

# SUICIDE STUNT

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

*A special kind of trap had been provided to guarantee a most spectacular ending for the male movie star. And the killer suspects had figured some highly colorful dodges in order to confound Dan Turner, the surging shamus of this cinemaland!*



*"I'll fix that, you rat!" he told me. Then he whammed the vase down on my dandruff.*

THE sequence was so spectacular it gave me goose pimples the size of mushrooms. A dead-end street set had been erected on the back lot of Parametro Productions, with a brick wall barricading the closed end; three city blocks extended from this to the spot where the action was to start. It was noon, the light was bright, the camera was grinding, and the signal had been given. Here came Chuck Linstrom hellity blast on a roaring motorcycle, heading directly for the wall with his noggin down and his shoulders hunched over the handle bars.

Linstrom was a stunt man, and a good one—as good as you'll find here in

Hollywood where they raise them tougher than a loan shark's terms. I watched from the sidelines as his yammering bike gathered velocity; felt my kidneys puckering like prunes when he flashed toward the camera setup. Involuntarily I stiffened myself in sympathy for the impact he was about to experience; after all the guy was a pal of mine and had invited me on the lot to eat lunch with him when he completed his chore, and I couldn't help wondering if he'd live to keep the date.

Alongside me a gorgeous blonde cupcake in a vivid scarlet ensemble suddenly commenced wringing and twisting as if a colony of termites had

unexpectedly established headquarters in her girdle. “He’ll be killed!” she yeped.

“Don’t be silly, Karen,” her tall escort retorted. “I told you before the trick’s not really dangerous.”

It was true the tall party had told her before. In fact, he’d been saying it for the past ten minutes to my personal knowledge; that was how long he and the blonde chick had been parked ferninst my elbow. I had heard his reassurances so often I was beginning to get fed up with his mellow but somewhat petulant voice.

Not that I blamed him too much for his petulance. He was in a rather embarrassing spot when you stopped to consider that he was Barry Duane, one of the top hams on the Parametro payroll, and the star of this thrilling opus now being filmed. As such, he was supposed to be the bozo on the motorbike; but of course the company had hired a stunt expert to double for him, that being the usual custom when a scenario calls for something hazardous.

It was obvious that the cookie in the scarlet garb was a nonprofessional and consequently ignorant of the finer points about movie-making technique. From the outset she’d been needling Duane with dopey remarks like: “If it’s so safe, then why aren’t *you* doing it instead of letting someone else substitute for you? *You’re* the hero of the picture.”

“You just don’t understand, darling,” he would answer with a patience marking him as a citizen in love up to his adenoids. “I could ride that motorcycle just as well as Chuck Linstrom could; but the studio doesn’t like me to take unnecessary risks. They’ve got an idea the public likes me better without any scars on my profile.”

“But *why* would you have scars if it’s as safe as you say? I mean I wouldn’t want you scarred up, either, only I think a star shouldn’t disillusion people by—”

**I**F THAT frail had belonged to me I’d have had her brains examined for feathers; her dialogue was as empty as a vacuum. But the handsome Duane hambo took it without flinching; kept trying to square himself when by rights he should have whapped her bow-legged and stalked off in a towering dudgeon. That’s romance for you, though; one touch of Cupid and a guy acts like a fugitive from a butterfly net. Even a guy like Barry Duane, who was old enough to have better sense.

I tried to ignore the poor idiot; concentrate on the cinema scene. Presently it began; and, as I say, Chuck Lindstrom steered his thundering course straight at the brick wall.

“He’ll be k-killed!” the blonde doll yeped. Excitedly she flipped away the butt of a gasper she’d been inhaling; paid no attention to Duane’s soothing remarks. Then Linstrom went barreling by us in a shower of peanut brittle—

*Ker-blooie!*

He hit the wall head-on and bricks sprayed outward like red chunks from a fragmentation bomb. The motorcycle bucked and went on through the hole it had torn in the masonry; vanished from view. There was an instant’s suppressed silence, a general sigh of relaxation from everybody on the set, and finally the director called: “Cut!”

The scene was in the cans.

“You see, Karen?” the Duarte ham said. “I told you there was nothing to it.”

“But—but the way he crashed into those solid bricks—”

“Those solid bricks are nothing but props made of balsa wood and painted. It was what we call a breakaway wall.”

“Balsa wood!” the wren looked puzzled.

Duane nodded, grinned. “They’re about as light as dry sponges. You couldn’t get hurt if you were hit with a carload of them.

If you don't believe me, look—here comes Linstrom now.”

Sure enough the stunt expert was ankleing toward us with an unconcerned expression on his freckled mush and a happy-go-lucky whistle pursing his kisser. He spotted me, waved a greeting and said: “Hi, Sherlock. Right on time, hunh? Let's go to the commissary and put on the nose bag.”

I was on the verge of saying it sounded like a marvelous notion when Barry Duane stepped forward. “Oh, I say, Linstrom.”

“Yeah?” Chuck looked at him quizzically and then bent an admiring eye on the blonde tomato.

Duane thereupon performed reluctant introductions. “Darling, this is Chuck Linstrom. Er, my fiancée, Miss DeVore.”

“Hiya,” Chuck said.

Duane went on: “Miss DeVore was worried about your safety in that shot. I assured her you were quite all right, but she insisted on meeting you and seeing for herself.”

“Nary a scratch on me,” Chuck chortled. Then, indicating me, he added: “This is my friend Dan Turner, the private dick. Maybe you've heard of him. Everybody has.”

Duane scowled. “I haven't.” He looked nettled, possibly because his golden-haired sweetie was showing so much interest. As a matter of fact she seemed practically overwhelmed; widened her stary blue glimmers first in Linstrom's direction, then in mine.

“Imagine!” she cooed. “Poor little me meeting a famous private detective and a big brave stunt man all in the same day! It seems just like a dream!”

**L**INSTROM gave her a double-take; blinked when he realized he wasn't being ribbed. Then he copped a quick gander at Duane, and so did I. The actor

was commencing to seethe with jealousy, which was natural enough. Here he had all the glamour in the world, yet his doll was practically swooning over a common stunt expert and a Hollywood snoop. It was enough to make any he-man star go into a tantrum.

Seeing this, Linstrom made a disparaging gesture. “Brave? Me? Aw, shucks, I only did what any red-blooded American boy could do. Shucks.”

“Exactly what I've been telling her,” Duane muttered.

The jane said: “Yes, Mr. Linstrom—Barry was saying he could make that motorcycle ride as well as you could.”

“Sure, but why should he!” Chuck parried. “He's too valuable for stuff like that.”

Duane's puss slowly reddened. “If that's sarcasm—”

“Sarcasm? Not at all. I was telling the truth,” Chuck looked hurt. I caught a twinkle in his peeper, though, when he darted a glance at me.

The Duane ham seemed mollified. “I beg your pardon, I'm sure. Come, Karen, we're having lunch, remember? Let's go.”

“Of course, darling.” Then she paused. “I have an idea. Why don't we ask Mr. Linstrom and Mr. Turner to join us?”

“They probably have other things to do. Come along.”

Ordinarily I'd have let this ride, but I was still irked by the way the handsome hunk of cheese had acted when Chuck Linstrom introduced us a moment ago. He had said he'd never heard of me, which rankled. So I got even.

“Not at all,” I presented him with a mocking leer. “We haven't anything else we'd like to do, have we, Chuck?” And I tipped my stunting chum the office.

“We'd love having lunch with, you,” Chuck told the DeVore cupcake. “And you,” he added to Duane.

The hambo's glare would have made ice cubes without a Frigidaire, but he was stuck and he knew it. His feather-brained sweetie had jockeyed him into a spot with her screwy antics; a spot he couldn't very well get out of without bad manners. "All right," he sighed. "We'll make a foursome of it."

He was wrong, however. We hadn't gone more than halfway over to the commissary when a hulking ginzo with a Brooklyn accent lumbered at us, plucked Chuck's sleeve. "Hey, Mr. Linstrom, can I see you a minute?"

"Sure, Lefty. What is it?"

"I hate to distoib you," the guy lipped. "But there's somethin' I think you oughta take a slant at, over where you parked your motorcycle."

Chuck said. "Okay. You folks go on ahead; I'll join you soon as I can." Then he and the bruiser named Lefty barged away while I ankled on into the studio beanery with Karen DeVore and Duane. We got settled, gave our orders.

**P**RESENTLY, over my appetizer of Vat 69, I tried to make with the small talk. "Who was the bulky character that deprived us of Chuck's charming company?"

"Lefty Melton," Duane snapped irritably.

Our soup arrived and we gave it a workout. Over the last of it I said: "Belong here on the lot, does he?"

"Who?"

"Melton."

The hambo cocked a supercilious eyebrow. "I thought you were a detective!" Then he grinned a satisfied grin at his tomato, as if to say: "*See? Why should you be impressed by a yuck like Turner who knows strictly from nothing?*"

I savvied the meaning of his smirk even though he didn't actually speak the words.

"I'm only a detective in business hours," I said.

"Ah?"

"Yeah. Right now I'm not working at it."

"Obviously," he said in a peevish tone.

The DeVore quail pouted a ripe lower lip. "You're not very polite, Barry darling."

"No?"

"No, you're not. Mr. Turner asked you a civil question."

"Oh, yes, so he did. About Lefty Melton, wasn't it?" He smiled at her and glowered at me, no mean feat when done simultaneously. "You ask me if Melton belonged on the lot."

"It's not important," I said.

"But it is, really. I mean, if you're a detective, you must've noticed he was wearing overalls: That means he works here. He's a grip or prop man or something. I should think any ordinary shamus with sense could tell that."

I killed my second jorum of Scotch; set fire to a gasper, and said: "Score one for you, pal. Shall we call a truce or continue to make with the snide remarks until we both get sore and I beat out your brains with a slice of boiled tripe?"

"Oh, Mr. Turner!" Karen DeVore giggled. "You're so funny! Barry, darling, don't you think he's a scream? Imagine beating out a person's brains with a slice of tripe!"

"I'm about to die," the hambo snarled. The poor slob didn't realize how right he was—and neither did I. We found out soon enough, though. We began learning when somebody came lumbering to our table with bad news.

**T**HE BEARER of these ominous tidings was Lefty Melton, still embellished in overalls and looking concerned. He coughed apologetically, "Excuse me, folks. You wouldn't be waitin' for Chuck

Linstrom to jern you at lunch, wouldja?" Then, without waiting for an answer, he continued: "He won't."

"What do you mean, he won't?" I said sharply.

The big hulk shifted on his number twelves. "Mr. Linstrom's gone to the hospital. He met up with a slight accident—a pile of loose boards sort of fell on him. Bust his skull. They taken him away in an ambulance."

I choked on a hunk of toast; leaped upright. "The hell you yodel! Was he—he—he—?"

"The croaker says he'll be okay in a couple days," Lefty responded. "But that ain't all."

Karen DeVore widened her idiotic baby-blue peepers. "Not all? You mean he had other injuries besides a broken skull?"

"Oh, no ma'am. Not Linstrom. I was talkin' about the pitcher. You know, the moom pitcher. The motorcycle stunt."

"What about it!" Barry Duane demanded.

"The director says we gotta do a retake. But how can we when we ain't got no stunt man?"

I glared at the guy. "Retake! Why?"

"I dunno. Somethin' about the film or somethin'. Well, I gotta go rebuild that balsa-wood brickwork." And Lefty shambled off, mournfully wagging his noggin.

The DeVore wren stared after him. "The poor man."

"Who, Lefty?" Duane said. "Nothing poor about him. He's just punchy, is all. Used to be a prize fighter and took too many on the chin."

"No, I meant Mr. Linstrom. Imagine doing that marvelous ride through the wall without getting hurt and then having his skull broken by loose boards." She shivered, then brightened abruptly. "It's an

ill wind that blows nobody good."

I goggled at her. "Hunh?"

"Don't you understand?" she said pertly. Then she turned the full force of her infantile glims on Duane. "It's your big opportunity, darling."

"My opportunity for what?" his voice sounded strained.

"To be a real life hero as well as a movie one. *You* can make the motorcycle scene."

The ham recoiled as if she had sprouted fangs. "Oh, but—but I—that is, I—"

"Or were you teasing me when you said you could ride as well as Mr. Linstrom?"

I poked my oar into the dialogue. "Ixnay, baby, That's not for him. He's an actor, not a stunt man." I thought I was doing Duane a favor by saying this; I could tell he needed help—and why should I pack a grudge?

Curiously enough, though, he seemed to resent it. "You know, that's not a bad idea," he said. "Why shouldn't I make the crash scene myself and get the glory? Think of the publicity, I can almost see the headlines now—"

"Bravo, darling," the blonde cupcake said.

I said: "Now wait a minute. You can't take that chance, chum. In the first place the studio wouldn't stand for it; suppose you got hurt?"

"Wouldn't stand for it?" he arose majestically. "I'm afraid you don't realize the kind of contract I have with Parametro Pictures. They'll stand for it or else."

The DeVore doll squeezed his arm. "Oh, Barry, I think you're marvelous. Don't you think he's marvelous, Mr. Turner!"

"I think he's nuts," I said.

**T**HIRTY MINUTES later I was still telling her I thought Duane was nuts. By this time the quail and I were once more

parked by the camera setup on the back lot, with everything ready for a retake of the motorcycle sequence. There was one difference, however; she didn't have Barry Duane for an escort now, she had me. Duane was at the far end of the street set, astride a snorting motorbike and getting his signal to come hell-roaring toward us. The imitation brick wall loomed red and substantial looking in the bright glow of sunlight mirrored by huge tilted reflectors.

"Action," the director said.

Off in the distance Duane gunned his twin cylinders; whooshed into motion. Karen DeVore shivered thrillfully against me and fastened the clutch on my wrist. "Here he comes—I'm so excited I could scream!"

I grunted: "Help yourself."

She didn't yelp, though; not right away. She just sucked in a deep breath and held it while Duane thundered past us. His noggin was low and his shoulders sloped over the handle bars as he aimed straight for the barricade—

*Kee-rash!*

Even as he hit it, I knew something had gone haywire. The red balsa bricks erupted in a shower and the motorcycle bucked just as it had done when Chuck Linstrom was riding it; but there was a difference. Instead of plowing a hole in the wall, the machine seemed to crumple and fold like a concertina. Duane's body sailed flopping through the atmosphere.

Alongside me the blonde cookie screeched hideously. "Barry—oh, my gosh—*Barry—!*"

I said: "What the hell?" and sprinted forward, reached the point of impact a split second before the crowd closed in behind me. The first thing I piped was the wall structure where its facing of counterfeit bricks had been dislodged. The second thing I lamped was Barry Duane on the

ground, peering up at the hot blue sky without seeing it.

"Barry!" a keening shriek knifed through the sudden uproar. Chaos spilled over and Karen DeVore came in on the first wave of boiling froth. "Barry—what happened—?"

I grabbed her, held her back. "What happened is that some dirty disciple concealed a steel brace under the balsa brickwork," I rasped. "Whoever anchored the brace knew it would stop a motorcycle, Hell, it'd stop a truck."

"Barry—!" she moaned, squirmed in my grasp. "Get a doctor for him—hurry—"

I said: "He don't need a doctor. He needs my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad. Cop a swivel at his neck."

"It's—crooked—twisted—"

"Yeah," I said grimly. "It's busted."

"You m-mean—"

"I mean he's deader than chopped bait," I said. "He was murdered."

She went limp—and it turned out we needed a doctor, after all. The blonde doll had swooned. I handed her over to a cameraman and yelled: "Fetch a sawbones for her, bub!" Then I catapulted for the nearest phone to put in the squeal to headquarters.

**A** GUY rambled into my agency office on Hollywood Boulevard around three o'clock that afternoon. He was a nice-looking punk, in his late twenties at a rough guess, and there was something about him that seemed vaguely familiar although I couldn't quite put my finger on it for a moment. I waited until he got close to my desk.

"Yeah?" I said.

He hung the steady focus on me. "You're Dan Turner, I suppose."

"So they tell me. What can I do for you?"

“You can bring my uncle’s killer to justice,” he said in a taut voice twanging with vengeful overtones. “I—I’m Steve Duane.”

“Duane?” I blinked at him.

“I’m—I *was* Barry Duane’s nephew. His only relative.”

Then I tabbed the punk’s strong family resemblance to the defunct star; realized why his map seemed so familiar. “Well, for crying in a crock!” I said. “Sit down, kid. Have a snort of tonic?”

“No, thanks.”

I took one myself as long as I’d already pulled the fifth of Vat 69 out of my desk. “Now then, what’s all this about bringing your uncle’s killer to justice?”

“I’m asking you to take the case.”

“Why?”

“Because I want results and you’re the man for the job.”

I said: “Much obliged for the compliment, sonny, but you’re all wrong. It’s a cop case. We’ve got an efficient police force in this man’s town.”

“Maybe so, but—”

“And they’ve got everything under control,” I went on. “Lieutenant Dave Donaldson’s in personal charge. I gave him all the information he needed to get the machinery rolling; now it’s merely a question of time.”

“Time!” the punk lifted a lip. “That’s just it. How long will it take them with their blundering methods? Damn it, I—”

I said: “Hey, hold on. Who said the bulls were blundering? I guess you’ve been reading too many detective stories where the headquarters guys go around stumbling over one another’s brogans. That’s not true in real life. Donaldson knows all about how that steel brace was wedged inside the imitation brick facing. And he knows a guy named Lefty Melton was responsible.”

“Those things are just superficial. They don’t go deep enough to suit me,” young

Duane made a bitter mouth.

“Superficial?” I said indignantly. “Hell’s bells and popcorn, fella, what’s superficial about the fact that Melton lammed off the Parametro lot and couldn’t be found after the smash? Tell me what’s superficial about the police dragnet that’s out for Lefty right now?”

The punk stirred restlessly. “Do they know for sure it was Melton who slipped the steel cross-member inside the brickwork? Does Melton’s disappearance actually prove it?”

“It’s a damned good indication.”

“But couldn’t it have been done by somebody else?”

“Not according to the results of a cop check-up at the studio. No other workmen were on that job; Melton handled it solo.”

“All right, Mr. Turner, then I’ll ask you one question. Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why should this Lefty person want to kill my uncle? What was his motive?”

**I** SHRUGGED. “There you’ve got me. I don’t know.”

“Had there been any personal beefs between Melton and Uncle Barry?”

“I hadn’t heard of any,” I admitted.

“And neither had I,” he said. “But I’m pretty sure my uncle would have mentioned it to me if he’d been having any trouble on the lot during the past few days. He and I were pretty chummy. I mean, we were more like friends than uncle and nephew. As a general rule he always confided in me when there was anything bothering him.”

“And—?”

“And things were sailing smoothly on this new picture. There was only one thing he spoke to me about in the way of a petty annoyance.”

I said: “What thing was that?”

“The fact that they’d hired Chuck

Linstrom to double for him in certain stunts like the motorcycle crash . . . Barry would have preferred some other stunt man.”

This was news indeed. I pricked up my ears. “Why?”

“Oh, nothing serious. My uncle seemed to think Linstrom was a little too brash, was the way he put it. They’d worked together before and Linstrom had apparently irked him by his—well, I guess you’d call it his cocky manner.”

“Most stunt experts are cocky. And tough,” I added in defense of Chuck, who was a friend of mine. “Linstrom’s no worse than the average in that respect. If Barry Duane resented his happy-go-lucky attitude, he’d have resented the same thing in anybody else they might have hired. I don’t see what that’s got to do with the case.” I torched a gasper. “Beside, Linstrom was injured by some falling lumber; had to be carted off to the hospital with a dent in his steeple *before* Melton rebuilt that wall.”

“That’s just the point,” young Duane growled.

“Make it clearer,” I said. “I’m a little stupid this afternoon.”

He aimed a forefinger at me. “Look. If Linstrom hadn’t been injured by falling timber, he’d have been right there to make a second motorbike ride—to double for my uncle in the retake. I mean the accident that sent Linstrom to the hospital seems pretty fortuitous to me. It’s the key to the whole affair. Chuck Linstrom’s absence caused Uncle Barry to make the scene himself—and he was killed doing it.”

“Hey,” I narrowed my optics. “Are you hinting Chuck deliberately got himself beamed by a scantling so Barry Duane would ride into the steel-braced wall?”

“I’m not hinting anything. I’m propounding theories and asking questions.”

I came around from behind my desk,

clapped on my hat, grabbed the punk’s elbow. “You can ask your questions direct,” I snapped resentfully. “In my book, Linstrom’s as clean as laundry on the line. If you suspect him of any shenanigans, suppose you say it to his face instead of behind his back.”

“That suits me. We’re going to the hospital?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But instantly.” And I steered him down to my parked jalopy; lit a shuck for the surgical drydock where my stunt expert chum was laid up for repairs.



CHUCK LINSTROM resembled a freckled and somewhat pallid Arab or Hindu, stretched out on the hospital bed with his cranium all wrapped in a turban of gauze bandages. He pinned the bleary focus on me as I barged toward him. “Hi, Hawkshaw.”

“Hi. How’s the headache?”

“They tell me I’ll be as good as new when the stitches come out,” he grinned wanly. Then his glimmers went wonderingly toward young Steve Duane. “Insurance adjuster?”

I said: “No. This is Barry Duane’s nephew.”

“Oh,” Linstrom mumbled. “I—heard the news.”

“About Uncle Barry’s murder?” Steve’s voice was sour.

“Yeah. And—I’m sorry, kid.”

“I should think you ought to be. If

you'd been on the job, my uncle wouldn't have ridden your motorcycle. He wouldn't have been killed."

"That's right," Linstrom grimaced. "I'd have got it myself—I'd be dead right now instead of just out of circulation."

"And why are you out of circulation?"

"Some boards fell on me. Didn't Turner tell you?"

I horned in with: "Steve has some theories about that, Chuck. He seems to think you intentionally got in the way of that falling lumber."

"Wh-what? But—but why the hell would I—?"

"So Barry would make the ride and get bumped," I said. "Silly, isn't it?"

Linstrom tossed aside his covers. "It's so damned silly somebody's going to get a poke in the snoot!" he rasped woozily, and started to pile out of bed. He had his dukes balled and he looked capable of committing mayhem on the Duane punk, who emitted sudden yelps of protest and backed away fast.

I surged into action, ready to prevent violence; but my quick-trigger reflexes weren't needed after all. An expression of pain crossed Linstrom's freckled pan and he sagged back in bed again; closed his optics briefly. "I forgot I had a cracked conk," he whispered weakly. "But I'm remembering it now. Boy, am I dizzy!"

"Not as dizzy as this guy here," I indicated Steve Duane.

Linstrom said: "Yeah, remind me to take a rain check and pop him on the complexion when I'm feeling better, Philo."

"Now wait," the younger bozo bleated. "There's no need for animosity. I'm not trying to make enemies; I just want my uncle's murderer caught and punished. Is there anything so unnatural about that?"

Linstrom glowered at him. "There is if you try to suck me into it, sonny-boy. That

I don't like."

"Well, but—"

"But nuts! The plain fact is I got hit by falling woodwork and carted here to the hospital. Whatever happened at the studio after that is no skin off me."

I said casually: "Speaking of being bashed by a load of wood, just how did it happen, Chuck?"

"I don't know exactly, Lefty Melton braced me as we were all headed for the commissary, remember? He said there was something I ought to look at, over where I'd parked my bike."

"Yeah."

**H**HE SCOWLED. "I went with Lefty and he started to point out a soft back tire; or anyhow he said it looked soft to him although it didn't to me. Just as I stooped over, the pile of boards came down behind me with a hell of a clatter. Blooie! That's all I can tell you. It's the last thing I knew until I woke up here with my scalp in a sling."

"Where was Melton when it happened?"

"Behind me."

"You couldn't see him?"

"No. I haven't got eyes in the back of my head—or have I?"

I thought this over. "Is it possible that Lefty yanked a key timber out of the pile so the whole works would topple down, hit you?"

"Hell yes, it's possible. I hadn't considered it, but—say, maybe you've got something there, Sherlock. Maybe that's exactly what happened. He wanted to get me out of the road so Duane would have to ride for the retake, and—"

"And he had steel braces all set for Duane to smack into," I eked out the sentence. "He knew the hidden metal cross-member would bash Duane to cranberry jelly and he wanted to make damned sure

you wouldn't be the guy that took the jolt."

Chuck nodded, then winced because the movement of his noggin was too vigorous. "It fits," he said. "It meshes in with what we already know."

"And it doesn't add anything to what we're trying to learn," Steve Duane remarked in a frustrated tone. "We're already aware it was Lefty—but *why*?"

Just then a nurse came pussy-footing into the room, told us we'd overstayed our visit and kindly get out so Linstrom could take a nap. I powdered with the Duane punk, took him back to my bucket, kicked the starter, and said: "Satisfied now?"

"About what?"

"About Chuck Linstrom being clean."

He looked sullen. "I suppose I've got to be satisfied. What's your opinion?"

"My opinion is that Lefty Melton croaked your uncle and, when the cops nab him, we'll learn his motives."

"Will you work with the police—for me?"

I set fire to a coffin nail. "I don't see why I should. They can capture the guy if anybody can. There's more of them."

"Look," he said. "If it's a question of money, I can afford to pay you any fee you want. Or anyhow I'll be able to afford it as soon as Uncle Barry's estate is settled."

Dough happens to be my major hobby, and, when he mentioned it, my ears twitched forward like a mule's. "You figure to inherit a slice of Barry's geetus?"

"Not a slice of it; all of it. I was his only living relative. And he was worth plenty, so if it's a fee you're after—"

I said: "I'm always after fees, laddie. But once I undertake to crack a case, I crack it no matter who goes to the undertaker, which is not meant to be funny."

"You mean you *will* work on it for me?"

"I mean I'm getting interested; and I'm

getting ideas. About Lefty Melton, for instance. The way it looks now, he had no personal grudge against your uncle."

"That's right," the punk nodded.

"Then he must have had some other reason for doing what he did."

"And I want you to find out what that reason was."

I poisoned myself reflectively with a lung-load of smoke. "I can make a guess. He was hired."

"Hired?"

"Yeah, by somebody who wanted Barry Duane to croak."

"But who—?"

"Maybe somebody who stood to profit by Barry's demise," I said slowly.

Steve considered this, and an abrupt flush stained his youthful lineaments. "That won't do. Good lord, *I'm* the only one who'd gain by—I mean—say, listen, you're not accusing *me*, are you?" he yodeled in angry accents.

"Why, no," I summoned a placating smile. "Of course not. Why hell, sonny, you're the guy that's hiring me to investigate this clambake. Who ever heard of a criminal deliberately inviting a detective to track him down?" Which was just so much sheep-dip, of course. Lots of guilty characters try to cover their tracks by engaging the services of private snoops; it's a standard method of attempting to establish innocence.

But I didn't say so to Steve Duane.

**T**HERE WERE some points I craved to check back on at Parametro Productions. I gave the Duane punk a quick brush-off, then headed my teakettle to the studio; began asking discreet questions about Chuck Linstrom. Did the stunt guy have any enemies on the lot? In the past few weeks had he been in any brawls? Was it possible, or even remotely plausible, that somebody had hated Linstrom so much that

a murder scheme might hatch out of this hatred?

My quiz program was designed to remove any loose threads that might tangle up the puzzle more than it was tangled already. What if some unknown party had despised Linstrom's tripe and arranged the concealed steel brace inside the mock brick wall with the notion of exterminating the stunt expert? In other words, suppose Chuck himself had been the intended crash victim?

The theory had a certain amount of surface logic. The killer might conceivably have hankered to abolish Linstrom by means of the hidden steelwork, only to have the plan go haywire when Barry Duane rode the motorcycle in the retake. But the more I snooped around, the more I realized it was a blind alley. Chuck had no enemies at Parametro; everyone liked him, even the missing Lefty Melton.

Moreover, Lefty wouldn't have arranged a murder stunt for Linstrom and then dumped a stack of lumber on him before the scheme went into operation, thus defeating his own purpose. That didn't make any sense at all. No matter how you looked at it, the whole plot had been aimed full at the Duane hambo and nobody else. It had to be that way.

I braced a pal of mine in the studio's lab department—the building where they develop exposed spools of negative and make positive prints; persuaded him to give me a gander at Chuck's original crash scene and Duane's substitute remake of the sequence. We ran these rushes through a movieola, a little viewing gadget that lets you lamp the pix through a peep-hole instead of projecting the film on a beaded screen. The movieola is quicker and more convenient when only one guy wants to look at the action, and by now I was in something of a hurry.

Comparing the two scenes, I couldn't

tab much difference in them; at least not until the actual instant of impact against the dead-end wall. At that point Chuck Linstrom's take was spoiled by some sort of flash halation on the negative, which spoilage had necessitated re-filming the episode. And of course when the Barry Duane crash flitted in the viewer his motorbike failed to go on through the balsa bricks; instead, it crumpled up under him, bucked him off, and cooled him by means of a broken neck. I shivered a little when I watched this reproduction of an actual death; it was weird, unpleasant.

By the same token, it put me on the track of the truth.

I THANKED my laboratory friend, lankled out to my jalopy and headed for the nearest grog dispensary for a good stiff slug of Scotch; my nerves needed it. By now it was dusk and I aimed for the phone booth, consulted the directory, thumbed down the D's until I located Karen DeVore's address. It was an apartment wigwam on Yucca near Vine.

I went there.

The feather-brained blonde doll opened up to my knock; widened her weepy blue peepers when she recognized me. "Wh-why—Mr. Turner!"

"Hi, kitten," I said. "Mind if I come in?" The question was strictly academic because by that time I was already over the threshold and planting my poundage on a davenport. "Maybe you'll think it's funny, my visiting you so soon after what happened at Parametro this noon."

She shed a little brine down her lovely complexion. "Not at all," she made an obvious effort to keep the sobs out of her dulcet voice. "I—I'm glad you did. I f-feel so alone, now th-that Barry's—d-dead."

"Take it easy, hon," I said gently.

"But—but it was all m-my fault."

"Your fault?" I fastened the astonished

focus on her.

She nodded woefully. "Yes. I—I teased him into riding the m-motorcycle—"

"So okay, so you teased him. You didn't force him, though. He was showing off; making with the bravery for your benefit. Wasn't that natural? He was in love with you; he wanted to impress you—and why not? You're a damned attractive dish."

"Th-thanks. But I shouldn't have—I mean I—oh-h-h, Mr. Turner, I'm so miserable!"

I stood up, walked close to her, patted her shoulder. "Ix-nay, toots. Tears won't bring him back." Then I piped something over on the mantel; moved in that direction. "Hm-m-m. A picture of young Steve."

"Y-yes. He's . . . he was Barry's nephew."

I nodded. "Yeah, I know. Inscribed, too. *From Steve to Karen, with love.*"

"He gave it to me last Christmas. He used to have a crush on me."

"Before you got engaged to his Uncle Barry?" I said.

"Yes." She hesitated. "Why are you frowning, Mr. Turner?"

I said: "I always do when I'm thinking."

"And wh-what are you thinking about?"

"You may not like it if I tell you, baby."

She looked puzzled. "I don't understand."

"I'm thinking about a young sprout in love with a very sweet hunk of she-male fluff. A young sprout who loses that very sweet hunk of fluff to his uncle."

She added this up on her mental fingers, then gasped. "You're talking about Steve . . . and me . . . and Barry!"

"Yeah."

"But Steve was never in love with me. Or at least I was . . . never his girl."

"You're sure of that, kitten?"

"Of course I'm sure. I mean, well, certainly he liked me. But he wasn't jealous when I told him I was going to marry his uncle. He just . . . wished us luck."

I said: "Sometimes jealousy doesn't show on the surface, hon. Sometimes it runs deep. Hidden. And poisonous."

"Are you trying to hint Steve had . . . anything to do with Barry's d-death?"

"I don't know," I said. "Jealousy makes a good motive."

"But that's silly. I tell you Steve *wasn't* jealous."

I shrugged. "Dough makes a good murder motive, too. Put them together and you get something that could be damned ugly."

"And I say it's silly." She pouted out her ripe red lower lip. "Did you come here to sympathize with me about Barry or to . . . ask me questions about Steve?"

"I do sympathize with you," I hedged, not giving her a direct answer. "You've had a very tough break indeed."

**A**GAIN her glims leaked a little moisture. "Let's not talk about it any more, shall we? I just got back from ordering flowers for the funeral, and . . . Let me fix something to drink, may I?"

"Okay," I watched her as she pattered toward the kitchenette; couldn't help admiring the pert sway of her walk. She paused en route by a console radio, clicked it on and remarked that she always liked a spot of music with a highball; it made the nasty stuff taste better. Then she went into the next room and I heard ice clinking in glasses; the liquid gurgle of something being poured from a bottle. I hoped it would be Scotch.

The radio warmed up on a news broadcast: “—*studio employee named George ‘Lefty’ Melton was found dead in a clump of underbrush beneath the Arroyo Seco Bridge in Pasadena. Melton, who had disappeared from Parametro Studios in Hollywood earlier today after the death of movie star Barry Duane in a stunting mishap, was being sought by police on suspicion of responsibility for Duane’s death, the accusation being that Melton inserted a steel crossmember in a breakaway brick wall into which Duane crashed a motorcycle while making a motion picture scene. Melton’s body, when discovered by Pasadena police officers, had two bullets through the right temple—*”

I careened toward the console, snapped it off and emitted a strangled: “What the hell! Then I yeped: “Miss DeVore—Karen! Did you hear that?”

“It m-means Melton’s d-dead?”

I said: “It means he was squibbed off.”

“Squibbed off?”

“Murdered.”

Her kisser made a startled O. “But—but the radio didn’t say that. It said he was found under the Pasadena bridge with two bullets through his temple.”

“His *right* temple, to be exact.”

“Maybe he committed suicide,” she said. “Maybe when he saw he couldn’t escape, he decided to k-kill himself.”

“His name was Lefty,” I grunted.

“But what has that to do with—?”

“Why’s anybody called Lefty?”

“I—I suppose because—because they’re—”

“Because they’re southpaws, yeah,” I said grimly. “And being *left*-handed, Melton wouldn’t plug himself through the *right* temple. Get it? He didn’t Dutch himself!”

“I—yes.”

I went on: “And besides, very few suicides put two bullets in their skulls.

After the first one they’re generally too deceased to fire a second shot unless they’re using an automatic roscoe and a dying reflex twitch triggers it again. Even then the extra pill usually goes wild.” I started across the room.

She stared at me. “Wh-what are you going to do?”

“Use your phone if you don’t object. I’ve got to call the law. But quick!” Then I whirled the dial so fast it gave out smoke; bestowed a bellowing request on the operator who answered at headquarters. “Dave Donaldson of homicide! Yeah, Donaldson.” I waited a while, then: “Dave?”

His rumbling mumble came back over the line like distant thunder. “Yah. Who wants what and why?”

“Turner squalling. Flag yourself over to Steve Duane’s tepee.” I mentioned the address. “That’s right, Steve Duane, Barry Duane’s nephew. I think I’m on the brink of handing you a killer, so don’t spare the gas coupons. Yeah. I’ll meet you there.” And I rang off before he could fire a cargo of useless questions at me.

The DeVore wren gasped: “Steve—? Oh, no! Not Steve!”

“But definitely, kitten. Come on, you may as well be in on the payoff.” Then I yanked her out of the flat, down to my coupe, and gave her the wildest ride this side of a shoot-the-chutes at an amusement park.

For all our sped, though, Dave Donaldson got there a minute ahead of us. He was already emerging ponderously from his official sedan as I tossed out my own four-wheel anchors. The guy drives like a maniac.

A STUPEFIED expression contorted Steve Duane’s puss when he opened his front portal. “Turner!” he said. “And—Karen! Karen, darling!”



I made a mental note of that darling routine; copped a hinge at the way he slid an arm around her cuddly waist. Then I said: "That identifies two of us, sonny. This third member is Lieutenant Donaldson of the homicide detail."

"Oh?"

The blonde cupcake squeezed close to Duane. "Steve, dearest, they—they think—I mean, Mr. Turner says you—"

"He says I what? Hey, what is this?" the punk demanded.

Donaldson nudged me. "It's your show, Sherlock. Better get on with it."

"Yeah." I said. I looked at Steve. "Have you heard the news?"

"News? What news?"

"It was on the radio. Lefty Melton's been cooled."

"What?"

"He was murdered."

"Good heavens!" the punk wheezed. "Now we'll never know—"

I growled sourly: "Don't kid, yourself. We know plenty. And I can piece out the rest with guesswork, so brace yourself."

"Brace myself for what?"

"The lowdown," I said. "We've already got it doped out that Lefty arranged the steel cross-member inside those balsa bricks to croak your Uncle Barry. The question is, who hired Lefty to do the dirty work?"

He gave me the steady glimpse, "You tell me."

"Presently," I promised him. "It's my theory that the party who hired Lefty for the job promised to meet him and pay him off under that bridge in Pasadena. Lefty was a punchy sort of character without too many brains. He believed he could pull the job, collect, and get away with it. He didn't suspect he would get the kind of payment that comes out of a gat."

"That sounds reasonable. You mean he was murdered to prevent him from naming his employer in the—the plot to kill Uncle Barry."

I fished a gasper from my crumpled pack; torched it. "Exactly. Before I go any deeper, though, let me ask you something."

"Help yourself."

"You keep calling Miss DeVore 'darling' and she calls you 'dearest.' Does that mean you're still in love?"

"Why . . . yes. Not that it's any of your business. And this is a hell of a time to bring it up, anyhow. But since you mention it, I . . . well, I intend to ask her to marry me, now that my uncle is . . . dead."

I darted a significant slant at Donaldson. "That's the final nail in the casket, Dave."

"What is?"

Instead of giving him a direct answer I wheeled again to the Duane punk. "Up to now we've been beating our gums about all the facts except the main one. We know Lefty Melton dumped a pile of lumber on Chuck Linstrom so Chuck wouldn't be able to ride in the retake of the crash scene. Right?"

"Yes," Steve said nervously.

"We also know Lefty set a steel trap so this retake would be disastrous to your Uncle Barry—if Barry was stupid enough to do the stunt personally."

"That's right."

I said: "But the entire chain of action depended on something we haven't yet discussed. *Who knew in advance that the*

*retake was going to be necessary?"*

"I d-don't get you."

"Sure you do," I rasped. "In order to guarantee a retake, the original stunt scene had to be spoiled; ruined. See that vase on the table over there? Let's suppose it's the lens hood of a movie camera. Now watch." Then I flipped the butt of my gasper straight at the vase; scored a bull's-eye. Sparks erupted in a bright red shower. "That's how you spoiled the first take, Karen DeVore," I said. "*—Grab her, Dave!*"

**D**ONALDSON was moving before the words were out of my kisser; and so was the shapely blonde cutie. She was fast on her gams—but Dave was a shade faster for all his bulk. He reached out and clutched at her shoulders, hauled her backward. "Got you!" he announced loudly.

She screamed.

I ankle past the flabbergasted Steve Duane; planted myself in front of the squirming, caterwauling Karen. "You never were in love with Barry; never intended to marry him. It was Steve, here, that you loved. But Steve was practically a pauper. You decided to make him wealthy by bumping his uncle. That way, the kid would inherit everything. You'd be his wife and roll in clover."

"It's a lie—you stinking flatfoot, it's a lie!"

I said: "No, toots, it's the truth. I remember seeing you as you flipped away your cigarette during that first motorcycle sequence. I checked the film later and saw it had been ruined by a flash of sparks that made light-halations on the negative. Then, finally, you told me you'd been out arranging for flowers to be sent to Barry Duane's funeral—but actually you'd had a different kind of errand under the Pasadena bridge. A murder errand—with Lefty Melton as the party of the second part."

"No!" she yeeped. "No!"

"Will you stand still for a paraffin test to determine whether or not you've fired a cannon lately?"

That got her. She stared down at her quaking palms; seemed to shrivel in her clothes. Then, quietly, she collapsed. Dave Donaldson snicked the bracelets on her and peered dazedly at me. "I'll be damned if I know how you do it, Hawkshaw," he said. "Always it happens the same way."

"Not always," I contradicted him. "This time the routine had a missing part. At no time in the scenario did I get clouted on the dome."

Steve Duane snarled: "I'll fix that. You've convicted the only girl I ever loved, you rat." Then he snatched the vase off his table; whammed it down on my dandruff.

When I woke up I was in the hospital, occupying the bed directly alongside Chuck Linstrom. We had a meal together, after all.