

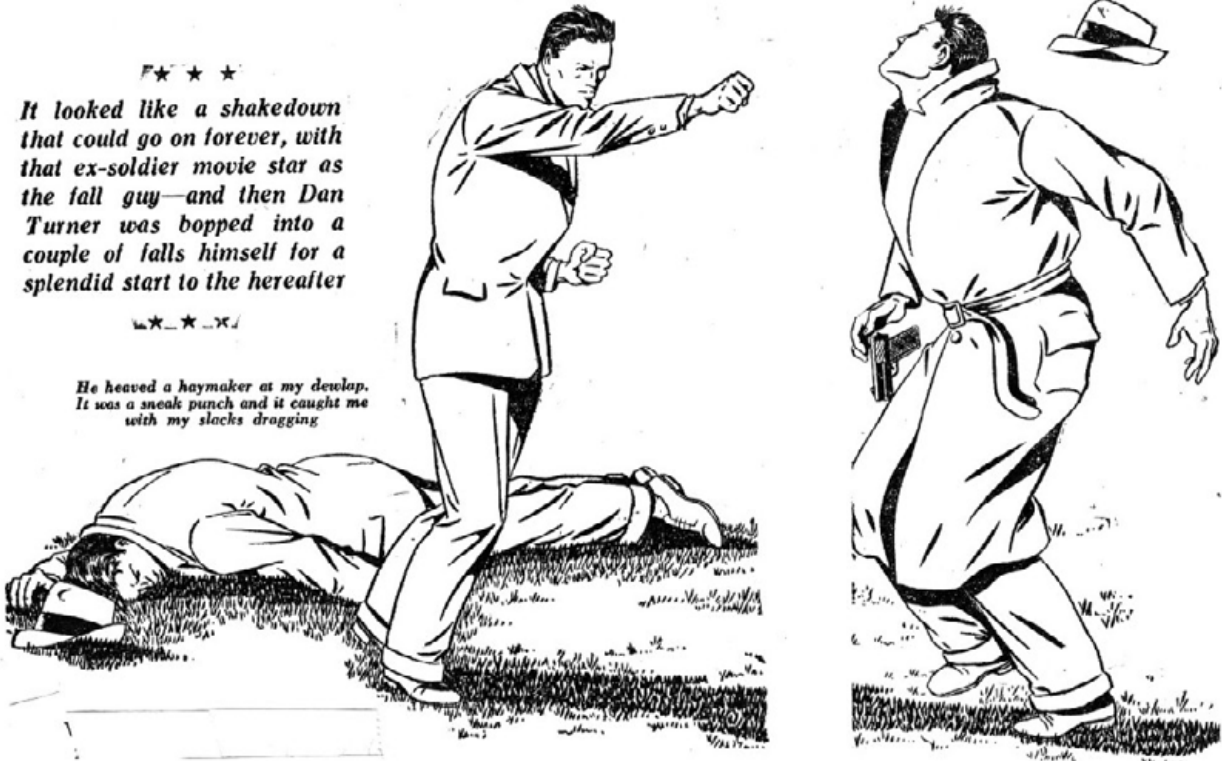
TRUMP FOR THE ACE

BY ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

★ ★ ★
*It looked like a shakedown
that could go on forever, with
that ex-soldier movie star as
the fall guy—and then Dan
Turner was bopped into a
couple of falls himself for a
splendid start to the hereafter*

★ ★ ★

*He heaved a haymaker at my dewlap.
It was a sneak punch and it caught me
with my slacks dragging*



EVEN THOUGH he was a hero I felt sorry for the guy. I'll admit he didn't look like a character anybody ought to feel sorry for; he was tall, handsome, and dashing, with the brand of smile that makes the lassies get palpitation of the giblets. Moreover, he had tossed aside his stardom in the galloping snapshots; had enlisted in the Army Air Force long before his draft board could pick his number out of the hat. Within a year he'd won the rank of captain, shot down nine Jap planes, and been invalided out of the service because of combat wounds. Now he was back in Superior Pix, a bigger star than ever—and he was in a jam.

"It's driving me nuts, Mr. Turner," he said to me as he paced the little front room of his studio dressing bungalow. "If I thought for one instant that I was being taken for a sucker, I'd—I'd kill the fellow as sure as my name's

Ken Kensington. I'm not kidding."

"Don't be a chump," I grunted. "Don't talk that way. Don't even think that way. Hell's bells, bud, you've got your life ahead of you; a screen career, fame, dough—"

He interrupted me. "What good are any of those things if a man can't marry the girl he loves?" He made a bitter mouth. "It may sound silly to you, but I'd sooner be a janitor and have Lorine than be in pictures and not have her."

"Calm down," I advised him gently, "Quit looking at the sour side. After all, you're hiring me to straighten out this jigsaw for you. From now on, let me do the worrying."

"I wish it were as easy as that."

I assured him: "It will be. Now let's go over the scenario again just to make sure I savvy all the salient details. About ten years ago, back in a small town in Pennsylvania,

you had an attack of puppy love and got hitched to a jane a good deal older than yourself; right?"

"Right. I was just a punk at the time; I didn't know which way was straight up." He thought a minute. "Don't get me wrong, though. Bessie was okay. We were happy enough while it lasted. I had a fair job as timekeeper in a colliery and she worked, too. Her earnings helped pay my way through night-school courses in dramatic acting."

"So all right'," I said. "Then you got a lucky break playing juvenile leads in a third-rate stock troupe—and Bessie pulled up stakes. She left you a farewell note saying she'd fallen for some other guy and was eloping with him. You never filed suit for divorce on grounds of desertion, because a little later on you received word she'd died."

He looked glum. "It was just a newspaper clipping from some crossroads in Kansas. I couldn't find out who sent it to me. I tried, but—"

"That's unimportant. The point is, you eventually came here to Hollywood and whooshed to the top. Next you enlisted, became a combat pilot. Now you're out of the army, back on the screen, and engaged to your leading lady, Lorine Lansen. This time it's the real thing. You're old enough to know."

He set fire to a fresh gasper, chain fashion, from the stub of the one he'd been puffing. "That's the hell of it. It's real; so real it hurts."

"So now some anonymous guy phones you, tells you Bessie is still alive," I said. "If this is true you can't marry Lorine; you'd be committing bigamy. Divorce proceedings are indicated—but how can you get melted from a quail who may be defunct? You don't know whether the anonymous guy on the phone was leveling or lying."

"If he was telling the truth, I'd know what to do," Kensington muttered. "I could contact Bessie and arrange everything legally; I'm sure she'd let the divorce go through. It's the uncertainty that gets me down, though. The

fellow said he wanted ten thousand dollars before he'd tell me where to find her. And even if I pay him, how do I know he'll come clean? It might be a shakedown that could go on forever—during which time my marriage to Lorine is indefinitely postponed."

"That's where I come in," I told him.

"My job is to shadow the heel after you make your payoff to him. If he gives you information that proves valid, okay. If it's phony, I'll make him wish he'd never been hatched."

"You'll be at my house this evening when he calls on me for the cash?"

"With my hair in a braid," I promised. We shook hands and I barged out of his dressing bungalow, thereby damned near getting myself croaked.

IT was a cream-colored Cad coupe that nearly rendered me perished. This gaudy go-cart was whizzing along the studio street at extreme velocity with a gorgeous golden-haired tomato at the rudder, and if I hadn't leaped halfway up a nearby telephone pole, her radiator ornament would have impaled me like a bulge on a hatpin. I missed this dire fate by a whisker, however. The wren with the yellow tresses tossed out her four-wheel anchors, came to a howling halt. "Oh-h-h, my g-goodness, I—I almost hit you!" she gasped.

I stalked toward her, peevishly recognizing her as none other than Lorine Lansen, the cupcake Ken Kensington craved to wed. I said: "That looked downright deliberate, baby."

"Deliberate?" her blue glimmers opened wide. "But . . . but I . . . I don't even know you! So why should I try t-to—?"

"That's what puzzled me," I growled.

She reddened. ". . . I was in a hurry. I'm late, and I've got to have a costume fitting, and I w-wanted to see someone before the wardrobe woman comes to my dressing quarters. That's why I was driving a little f-fast."

“You wanted to see somebody, hunh? Who?”

“A man named Dan Turner. He’s supposed to be calling on my fiancé, and—but what business is it of yours?”

I said: “I’m Dan Turner.”

“Y-you—you’re the private detective Ken is going to hire? And I almost ran over you? Well, isn’t that a coincidence!” She opened the door of her costly kettle. “Get in. Come with me to my bungalow. I want to talk to you.”

I complied, wondering what was on her mind, and she whisked us down the line of miniature cottages; parked in front of the last one on the row. We went indoors and there was a stout grey-haired dame waiting there with her kisser full of pins and her arms full of a fluffy white crinoline creation which she, as a wardrobe employee, evidently planned to fit upon the blond cutie’s dainty dimensions. “I was scared you wouldn’t get here in time for a try-on before you go to the set, Miss Lansen. You’re due at rehearsal soon, you know.”

Lorine waved her away. “I’ll be ready for you in just a minute, Mamie.” Then, to me: “Have you seen Ken?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he tell you about this man who claims to have information about . . . about Ken’s first wife?”

“Oh,” I said. “So you know about the caper.”

“Yes.” Her peepers puddled with brine. “Ken told me how he had got the anonymous phone call; how he and I can’t get married unless he finds out for sure whether his first wife is alive or d-dead. He said the man who phoned him demanded ten thousand dollars-”

“Okay,” I interrupted her. “No use going over it again. Ken dished me the story and everything’s under control.”

“Y-you’re going to work on it?” She brightened.

I nodded. “I’ll be there tonight to tail the guy. Put it out of your thoughts and go ahead

with your costume fitting. Lay off the jitters—and for heck’s sake watch your driving the next time or you’ll maim some innocent citizen.” Then I scrambled, unaware that I was stepping up to my adenoids in a murder mess.

KEN KENSINGTON’S igloo was a neat affair of not more than sixty-seven rooms perched in the lee of a hill that loomed over it in the darkness like a solidified wave about to engulf an ocean liner. I arrived just in time to pipe Kensington giving his servants the night off, brushing them out of the stash and telling them not to come back until after midnight.

As soon as the last lackey had left I said, “What was the idea, chum? Pruning some expense off the payroll, maybe?”

“No.” He heaved a concerned sigh down around his shoestrings. “I had another call from that fellow who’s coming here. He insisted on my being alone when he brings me that promised information about Bessie.”

“He afraid of trouble?”

“It looks that way. You’d better pick your hiding place and get settled, Turner. He’s due in thirty minutes.”

I prowled the premises, then decided to lurk outdoors behind a clump of bushes in the side patio, a spot which commanded the big French windows of Kensington’s study. That was the room where he was going to make the payoff, and from my vantage point I’d be able to lamp the scene without being suspected. Presently I got settled, made my hundred and ninety pounds as comfortable as possible, and loosened my .32 automatic in the shoulder holster where I always carry it for emergencies. Not that I anticipated an emergency, but it pays to play safe.

I waited.

After what seemed an hour, but which was only fifty-nine minutes, Kensington’s caller showed up. Not having X-ray optics, I didn’t tab his arrival at the front portal. I copped a healthy gander at him, though, when he was ushered into the study.

He was short and scrawny, garnished in a set of threads you wouldn't pay more than six bucks for at a fire sale, and he had a chin that receded worse than the stock market in 1929. His mush was muddy, his manner furtive, and he reminded me of something under a wet rock.

The next few minutes were like an old-fashioned silent movie; you watched the action but heard no dialogue. The scrawny ginzo would bump his gums a while, then Kensington would answer. This would bring forth a fresh line of chatter from the furtive jerk, accompanied by violent gestures. It ended with Kensington opening an escritoire, digging out a flat brown paper parcel and handing it over. Then both parties to the transaction drifted from view, left the room.

I straightened up, tensed my thews and sinews. My client had paid off, and now my job commenced. I was to trail the guy with the muddy mush, discover his hangout, and then make a fast phone call to Kensington, who would let me know whether he'd been gypped or was satisfied with his bargain. Depending on the answer, would either drop the matter or put the finger on the scrawny character and make with the assault and sluggery. I had a hunch it wouldn't take too many knuckle-dustings to force the guy to confess what lay behind his racket.

Crouching and keeping to the grass so my brogans were silent, I made toward the front of the wigwam. A door opened; I heard it distinctly in the otherwise silent night. And then, unexpectedly, a roscoe sneezed: *Ka-crow! chow!* with spiteful accents. This was followed by a gurgling groan, a slumping thud, a bewildered oath and a voice raised desperately: "Turner! Turner—come quick!"

ISPRINTED forward, blipped around a corner of the shanty under forced draft, caromed against something big and unyielding. It was Ken Kensington running to find me, and we knocked together like a pair

of dice bouncing off the side rail. I lost my footing, took a lurching fall. A rosebush cushioned me with thorns and I suddenly knew how a railroad ticket feels when it's perforated. I yodeled in anguish.

"Turner!" Kensington bleated again. He staggered in my direction, located me, helped me upright. "I . . . I'm sorry. I d-didn't mean to—"

"Skip the apologies. Tell me about those shots."

He gulped. "They came from the other side of the front portico just as I was letting Ormond out of the house. He—"

"Ormond. Was that his monicker?"

"It was what he called himself. Just as—"

"What did he tell you in exchange for that package of greenery I saw you slip him?"

Kensington gulped out noisily. "Nothing. I . . . he—"

"Nothing?" I barked. "You handed him the dough out of charity?"

"No. He promised to send me the information about by Bessie by mail tomorrow. And then there were shots, and . . . and he—" By this time we had gained the front grounds and the actor pointed. "There. See for yourself."

I yanked out my pencil flashlight, sprayed its feeble beam across the clipped lawn.

The scrawny citizen was crumpled beyond the borders of the walkway, and the instant my illumination hit him I knew he had taken two other hits in the immediate recently—the kind of hits a marksman makes with a fowling piece. A pair of slugs had bored holes in the guy's conk and he didn't mind it when I flashed my torch in his glims; he would never object to anything again. He was deader than fried clams.

Kensington whispered: "Is . . . he—?"

"You ought to know. Weren't you in the war? I should think you could tab a cadaver when you see one."

"Then he's d-dead, eh?"

I stooped over the murdered gee, then

lengthened out my full six-foot-plus. “Copiously,” I said. “And any idiot can savvy why you drilled him. I can savvy it.”

“Are . . . are you accusing m-m of—?”

“It looks open and shut,” I said regretfully. “This blister put the chew on you for ten grand, promising to dish you the dope on your erstwhile frau. You gave him the lettuce and he reneged on his end of the bargain. Instead of telling you what you wanted to know, he said he’d send it to you by mail. You knew it was a squeeze play and you couldn’t take it.”

“So you think . . . you think I—?”

“Yeah,” I rasped. “You burned him down. Sorry, Ken, but I’m afraid I’ll have to hand you over to the bulls.”

He made a savage gesture of protest. “But that’s ridiculous! I didn’t fire the shots; they came from somewhere over in that direction.” He pointed across the garden, vaguely.

I said: “You’re sure?”

“Of course I’m sure!”

“You’d swear to it in court?”

“Definitely.”

“That may be too bad for Lorine Lansen,” I said.

He twitched as if I’d kicked him in the kidneys. “What do you mean by that remark?”

“She’s the only other person who knew about the deal.” I shrugged. “Unfortunately you’d told her the details; explained why you couldn’t marry her until you knew for certain whether Bessie was alive or defunct. Now you claim you’re innocent of this kill. Therefore Lorine must have sneaked here and creamed the creep whose alleged knowledge was all that stood between you and her getting hitched.”

Kensington nearly strangled. “No, you can’t mean that. Not Lorine! She . . . she wouldn’t—”

I hung the steady focus on him. “Take your choice. Lorine’s the killer or you are.”

“All right,” he said. “I am.”

“You confess?”

“Yes, if it does you any good.” Then he wound up like a pitcher on the Cardinals and heaved a haymaker at my dewlap. It was a sneak punch and it caught me with my slacks dragging. His balled duke exploded against my button and I went bye-bye.

SOME sinister slob was slapping the stuffing out of me with an open palm, whacking me across the features with the regularity of a metronome and bringing that schoolgirl glow to my agonized complexion. I mumbled: “Cut that out, you dirty wretch, or I’ll wake up and strew you all over the acreage.”

“Strew *you*, hot shot,” a voice snarled. Those were the tones of my friend Dave Donaldson from the homicide squad; I could tab him without opening my peepers. He splatted me again. “Speaking of waking up, suppose you do so. Instantly. Before I lose my temper and get tough with you.”

I made swimming motions. “This spanking isn’t tough, eh?” I demanded.

“It’s just a sample of what’s coming.”

“Oh, yeah?” I blinked my lamps open and took a foggy hinge at his beefy lineaments. He had a mean expression, the kind he wears when he’s on the brink of arresting somebody for burning little children with red-hot ramrods; but since I hadn’t been burning any little children with red-hot ramrods I couldn’t quite understand why he should bend this ferocious look on me. “Threatening me, huh?” I said. “What causes these symptoms, pray tell?” Then I sat up. “And where am I?”

“You’re in Mr. Kensington’s living-room. He brought you here after he knocked you frigid. Then he phoned headquarters.”

I was mildly astonished by this tidbit of gossip. “The Kensington hambo phoned you? Well, that was decent of him after creaming a guy.”

“No,” Dave said. “He didn’t cream a guy. You did.”

That snapped me out of my mental fog in a thundering hurry. I lurched upright, cut loose with an indignant yelp. "I did? Who the hell says so?" Then I glared around the room, which was infested with plainclothes dicks and harness coppers, plus, in a far corner, Ken Kensington himself.

Kensington refused to meet my irate glower. "I say so, Turner," he muttered. "I've told these policemen everything; how I was being shaken down by that shabby little man, how I hired you to protect me from him, and how you shot him as he was running off with my ten thousand dollars."

"So that's your story," I said.

He spread his mitts. "Isn't it the truth? And after you killed him, didn't I knock you unconscious and hold you here for the authorities?"

"That much of it I'll buy," I answered bitterly. "But as to the rest of it, ix-nay. I can see what you're trying to do, however. You want to protect yourself—or your girl friend."

He clouded up, took a sudden step at me. "Leave her out of this."

"You'd like me to leave her out of it, wouldn't you?" I peeled a lip, showed him my grinders. Then I whirled to Donaldson. "Look, numbskull. There's one quick way you can find out I'm innocent. Give me a paraffin test. It'll show negative on nitrate flashback stains, proving I haven't triggered my heater tonight."

Dave smiled the smile of a pussycat who has dined on the family canary. "We gave you that test while you were senseless, Sherlock. It showed positive, not negative. You're hooked."

"Well I'm a—!" I choked. "Positive, eh? That means Kensington closed my clutch around a gat after he whapped me unconscious. He used my finger on the trigger, caused me to fire a shot and thereby stained me behind the eightball. A fine kettle of herring!"

"Oh, I don't know that it's so bad, Hawkshaw. You might not get too stiff a rap." Dave was cynically soothing. "You can enter a plea, claim you were trying to arrest the guy who called himself Ormond. After all, you were working for Kensington here, and Ormond had stolen ten thousand dollars cash. As a private snoop you attempted to prevent the theft and got a little too free with your firearm; as a result of which, Ormond was taken suddenly deceased. I imagine the Jury will let you off with ten years." He added helpfully: "With time off for good behavior."

"You're so comforting," I said.

He shrugged. "Well, it's the best I can do. There are two pills gone from your cannon, and—"

"Nuts!" I yelled. "That only proves what I just told you. Kensington closed my fingers around the rod and made me shoot a couple of harmless slugs while I was senseless." A sudden hopeful hunch sneaked up my leg. "Hey, look. Match the murder bullets against the ones that croaked Ormond. You'll discover they didn't come out of my roscoe at all."

He sneered. It was a spectacular sneer, full of pity and sardonic triumph. "You know we can't do that. The murder bullets went all the way through Ormond's brain, lost themselves in the night. You're not helping yourself a bit with that hogwash, gumshoe."

"Meaning you intend to take me downtown?"

"And toss you in the jug," he agreed.

The prospect made the short hairs prickle at the nape of my neck. Being held in durance vile for a killing I hadn't committed was something I didn't care to contemplate. Therefore I refused to contemplate it.

Instead, I grabbed the nearest object, which happened to be a chair, and treated Donaldson to a scalp massage. I didn't smack him hard enough to cave in his cranium, but I nailed him to the rug so he wouldn't get up in

a hurry. A lot of repair work would be required for the chair, too.

Dave's minions were momentarily petrified at the sight of their superior officer stretched out snoring on the floor. For a split second they were too flabbergasted to sail at me; this was likewise true of Kensington. Taking full advantage of the confusion, I pivoted and catapulted my tonnage at the nearest window. It was closed, but that made no difference. I shattered it outward like a bomb bursting from confinement, hit the outer earth, oriented myself until I could determine where my jalopy was parked.

Then I ran to beat hell.

LORINE LANSEN was the cookie I craved to contact. Any way I looked at it, that curve-some blond baby was the answer. Barring Kensington, she was the only character in the cast who had been privy to the fact that Ormond was demanding ten G's and that his alleged knowledge stood in the way of her wedding. That gave her plenty of motive for bumping the shabby little slob.

Of course, you might say Kensington himself had the same motive, only more so. But here an angle bobbed up: Ken was a hero, the sort of person who wouldn't stoop to shield himself by framing somebody else—meaning me. If he had been guilty of the murder, I was convinced he would have admitted it openly to the cops and taken his medicine. He simply wasn't capable of hanging the frame on me just to save his own handsome hide.

But when it came to the chick he loved—well, that was different. He was the type that would go to any lengths to protect her. I recalled how he had blurted a confession an instant before slugging me insensible; a confession which, in the light of subsequent events, now sounded pretty phony. Perhaps he had realized Lorine's guilt and had said the first thing that slipped into his mind, trying to front for her after I accused her. Then, later,

when he had bashed me, he'd figured out a better stratagem: to pin the bump on my coat-tails. If so, it wasn't for his own sake but to get Lorine out of the mess with clean skirts.

Therefore it was up to me to brace the golden-haired tomato and bruise the truth out of her; it was the only way I could possibly clear myself. I didn't relish the idea of spending my next few years in the bastille on a trumped-up rap; confinement gives me the jabberwockies, particularly when I'm merely the innocent fall guy.

I drove to the nearest druggery, parked, and went in; thumbed the city directory and discovered the Lansen quail's address. It was an apartment farther downtown and I sent my coupe careening across the intervening distance in a cloud of momentum; reached my destination as fast as you could say trinitrate of tuluol. I hotfooted into the lobby, made for the desk clerk, and said:

"Is Lorine Lansen on the premises?"

He copped a supercilious swivel at my mussed raiment, moved his glims to the duck-egg which had been festooned on my jaw by Ken Kensington's fist. "No, she isn't in," he said. "And even if she were, I'm sure she wouldn't wish to see you. She never buys anything from Fuller-brush men."

"Fuller-brush men are neat and dignified," I snarled. "Do I look neat and dignified to you, bub?"

He breathed on his nails, buffed them against his lapel, and said: "Certainly not. You look like a bum."

"I am a bum. I'm a private ferret, which is practically the same thing." I let him squint at my badge. "Let us not tarry with personal remarks, because I'm in a mood for mayhem and I'd as soon knock you loose from your bicuspid as not. Which floor is the Lansen doll on, and what number?"

He gave me the information, hurriedly and in apologetic accents, adding a sir between each syllable. "But, sir, I'm sorry, sir, you won't find her at home, sir."

“She’s out? You’re shooting level with me?”

He called on heaven to witness that he was uttering the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him Leningrad. “She left some time ago, Sir.”

“At what exact hour?”

“I really couldn’t say, sir. I didn’t note the time. It was immediately after she received a phone call, sir.”

“From whom?” I said.

He looked impressed. “A dick who uses good grammar. From *whom*, no less.” He made an admiring mouth. “Now I’ve seen everything.”

“That’s what you think. You’re wrong, though,” I contradicted him. “There’s one thing you haven’t seen yet: a swift poke on the beezer if you don’t tell me what I want to know.”

He backed off in some alarm. “Never mind, thanks. I don’t believe I’d like to see a swift poke on the beezer.” Then he said: “I don’t know who called her, sir; I didn’t listen in.”

“Was it male or she-male?”

“A gentleman, sir. Then she made an outgoing call—”

“Did you dial it for her from your switchboard here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And then?”

“And then she left in something of a hurry.”

“What was the number she called?”

HE consulted some slips of paper, gave me a Hillside figure. “It wasn’t a very long conversation, sir.”

“Okay. Get it for me. I’ll take it on the desk phone here,” I said. “Snap it up, palsy walsy.”

He put a plug in a hole, threw a switch key, twirled his dial, and gestured for me to pick up the hand-set on the counter. I did this and listened a while to the ringing signal,

which was all the satisfaction I got. Nobody answered. Apparently nobody intended to answer.

“Get me Information,” I said.

He fiddled with his gadgets. Presently a dulcet voice informed me she was Information, and I said: “Police business. Hunt up this number in your reverse-listing directory and tell me the subscriber’s name and address.” I gave her the Hillside figure the clerk had furnished.

There was a wait. I torched a gasper and heard: “That telephone is listed to a Miss Mamie Ryan, sir.” She mentioned an address near Sunset.

“Thanks,” I said, and rang off. Mamie Ryan, Mamie Ryan; who the hell was Mamie Ryan? Where had I heard the name Mamie recently? Then I caught hep. “The wardrobe woman!”

“Wardrobe woman, sir?” The clerk blinked at me.

I told him to go paint a zebra; ankled out to my jalopy, and kicked it into rapid motion. The picture was pretty clear to me now. Lorine Lansen had received a phone call from a man. In all likelihood it was Ken Kensington who had given her the jingle after bopping me and notifying the cops. He had probably told her to go establish an alibi, thereby fixing things so that the violent demise of the shabby Ormond could be fastened firmly on me and I wouldn’t be able to make a counter accusation against Lorine herself.

Lorine had then phoned her wardrobe dame, Mamie, to aid her in preparing the spurious alibi. After completing this call, she had powdered. This meant that Lorine and Mamie were together at one place or another right now.

They weren’t at Mamie’s stash, though. I had just tried to ring it and there’d been no answer. All right, genius, I growled to myself, where would they be? And the answer was the Superior lot, of course. Lorine must have told Mamie to meet her at the studio, probably to

go through the motions of fitting some costumes; this would look valid to the homicide bulls and appear air-tight if an inquiry arose.

I twisted my rudder; headed for the Superior layout. I felt very good inside. I was a smart snoop.

MY BADGE got me by the guard at the studio's main entrance gates. I rolled past giant sound stages, threaded my way around clusters of lesser buildings, and finally found the row of dressing bungalows used by the stars. I parked near the last one on the line and piped lights glowing inside it. My hunch was panning out; the blond Lansen quail was in there.

In fact, she herself opened up when I rapped on the portal. She was adorned by an emerald evening gown, the strapless kind that stays in place by some mysterious means bordering on the miraculous; and Mamie, the stout and elderly dame from the wardrobe department, was in the front room with her kisser full of pins. From an alibi viewpoint the picture was perfect.

I cast a casual glance at the grey-haired dame and then bestowed a gentle shove on Lorine, pushing her aside so I could enter. "Hi, kitten," I said.

"Wh-why, Mr. Turner—what's the meaning of—?"

I said: "Come, come, baby, let's not get comic. You know why I'm here."

"How should I know? Is . . . is anything wrong?"

"That depends," I answered darkly.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you, Mr. Turner."

"You will. Everything will get clear to you in a minute, sis. Suppose we start by making like a quiz program. I'll ask the questions."

"What questions?"

"Well, first, how long have you been here in this dressing bungalow?"

"I'm not exactly certain, but—well, at

least a couple of hours. Hasn't it been that long, Mamie?"

The wardrobe dame nodded. "All of two hours, Miss Lansen," she said through the pins in her mush.

"You mean you two have been fitting dresses and so forth?" I kept my tone casual. "Neither of you went out at any time?"

"That's right," the blond cupcake insisted. "You see, I've got to wear these various changes for several big scenes tomorrow, and—"

I waved her quiet and fastened the focus on Mamie. "Are you ready to testify to that effect, madam?"

"I am."

"How much is Miss Lansen paying you for perjury?"

She almost swallowed some of the pins; choked, and sprayed an assortment of them on the floor. "Perjury? How do you get in that condition, copper?"

"I'm not a copper," I corrected her. "I'm a private man." I made a ferocious face. "And you're lying."

The Lansen doll put her hands on her hips. "See here, don't you dare talk to Mamie that way! Besides, what right have you got to accuse her of lying? What right have you got to come here at all? You're supposed to be under arrest for—" All of a sudden she tried to cut the words off, but they were already delivered. Her pan got crimson as she realized she had given herself damnably away.

"Yeah," I jeered. "I'm supposed to be under arrest for killery. But how could you know about that unless Ken Kensington told you? It proves he's the one who called you on the phone."

"I . . . I don't—"

"Aw, nuts. Cut out the innocent routine. You know as well as I do that a scrawny yuck named Ormond tried to put the shakedown bite on Kensington and got croaked in the process. You likewise know that Kensington attempted to frame me for the bump, in the

meantime phoning you to establish a bogus alibi in case the law queried you.”

LORINE made a plaintive, fluttery gesture. “Please, Mr. Turner. I . . . you—”

“So you bribed Mamie, here, to help you establish that alibi. Naturally you didn’t yearn to be dumped in the grease.”

“Prove it!” she challenged me, her bravado as false as a six-dollar bill engraved in pink ink. “I had nothing to do with that man’s murder. I swear it!”

Mamie said: “And I’ll back her up, copper.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not a copper? I’m a private man.”

“And you’re a fugitive from the law,” the Lansen blonde said swiftly. “You must be. I know you were arrested, accused of—”

I grinned. “So Kensington *did* phone you.”

“What of it? Is that against the rules? The point is, you wouldn’t be here unless you had escaped from the police. I think I’ll call headquarters and hand you in.”

She was smart to savvy my status—that I’d lammed from the clutches of the bulls. I decided to meet craft with guile, shrewdness with lies. “Go ahead, help yourself.” I shrugged. “Make the call. I don’t mind. I was turned loose by official orders a while ago.”

“They . . . they released you from custody?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“But why? On what grounds?”

“Because they learned I was innocent.”

“How?”

“They caught the guilty character,” I told her, looking her straight in the peepers.

She tensed. “Caught . . . c-caught the . . . the guilty—”

“You heard me.”

“How . . . how did they?”

“He confessed,” I said. “So they took him to the cooler.”

“Who confessed?”

I said: “Why, Kensington, of course.”

“Ken? Oh-h-h, no . . . n-no!”

“I’m sorry, precious, but that’s the way it is. I figure he’s either telling the truth or fronting for you. Whichever he’s doing, it all amounts to the same thing.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“He goes to the gas house and inhales cyanide perfume.”

For a moment I thought she was going to crumple in a swoon, but she fooled me. She got an abrupt grip on her reflexes, wheeled in a semi-circle, and darted past me; whisked her shapely chassis out through the doorway into the night. I started after her and she slammed the portal shut just as I gained the threshold. It swatted me on the profile, bounced me backward on my heels. From outside the bungalow a Cad motor roared its eight-cylinder symphony and tires squealed, spinning for traction. Then they caught hold and the roaring receded, going away fast.

I yeped: “What good will it do her to go to headquarters? She can’t talk Kensington out of his cell!” Then, yanking the door open again, I plunged to my own jalopy and fed it a charge of ethyl. I had places to go and folks to visit.

INSTEAD of barreling downtown I tossed a mental coin; it came up heads and I made knots in the direction of Ken Kensington’s igloo, hoping that Dave Donaldson would still be there hunting clues and pretending he was an expert at it.

Luck perched on my shoulder. The instant I came in view of the stash in the lee of the looming hill I lamped official sedans parked hither and yon, among them Dave’s. Maybe he and his underlings were giving the grounds a frisk, searching for the two spent slugs which had tunneled through the scrawny Ormond ginzo’s steeple, hoping to match them against my confiscated gat.

I scorched blisters on my brake drums, came to an earthquake stop, and went scissoring over the lawn. “Dave!” I yodeled.

“Hey, Dave Donaldson!”

Flashlights turned toward me, impaled me. Then Dave’s infuriated bellow filled the night with thunder. “*You!*”

“Hello, chum,” I said.

He made a grab at me and I piped the bandage around his brow like a Turk’s turban where a sawbones had vulcanized him after I maced him with the chair. “Giving yourself up, hunh? Ready to absorb your medicine.”

“No,” I said. “Ready to figure the killer for you.”

He puffed up like a balloon on the brink of bursting. “Finger the killer be damned! You’re him.”

“You should quit smoking opium,” I said sweetly. “Where’s Kensington?”

“Right here,” a new voice horned into the dialogue as the Superior star lugged his handsome tonnage toward us. “What goes on? What cooks?”

I said: “*You* will when you learn the truth.”

“What truth?”

“I’ve had a gabfest with Lorine Lansen.”

He clouded up worse than a storm looking for a place to rain on. “Damn you, Turner, if you went to Lorine’s dressing bungalow and bothered her—”

“So you know she was in her dressing bungalow,” I said. “How perfectly ducky.” Then I scowled. “You couldn’t have known it unless you phoned her and sent her there yourself to rig a bogus alibi with her wardrobe woman.”

“Now wait,” he choked. “You can’t prove—”

I scooped up a leer. “The hell with what I can prove. In this particular clambake it’s what I accomplished that counts.”

“Meaning what?” he asked in a worried tone.

“Meaning I needled your sweetie into rapid action. She zoomed off the lot in a cloud of shavings when I told her you’d been pinched.”

“Me? Pinched? That’s nonsense!”

I said innocently: “Yes, isn’t it? But there’s no way to tell what Lorine may do in her present state of hysteria. Dames are unpredictable. Hey, Dave, may I make a suggestion?”

“Go ahead.” Donaldson sighed wearily. “I can’t think of any good way to stop you, and I’m speaking from long experience.”

“Thanks,” I said. “In that case, let’s go close the lid on this shindig.”

“I’ve got it closed. Or anyhow I will have when I install you in the gow.”

“You refuse to play ball with me? I’m warning you, the newspapers will make you look like a monkey by tomorrow morning unless you string along my way.”

He glowered. “Just what is your way, Hawkshaw?”

“We all pile into your bucket,” I said. “You, Kensington and myself. Then we go places.”

“Where, for instance?”

“The Superior layout first. That may be the end of the trail, or it may not be. We’ll see when we get there. Is it a deal?”

“Okay, it’s a deal. Let’s ramble. Remember, though, if you’re running a whizzer on me, you might as well kiss yourself good-bye. I’ll take you apart like a string of beads.”

On this baleful note we paraded to his sedan, boarded it, and headed for the payoff.

AT the Superior main gates the uniformed guard told me Lorine Lansen hadn’t returned after departing in her Cadillac. He also said that the wardrobe dame, Mamie Ryan, was no longer inside the grounds; she had left shortly after I did.

I said to Donaldson: “An alibi is about to be shot to glory. Tickle this heap.”

He tickled it. “Where now?”

“Mamie Ryan’s igloo,” I said, giving him the address which I had obtained from Information some while back.

"Who's Mamie Ryan?" he inquired querulously.

"She works in the wardrobe department."

"So what has she got to do with the prices of tamales?"

I said: "She was the Lansen frail's phony alibi. Lorine bribed her."

"Oh, I get it. We'll go pick this dame up and make her admit the alibi is faked. Then we'll have the goods on Miss Lansen, is that it?"

"Not by several miles," I retorted as we whammed around an intersection and turned off Sunset. "Drag anchor—this is our destination." And I indicated a shabby cottage on the right, a little box-shaped stucco affair. "Mamie's hangout," I said.

Dave latched his brakes and leaped to the sidewalk with Kensington following. I overtook them halfway up to the porch steps of the shanty; and then, just as I dived toward the front portal, a cannon inside sneezed: *Ka-choop!* with a muffled report. There was the slithery thud of somebody falling.

I hurled myself at the door, smashed it open. "We're too late! The killer creamed herself!"

Donaldson and Kensington sandwiched me just within a tiny and poorly furnished living room. "Killer?" Dave gasped.

"Yeah." I pointed. "Mamie Ryan."

The grey-haired wardrobe dame lay sprawled before us, a red stain spreading across the bosom of her dress where ketchup was leaking. She was still alive but fading fast, and her heater was clenched in her left mitt.

"Hello . . . copper," she greeted me.

I said: "Not a copper, toots. A private man."

"Does . . . it . . . matter?"

"Not now," I said. "You did bump in Ormond, didn't you?"

"Yes . . . I . . . bumped him."

"Because he was putting the shakedown on Ken, eh?"

"That's . . . right." Her glazing glims turned toward Kensington. "I'm . . . sorry . . . honey."

Then he got it. "Good heavens . . . it's . . . it's—"

"Yeah," I said soberly. "It's Bessie."

"But she's so fat, so grey . . . so old! I would never have recognized her!"

She stirred on the floor, feebly. "That's why I . . . left you," she gasped. "I knew . . . you had . . . acting talent. I knew you'd go places . . . but I was . . . too old for you . . . even then. I'd have only been . . . in your way."

"No. No, Bessie." His voice was gentle as he leaned down to her. "You even helped pay for my dramatic course. I would have stayed loyal to you."

She smiled. It was a nice smile, considering. "Loyalty isn't love, Ken. That . . . wouldn't have lasted much longer. You were better off . . . thinking I was . . . dead. That's why . . . I sent you a fake newspaper . . . clipping."

"But Bessie!" He choked up.

"Then . . . later I . . . came to Hollywood just . . . to be near you . . . so I could . . . see you once in a while . . . from a distance. It would have . . . been all right except . . . for Ormond."

I horned in with: "Just who was Ormond?"

"The . . . man I ran away with . . . when I left Ken. I ditched him later. He was a . . . crooked little . . . heel. But he . . . caught up with me . . . here in Hollywood . . . and said . . . he intended . . . to get some . . . money from Ken." She let her breath out painfully. She was coming to the end of her string.

In a quiet tone I said: "Let me take it from there, hon. As I see it, there were only three people aside from myself who knew Ormond would visit Ken tonight for the ten grand. One of them was Ken himself. The second was Lorine Lansen. And the third was you. I'll admit I didn't even count you in on the caper at first; but presently I remembered you had

been in Lorine's dressing bungalow when she brought me there and talked to me. You heard everything we said."

"Yes . . . I heard . . . everything."

"So you sneaked to Kensington's stash and ambushed Ormond as he came out," I went on. "You knew I was going to be there, and maybe you figured the rap would fall on me."

She nodded apologetically. "Either that . . . or it . . . would be . . . an unsolved mystery."

"Okay. I don't hold a grudge," I said. "But when I doped you as the guilty person, I lit a fire under you. By chance, Lorine had bribed you to corroborate her alibi. So in your presence I announced that Ken himself was going to the gas chamber for the murder. I had a hunch you couldn't allow that to happen. You had loved Ken, helped him in his younger days, deserted him for his own good. You'd croaked Ormond for Ken's sake. And now

that Ken seemed to be in a jackpot I figured you would do something about it."

"That's . . . right. I wrote a . . . signed confession. You'll . . . find it . . . over on that chair . . . where I put it . . . just before . . . I shot myself."

Kensington cradled her. "Bessie, you needn't have done this. You needn't even have murdered Ormond. A divorce—"

"I . . . got a divorce from you . . . long ago, darling. You've always been . . . free." Once more she let out a ragged sigh. This time, though, she didn't inhale again.

Kensington looked up. "She's—"

"Yeah, bub," I said. "She kicked the bucket. She was a damned swell person." I set fire to a gasper. "Now you can go find Lorine and tell her the wedding plans are all straightened out." I moved toward Donaldson. "Lend me your handkerchief, stupid. This smoke gets in a man's eyes."