



I hotfooted out and got Dave's hit; maybe the test would reveal more than they figured.

STARS DIE AT NIGHT

By Robert Leslie Bellem

If you tangle with a burglar and a corpse—both of them female and beautiful and very prominent—you're apt to steam four ways at once, the way Dan Turner did.

FOR FIFTY bucks, received in advance, I staked myself out on the stipulated corner of Hollywood and Vine at ten o'clock sharp. The night was drizzly and I'd neglected to bring along a topcoat, so by ten-thirty my sinus trouble started giving me fits. At ten forty-seven I decided the hell with this nonsense and drove home to my apartment, with my bridgework clattering. What I craved was a hot shower, a few jolts of Vat 69 to fend off pneumonia, and a nice warm session in the feathers.

What I got was a burglar and a corpse, both she-male.

The instant I keyed my bachelor flat's front door open, I had a hunch there were guests on the premises. Hunches are handy in the private snooping profession, particularly

when they're predicated on sharp observation. In this case I'd left a lamp burning when I went out, and now, by its feeble glow, I tabbed a cushion out of position on the davenport; a chair that had been moved an inch or two from its usual spot. Somebody had been prowling here during my absence; and to judge from a slight sound issuing from the bedroom, the intruder was still on deck.

I slipped my .32 automatic from the shoulder holster where I always carry it; thumbed off the safety, and stalked toward those noises I heard. Until I gained the bedroom portal, I was as silent as a fly walking on whipped cream; then I grasped the knob, yanked it, and catapulted over the threshold.

There was nobody in sight, but I piped

movement in a clothes closet. I snarled: “Freeze! Come out of there with your mitts in the air or I’ll blow you to hellangone!”

My uninvited visitor gave vent to a strangled bleat. “Oh-h-h, my God—”

That was my cue to be flabbergasted. The voice was feminine; and so was the prowler herself when she backed into view. All I could see at first was the rear drape of a costly emerald satin creation garnishing a set of slender but very gorgeous contours, the green ensemble topped by a disheveled coiffure as red as sunset in the Pacific and twice as spectacular. Then, slowly, this amazing vision turned around to face me. I felt my glimmers popping like squeezed grapes.

“Barbara Banning!” I choked.

MY startled stupefaction was natural enough when you considered the red-haired quail’s Hollywood status. She was one of the hottest stars in the galloping snapshots; the top name on the Altamount roster. Her wistful map decorated advertising billboards from coast to coast and her weekly wages would have paid off the national debt of Bolivia; yet I’d nabbed her frisking my wigwam like a common burglar. It was crazier than pouring salt in your coffee. It didn’t make sense.

She took a woeful gander at my gat and uttered a plaintively terrified whimper. “Please d-don’t sh-shoot me, Mr. Turner. I—I haven’t stolen anything.”

“Aha,” I said. “So you know me!”

“Y-yes. You’re Dan Turner, the d-detective.”

I said: “Right. And since you do know me, that means you realized it was my tepee you busted into. In other words, you didn’t pick it at random.”

“Th-that’s true, Mr. Turner,” she admitted through a crimson blush.

I rammed my roscoe back in its armpit rig; set fire to a gasper, and exhaled a reflective billow of fumes. “Let’s see,” I said. “There

must be a pattern to all this. It starts with an anonymous letter that reached me today.”

“Letter?”

“Yeah, a typewritten page of instructions pinned to three tens and a twenty,” I fastened the furtive focus on her through another cloud of smoke. “Remember?”

She flushed again. “No-no, I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re t-talking about.”

“Sure you do, kitten. The unsigned message asked me to be on the southwest corner of Hollywood and Vine tonight at ten o’clock, whereupon a prospective client would brace me within an hour. To prove the deal was on the level I would please find fifty shells enclosed herewith.”

The Banning babe shifted her weight uncomfortably. “W-what’s that got to do w-with me?”

“Everything,” I said. “I wasn’t braced by anybody. The whole caper was phony. And instead of waiting a full hour in the rain, I came home slightly ahead of schedule, thereby catching you ransacking my roost. Now do you get the drift?”

“Please,” she faltered. “I—I—”

I said: “Don’t feed me any innocent routine. *You* sent me the letter containing that half a century. You wanted to lure me out of my stash so you could fan it.” I took a threatening step forward. “Come, clean, toots.”

“All r-right,” she wilted visibly. “It’s true. Now what are you g-going to do with me?”

I studied her. “That depends.”

“On wh-what?”

“On how you explain this scenario,” I put a growl in my tone. “And you’d better make the explanation interesting or I’ll have you jugged for burglarious entry.”

“You—y-you wouldn’t!”

“I sure would.” Then I added: “Just think what that would do to your career, kiddo.”

She shuddered. “I w-was thinking of my c-career when I came here. I was trying to save myself from scandal. That’s why I—I b-broke

in.”

“Double-talk, no less,” I remarked. “You sound like a candidate for a crazy mansion.”

“Th-there’s nothing crazy about wanting my letters back, is there?”

I stared at her. “What letters? You mean the anonymous note you sent me? The one containing fifty fish?”

“No,” she said wearily. “The threatening ones I sent to Norine North. I know she turned them over to you for investigation. And I was t-trying to steal them back.”

I yodeled: “Now wait a minute, babe. Let’s start over again from scratch. Are you talking about the Norine North who stars for the same studio where you emote? Your only serious rival on the Altamount lot?”

“Y-yes.”

“You wrote her some threatening letters?”

“Th-that’s right.” She drew a quavery breath. “They were unsigned . . . d-death warnings.”

I almost swallowed my coffin nail, fire and all. “I guess I must be losing my hearing,” I strangled. “It sounded as if you said death warnings.”

“I d-did say death warnings,” the luscious redhead answered in doleful accents: Then she burst into unexpected motion; blipped sidewise, ducked around me and scurried buckety-slam toward the door.

YOU need fast reflexes to be a private ferret and mine were sharpened to a hair-trigger edge at that moment. I careened after the Banning cutie, overhauled her before she reached the portal. “Ix-nay, sis!” I glued the grab on her. “You’re not powdering out of here until you spill.”

“Please . . . y-you’re hurting my arm . . .!”

“I’ll belabor the custard out of you if you don’t make with the conversation,” I promised dourly. “Now tell me why you sent threats to Norine North.”

She squirmed in my clutch, then subsided. “As if you didn’t already know!”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t be asking you. Come on, talk it up before I lose my temper.”

Her peepers puddled with brine. “Do you mean she hasn’t b-been here to consult you?”

“Who?” I said. “The North quail? No, she hasn’t consulted me about anything. Look, hon, quit quizzing me. I’m the one that’s asking the questions.”

“But—but if Norine hasn’t been to see you, I—I’ve made a mistake about the whole thing! I mean—”

I said: “Just what *do* you mean? Let’s start from the very beginning. Why did you threaten the jane?”

“Because she’s married to the man I love and she refuses to divorce him.”

I hung the astounded gaze on her. “Are you telling me you’re ga-ga over Garry North?”

“Y-yes.”

“Well, at least you pick them handsome,” I said, and I meant every word of it. This Garry North citizen was a former cowboy hambo who’d recently made the big leap from horse opera to plush “A” pix; who’d clicked far bigger in white tie and tails than sombrero and six-guns. As a star in quickie westerns he had registered zero on the Hollywood horizon; but the switch to drawing-room dramas had bounced him to the top of the pile. Every major studio in town was screaming for his services—and so were a hell of a lot of dames. He had what it takes to put the lassies in a lather.

Curiously enough, though, his private domestic life wasn’t worth a pinch of salt. Hitched to the glamorous Norine North, he’d been separated from her almost two years; but the separation had never progressed to the Reno routine. In consequence he was all tied up legally as far as acquiring a new wife was concerned. No matter how much romance he might have on his mind, there was nothing he could do about it this side of bigamy, which is illegal even in the movie colony.

“So he wants to commit matrimony with

you but his wife won't let him, eh?" I said. "Therefore you threatened to bump her off."

"Yes. I—I thought it might frighten her into giving him an uncontested divorce. Of course I didn't sign my name—"

I gave her an irritated scowl. "What difference does it make whether you signed your name or not? If she knows he's sweet on you she must also realize you're the one who sent the threats. A half-wit would know that."

"No, you're wrong. There are dozens of women crazy about Garry; I just happen to be the lucky one out of many. I figured his wife would get scared without a guessing which of his flames wrote the anonymous letters." She made a timid gesture. "I even disguised my handwriting."

"Nuts," I grunted. "Experts can penetrate disguised handwriting."

She made an unhappy mouth. "I thought of that when it was too late. That's why I forced my way into your apartment tonight."

"Because you were under the impression Norine North had given me the notes to investigate?"

"Yes," she faltered. "Garry told me he'd heard she was going to hire you on the case. Naturally th-that made me panicky. What would happen if you should trace the threats to me? I'd be ruined in pictures. I might even be arrested and—and sent to prison f-for misuse of the mails. "

I said: "burglary can land you in the cooler too, hon."

"But—but I've already explained why I—"

"Sure," I needled her to teach her a lesson. "Only the North quail hadn't hired me and I haven't got the letters. That means you had no good reason to frisk my flat. By rights I should ferry you to the bastille and let the cops salt you down until you learn to control your wayward impulses."

FROM behind me a resonant baritone voice horned into the conversation. "No, Sherlock, you won't do that to Barbara. I

won't let you."

I gasped: "What the hell?" and pivoted like a whirling dervish with the hotfoot. "Garry North!"

"Garry, darling!" the Banning redhead yeped.

My second uninvited guest strode into the bedroom with a determined expression on his handsome, sun-tanned puss. He was an athletic looking hombre, tall enough to top my own six-foot-plus, and outweighing my hundred and ninety pounds by several muscular ounces. In addition to this dubious advantage he was also toting a cannon—an oversize Colt auto that looked meaner than the unpleasant end of a skunk.

"Now, then," he said sonorously.

I took a goggle-eyed gander at his gat and felt my tripes beginning to sizzle with righteous wrath. "Hey, what is this—the Grand Central Station or something? For a private wigwam there's a lot of public traffic, it seems to me."

"Keep your shirt on. The front door was open and I walked in. Now what's all this about putting Barbara in jail?"

The Banning frill took a hesitant step toward him. "Mr. Turner was just j-joking, darling. He didn't mean it."

"Maybe I didn't at the time," I said sourly. "I'm commencing to change my mind, though. I don't like people to brandish their rods at me. I'm allergic to firearms."

The North hambo cast a sardonic leer in my direction. "Stand aside, flatfoot. I'm taking Barbara out of here." He grasped her by the arm. "Come along, sweetheart." Then, as they edged toward the living room, he added: "Did you get the letters?"

"No-no."

He drew up short. "Why not?"

"Because," she flicked her peepers at me. "He said he didn't have them. He said Norine hadn't hired him to investigate them."

North's pan seemed puzzled. "But—but—"

"Go on, scram," I told him. "You heard

her. I haven't got the letters and your wife hasn't been here. Would you like me to swear it before a notary?"

He lowered his roscoe irresolutely. "Good grief. Maybe Norine went to some other private dick instead! If that's the case, we—we—"

"Yeah," I grinned. "You're in a jackpot. Pardon me if I fail to weep any tears of sympathy."

In a stricken whisper he called on heaven to witness that he and Barbara Banning were in a nasty mess indeed, especially since he was the guy who suggested that Barbara send his wife those death threats. "If Norine traces them, we're sunk!" he muttered disconsolately. Then he reached for the knob of what he thought was my tepee's front door.

Actually it was my living-room closet. I started to tell him this but the words got stuck crosswise in my gullet—because at that instant he yanked the closet open.

Which was when the shemale corpse toppled forth. It was the body of Garry North's wife: buxom, beautiful, brunette, and bumped off.

THE DEFUNCT dame slumped limply out of the closet and sagged kerplunk into North's arms. He didn't seem to enjoy this at all. In fact, he seemed paralyzed. His map turned the color of adulterated milk, his kisser flopped open, and his glims resembled blood-shot marbles.

"G-guh-gahd—!" he wheezed.

The red-haired Banning cutie screamed.

That scream snapped me out of my own petrified trance. I catapulted across the room, gave North a sharp shove. He tottered one way and his deceased wife fell the other. She hit the carpet with an ugly thud, bounced twice like a life-sized rubber doll, and flopped gruesomely over on her back; smiled up at the ceiling with a hideous grin that will haunt me for the next eleven years. I piped a round blue hole in the middle of her forehead, and two

thin dribbles of crimson gravy had sneaked down her countenance, dividing at the bridge of her sniffer and streaking to the corners of her flaccid lips. You didn't have to take a second hinge to realize she was deader than Confederate war bonds.

She hadn't been croaked very long, though. Her limberness indicated this; and in addition to the absence of rigor mortis you could see that the gore hadn't yet had time to oxidize to a dark brown. All of which gave me a fairly accurate picture of when and how the kill had been performed.

I swung around to Garry North, who was still teetering off-balance from the shove I'd given him. His Colt was still in his clutch but he seemed to have forgotten it. I jumped him, snatched the gat, flourished it.

"Wh-wha-what—?" he mumbled stupidly.

I snarled: "Quiet, bub." Then I covered the red-haired Banning cupcake. "Okay, sister. You're under arrest for murder."

All the tint leaked out of her complexion, leaving it pasty under splotches of makeup. Her shapely stems lost their starch. "Me . . . ?" she uttered tautly. "M-murder . . . ?"

"Yeah," I rasped. "You creamed Norine North. It's as plain as a pimple in a dimple. You pushed a pill through her conk, and the sovereign state of California will gas you for it."

"No—no—that's not true!" she moaned. "I didn't even know she was here! You—you told me yourself she hadn't been here—and I—I believed you—"

I said: "Stow it. Save it for the jury."

"But I tell you—"

"Look," I said. "Here's how it probably happened. You'd sent her some threats and you learned she was coming to consult me tonight. So you sucked me out of my igloo with a phony message and fifty fish; then you came here, broke in and ambushed Norine the moment she showed up."

"No! That's a lie!"

I ignored the interruption. "You drilled her

and stuffed her in this closet. Then, just as you were about to make your getaway, you heard me coming home ahead of schedule. The only thing to do was brazen it out; feed me a load of rubbish about searching for the threatening letters.”

“Please, Mr. Turner—”

“You figured I’d fall for the act and feel so sorry for you that I’d let you lam. That would put you in the clear, even when I eventually discovered the body. By that time I’d have no way of proving you’d been here. It would be my word against yours, and you were probably scheming to have an alibi cooked up so that the cops would think I was a liar.”

“It isn’t so! You’re wrong!” she whimpered.

I said: “You planned the whole thing so I’d be dumped in the grease. After all, I would be the bozo with a corpse on my hands. And I’d have a hell of a job explaining it.”

She turned to North. “Garry, darling—make him stop talking like that! Make him stop accusing me—”

“Not until you tell me something, Barbara,” the handsome hambo said shakily.

“Tell you—wh-what?”

“The truth. Did you kill Norine?”

Her voice broke. “Garry! How can you ask me much a thing!”

“I’ve got to know, Barbara.”

She made a pleading gesture toward him. “No. I didn’t k-kill her. I swear I didn’t! I don’t know anything about it!”

“That’s all I wanted to hear, darling,” he said. Then he dived to the floor before I could guess his intentions; rolled like a barrel going downhill. His weight slammed me behind the knees; buckled my gams. I went down in a sprawling tangle, yowling curses at the top of my tonsils.

North came upright over me; measured me and delivered a kayo cargo of knuckles to the point of my prow. The jolt short-circuited me and I was gobbled by a black maw of unconsciousness.



That was my cue to be flabbergasted. The voice was feminine and so was the prosler.

SOME STRANGE guy’s far-off voice was talking on my phone when I woke up. The voice wasn’t even slightly familiar, but I thought I recognized the words. Muffled by distance, they sounded like a routine I’d used, myself, many a time in the past.

“Hello. Police headquarters? Let me talk to Lieutenant Donaldson of the homicide squad. Yeah, I’ll wait; but make it snappy. I crave to report a croakery case.”

There was a short pause while I tried to pry my peepers open. I had a headache to fit a herd of elephants and my battered profile felt like the loser in a joust with a pile driver; despite which flaws, however, my think-tank seemed to be functioning. I wondered who in hell was calling my friend Dave Donaldson and employing my copyrighted dialogue. Apparently there was a plagiarist on the premises.

Dave’s thunderous bellow came on the line. “Well, who’s bleating and what about?”

This startled the everlasting bejoseph out of me because it sounded so close by; practically in my ear. I was even more flabbergasted when the far-away stranger answered: “Dan Turner squalling. Flag your frame over here to my nest in a hell of a yank. And bring along a meat basket; I’ve got a cadaver for company. A movie star named

Norine North who recently joined her ancestors by means of a slug through the steeple!”

My glims flew open and I suddenly realized I was doing the telephoning myself. I was standing upright in my living room, a gasper in one mitt and the phone in the other. The brunette North cookie was stretched out at my feet, in the same position I had last lamped her and just as dead. The only absentees were Garry North and Barbara Banning, who had obviously lammed after I got slapped insensible.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” I said. “So I’m the guy that’s talking!”

Donaldson roared, “What’s that? Hey, are you plastered?”

“No, just slightly scrambled. But the facts remain as related. I’m wading around in a murder mess. Kindly waft your tonnage over here according to request.” Then I hung up on him before he could pester me with useless questions.

What I needed was a drink; a big one. I lurched across to my cellarette, broached a fresh fifth of highland prescription, tilted the bottle to my yapper, and let a generous jorum slide down my alimentary tract. The instant the Scotch touched bottom I began to feel better. I felt so good I repeated the treatment. My headache scrambled and I sat down in an easy chair.

I fell sound asleep with my optics wide open.

THE next thing I knew my stash was infested with headquarters heroes and Dave Donaldson himself was whapping me across the map with an open palm, *splat-splat-splat*. “Snap out of it, fireball!” he grated. “Come alive and start whistling.”

I fixed the groggy focus on him. “What shall I whistle? Name your tune.”

“You know what I want!” he yeped. “Tell me why you chilled this North woman.” He spanked me again on the jowls. “Let’s have

it.”

That final stinger across the mush dissipated the last of my apathy. I came alive, sprang out of the chair, grabbed a fistful of Donaldson’s shirt-front. “You lay another duke on me and I’ll strew your carcass from Pasadena to Manhattan Beach.” I promised. “I’ve been shoved around enough for one night and I don’t want a renewal of the process. I don’t like it.”

“And I don’t care whether you like it or not. When I ask questions, I expect answers,” he pulled away resentfully. “Especially from a murder suspect.”

I matched his frosty manner. “When a cat has kittens in the oven, that doesn’t make them biscuits. And just because there’s a slain jane in my wikiup it doesn’t prove I bumped her. As a matter of fact, it doesn’t prove a thing—except that maybe I could finger the guilty character for you if I wanted to.” Then I dredged a wheezer from my pocket, torched it, blew smoke at him. “I’m not sure I want to.”

“Now, wait a minute—”

I sneered elaborately. “Yeah. It’s different now. All of a sudden you savvy I might help you unravel this riddle and you’d like to be chummy. Nuts to you, pal.”

“Don’t be like that. Hawkshaw. After all, if you know who shot this tessie—”

“I haven’t said I know who shot her.”

“But you hinted you could finger the guilty character. It’s your duty as a citizen. Besides, you’re a licensed dick. That’s the same as saying you’re a cop in a left-handed sort of way. No cop has a right to conceal evidence.”

I smirked at him. “Didn’t you just tell me I was a suspect? Didn’t you imply I was under arrest?”

“Well, yes.”

“So if I’m under arrest, my license is automatically suspended. Therefore I’m not a private cop. Therefore I can keep my yap zippered if I feel like it.”

He caved in. “All right, dammit, I

apologize. I take it all back. You're not pinched and I'm sorry I whapped you on the puss. Now who the hell croaked Norine North?"

"A quail," I said.

"What quail?"

"A cinema star."

"Which star, for Pete's sake?"

"One of the topnotchers from the North chick's home lot, Altamount Pix."

He emitted a plaintive oath. "Will you quit giving me the run-around? Name her!"

"Barbara Banning," I said.

"Hunh—? You mean that nifty number with the red hair? The cutie with the curves? The doll that played the lead in—?"

I said: "Never mind listing her starring roles. Yeah, Barbara Banning, the cupcake with the contours and the Technicolor tresses." Then I gave him a careful synopsis of everything that had happened, starting with the phony message with the fifty dollar bait that had lured me out of my stash. I explained how I'd nabbed the Banning frill frisking my drop; how Garry North had butted into the scene a little later. I described Garry's discovery of his wife's corpse in the closet and ruefully admitted that he had subsequently knocked me for a row of goals.

DONALDSON was jerking and twitching by the time I got to the finish line. "And then North powdered with Miss Banning after he slugged you senseless?"

"Presumably," I made a bitter mouth. "I was too unconscious to notice."

"Well, for hell's sake—let's go!" Dave yelped.

I blinked at him. "Let's go where?"

"To pick her up, of course! I want you with me when I fasten the pinch on her. I'll need your testimony to make it stick. If you don't mind," he added with sarcasm.

"And where do you figure to find the frail?" I said.

"We can try her home first."

"You'd throw snake-eyes," I told him. "It seems to me she'd steer clear of her usual haunts until she learns how the wind's blowing. She's bound to realize the law is on her trail. It's my guess she'll hide out somewhere, pending developments. Maybe she was hoping I'd be her fall guy—in which case she won't turn up in public until the newspapers announced that I've been arrested; that I'm accused of the kill."

Dave admitted this made sense. Then he brightened. "Why not try Garry North? Chances are he took her to some hideaway—and he'll have no reason for staying under cover himself. All he'll do is deny he had any connection with the mess."

"Do you think you can break his denial?" I asked.

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Dave pulled a blackjack out of his pocket. "It's amazing how many arguments I've won by two or three taps with this blunt instrument. Come along. A ham named North is about to get his skull massaged."

DONALDSON WAS wrong, though. At least he was wrong if he expected to find Garry North at home. We drove in Dave's official sedan to the swanky apartment joint where the former quickie cowboy had a lavish layout; whereupon a slab-sided British butler informed us his master hadn't been in since late afternoon. "I'm sure I can't tell you where you might locate him," he added in haughty accents.

"Meaning you won't tell us?" Dave growled.

The butler made noises with his adenoids. "I do not care to discuss the matter any further, sir." He backed disdainfully into the apartment; started to shut the door.

You should never pull a prank like that on a policeman. Dave bristled, sputtered like a lighted fuse and surged at the portal with the irresistible force of an Alpine avalanche; bashed it so hard it knocked the arrogant

lackey staggering. An instant later we were inside.

“I say—!” the flunkey protested.

Dave regarded him with calculating glimmers. “You say what?”

“Get out of here instantly or I shall call a cop!”

“You won’t have to call very loud,” Dave rumbled. “I’m one.” He flipped his lapel, displayed his tinware. Then he made a vise of his fingers and thumb; gripped the guy’s gullet. “Any remarks out of you and I’ll squeeze cider from your Adam’s apple.”

The butler gasped: “Glug!” and made pawing motions with both mitts. “Glog glammit, you’re glosing me! Glut it out!”

“Will you be polite?”

“Glug-glertainly!”

“Will you tell us what we want to know?”

“Glif I glan. Glouch!”

Dave relaxed the pressure. “Okay. That was just a sample and there’s more where it came from. Now then, where’ll we find your boss?”

“I already told you, sir. I don’t know.”

“Could you make a guess?” I poked my beak into the party.

The lackey looked pained. “He might be with his fiancée, sir. He spends all his spare time with her.”

“A fat lot of good that does us,” I was disappointed and let it show. “We already know he was with Barbara Banning. The point is, where might he have taken her?”

“Barbara Banning, sir? But I’m afraid you misunderstood. His fiancée is not Miss Banning. Not any more. It’s a young lady named Susan Sullivan, sir.”

I felt a sudden premonition. “Susan Sullivan? Who the hell is she?”

“I just informed you, sir. She is the person Mr. North plans to marry if his wife ever grants him a divorce.” The guy lowered his voice confidentially. “But if you ask me, sir, I don’t think that is ever going to happen. Ever since he left Mrs. North and moved here to

these bachelor quarters, he has been trying to persuade her to give him his freedom. She refuses.”

“She won’t refuse any longer,” I said, remembering how she’d been rendered defunct in my own igloo. “Garry can marry whenever he wants to, now. Tell me more about this Sullivan skirt.”

The butler frowned. “Skirt, sir? Oh, yes, of course; a slang term, no doubt. Well. Miss Sullivan is of Irish extraction, I’m inclined to believe.

“You astound me,” Donaldson said. “Come on, let’s have the lowdown.”

“Yes, sir. Very good, sir. I was merely attempting to depict the young lady for you, sir. She is typically Irish: very black hair, very fair complexion, rather dainty as to size and hot as to temper. I once saw her throw a vase—”

“Will you for heaven’s sake skip the character sketch and tell me her address?” Dave screeched. “Or do I have to club it out of you?”

“That really won’t be necessary, sir. She lives in a duplex bungalow on Yucca Street.” He mentioned the number.

Dave snarled: “At last it makes with the results. Let’s ramble, Sherlock.”

“Yeah,” I said, and trailed him out of the building.

WE piled into his bucket; headed toward Yucca under forced draft. “So you think we may find the North hambo in Susan Sullivan’s drop?” I said presently.

“It’s a possibility, sure. Maybe he took the Banning doll to some hideaway and then holed up himself with the Irish chick. If so, we’ll have him by the short hair.”

“How so?” I inquired.

He took a corner on two wheels and a whisker; straightened onto a cross street. “Look. First Barbara Banning claims she’s going to marry him if he can get rid of his wife. Then the butler tells us it’s Susan

Sullivan that's engaged to him. In other words, North seems to have promised marriage to two different girls."

"And what do you make of that?" I prodded him to find out how he was thinking. Donaldson's mental aerobatics always interest me because they're so frequently haywire.

"I make plenty out of it," he growled. "If he's playing around with two different janes, it's a cinch he doesn't want one to know about the other. Right?"

"Very likely," I agreed. "Continue."

He said: "So if we catch him with the Sullivan girl, we'll threaten him privately. We'll warn him we intend to tell Susan Sullivan about his other sweetie, Barbara Banning. Naturally he won't like that."

"And so he'll be forced to let us know where the Banning female is hiding. Then we'll go put the pinch on her and the case will be all cleaned up."

I nodded. "Very neat. There's only one hole in it."

"What hole?"

"A new angle," I said thoughtfully. "A fresh possibility."

"Such as—?"

I said: "One of my major reasons for suspecting Barbara Banning of the kill is the fact that she had a valid motive. Removing North's wife from this mortal coil would make North a free man so he could get married again."

"Yeah, sure."

"And Barbara figured she was the one he intended to wed," I went on. "But now we have a second damsel, Susan Sullivan, who also seems to be engaged to this North romeo."

Dave whooshed us around another corner, narrowly missing an oversize garbage truck whose driver gave vent to an agonized utterance and careened violently against a palm tree, scattering a rain of grapefruit rinds all over the precinct. "Well?" Dave demanded.

"You just heard North's butler describing

Miss Sullivan," I said, patiently combing an elderly potato and two eggshells out of my haircut. "He told us she was Irish and had a hot temper—even to the extent of hurling a vase at somebody."



"So that's it! I get your drift now! You think maybe it was the Sullivan cookie who did the croaking. She had the same brand of motive—a desire to be North's next wife!"

I shrugged. "Could be, and then again perhaps not. I'm merely showing you an alternate possibility. It's quite evident that North promised matrimony to two different sweeties, provided he could get loose from Norine. Therefore either one of those sweeties might have tried to get him loose from her by means of a homicide short cut."

Dave's beefy features looked petulant. "Every time I get a nice clean murder case you always poke your oar in to complicate it!" he complained. "Now there's two prime suspects instead of one. A fine thing."

"There could be more than two," I deliberately harassed him. "The Banning cupcake told me there were dozens of dames who were gushy over Gary. For all we know, he may have got engaged to a whole slew of them; which would broaden your search among an unknown number of broads."

"Ah, shut up!" Dave snarled. "You're making me dizzy. Now I don't know where I'm at."

I said: "You're half a block from Susan Sullivan's cottage. Drag anchor."

HE pounced on his brakes, skidded to a stop that would have given his tire rationing board the screaming meemies. An instant later we were both barging across a patch of lawn and approaching the Sullivan domicile.

"Shall we ring the bell or bust in?" Dave whispered when we gained the porch.

I pointed toward a blue Cad coupe on the driveway. "There's your answer."

"How come it is? I'm no good at riddles."

I said: "Unless I'm badly mistaken that's North's heap. I've seen him driving around town in it many a time. Which indicates he's on the premises."

"Then I was right," Dave preened himself. "I had a hunch I'd find him here."

"Yeah. So we bust in." I produced my ring of master keys and found one that worked the lock. There was a click, the door swung on its hinges, and we surged over the threshold, along an abbreviated hallway and into a living room where there were lights. The lights revealed Garry North in the ardent act of bestowing a sultry kiss upon a lassie who was cooperating for all she was worth. She was dainty, diminutive and fervent.

The clinch broke fast, though, when Donaldson and I appeared on the scene. North erupted into a roar of indignation and sprang away from the diminutive doll. "What's the big idea?" Then as he recognized me: "Turner! You—!"

"In person," I said. "Accompanied by the long arm of the law. This hefty character at my elbow is Lieutenant Donaldson of the homicide bureau."

"But—but what—?"

I looked at the dainty jane, who was patting her mussed raven coiffure into some semblance of order. "Susan Sullivan, I presume?"

"Y-yes."

"That's very cozy," I said. "Now we've all been introduced to each other and can get

down to brass tacks." I stalked toward the North hambo. "You ready to sing?"

He crossed me up; surprised the custard out of me by his reply. I was expecting him to get an innocent expression on his mush and demand to know what the hell I was talking about. Instead, he said wearily: "Yes, I'm ready to answer whatever you want to know. And—and I'm sorry I slugged you, Sherlock."

Dave Donaldson's amazement topped my own. "You mean to say you admit being in Turner's apartment? You confess you bopped him cold and helped Miss Banning to escape?" he yeped at the brawny he-man ham.

"Yes," North's tone was quiet, poised. "And if that makes me guilty of obstructing justice, I'm ready to take my medicine!"

THE wind was out of my sails in copious quantities. I recovered quickly, though. "There's just one way you can make amends, chum. Tell us where you took the Banning babe."

"Very well," he said. "Much as I hate the idea of being a—a stool pigeon, I realize it's the only thing I can do. Barbara must pay for killing my wife."

I said: "How come this sudden reversal of form? Back in my flat you bashed me so you could help her make a getaway. Why so pious now?"

"Because I've talked it all over with Susan, here, and she's agreed it's the right thing."

Donaldson blinked his peepers. "Ah. So Miss Sullivan is hep to the caper, eh?"

"Yes, I am," the dainty doll put in. "Garry told me the whole story. He used to be engaged to Barbara Banning, you know—until I came along. Then he fell in love with me. But he made the great mistake of not telling Barbara he was through with her. So she thought she still had a chance with him; and that's why she murdered Garry's wife."

North added: "Naturally I was all confused and upset when I realized what Barbara had done. My first impulse was to help her get away; for old times' sake, you understand. Now I regret the impulse."

"Hmm-m-m," Dave Donaldson rumbled. "You seem mighty anxious to toss Miss Banning to the wolves."

"No. I merely want justice done."

"Are you sure you aren't just fronting for this Sullivan woman here?"

North tensed. "What do you mean by that crack?"

"You know damned well what I mean. Maybe it was Miss Sullivan that bumped your wife."

The diminutive Irish frill let out an infuriated bleat. "How dare you say that?" her temper exploded. "What reason would I have for—?"

"The same motive Barbara Banning could have had," I took up the conversational ball and ran it several yards from scrimmage. "To free North so you could marry him."

"Take that back!" she caterwauled. "Take it back or I'll—I'll claw your eyes out!" And she flurried at me with her fingernails raking at my profile.

I made a loose fist, spooned her a careful tap on the button. I didn't put too much yumph in it; I didn't want to fracture her gorgeous features. Sometimes, though, I don't know my own strength. The blow knocked her bow-legged.

She staggered, crumpled. Simultaneously, Garry North sailed toward me with his maulies balled. "Damn you, I'll teach you not to hit the girl I love—!" he brayed.

Donaldson said: "Take him, Hawkshaw," and thrust out a Size Twelve brogan; tripped North as he pounded across the room. The hambo lurched off-balance and I nailed him flush on the wattles; dumped him like a stack of poker chips. He landed across Susan Sullivan's contours and they both floundered around on the floor, trying to get untangled.

I yanked out my roscoe; covered them. "Okay, kids, the fun's over," I announced. "Get up and be nice. We're all going to take a ride and pick up the Banning ruffle. Then we'll determine which sweetheart whiffed Norine."

DAVE SAT up front in his buggy and played chauffeur. I lodged in the tonneau with North and the little Irish colleen; kept them aware of the rod in my grasp. "Directions, Garry, old chum, old pal. Give out with where Barbara's hiding."

"You don't have to hold a gun on me for that," he protested. "I already told you I'm willing to turn her in." Then he spat a stream of instructions at Donaldson and we turned left off Yucca into Cahuenga; wheeled out toward the new freeway through Cahuenga Pass toward San Fernando Valley.

Presently there was a shabby auto court dead ahead, its cottages arranged to form a U-shaped enclosure with the open part facing the street. They were cabins rather than cottages—ramshackle rabbit hutches of stucco slapped on wire and lath. Some of the stucco had peeled off the fronts, disclosing the jerry-built woodwork beneath. Garry North pointed. "That's the place."

"Which shack?"

"All the way to the rear, in the middle. I left her there and she promised to stay until she heard from me."

I said: "She's going to hear from you, all right," and then Dave parked before the court. We all piled out of the sedan: Susan Sullivan, North, Donaldson, and myself. We trooped toward the rearmost cottage, Indian file.

"I feel terrible about this," North whispered.

"*You* feel terrible," I grunted. "Think how Barbara's going to feel."

"I guess I shouldn't be sorry for her. A murderess doesn't deserve much sympathy," he muttered.

The Sullivan chick said: "That's not a very

nice way to talk, Garry. After all, she did it because she loved you—”

Donaldson glowered at her. “Quiet. You’re not out of the woods yourself. Not by a hell of a distance.” Then he rapped on the cabin’s front door with that hard, imperative knocking that spells policeman.

From inside the shanty came the Banning cupcake’s uncertain: “Garry? Is that you?” There was a pause. “G-Garry—?”

I nudged North. “Go on, stupid. Answer her.”

“Yes, Barbara,” he raised his voice. “Open up. Let me in.”

The latch rattled and the portal swung inward on creaky hinges. Looking more like a bedraggled waif than a glamorous, famous red-haired movie star, Barbara Banning stood framed in the cabin doorway. Her sunset tresses were tumbled and her emerald costume had a wrinkled appearance, as if it had been slept in. She glued the glimpse on North; then she lamped the rest of us and drew an uneven breath. “Garry—!”

“I brought some people with me,” he said uneasily.

Donaldson snorted: “People, hell. The law.”

THIS triggered the Banning quail into abrupt motion. She spun on her heel, darted across the cabin’s single shabby room, raced for its rear exit. I dug an elbow into Dave’s short ribs, rammed him aside and sprinted over the threshold in hot pursuit of the redhead.

I caught her.

Dave, North, and Susan Sullivan were in the stash by that time. I held my squirming captive, turned her around, made her face them. “All right,” I snapped. “Let’s get this mess washed up.”

“Yeah,” Donaldson lipped. “Miss Banning, I’m arresting you on suspicion of murdering Norine North.”

She didn’t answer him directly. She just

looked at Garry and said dully: “So you gave me to the police. You Judas!”

“But Barbara, I—I couldn’t help myself. They made me bring them here. And I—I can’t go on shielding you if you really murdered my—my wife—”

“I didn’t murder her. I told you I didn’t.” Then she took an uncomprehending swivel at the Sullivan doll. “Who are you? Where do you come in?”

I said: “This is Susan Sullivan, our second suspect. The way we get it, she’s engaged to Garry, too.”

Susan bridled. “That’s twice you’ve accused me of being messed up in the killing. I’ll take you into court and sue you—”

“Engaged to Garry?” Barbara whispered.

The Irish colleen nodded victoriously. “Yes.”

“Is—is this true, Garry?” the red-haired dame turned moist glims toward North.

He made a placating gesture. “Well, yes, Barbara. That is, I mean—well, yes.”

“I see,” she said faintly.

“Yeah,” Donaldson growled. “You croaked his wife for nothing. No personal gain, anyhow.”

Barbara shook her noggin from side to side. “No. I didn’t do that. I guess it doesn’t matter now whether you believe me or not, but I—I’m innocent.”

“All killers say that, sister,” Dave sneered.

I said: “So do the folks who really aren’t guilty, bub. May I suggest something?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“You’ve got your portable kit in your car. Why not give the paraffin test to both these wrens? The nitrate stains will show up from pistol back-flash if either one of them fired a gat any time tonight. It wouldn’t take long and it might save a hell of a lot of jaw music.”

He rubbed the stubble on his jowls. “Well, okay. You go get the kit. I’m sticking right here in case anybody tries to scam. Go on, snap it up.”

I WENT hotfooting out of the joint; found what I wanted in Dave's official bucket. Five minutes later he was peeling a wax mold from Barbara Banning's right mitt, then the left. He touched the wax with chemicals and nothing happened.

"Should come up purple," he grumbled. "This shows negative. I better try again. Must've used the wrong technic."

I said: "No, you didn't make any mistakes. If it's negative it means Barbara didn't monkey with a heater tonight."

The Banning cookie smiled crookedly, as if it didn't actually matter. "I told you I was innocent."

"You did indeed, hon," I said gently. "Suppose we give the test to Miss Sullivan."

"Like hell you will!" the doll-size colleen screeched furiously. "You touch me and I'll—"

I murmured: "Oh, come now. You're putting yourself in a bad light, babe. If you refuse the test, you'll make us think you've got something to be scared of."

"I'm not scared. I just won't stand for—"

"Look," I said. "There's really nothing to it if you're innocent. Here, we'll prove it. Garry will show you." I turned to the handsome hambo. "Won't you, bud?"

"I don't get you," he rasped.

"Of course you do. I'm just asking you to take the wax test yourself to prove to Susan it always shows up negative—if you haven't fired a cannon."

He edged toward the door. "Get away from me, shamus. Why should I take the test? Nobody suspects me."

"That's where you're wrong," I said. "You're the heel that bumped your wife—*Get him, Dave! There he goes!*"

The next ten seconds were a blur of motion, a chaos of thunderous sound. North pulled a Colt from his pocket, tried to put a pill through Donaldson's clockworks. He was slightly slow on the draw. Dave's service .38 sneezed: *Ka-Chow! Chow!* in spiteful accents. Barbara Banning screamed shrilly. Susan

Sullivan cut loose with a banshee wail. And Garry North groaned like a grampus as he was halfway to the doorway. He was still groaning when he fell down. There was no longer a Colt in his fingers. In fact, he no longer had any fingers. Donaldson had shot them off—and had doubled the damage by inserting a dose of metal in the ham's thigh. Both wounds were leaking spurts of ketchup.

"Fogged him!" Dave said heavily.

I nodded; leaned over the writhing North slob. "The whole affair was a deep-dyed plot on your part," I told him. "It started when Norine wouldn't give you a divorce."

I said: "Part two was Barbara Banning. You'd promised to marry her if you ever got free from Norine. But later you met Susan Sullivan and fell for her, neck over tin cup."

"My hand . . . my leg . . . oh God . . .!"

"Now, even if you got rid of your wife, you wouldn't be able to get hitched to Susan because Barbara had a prior claim on you. In brief, you wouldn't be free unless both Norine and Barbara were out of the picture."

He whimpered: "Please . . . do something . . . I'm bleeding . . ."

"Presently," I promised him. "Let me finish talking first. I haven't got much more to say. It goes like this: you persuaded Barbara to send Norine some anonymous threats. Then, by a neat double-cross, you managed to convince Norine that she should consult me about those warning notes. When Norine agreed to do that, you carried the information back to Barbara.

"The rest was easy. A phony note containing fifty hermans lured me out of my tepee. You broke in. You ambushed your wife when she came to see me. You buried a bullet in her brain, put her corpse in my closet, and powdered. Shortly afterward, Barbara likewise burgled my bin. She did it because you had told her to do it. She thought she'd find the incriminating letters. Naturally she didn't realize your wife's remainders were in the igloo. That was the frame you'd set for her."

“For . . . heaven’s sake . . .”

I said: “Everything was all set. I caught Barbara ransacking the stash. Then you showed up—and by a pretended accident, you opened that closet door; revealed Norine’s body. The entire act was designed to pin the kill on Barbara so she’d be sent to the smoke house. Then you could marry Susan and everything would be jake.

“You even covered yourself by helping Barbara to make a getaway. On the surface, that directed suspicion from you and turned it toward her all the stronger.

“But you made one bad blunder. That was when you showed up at my joint and bopped me cold. How could you have known Barbara was going to be there doing her burglary routine unless you were the one who’d suggested it to her? And why would you suggest any such ridiculous caper? The more I thought about it, the more it struck me you were in the mess deeper than appeared on the surface. So I decided to trick you.”

He tried to stanch his leakages. “Please . . . do something . . . I don’t want . . . to die . . . like this . . .”

“The trick was simple,” I finished my spiel and ignored his bleats. “I managed to get you,

Susan and Barbara gathered together in one spot. Then I came up with the paraffin test idea. I jockeyed you into a corner where you’d either have to agree to take the test or make a break that would be the same as a confession of guilt. I’ll admit I was bluffing.

“Get . . . some bandages . . . hurry. . . .”

I inspected his thigh. Dave’s slug had made a shallow nick, a mere crease less than a quarter of an inch deep. Instead of announcing this, though, I said: “Too bad. Severed the femoral artery. No way of saving you unless we rush you to a hospital in damned short time.”

“Then . . . take me . . . out to the . . . car.”

“Not until you come clean.”

“God . . . yes . . . I confess . . . everything! I’m . . . guilty. . . .”

I straightened up, set fire to a gasper, gestured to Donaldson. “You heard him, hot shot. From now on it’s your baby.” Then I cast a gander at Susan Sullivan and the Banning jane.

They weren’t rivals any more. Evidently they realized what a rat they’d both loved; what an utter jerk. And they were cuddled in each others’ arms, weeping happily the way she-males will.