," I snarled, and catapulted at Winslow; dived for his ankles. He toppled with a jarring thump and I pinned him with my poundage, held him helpless. "Be nice," I said. "Be nice, or it gives violence."

He regarded me without rancor. "You couldn't have done this if you hadn't sneaked up on me from behind."

"Yeah. Have it your way." I perched on his chest and darted a glance at Cranston. "Let's go into that alleged blackmail routine, Ziggy. Right now it's all pretty hazy. Whistle the patter while I restrain this ape."

Cranston made a harried grimace. "There's nothing hazy about it, Hawkshaw. First of all, do you know what we mean in the picture industry when we speak of a stock shot?"

"Sure. Old newsreel footage or random reels of travel background; foreign scenery and the like. Battleship launchings, big city fires, sports events, mob scenes, spectacular wrecks and accidents—anything that might come in handy when you're making a movie and want to splice in some authentic bits of business without it costing too much. For instance, say you're producing an opus that has a railroad smashup as part of the plot. You go to your library of stock shots and drag out a reel of genuine train wreck. You feed in this footage, matching it up with a sound stage set which fakes the closeups of the train debris."

"Right," Ziggy said. "Every studio has such a stock shot library; and, in addition, can rent similar reels from various outfits

making a specialty of supplying that sort of material. Masterpiece has a fairly complete assortment, collected over a long period of time."

I said: "So what?"

"Well, a couple of months ago there was a minor fire in a small hotel here in Hollywood; more smoke than flames. It was at night and a lot of fire department equipment showed up, although it wasn't really needed. The hotel staff got everything under control with hand extinguishers."

"It's still hazy," I said. "All dialogue and no action."

He shushed me. "Comes the action now. I was on a bender. You know what I mean? Saturated. Fried to the hat. When I go on these drunks, I always wind up sleeping it off in some grade B hotel. I wouldn't want Sylvia to know this, you understand. She disapproves of drinking to excess—"

"Yeah, you told me she was a Puritan. If she found out you're a periodic lush, she'd ditch you, hunh?"

"Exactly. So I'm in this hotel and there's a fire. I wake up in my underclothes, open the window, and climb out the fire escape. But just as I'm going over the sill I hear somebody pounding the door of my room. I go back inside and open up. There's a—a girl standing there; a woman. In her nightgown."

"Oh-oh," I said.

He went on: "She had an inside room. No fire ladder. My room was her shortest avenue of escape. Smoke was billowing all around. She was hysterical. Well, hell, what was I going to do, let her stay there and maybe perish or something? Mind you, I didn't know but what the whole place was burning."

"So you picked her up and carried her out your window, down the fire escape," I said.

“Yes. An entirely innocent act.”

I COCKED a glimmer at him. “It makes a plausible scenario, anyhow. Some folks might not believe it, though.”

“Sylvia wouldn’t,” he said. “She’d think the worst. She’d get the idea that girl and I had been in the hotel together . . . you see what I mean?”

“Definitely,” I nodded. “But what’s that got to do with your blackmail beef? And where do those stock shots come in?”

He made a discontented mouth. “Some damned fool independent movie photographer happened to be in the neighborhood and took a lot of footage with handsize Filmo. Mind you, the blaze wasn’t big enough to draw any newsreel outfits. Just this one jerk with a sixteen millimeter camera. Later he sold the shot to Masterpiece for its stock library. It was fairly spectacular, what with all the smoke pouring from the upper windows.”

“And he got some footage of you lugging a dame down the ladder in her nightie, is that it?”

“Yes,” Ziggy moaned. “I didn’t even know it. And I didn’t know the reel was sold to Masterpiece until recently.”

I said: “How did you find out?”

“A studio employee in charge of stock shots reported to me that the files had been burgled. One can was missing. Fire stuff. Next thing I knew, I began receiving anonymous letters enclosing clips from the hotel scene—individual frames, cut from the reel itself. Those pictures show me, as large as life, coming down the fire escape with that girl.”

“What’s the bite?” I asked.

“Bite—?”

“The demand. The payoff.”

His peepers got wrathful. “A threat to show the entire scene to Sylvia unless I sign over my majority holdings in Masterpiece Pictures.”

“Sign them over to what guy?”

“In blank,” he said. “The scheme is too clever to name a specific recipient. But obviously it’s that man you’re sitting on—Wilbert Winslow. He’s the one who wants his studio back. Anybody can see that.”

Winslow stirred fretfully under me. “That’s a lie. I want my just due, but I wouldn’t stoop to blackmail.”

“Quiet, cousin,” I advised him. Then I said to Ziggy: “Even so, I can’t understand why you’d be so scared. All you have to do is explain the truth to your sweetie—”

“She wouldn’t believe me.”

“Why not put her to the test?”

He shook his head. “No. I’d have to confess to her that I was plastered at the time. In her eyes, that would be almost as bad as being with another woman. She—”

“Yeah, a Puritan. She’d give you the frigid air.”

“In a hurry,” he agreed morosely. “That’s why I sent for you. I was going to tell you all this stuff and then have you try to break into Winslow’s house, steal the reel away from him, destroy it.”

I growled: “Instead of which he barges over here and steps into trouble. That’s dandy.”

WINSLOW attempted to buck me off his chest. “I don’t see anything dandy about it,” he complained. “The whole thing is a frame-up. I haven’t got any stolen reel. I haven’t been on the Masterpiece lot since I lost control.”

“You’ve been hounding Ziggy, haven’t you?” I said.

He nodded sullenly. “Yes. I wanted—”

“What you wanted makes no difference now,” I announced grimly. “It’s what you’re going to get, which is a swift poke in the kisser unless you cough up that shakedown footage.”

Ziggy said eagerly: “That’s right, Sherlock. Give him lumps.” He came

toward us. "Lean aside and I'll take the first punch. Let me at him."

"No, not yet. First we go through a slight formality. You put some geetus in my duke. Say five hundred hermans as a retainer. A grand extra when we recover the reel." Winslow did some more bucking and squirming. "A fine thing, I must say!" he sulked. "Accepting money to beat me up. And before my very eyes."

"Don't worry," I told him. "You won't be able to see me write out a receipt. You'll be unconscious, if that's any consolation." I looked at Cranston. "The dough, Ziggy."

"Eh? Oh, yes, sure. Here." He dug out his wallet, peeled five centuries off his stack, thrust them at me.

I reached for the lettuce, started to stuff it in my pocket.

Never in my misspent career have I made a worse mistake than grabbing for that greenery. For an instant my attention was diverted from the chunky Winslow, and he seized his golden opportunity so fast it made my kidneys pucker like raisins. With a mighty heave he dislodged me off his torso, sent me floundering. I careened across the carpet at a crazy angle, caterwauling at the top of my tonsils and calling him every name in the stud book.

He seemed to take exception to this, because he arose in the full panoply of his anger and said: "Tut, tut. Such language. No gentleman would use it."

Then he kicked me on the skull and ran like hell; aimed himself at the doorway to the solarium. Ziggy Cranston took out after him—an action which I only dimly witnessed because my peepers were thumped out of focus. Then I heard a terrific crash of glass and a petulant yelp from Ziggy. "Dammit!" he screeched in irate tones. "At least you could have been polite enough to go out through the pane you broke when you came in. You didn't have to smash another one!"

FOOTFALLS sounded on the outer grounds, receding hellity blip. That was Winslow taking a rapid powder with Cranston still trailing him by three laps. I couldn't see any of it but I could get the picture in my imagination: Winslow scissoring toward the tall timber and Ziggy trying to catch him. It reminded me of a slapstick comedy chase and my dazed condition made it seem as funny as a two-reeler in the old silent days. I started to giggle.

I quit giggling when the shot sounded.

It came from a distance, the spitefully sneezed: *Ka-chow!* of a triggered roscoe. This was followed by a fading scream, ending in a gurgle like sewage going down a clogged drain. Then came an ominous silence.

I struggled to my stems, launched myself on an erratic course through the sun room, pelted across the rear garden, and finally came to a frozen halt near the Cranston swimming pool. There was somebody in the pool, floating face down; a bozo with a bullet hole in his dandruff. Gravy was leaking from the wound, staining the water with streaks of pallid pink, and I didn't need a second gander to tell me I was gazing upon the mortal remnants of Wilbert Winslow.

He was deader than chopped bait.

Ziggy Cranston stood at the pool's tiled edge with a smoking rod in his mitt and a severe case of the quaking jabberwockies shivering through his tonnage. A brunette cupcake was just churning into view, racing around the corner of the nearby building which served as garage and servants' quarters. I tabbed her immediately; she was the cookie of Cranston's snapshot, the doll he craved to marry—Sylvia Duane.

"Ziggy!" she wailed. "You . . . you killed a man!"

CHAPTER III

The Answer to \$10,000

AT THE sound of her voice, Cranston pivoted; goggled at her and then at the fowling piece in his fist. He twitched as if he'd found himself caressing a rattlesnake; made a motion to toss the gat into the water.

I roared: "Oh, no you don't!" and lunged up close to him, relieved him of the deadly weapon before he could throw it. Then I prodded him with its muzzle. "No tricks, Ziggy."

"Huh? Wh-what?"

"I said no tricks."

He seemed stupefied. "No tricks! You mean . . . you mean you . . . I . . . you think I shot Winslow?"

"Your sweetie just accused you of it," I said. "And the guy's obviously deceased. Moreover, here you were with a cannon. Everything adds up, including your motive. Winslow was blackmailing you and this was the payoff."

"But . . . but that's not true!" he gibbered. Then he turned to the Duane frail, who had reached us by that time. "Sylvia . . . darling . . . surely you didn't mean to . . .?"

She kept her big dark glims away from the thing that floated in the water. "What else can I think? I saw the same thing Mr. Turner saw. Winslow falling into the pool, and you with th-that gun." Brine began to spill down her peach bloom complexion. "T-to think I'm engaged to a . . . a murderer!"

"Now wait," Ziggy burst out desperately. "Let's not jump at conclusions, either of you. I can explain this. I can explain it so you'll both understand what happened."

I said: "You don't have to, pal. You were chasing the guy and he was getting away. So you creamed him."

"No." He got red and then pale, like a traffic signal with a short circuit. "No, it wasn't that way at all. I ran after him—yes. Then all of a sudden I heard a shot and he yelled and threw up his hands and—pitched into the pool."

I brandished the rod I'd glommed from him. "And this sprouted in your duke, I suppose. By magic, maybe."

"Listen. Listen to me, please. I was looking at Winslow as he fell in the water. Naturally I'd be looking at him. So then when the splash came I—I sort of stepped back a little. Reflex, perhaps; you know how you'll do when you see water coming at you. I felt something under my foot. It—it was that gun. I stooped and picked it up, and then—well then you and Sylvia came. That's as much as I can tell you, and it's the God's truth."

The brunette wren pasted the puzzled focus on him. "Oh, Ziggy, you sound as if you weren't lying. And yet—"

"Yeah," I rasped, "And yet his story's as full of holes as the inside of a sponge," I swung around. "Show me the exact spot where you claim you stepped on the rodney."

He took three strides; pointed to an indentation in the turf. "Right here."

SURE enough, the outlines of a pistol seemed to be impressed in the ground; but that didn't mean much. "You dropped the roscoe after you bumped Winslow. You accidentally stepped on it, then picked it up again. That's the only way it makes sense as far as I can figure," I said.

He stretched out his palms imploringly. "I tell you it isn't so. Somebody else—"

"Now look, Ziggy," I tried to be patient with him. "Who else was in sight when the guy got drilled?"

"Nobody. That is, I didn't see anyone."

I said: "So whoever fired the murder slug was an invisible man, eh? He stood

here and you couldn't see him. Horse apples." I spun on my heel, started back toward the house. "This is something for the homicide heroes to chew on."

"Wh-what are you guh-going to do?"

"Phone headquarters."

"You mean you—you're going to have me arrested?"

"That'll be up to the cops. Maybe they'll believe your screwy story."

"But you d-don't, eh?"

"Correct," I said. "Come on, march ahead of me. You may as well make the best of it. Don't force me to use my handcuffs on you. After all, you're a friend of mine." Then I added: "Not that I ever let friendship interfere with duty when I'm messed up in a bumpier case."

He balked, cast a sorrowing glance at Sylvia Duane. "Don't let him do this to me, Sylvia honey. Say something to him. Try to convince him I'm innocent!"

"How can I do that when I'm not convinced myself?" she demanded hesitantly. "Oh-h-h, Ziggy . . . everything's so jumbled up!" All of a sudden she faced me, her dark glims narrowed suspiciously. "What was that you said about . . . blackmail?"

"Ask Ziggy; hon. He'll tell you."

"No!" Cranston yiped in panic. "That's not to be mentioned—not, to be talked about! I don't w-want Sylvia to—" He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial wheedle. "Look, Turner. Let's make a truce. How would you like five thousand dollars?"

"I'd love it."

"Then all you have to do is help me move Winslow's body somewhere off my estate. Let it be discovered some other place where nobody will connect me with—"

I said: "Nope. No dice."

"But for five thousand dollars, Turner! You said you'd love to be paid—"

"I wouldn't love it that much," I said. "I'd be compounding a felony, obstructing justice, and putting my tippet in a wringer. You and Miss Duane would be in on the deal with me. You'd be able to make me dance to your tune from that time on. We'd all be conspirators together. Much obliged, I value my conscience more than that. Let's go phone for some law."

His shoulders drooped and he pretended to surrender. Then he pulled an unexpected fast one; whirled and started running. Maybe I could have brought him down with a pill from my heater, but I hated the idea. Instead, I plunged after him.

And again he fooled me. This time he reversed his direction, angled off at a tangent, aimed himself toward a cable of electric wires leading from a tall pole to the rear of his tepee. Gaining these, he leaped high in the air; grabbed them and swung hard on them.

They snapped. He tumbled, almost fell. At the same instant I overhauled him, collared him and snarled: "What the hell was the big idea?"

"Phone wires," he said simply. "Now you can't call headquarters. Not from here, anyhow."

"So you think that'll do you any good?"

He shrugged. "It's a delay. Now we can talk some more. What's your answer to ten thousand dollars?"

"This," I said, and made a tight fist; corked him on the prow. He dropped like a cut rope and I leaned over him, whisked out my nippers, fettered his wrists. I started dragging him around toward the front porte-cochere where my jalopy was parked.

THE Duane chick raced after me. "You—you can't—"

"Keep your beautiful beak out of this, babe," I warned her.

"But—but Ziggy—you knocked him unconscious—"

“That was the general purpose.”

“What are you going to d-do with him? Where are you t-taking him?”

I fed her a supercilious leer. “To the nearest gendarmes. And if you get in my way, I’ll knock you loose from your girdle. That’s a promise.” Then I boosted her boyfriend into my bucket, crawled in beside him, kicked the starter, and went away from there in a cloud of peanut brittle.

I didn’t go very far, though. There was another palatial wigwam farther down the winding drive, a stash belonging to some big shot movie director. By dint of persuasion plus a flash of my badge I got a butler to let me use his telephone, whereupon I dialed my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide bureau. “Dan Turner squalling,” I announced. “I’m wading around in croakery and I’ve got the killer under wraps for you. Come a-running.”

“What?” Dave’s voice rattled the receiver.

I said: “You heard me. Ziggy Cranston, current owner of Masterpiece Pix, just cooled the studio’s formal mogul, name of Wilbert Winslow. Flag your frame out here in a hell of a yank. I’ll wait for you.”

After that it was all over but the trial—or so I thought. I was wrong, though. I went back out to my coupe, kept a wary glim on Cranston; burned my way through half a deck of gaspers. Then I heard a siren wailing, coming closer. That was Donaldson’s official sedan imitating a rocket. Presently I spotted it coming around a bend; flagged it down.

“Hi, hideous,” I said.

Dave poked his beefy lineaments at me. “Never mind the airy chatter. Let’s have more on this alleged kill. Hey, who’s that sleeping in your car?”

“Cranston,” I said. “The guilty gee. Follow me up the street and I’ll show you the bozo he rendered defunct.”

So we made a parade to the Cranston igloo on the hilltop; assembled ourselves and ankled toward the swimming pool in the rear. Cranston himself was just regaining a section of his senses, but his brogans weren’t tracking very well and he needed support from both sides. Dave and I furnished this; steered him where we wanted him to go.

We reached the pool. It contained an occupant, all right; but not the one I was expecting. Sylvia Duane was splashing around in a red silk bathing rig the size of an airmail stamp, looking gorgeous; but there was no trace of a cadaver.

The late lamented Wilbert Winslow had lammed.

CHAPTER IV *What Body?*

DONALDSON COPPED a squint at the swimming cupcake. Then he glared at me and grated: “Corpse, hunh? That’s the liveliest stiff I ever saw. What’s the rib? Tell me so I can laugh too.”

“Hold everything!” I bleeped. “Hey, you—Miss Duane!” She pretended to spot us for the first time; rolled over and paddled to the edge of the pool. Dripping from every curve, she hauled herself out of the drink and stared at Ziggy handcuffed between Dave and myself. “Darling! What—what is it? What’s happened? Why are these men holding you that way?”

You had to give Cranston credit; he was quick on the uptake. He blinked blurrily at the brunette doll, sucked in a deep sigh, got control of himself and said; “I’m under arrest for something that never happened.”

“But—but I don’t understand!”

“Neither do I,” he lied like a taximeter. “I was strolling around the front part of the grounds when this maniac Turner got out of his coupe, jumped me, knocked me cold,

and handcuffed me.”

She stiffened. “But why? What for?”

“There you’ve got me. When I came to, he had this other cop with him and they brought me back here. Your guess is as good as mine, honey.”

I said: “All right, you’ve had your fun, both of you. Now I get my turn. What became of Winslow’s body?”

“Winslow?” the Duane quail said. “What Winslow?”

“The one that was in the pool when I left here with Ziggy,” I rapped back at her. “What have you done with the corpus delicti?”

She was as calm as Sunday in Philadelphia. “Really, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve been here swimming for the past hour or more, and I’m sure I haven’t noticed any corpus delicti—whatever that may be.”

“Wait,” I tried to keep my voice down. “Do you mean to stand there and tell me in my teeth Ziggy Cranston didn’t plug Wilbert Winslow through the brains?”

“You must be drunk,” she said. “Stinking.”

I gnashed my grinders; turned to Donaldson. “Do I look saturated?” I demanded in challenging accents. “Here, smell my breath.”

Dave squinted at me thoughtfully. “Maybe you’re slipping. As a man grows older his capacity diminishes. What are you trying to pull?”

“Pull!” I yodeled. “Thanks for reminding me. Take a slant at those phone wires leading from that pole into the igloo. You can see where Cranston pulled them apart so I couldn’t call you from here. That’s why I had to bop him and nipper him. Then I ferried him to the next stash down the hill; dialed you from there.”

“Do tell.”

“And while I was gone this doll must have fished Winslow out of the pool and—”

“How big was he?”

“Not tall, but chunky. And plenty muscular. He even lifted a chauffeur and hurled him at me some time before the shootery.”

“I see,” Dave said.

“You see what?”

“That you’re out of your mind.”

“Me?” I strangled. “Why, you—”

“I’ve got a bird’s-eye view of this young lady hauling a cadaver out of the water and hiding it. Especially the cadaver of a guy who could fling grown men through the atmosphere.”

“But I tell you—”

He scowled ferociously. “You’re nuts. I always knew you’d go off your chump some day from too much alcohol.”

I SNARLED: “Now, look. Be reasonable; use your common sense. There was a corpse in that pool; Wilbert Winslow’s body. Ziggy Cranston cooled him. Here’s the rodney he did it with.” I yanked the gat from my pocket; flourished it. “Okay. If the jane is too tiny to have disposed of Winslow’s remainders all by herself, it just proves she had help.”

“What help?”

“A servant, maybe.” Then a hunch hit me. “The chauffeur I was telling you about would be a likely prospect.”

“Why would he?”

“Because he’s a phony to start with,” I said. “He—”

Ziggy rattled his handcuffs with a plaintive gesture. “Am I supposed to stand here in chains while you morons discuss a murder that never happened?”

“Quiet,” I growled.

The Duane frail said: “Yes, darling, give them enough rope. You can sue them later for assault, false arrest, illegal detention and slander.”

“You forgot arson and kidnaping, kitten,” I sneered.

“Much obliged. We’ll add them to the list.”

Dave said: “How was he phony?”

“How was who phony?” I tried to pick up the thread of my interrupted discourse. “Oh, yeah, the chauffeur. He talked with a fake French accent but dropped it when he got sore.”

From behind me a voice horned into the dialogue. “So okay, I use a phony French accent. What does that make me?”

I whirled. “Ah, Antoine Leblanc.”

“In person,” he said evenly. He flicked a speck of dust from his sky-blue livery, tweaked the points of his waxed mustache. A supercilious smile played around his kisser as he added: “So I’m under discussion, eh, shamus?”

Ziggy Cranston goggled at him. “Hey, I thought you were from Paris!”

“Paris, Texas,” the guy grinned. “Sorry if it shatters any of your illusions, sir. I had a grapevine that you preferred foreign servants, so when I applied for the chauffeuring job I made with the Frog routine. Am I fired?”

“Well, I—I—dammit all, don’t annoy me with trifles at a time like this. Can’t you see this stupid gumshoe is trying to put me in a jam?”

Dave Donaldson snapped: “Oh for cripes’ sake, shut up, all of you. You’re making me dizzy.” He glowered at Antoine. “French, eh?” Then he turned to me. “At least you were right about him being a fake.”

“I was right about the rest of it, too,” I said. “Five brings you twenty that Antoine knows where the body’s buried, if I may coin a phrase.”

The chauffeur showed me his uppers and lowers. “What body?” he purred.

“The one you helped Miss Duane drag out of the drink. Wilbert Winslow.”

“It’s funny how you can take a dislike to a guy the first instant you see him,” he

murmured softly. “You’d be amazed how much I don’t like you, flatfoot.” He took a handkerchief out of his tunic; stooped down as if to dust his polished black puttees. As he leaned forward he launched himself full at my elly-bay; butted me like a goat.

I let out an agonized whoosh and did a backward jack-knife into the swimming pool; hit the moisture with a geysering splash. I was paralyzed; my tripes felt dislocated and I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t swim. Confidentially, I sank.

CHAPTER V

The Prowler

THEY SAY when you’re drowning your whole past flashes before your eyes like a movie montage. Mine didn’t. I simply surrendered to an enveloping blackness that gulped me like a raw oyster, and when I woke up, I was in a hospital bed with an empty sensation in my clockworks and a feeling that somebody had probed my lungs with the business end of a blow torch. I learned later that a rescue squad had used a stomach pump on me, which accounted for the emptiness; while the fire in my bellows was the result of artificial respiration with a pulmotor. I felt lousy.

Dave Donaldson leaned anxiously over my bed; breathed his halitosis in my kisser. “You alive, Sherlock?”

“No,” I said bitterly. “Get away from me.”

“Don’t be like that. After all, I—”

“After all my nostrils!” I grated. “You stood there like a baboon and let that chauffeur character ram me into the soup. Powder, pal. I hate you to pieces.”

He sulked. “A fine thing, after I ruined a perfectly good suit of clothes diving in and saving your life. Nineteen bucks that suit cost me. So the water shrinks it to fit a

midget, and what thanks do I get?" He drew a deep breath. "Oh, well, that's gratitude."

"What time is it?" I said.

"Time? Why, eight o'clock. You've been here in the hospital since sundown."

I yeped: "The hell you preach! And what have you been doing in the meanwhile?"

"Oh, a little of this and that. Detecting, mainly."

"Detecting what?"

He looked hurt. "Your accusations, of course. We prowled every cubic inch of Cranston's house and grounds, including the garage and servants' quarters. No dice. I mean no corpse. We quizzed the household staff and they denied they'd heard a shot, seen a murder or witnessed a body being moved from the pool."

"Bribery might account for that," I said. "Maybe they'd been paid to keep mum."

"Whale feathers! The plain and simple truth is there never was a dead guy. You must have dreamed it." Then he added: "You've got one satisfaction, though. I cast that Antoine Leblanc bozo in the jug for butting you into the water. You can make formal charges against him tomorrow and we'll salt him down for a spell on general principles."

I sat up, shoved my covers aside. "That's fine. Meanwhile I've got work to do."

"What kind of work? Hey, get back in that bed. You're a sick man."

"And you'll be sicker than I am before I get finished," I retorted grimly. "I'm going to prowl Wilbert Winslow's wigwam, find a certain movie reel—"

"Movie reel?"

I nodded and stood up. "A stock shot whereby Winslow was blackmailing Ziggy Cranston. It will prove Cranston had a definite motive for bumping the Winslow citizen."

"Now why don't you relax?" Dave said earnestly. "There wasn't any bump. You can't have a bump without a corpse."

"I'll find that too, before I'm done," I dished him a sarcastic leer. "Where are my garments?"

"In that closet, all dried and pressed. I saw to it myself." He tried to block me. "But damn it, you're in no shape to go gallivanting—"

I said: "I'm in shape to clout you on the smeller if you get in my hair." Then I skirted him, located my threads, installed myself in them and made for the door.

Dave made one last attempt to wheedle me. "Look, Philo. How's for letting all this slide until tomorrow? Then you'll see it in a different light."

I told him I preferred the dark and scrambled.

MY jalopy was in the hospital garage, another of Donaldson's efforts to be helpful. I piled in, got a flask of Scotch tonic out of the glove compartment, swallowed a copious jolt to ward off possible snake-bite and lit a shuck for Westwood where the late lamented Winslow party had lived. It took me fifteen minutes to drive there and another three to find a master key on my ring that would work the lock of the modest bungalow's front door. Presently the latch clicked and I stole over the threshold with as much noise as a mosquito landing on a bowl of jello. In the snooping racket it sometimes pays to be silent.

This was one of the times.

As I groped forward in solid blackness, I reached for my pencil flashlight; got ready to risk a ray as soon as I was certain the joint was uninhabited. Then, all of a sudden, I saw a brief and vagrant flicker of illumination from one of the rear rooms, like the beam from an oversized electric torch.

I got tense all the way to my toenails. Somebody was in the tepee with me; somebody who didn't belong there any more than I did. Wilbert Winslow had been a bachelor; had lived alone without any servants. Now that he was defunct, nobody ought to be prowling his premises; and I knew it couldn't be Winslow's ghost because ghosts don't use flashlights.

My .32 automatic was in its shoulder clip, undisturbed during my hospital sojourn. I hauled it forth, snapped off the safety, jacked a cartridge into the chamber. The metallic click was drowned out by other sounds emanating from that rear room where an intruder was moving around. Judging from the noises, a job of frisking was being committed.

You could tell that this unseen character considered himself to be alone, for he wasn't making much effort to disguise his movements. I figured he must be pretty engrossed in his work, so I chanced a quick splash of glow from my own torch. In that momentary wink of light I piped my surroundings, realized they'd been rifled. I was in a living room that looked like the aftermath of a Kansas cyclone. There was a desk in one corner with its drawers sagging open, their contents dumped on the floor. There were several hunks of overstuffed furniture, the cushions and padding slashed by a sharp knife. A bookcase yawned emptily, its volumes piled on the threadbare carpet and a lot of their pages ripped out. The prowler was damned thorough.

But what was he looking for?

I thought I knew. I also had a pretty good idea who the bozo was. I stalked toward that rear room, gained its doorway, peered in and lamped a tall, suntanned guy in the act of taking a down pillow apart feather by feather.

"Hi, Ziggy Cranston," I said.

CHAPTER VI

A Threat

HE WHIRLED like a dervish with the hotfoot, hung the flabbergasted gander on me and choked: "Turner . . . you . . .!"

"Yeah. Were you expecting Santa Claus?"

"I—I didn't expect anybody. I mean—"

"Sure, you thought you could fan the joint without being nabbed. Keep your dukes still, chum. This thing I'm holding doesn't shoot marshmallows."

He sucked in a noisy breath. "I—I'm not armed. I won't try to—to do anything."

"You've done enough already. You croaked Winslow. Now you're trying to locate the blackmail reel."

"No. No, I didn't kill Winslow. I swear I didn't! I'll admit I've been hunting for that reel of film, but—but—"

I said: "It all meshes. If you could find the footage and destroy it, nobody could pin a murder motive on you. But you've given yourself away by coming here. Reel or no reel, it links you up with the Winslow bump."

"Won't you please listen to me? I—"

"Shut up." I advanced on him, waved my rod. "You're going to tell me what happened to the guy's remnants. You're going to tell me now and save yourself trouble or you can do it later after I beat you across the mush with this cannon. Take your choice, and take it fast."

He quailed. "I don't know what happened to the b-body."

"Quit stalling. Speak out before I make with the violence."

"I give you my oath I don't know!" he squealed. "Sylvia took it from the pool, yes; she admitted that much to me. She said she did it to get me out of trouble."

I sneered: "A noble gesture on her part. Evidence of her true love. But where did

she hide the defunct gee?"

"She w-wouldn't tell me. She said it would be better if I didn't know."

"Damned thoughtful of her," I said. "Particularly since she seemed to be convinced that you were the murderer."

"You're wrong about that. She thought it over and decided I was innocent. That's why she went to bat for me, fronted for me. She figured I had no logical reason for shooting Winslow; therefore she concluded I wasn't guilty."

I regarded him bleakly. "You mean she still isn't hep to the blackmail angle?"

"Gosh, no! I've kept that from her. Otherwise she'd think the worst and leave me in the lurch!"

"That'll happen anyhow when the blowoff comes," I said. "And there's always a blowoff when you monkey with homicide. Thanks to you, I know now how to crack Sylvia Duane wide open and force her to spill."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I'm going to tell her you were being blackmailed."

"No—!"

"I'm going to tell her why you were being blackmailed."

"Please, Sherlock, you mustn't do—"

I said: "Then she'll get the idea you were playing around with some other dame. She'll be sore as hell. She'll quit shielding you and come clean. She'll believe you're guilty of croaking Winslow; and she'll confess where she hid his carcass."

"Don't do that, Turner!" he begged. "I love Sylvia. She'll never marry me if you did that!"

"She couldn't marry you in any case, bub. You'll have a previous engagement with the gas chamber. The instant we locate a corpus delicti we'll have you by the short hair. Catch on?"

He winced. "You insist you're going to

railroad me, do you?"

"Yeah, if I can."

"Would money make any difference?"

"Not a bit. This is one time I'm bribe-proof."

"But do you realize if you trick Sylvia into telling where she hid the body, she'll be confessing herself into a jam? I mean obstruction of justice or whatever you call it—"

"Accessory," I nodded. "She'll be juggled." I beckoned to him with my heater. "Come along, let's go talk to her. Where does she live?"

HE faltered: "The Gayboy on Wilshire. She isn't there now, though. At least I don't think she is."

"How come?"

"Because I—I left her at my house an hour or so ago. I told her I had an errand. She said she'd wait for me."

"I'll check that," I said, prodding him into the front room. There was a phone in one corner and I made him dial it while I kept him covered. He got a connection with the Gayboy Arms; handed me the instrument. I said: "Is Miss Sylvia Duane in her apartment?"

The clerk asked me to wait while he rang. There was a pause, then, "Sorry, sir, she doesn't answer. Any message?"

"Nope." I hung up, nudged Cranston out of the bungalow; told him to take my jalopy's wheel and drive while I sat beside him with my .32 nudging his short ribs. He obeyed with his bridgework clattering and we made knots toward his hilltop hovel, presently drifting to a halt under the mammoth porte-cochere. I said: "Do you ever accept free advice, Ziggy?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean you'd better play your cards my way if you crave to avoid a fractured skull. We're going indoors, savvy? And you're going to sing extremely small while

I feed your sweetie the sixty-four dollar question.”

He nodded, keyed his front portal open and we marched inside like a two-piece parade. The first character we encountered was a flunkey in the reception hall: the same pompous footman who had admitted me earlier that afternoon. This individual took one horrified hinge at the roscoe I held against his master’s left kidney and emitted a strangling gurgle. “Wh-wha-what—?”

Ziggy said weakly: “It’s quite all right, Jervis. Just a little joke between Mr. Turner and myself.”

“It is like hell,” I growled. “I never jest with firearms.” Then I added: “Where’s the quail?”

“Quail, sir?”

“Yeah. Miss Duane.”

Ziggy made a plaintive mouth. “Tell her we want to see her, Jervis. Instantly.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but she’s not here. She departed fifteen or twenty minutes ago. She left a message for you, sir. She said to tell you she would telephone you later tonight.”

If ever a guy registered sheer relief it was Ziggy Cranston. He acted like a condemned prisoner with a last-minute reprieve on the thirteenth step of the gallows. “I see,” he whispered. His suntanned puss brightened. “Well, gumshoe, I guess you won’t be asking her that sixty-four dollar question after all. Not right away, anyhow.”

This, unfortunately, was all too true. I wasn’t stymied, however. “Don’t be so happy about it,” I snapped. “I’ll find something to while away the idle hours, commencing right now.” I turned to the footman. “Jervis.”

“Yes, sir?”

“How many servants are there besides yourself?”

He counted on his fingers. “Three, sir. Butler, cook and parlor maid.” Then he

corrected himself. “Beg pardon, sir, I forgot to include the chauffeur. Antoine.”

“Skip him,” I said. “He’s out of circulation. Go fetch everybody else. Have them here in a hurry.”

The guy bowed, turned, stalked off. After a brief time he reappeared with the rest of the household staff and they all glued the bewildered glimpse on me.

I lined them all up with a wave of my artillery. “Okay, pals. If anybody doubts my authority to ask questions, just remember a man with a gat is always top dog. Now, then. This afternoon just before sunset there was a murder committed near the swimming pool of this estate. How many of you witnessed it?”

All I got was silence for an answer.

I said: “Well, then, who heard the shot?”

Four noggins shook a vigorous and concerted nix.

I WAS beginning to get impatient. “Did any of you happen to look toward the pool and pipe Sylvia Duane dragging a body from the water?”

“Miss Duane, sir?” the footman said. “Oh, no, sir. It’s precisely as we told the police when they investigated: none of us knew there had been a murder.”

“Oh. Then the cops have already quizzed you, eh?”

“Quite so, sir. It was Lieutenant Donaldson, sir. He gave us all a—a grilling, I believe the term is. We informed him as to our whereabouts at the approximate hour of the alleged homicide. Cook was in her kitchen preparing dinner, sir. She had no view of the rear grounds. The butler and I were in the front of the house. Maid wasn’t here at all; it was her afternoon off. Moreover, sir—”

He stopped on that. He corked his gab because he was interrupted by a bell in the

room, shrill, insistent; the phone bell. It startled me, too.

“What the hell!” I said. “I thought the telephone wire was busted.”

Ziggy Cranston put in: “We sent for a repairman as soon as you’d been taken to the hospital to be pumped dry, Hawkshaw. We had it fixed.”

“Oh, so?” I growled. “All right, Jervis. Answer it.”

“Yes, sir.” The flunkey moved across the room, lifted the instrument from its cradle. “Mr. Crandon’s residence . . . Yes . . . You wish to speak to Mr. Cranston personally? And who is calling? . . . I see.” He turned, covered the transmitter with his palm. “Someone who refuses to give his name, sir.”

Ziggy made a vague half-step toward the phone but I cut over in front of him, gave him a shove. “I’ll take it,” I grunted.

A muffled voice came over the wire, thick, obviously disguised. “Cranston? Listen and listen fast, I’m just going to say this one time, understand?”

“Yes,” I said. If the party on the other end of the connection thought I was Ziggy I wasn’t going to correct him. Maybe I’d learn something if my luck held. “Yes,” I repeated.

The voice said: “I want that Masterpiece stock, see? You’re to sign it in blank; a full endorsement and no trickery with the signature. Put the certificates in an envelope and mail them to John Q. Smith, general delivery downtown. John Q. Smith, got it? Don’t forget the Q. part. And you better not have any dicks watching at the general delivery window to see who picks up the envelope. Not if you wanna stay out of jail.”

“Jail?” I tried to make my tone sound disturbed.

“Yeah. And don’t get the idea you can trace me through the eventual transfer of the stock to my real name. It’ll pass

through two or three dummies before it finally gets registered to me, and by that time you won’t be in no position to blow the whistle on me. Not when you got a murder rap staring you in the face.”

I quavered realistically: “M-murder?”

“You heard me. The last time I put the bee on you it wasn’t no iron-clad setup like it is now. All I had to go on then was a lousy stock shot reel. Now it’s different. I know you put a slug in Wilbert Winslow—and I know where your sweetie stashed the body after she fished it outa the pool, see? I was watchin’ her. So unless you play ball my way I’ll let the cops know what really happened. I’ll tell ‘em where to find that corpse. Then you’ll sniff cyanide at San Quentin an’ the jane will go up as an accomplice. Think it over, Cranston.”

The line went dead.

CHAPTER VII

The Plan of Action

ZIGGY CRANSTON goggled at me, his Zpeepers protruding like a pair of squeezed grapes. “Who—wh-what—?”

“A witness,” I said. “A witness to the kill.” Then I started dialing so fast the gadget gave off sparks. “Hello. Police headquarters? Lieutenant Donaldson of homicide and I won’t take no for an answer.”

There was a wait, then Dave came on the connection. “Who is it and what does it want?”

“Turner talking. Is that phony Frenchman still down there in the bastille?”

“You mean Cranston’s chauffeur? Funny you’d ask about him at this particular time. Quite a coincidence. I—”

“Omit the conversation and give me the answer!” I caterwauled. “Is Antoine Leblanc there or isn’t he?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, no he isn’t. Somebody put up the five hundred dollar

bond he was under; did it through a bail broker. All we had on him was an assault rap, you know. I mean there was no way we could legally hold him after—”

I screeched: “I don’t want the details! When did you turn him loose?”

“Just now. That is, he walked out of here not two minutes ago. I happened to be passing through the main office and saw him get his belongings from the property sergeant. How it came to my attention is, he noticed me and thumbed his nose at me. I was going to go up to him and slap a few of his teeth out on general principles, but just then somebody sidetracked me and asked me a question. By the time I—”

“Will you quit using so many words?” I yodeled. “I don’t want a case history. Wait, hold the line a minute!” I turned to Ziggy. “Did Antoine live here in the servants’ quarters?”

“Why yes. That is, all except his day off. I understand he had an apartment somewhere, but I don’t know where. I don’t keep track of the help. Not their personal lives.” All of a sudden he seemed to realize what I was driving at. “Antoine! Do you mean maybe *he*—”

I tried to hold my temper in check. “Talk, talk, talk! All I get is talk and no information. Will somebody please for heaven’s sake make a little sense? I want Antoine’s private address. Now. Before I blow my top!”

The butler cleared his throat. “I can furnish that, sir.” He mentioned a number on Franklin. “I believe that is the apartment house where Antoine resides.”

“You’re marvelous!” I applauded him. Then, talking fast, I relayed the address to Dave Donaldson, who was still waiting at the other end of the phone connection. “Meet me there as quick as you can travel,” I told him. “I’m on my way right now and we can’t afford any delays.”

“But—but what’s the idea? I mean—”

“It’s a possible solution to this croakery clambake. Get on your horse and ramble,” I yeped, and rang off in his ear. Then I pivoted, grabbed Ziggy Cranston’s arm. “Let’s make tracks, bub. Here comes the payoff.”

He tried to pull back. “Payoff? Now wait. I tell you I didn’t kill Winslow. I don’t know who did. I don’t know what became of his b-body; and you aren’t going to drag me any deeper into something I had nothing to do with.”

“Ah,” I snarled as I dragged him toward the front portal. “I see. Then you admit Winslow got killed. You admit there was a body that vanished.”

“Well, y-yes, only I—”

I turned to the gawking servants. “You heard it. All of you. Make sure you remember it in case we need your testimony later. All right, Ziggy boy. Out.”

MOANING piteously, he obeyed. Once again I forced him to take the wheel of my crate while I perched beside him and fondled his liver with my fowling piece. He got the cylinders firing and we aimed toward Franklin Street under forced draft with my gasoline ration coupons spurting out behind us in a red stream of exhaust sparks. The sight saddened me.

I felt better, though, when we finally barreled to a squealing stop in front of the apartment dump where I’d told Donaldson to meet me. Dave’s official sedan was just arriving from the opposite direction, which was damned nice timing. He berthed his bucket at the curb; came lumbering across the sidewalk looking peevish. “Hey, what brews?” he demanded when he lamped me nudging Ziggy out of my conveyance at the muzzle of a gat.

Ziggy, meantime, was staring at a station wagon parked nearby. “Now how the devil did my—?”

“Quiet,” I cut him off. Then I said to

Dave: "We'll go inside and do some trapping."

"Trapping? You mean when Antoine gets here?"

"If he isn't here already," I nodded. "Come on."

Dave shook his noggin foggily. "He couldn't be here already. That fake Frenchman, I mean. You phoned me at headquarters only a minute or two after he was turned loose. Then I dashed out to my sedan and drove here like crazy. Even if he was riding on a skyrocket I must have passed him on the way." He glowered at me. "I don't get the setup. I don't get any part of it."

"We're clearing up a kill," I said.

"But dammit to hell, there wasn't any kill!"

I said: "Oh, yes there was. Ziggy, here, has finally admitted it in the presence of witnesses. His four servants heard him. He spilled the works."

"You mean he confessed?"

Cranston called loudly on heaven to help him out of his jackpot. "I never confessed anything!" he denied vigorously. "Except that Winslow got shot and his body disappeared. But I didn't have anything to do with it. How many times must I say it? I'm innocent. I want a lawyer!"

"Well, well," Donaldson purred. He turned to me. "So you were leveling, after all."

"Yeah."

"Then where's the corpse?"

"That remains to be seen."

Dave rubbed his jowls. "I get it. You said just now we would go inside and do some trapping. You meant the chauffeur. We'll be planted in Antoine's flat when he shows up, eh?"

"Yeah."

"And then we'll make him sing what he knows. You figure he's got the lowdown

on the missing body. He saw Miss Duane haul the dead guy out of the pool and hide it."

I said: "Yeah. Do we start now or stand here on the pavement all night beating our gums?"

"Let's go. And you, Cranston—don't pull any funny stuff. I mean I'm officially placing you under arrest right now on suspicion of homicide. Got that?"

Ziggy gulped a couple of times; nodded. Then the three of us ankled into the apartment drop; consulted the row of brass mail boxes in the lobby and located Antoine Leblanc's number. It was up on the second floor, 205. We marched up the stairway and headed for the phony Frenchman's portal.

"Dave," I whispered. "Let me handle the routine from now on. If you don't mind," I added.

He made a sour mouth. "What difference will it make whether I mind or not? I'm just your stooge. I've been your stooge for ten stinking years. The scenario never changes. Lead on, genius. The show's all yours."

"Thanks, pal," I said. And I knuckled a light tattoo on door 205.

From within, somebody said: "Is that you, Tony? Just a moment, darling." There was a click of the latch, a creak from the hinges and we stood ferninst Wilbert Winslow's murderer.

"Hi, Toots," I said to the brunette Sylvia Duane. Then I produced my roscoe, jabbed her with it. "Consider yourself pinched for killery."

CHAPTER VIII

Fitting the Puzzle

FOR a split instant there was nothing but shocked silence, a series of stunned gasps from everybody concerned. Then Ziggy Cranston emitted an anguished yelp.

“Sylvia—!”

I shouldered the shapely cupcake back into the flat; followed her and gestured for Dave and Ziggy to come in. Sylvia’s peepers narrowed at me, hot with hate. “What’s the idea?”

“Shakedown payoff, hon,” I said. “End of the line for you.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

I said: “Sure you do. Shall I sketch you a blueprint? It may be a trifle boring.”

“I’m sure you haven’t anything to say that would interest me in the slightest degree,” she gave me the haughty focus. “But if you want to make a speech I guess I can’t stop you.”

“Damned right you can’t,” I agreed. I set fire to a wheezer, exhaled the poisoned fumes and murmured: “It commences when you set your cap for Ziggy Cranston; made him fan in love with you. As this romance blossomed, you convinced him that you were very sedate, very strait-laced. A Puritan. I think, though, that you never really cared a damn about him. You hooked him because he’s a goose that lays golden eggs.”

“How chivalrous of you to say such nice things,” she sneered regally.

I went on: “Ziggy acquired the majority interest in Masterpiece Pix. You were only a cowgirl in cheap B westerns; a horse-opera prima donna. To you, Ziggy meant an opportunity to get on top of the Hollywood heap.”

“What is this, a mind-reading act?”

“No,” I said. “Some of it’s guesswork and some is backed by actual facts. Let’s see, where were we? Oh, yes. With Ziggy owning Masterpiece, you had access to the studio. I’ll probably never know whether you knew of the existence of a certain stock shot or whether you stumbled on it by sheer chance. Anyhow, you glommed that hotel-fire footage from the Masterpiece

files and began blackmailing Ziggy with it.”

She stiffened. “How dare you say that!”

“You blackmailed him by threatening to show the reel to yourself. You were the anonymous shakedown artist, baby. And through your Puritan pose you made Ziggy think he might lose you if that footage ever came to light.”

“I suppose you have proof of all this. I hope you have. Otherwise I’ll sue your pants off, shamus.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Now we come to this afternoon. Wilbert Winslow busted in on Ziggy with certain screwy demands. Ziggy concluded that Winslow was the blackmailer. This was all wrong; but it threatened to upset your own plans. Maybe Ziggy would give Winslow back his studio stock holdings—in which case you’d be left out in the cold. And you wanted control of Masterpiece yourself. As majority owner you could make yourself a star.”

SHE peeled her lips away from perfect white grinders. “This is fantastic. Ziggy, are you going to stand there and allow him to accuse me of—?”

“Hush,” I said. “Now, with Winslow horning in, he became a menace to your shakedown shenanigans. So you croaked him. It was a very neat trick indeed. You were concealed around a corner of the combined garage and servants’ quarters.

You plugged Winslow as he was running away from Ziggy. You drilled him through the conk and he toppled into the pool. Naturally, Ziggy was watching him fall in the water. *That was when you tossed the murder gun toward Ziggy’s feet.* When he lurched backward to avoid the splash from Winslow’s body, he stepped on the roscoe and then picked it up, wondering where it had come from. He thought some invisible character had dropped it.”

She said: "You make it sound so plausible."

"I'm a plausible guy," I nodded. "Well, I accused Ziggy and bopped him cold; carted him away. That was when you fished your defunct victim from the pool. You now had a stronger hold on Ziggy than you'd had before. Instead of blackmailing him with that stock shot reel, you could club him into line by threatening to dump him in the grease for a bump-off."

"How wonderful!"

"Yeah. I tumbled to it when you phoned Ziggy's stash a while ago, demanding the studio stock back in the name of John Q. Smith. It was your voice I heard on the wire. You muffled it and lowered it so you wouldn't be tabbed; but I had a hunch. You see, none of the servants were hep to the murder. Nobody knew it but Ziggy himself, and me, and you."

"No other possibilities?" she challenged me.

I said: "Well yes, one, Antoine Leblanc. But he couldn't be the party who made the blackmail call. I checked and found out he was just being released from the gow at the time the call was received in a Ziggy's tepee. So that left you."

"Nonsense!"

"You weren't at your own apartment at the Gayboy Arms," I ignored her interruption. "You wouldn't risk calling from there because you might be checked through the Gayboy switchboard operator. So I asked myself where you were when you dialed Ziggy's igloo. The answer was interesting."

"Was it?"

I crushed out my butt. "Yeah. It goes back to when you hauled Winslow's remainders out of the pool and hid them. You must have had help. And Antoine was the only person available to give you some assistance on that particular caper. If Antoine was in with you on that job, maybe

he was also connected with your blackmailing activities."

She tossed her head. "Do you think I'd attach myself to a—a common chauffeur?"

"Maybe," I said. Then I resorted to a pack of lies. "If you want to know something, we pinched Antoine before we came here. He confessed everything, How you shot Winslow, and all the rest of it."

"Tony—you mean he—he ratted on me?"

"Yeah. So we came here and knocked on the door and you figured he was outside. You even said: *Is that you, Tony? Just a moment, darling.* Which proves he's your sweetie, although the fact that we found you here in his nest is proof enough."

"You—you say he—confessed?"

"He implicated you all the way up to your adenoids, kitten. He did it to save himself," I lied some more.

ALL the color leaked out of her puss, leaving it as white as bleached linen under splotches of rouge. "The heel. The filthy weak-livered heel! Getting out from under at my expense! Why, I—I did what I did because of him. Because he wanted to get in pictures and nobody would consider him as an actor. I was going to control Masterpiece and make Tony a star, Tony, you understand, not myself. Now he rats on me!"

The front door pushed open. "Who rats on you?" a voice said. It was Antoine.

The Duane chick took one vicious swivel at him, her glimmers brimming with loathing. Then she whipped up her skirt, displayed a length of extremely nifty gam. There was a .25 auto strapped to her thigh. She brought it up, aimed it, pulled the trigger. The gat sneezed: *Ka-Cheef!* and sent a hot pill into Antoine Leblanc's ticker.

He fell down. He was deceased before he hit the rug.

At the same instant Dave Donaldson unlimbered his service .38 and squirted flame at the brunette doll. His bullet took the automatic right out of her mitt, along with an assortment of fingers. She moaned briefly, then stared at the ketchup spurting. "My . . . my hand . . ." she whispered.

I said: "Think nothing of it, sister. You won't need those fingers where you're going."

"Where . . . I'm . . . going . . . ?"

"Yeah. The gas house," I said. Then I turned to Ziggy Cranston. "Well, stupid, I've saved you from the clutches of romance. That will cost you five grand."

He paid me the day they executed Sylvia Duane.