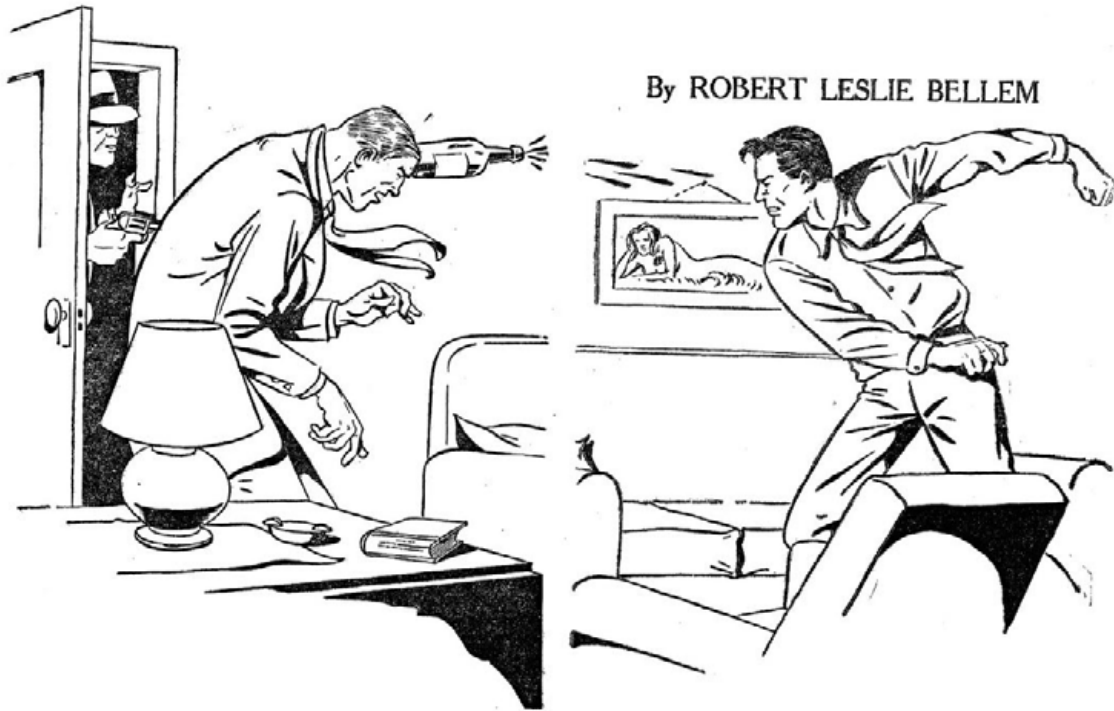


HOMICIDE SURPRISE . . .



Dan Turner was out for the gravy, and he got it—right in the kisser! Which made Hollywood's ace private dick almost as mad as the corpse's bodyguard, who, in friendly fashion, beat the bejunior out of his pal Dan. All in all, it was the whackiest murder case in his career!

ORDINARILY I'm opposed to dames wearing trousers, but this doll was different. She was a tall and luscious red-haired tomato in a sleekly tailored emerald slack suit that made you want to howl like a wolf when you saw how it stressed her willowy curves, and her chiseled mush was just as gorgeous as her contours. She came drifting into the Trocambo on the Sunset Strip while I was inhaling supper, and the instant I lamped her I lost my appetite for fried chicken. She was that kind of cookie; she sent you. And after you'd been sent you had the feeling that you didn't want to come back, ever.

Maybe I was just impressionable; I'm a fool for red-haired wrens anyhow. There

was one flaw about this particular cutie, however. That was her escort, a sallow and undersized bozo named Lew Russell who worked as a free-lance publicity agent here in Hollywood whenever he could snag an unsuspecting client off one of the movie lots. Russell was a louse and I disliked him all the way to the toenails, and it galled me to pipe him with a dish as spectacular as this delicious number in the green slacks. He didn't rate any such luck.

Out of the tail of my glimmer I watched him as he steered her through the restaurant's portals. For an instant it seemed almost as if he might be making a gesture toward my solo table, pointing me out to his dazzling she-male companion and standing on tiptoes to whisper in her

ear. Then he took a duck-out powder; headed for the gents' retiring room.

And damned if the jane didn't barge straight toward me!

I stood up as she approached; a quizzical smile appeared on my pan and I gave her the welcoming gander. In exchange she impaled me with a stare as sharp and icy as a dagger in a refrigerator.

"Are you Dan Turner?" she inquired.

"Yeah. I—"

"The private detective?"

I said: "Yeah. I—"

"My name is Valerie Starr."

"Glad to know—"

She interrupted me for the third consecutive time. "Never mind the polite dialogue, flatfoot. The point is, I despise private detectives. All of them. Which includes you." Then, before I could guess her dizzy intention, she reached in front of me. She grabbed up the tureen of thickened gravy that had come with my fried rooster and threw its gooey contents full in my features like an old-time Keystone cop tossing a custard pie.

THE suddenness of this maniac routine caught me with my guard down; I didn't even have time to dodge. A viscid gob the consistency of warm paperhanger's paste drenched my complexion, dribbled off my profile and made plopping sounds as the drops softly rained on my shirt-front.

I choked: "Gah—guh—gug—" and stopped as I heard bellows of laughter roaring through the joint. My peepers were all gummed up with sticky gunk and I couldn't see a damned thing, but I knew the score all the same. Everybody in the cafe had lamped what had happened to me, and now I was a target for the biggest giggle to hit Hollywood since they quit grinding out slapstick two-reelers.

To make it worse, a batch of tattle

columnists and newspaper reporters rushed onto the scene just as I dabbed a napkin across my optics; then I really began to seethe. Headlines were exactly what I needed to complete the ruination of my hardboiled reputation; if this insane story reached print I would be the butt of jokes from hell to Havana. And I hadn't the foggiest notion why the red-haired tomato had dumped me in the soup.

It couldn't be a personal grudge, I reflected bitterly; she and I were total strangers—or at least we had been until she introduced herself to me with the gravy bowl. And now the newspaper vultures descended on us, surrounded us, started firing questions at us. For the first minute or two, though, I couldn't get a word in edgewise; it was the quail they were interviewing. What's your name, lady? *Valerie Starr*. Are you in pictures? *No, but I'd like to be*. Why'd you toss the gravy on Mr. Turner? *Because he's a private dick and I hate private dicks*. Is that all you care to tell? *Yes, that's all*. And she started to ankle away as if the entire affair bored hell out of her.

By this time I'd mopped most of the mess off my mush and spotted her scrambling. I caterwauled: "Oh, no you don't!" and fastened the grab on her, hauled her back to my table. She struggled in my clutch, and simultaneously a *Herald* photographer took aim with his minicam and focused on the fracas. I had an abrupt vision of the added ridicule such a pic would heap on my noggin; when you're as big and muscular as I am you're not supposed to wrestle with poor defenseless she-males. Not in public, anyhow.

FORTUNATELY I tabbed the photographer as Nick McLennan, an occasional drinking crony of mine. He was a tall, skinny ginzo with freckles and a sour disposition which I suspected came

from peptic ulcers; but I knew he'd listen to reason if I gave him a plausible story. "Hold it, Nick!" I yeped at him just before he clicked his shutter. "Save your film for something important."

He cocked a sardonic eyebrow. "Such as?"

"A nice fast payoff," I growled grimly. Then I yanked the red-haired doll around to face me. "Okay, Tutz. A moment ago you said you weren't in pictures but would like to be."

"Get your paws off me. Yea, I said that."

"You also came into this eatery with an escort who pointed me out to you and then ducked. But he's on the fringe of this gathering now and he happens to be a press agent." I turned the cupcake loose, made a speedy forward plunge and got my dukes on the undersized Lew Russell, who'd just arrived. "Now then!" I snarled, giving the sallow little slob a savage shake.

He started squealing like a pig under a fence. "Let me go! Do you hear me? Turn me loose—"

"Presently." I leered at him. "First I crave to make like a detective. The way I figure this caper, Miss Starr hired you to get her some newspaper notoriety so the movies would grab her. She's screen-struck. Okay; you decided to use me for a goat. You talked her into framing this scene with me, which would make me look silly and put her on all the front pages."

"I . . . I . . . that is, I—" he gibbered.

Nick McLennan cast a thoughtful gander at the red-haired muffin. "Is that true, Valerie?"

"Well, y-yes," she admitted.

I grinned thinly at the lanky photographer. "Thanks for chiseling the confession out of her, bub. And now if you'd like some snazzy snapshots for your

sheet, here's your golden opportunity." Whereupon I sat down, doubled the half-pint Russell guy across my lap and dished him the spanking of his life; whaled the everlasting bejunior out of him. Moreover, McLennan took action pix of the whole performance while everybody else in the joint applauded vigorously. Russell had damned few friends.

He had plenty of verbal venom, though. With every whack I fed him he cursed me at the top of his adenoids; screeched an assortment of threats to get even with me. Then, when I finally released him, he turned his tirade against the red-haired cookie; loudly blamed her for fouling up the best publicity scheme he'd ever hatched. "You had to open your big fat mouth and give the game away!" he railed at her. "You dimwitted tramp—"

She slapped him across the kisser, hard. "I'll kill you if I hear you call me that again." Her voice was taut.

"Yeah," I backed her up. "Scram before I help her render you defunct. That's a promise."

It was a promise I was destined to regret. But the regret didn't come until later, after a giant named Sweeney loaded me with lumps.

Very bad lumps indeed.



I WAS blotting up a Scotch nightcap in my bachelor apartment stash when the giant rapped on my portal. This was about midnight, several hours after the

Trocambo brawl, and I wondered who could be butting in on me so close to bedtime. When I opened the door I damned soon found out. The hard way.

Sweeney could have used a bath. He stood there at my threshold smelling like an old birdcage and looking tougher than a canceled contract. His tallness topped my own six-feet-plus by several inches, he weighed all of two hundred and forty pounds and he sported a map that would scare Boris Karloff. He'd been a wrestler on the West Coast groan-and-grunt circuit until some careless antagonist squeezed part of his brains out through his cauliflower ears with a headlock; since which he'd stumbled around Hollywood picking up stray quarters and dimes playing occasional gangster roles in "B" pictures—roles he could handle as long as they didn't give him any dialogue to deliver. He couldn't remember dialogue; he couldn't even read.

I knew him as well as I know most of the screwball characters around town; I'd even staked him to meals now and then when he'd had the pocketbook shorts. I said: "Hi, pilgrim. What the hell deposits you on my doorstep at this unholy hour?"

"Business," he said sorrowfully, and shuffled inside. "Lissen, Shoilock, they ain't nothin' poisonal about this, see? It's gonna hoit me as much as it does you." He closed the portal behind him; regarded me with vague glims that seemed almost incapable of concentrating. A frown furrowed his forehead, which was maybe a half inch wide when he had a haircut. "You and me has always been the same as pals, pal. Ain't we?"

"Yeah, sure. What's on your mind?"

He patted my back with a ponderous palm that damned near busted my shoulder blade. "I got me a salary job. I been woikin' four whole days now. I'm a chauffeur and handyman."

"Congratulations."

"Yep, for Lew Russell. You know. The press agent."

I stiffened warily. "Oh, so?"

"Well look." He made an apologetic mouth. "When a guy's boss gives him a order, the guy's gotta do it, ain't he? So Lew gimme orders I should shove you around some, on account you made a ape outa him this evenin'. I sure hate to do this to a pal, pal. But I gotta earn the dough he paid me." And the big bruiser grabbed me, clamped me in a hammerlock before I could duck. "I sure am gonna feel like a heel for this," he said, holding me with one mitt as he freed the other and clenched it into a fist the size of a soccer ball. "You been mighty nice to me when I needed a pal, pal." Then he hit me a terrific lick in the short ribs. "I wisht I didn't have to do it." He slugged me again.

I NEVER even felt the second punch. His first had slammed all the breeze out of my bellows in one agonized whoosh; after that I was too paralyzed to feel anything. Of course I tried to contest the issue, but I got nowhere rapidly; you can't fight a battering-ram, particularly if your slats are caved in. I did manage to retain my self-respect by giving the Sweeney behemoth a few feeble kicks on the shin, but this earned me no dividends. He kept holding me helpless and swatting me every time I squirmed.

Along toward the seventh or eighth impact all the starch went out of me and I sagged in his clutch, moaning. He peered at me in a sympathetic way. "You hoit bad, pal?"

"I'm dying. Get the hell away from me."

"Aw, you shouldn't oughta be sore at me. You and me is pals." He lowered me into an easy chair. "Jeeze, I only done what I was paid to do. And I laid off'n

your face, didn't I? I could a ruined you except you're a pal of mine."

I strangled: "Pal my elbow. If you say it one more time I'll eviscerate you, weak as I am. I'll tear you limb from limb. I'll scatter pieces of you all over the precinct."

"Oh," he sulked. "You wanna get even, hunh?" Then, suddenly, a glimmer of intelligence came into his optics. "Hey, that gives me a idear. Lew Russell paid me to lump you up, but nobody said nothin' about *you* lumpin' *me* up. Look. I done my job. Would you feel better about it if I was to leave you take a swat at me? A tie score, sort of."

I blinked at him. "Are you inviting me to hit you?"

"Yeah, sure. Anything so's we can still be pals."

"Pals," I yowled. "That does it!" I staggered upright, picked up a depleted fifth of Vat 69 from the nearby table where I'd been having my nightcap just before Sweeney's arrival. I uncorked the bottle, tilted it to my kisser and let its soothing contents slosh down my gullet. Then, hefting the empty fifth like a baseball bat, I teed off on the big bohunk's steeple; maced him to his knees.

And even as he dropped to the floor my front door swung open violently. I spun around, stared; piped my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad lumbering into the room. Dave was just in time to see Sweeney going down from the effects of my bludgeoning bottle; and, being a copper, his reaction was instantaneous. Out came his service .38 as he rasped: "Freeze, Hawkshaw. I've caught you red-handed!"

"So you have," I agreed mildly as I stepped over Sweeney's floundering poundage. "But if you think you can stick me with a charge of assault and bashery you're haywire. It was a case of self-defense. This halfwit just dealt me a

trouncing and I took protective measures, is all."

Dave lifted a lip. "That's pretty glib. Can you do as well with a murder charge?"

"Murder—?" I goggled at him.

"Yeah. You're under arrest for bumping a publicity agent by the name of Lew Russell."

OMINOUS ASTONISHMENT
skittered through my nooks and crannies when Donaldson made this bleak announcement. "Russell?" I gulped spasmodically. "You mean somebody abolished the little creep?"

"Shot him all to hell," Dave nodded. "You ought to know. You did it." He then informed me how Russell's leaking remnants had been discovered by a neighbor investigating the sounds of gunfire, and how the neighbor had thereupon put in a squeal to headquarters. That had been a couple of hours ago, and naturally the bulls had started investigating all the angles right away. It hadn't taken them long to learn I'd had a brawl with the deceased agent at the Trocambo, and that I'd been heard to utter threats after spanking him to a rosy glow.

"So the way I figure, you tailed him home after he left the cafe," Dave said. "You were sore because he'd persuaded that red-haired jane to toss gravy on you. Therefore, when you caught up with him again you croaked him."

"That's a lot of sheep-dip," I snarled earnestly. "If you're looking for folks who hated the little louse, that restaurant was crammed with them. And as far as threats are concerned, the Starr quail made some herself when Russell called her a tramp. She slapped him across the kisser and said she'd kill him if be used that word on her again."

Dave rubbed his bristly prow. "I heard

about that.”

“Then how’s for nabbing her while you’re in the pinching mood? She’s as good a suspect as I am. Better.”

“A bird in the hand,” Dave remarked.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning you’re the best suspect because you’re the one we’ve got. I put out a dragnet for this Starr female but it was no dice. She’s lammed!”

I said resentfully: “Well, hell’s bells and hardtack! Lammed, hey? That’s practically a confession of guilt—and here you are trying to hang the rap on me!”

“Because it’s a man’s crime, not a woman’s,” Dave lipped back at me. “The slugs came out of a .45, which is a heavy heater. The average dame couldn’t even handle one.”

“I pack a .32,” I said. “Always have.”

“You could have switched.” He shrugged. “Besides, why waste a lot of time gabbing? Let’s go down to the bastille and you can do your bellyaching to the prosecutor.” He reached toward his pocket for a set of bracelets.

He never got them out, though.

Sweeney, who’d been quietly lying on the carpet, suddenly surged perpendicular; apparently that lump I’d raised on his conk with the Vat 69 bottle was of no more consequence to him than a mosquito bite. He closed in on Donaldson from behind; wrapped him in a massive embrace and squeezed until Dave’s florid mush turned a bilious purple. “You shouldn’t be takin’ Mr. Toiner to jail, copper. He ain’t no killer. I’ve knowed him for years; he’s a pal of mine.”

“Haroo-oosh!” Dave gurgled desperately. “Heesh!”

Sweeney turned on more pressure. “You gonna pinch him?”

“Hee-oosh!”

I yeepped: “Hey, you fool, let go of him! You’re—”

“But I can’t let him pinch you for something I don’t believe you done, Shoilock,” the huge dimwit told me vaguely. “You ain’t no moiderer. I gotta give you a chanst to powder!” Then he raised Donaldson high in the air; gave him a mighty heave. Dave flopped neck over appetite across my living-room, crashed against the far wall and collapsed like an empty sack, groaning worse than a soul in hell. I started toward him to inspect the damage, but Sweeney put the grasp on me; yanked me away. “We gotta blow, pal. This is no place for us. Not now it ain’t!”



Sweeney raised Donaldson high into the air and gave him a mighty kayo heave.

“You damned idiot!” I tried to free myself. “First you festoon me with bruises and then you put me behind the eight ball by slamming a cop senseless—”

“I done it to save you from gettin’ pinched.” He looked indignant. “I don’t want no pal of mine tossed in the jug.” He smiled; it was the smile of a happy moron. “Now I don’t feel so bad about thumpin’ you a while ago. This makes up for it. We’re pals again. But we gotta blow.” He made for the door with one meaty duke locked around my left wrist.

I went along to keep him from ripping my arm out by the roots and taking it with him.

MY JALOPY was parked in the basement garage but we didn't use it. Sweeney had a sedan around the corner; it was the late lamented Lew Russell's heap. As Sweeney pointed out, though, Lew wouldn't be needing it any more.

"C'mon, Shoilock." He dragged me into the chariot and wedged himself under the wheel. "Bein' Russell's chauffeur, I got his gas-ration coupons. We can make it to Nevada easy."

"Nevada—?" I yodeled as he gunned the motor.

"Yeah, sure. We can find a hideout until the heat blows down. It's a cinch."

I snarled: "Listen, you fool. Homicide heat never blows down. There's only one way I can get out of this dizzy jackpot you put me into. That's to do some detecting and fasten the Russell croaking on the genuine guilty party."

"Jeest, I never thought of that," he cast me an admiring sidewise gander and almost sent our sedan crashing against a passing garbage wagon. He jerked his rudder hard to starboard, missed the collision by a whisker and added: "Where'll we start?"

"By locating that red-haired frail, Valerie Starr."

"Hey, now wait a minute. You hoid that headquarters dick say she's missin'. If the cops can't find her, how do you figger you can?"

"I've got a hunch."

"But look. That bull said a guy done the kill, on account the murder gat was a .45; so that lets Miss Starr in the clear. Even if she did scam, that don't prove she's guilty. Maybe she's got a idea somebody might put the finger on her, and

bein' innocent, why naturally she don't want to get railroaded."

I grunted: "What makes with this sudden chivalry on your part, buster?"

"I just don't think she done it, is all. Any more than I figger *you* bumped him."

"So that's why you're fronting for her."

"Sure, the same as I fronted for you just now. I mean when I like somebody I wanna help them."

"You knew the Starr doll well enough to like her?"

"Well, I was woikin' for Russell and she was a client of his. I seen her three or four times, and she was nice to me. You know, pleasant and perlite. She ain't the killer type, pal."

"She threatened him in the Trocambo."

"Maybe so. But look what he had did to her, gettin' her fouled up in that dopey publicity stunt. And look what he was schemin' to do to her. Hell, she had a right to threaten him. She didn't mean it, though. I'll make book on that."

I decided to put the big yuck's mind at ease. "Look, stupid. I don't really think the jane creamed Russell. The reason I want to find her is because I think she can clue me to the guy who did cream him."

"What guy?"

"Stick with me and you'll find out," Then I gave him a street number, told him to take me there in a thundering rush. Presently we dragged anchor in front of a neat little bungalow on Fountain Avenue and I said: "Come on, Sweeney. There's a light in the wigwam and I think our prey is on deck." A moment later we were rapping on the front portal of the stash; or at least Sweeney rapped. I was busy unshipping my .32 automatic from the shoulder holster where I always pack it for emergencies. This, I figured, was an emergency.

The door opened inward on Sweeney's fourth knock. I stepped ahead of him, flourished my roscoe and said: "Hi, Nick. You've got company." And I grinned grimly into the startled, freckled map of McLennan, the skinny and dyspeptic *Herald* photographer.

WHEN I told McLennan he had company I meant it more ways than one. Sweeney and I backed him into his tiny parlor and I made rapid conversation. "This evening at the Trocambo there was trouble; remember? And the trouble had repercussions. Lew Russell is now a corpse, which shouldn't be news to you."

"I . . . I heard it on the radio. But—"

"Quiet," I rasped. "Just before you snapped pix of me giving the little louse a spanking, you got Miss Starr to admit that the gravy-tossing routine had been a publicity frame."

"Yes, but why come here with a gun and—?"

I said: "When you questioned her, you called her Valerie. Unless I miss my guess, that meant you'd been previously acquainted with her; you knew her personally. Maybe intimately."

"And so what?"

"So I noticed after the brawl was over you and she left the cafe together, which substantiates my theory that the chick's a friend of yours. Okay. Russell's publicity stunt to get her into the galloping snapshots had backfired. There were mutual recriminations and threats. Both Russell and the wren had been made to appear ridiculous, which would naturally lead to animosity and even revenge."

Sweeney horned in with. "You called the toin on that one, Shoilock. That is, as far as Russell is consigned. He told me to give you your lumps while he hisself done a job on Miss Starr. He said he was gonna roon her beauty by throwing acid on her."

"But he never made the grade," I said. "He got squibbed off."

McLennan exploded: "If you're hinting Valerie killed him—"

"It's too soon for hints," I said. "Maybe you did the job for her, Nick."

He took a staggering step backward as if I'd stung him across the pan with a wet herring. "Hawkshaw, you don't really think that!"

"I think it's something for the cops to determine. After they run you and the cookie through the wringer they may get the right answers."

"Meaning you're going to turn me in, eh?"

"Yeah."

He shrugged. "Okay. Let them run me through the wringer. That won't buy them anything. And it won't matter a damn to me as long as they lay off Valerie."

"You're in love with her?"

"There's not much use denying it. Yes, I am." He squared his shoulders. "And I'll take the fall for her if I have to. Does that tell you what you want to know?"

"It tells me exactly what I want to know." I nodded. "It tells me you think she's guilty. And if you think she's guilty, it must be because she did something suspicious."

"Such as?" he tried to sneer and failed.

"Such as hiding out from the law," I said. "But there's only one way you could know she's ducking the cops. That's if she came here and asked you to keep her under cover."

It was a shot in the dark, but it scored a bull's-eye. McLennan twitched visibly and his puss went as pale as adulterated milk. "Listen, you can't—"

"That's what I meant when I said you've got company," I growled. "Valerie Starr is here in this igloo and I'm going to get her. Right now." Then, as he lunged at me, I added: "Take him, Sweeney."

Quick!”

“Sure, Shoilock.” Sweeney made for the photographer; swooped a pair of massive arms at him. “Like shootin’ fish in a barrel,” he said.

I yelled: “Ix-nay, stupid! Speaking of shooting, he may have a gat! Cover him before he pulls it!” Then I scuttled off toward the rear of the tepee, knowing the parlor situation was under control.

From now to the finish of the scenario, the pattern was perfectly plain; all I had to do was play my cards right and hope my luck held out. I began frisking the joint, prowling the back rooms and keeping my mental fingers crossed.

The third place I tried was a bedroom. That was where I found the red-haired Starr muffin, hiding in a closet.

SHE DIDN’T struggle when I dragged her out; didn’t even argue about it. “I knew this would happen,” she said dully. “I told Nick there was no use trying to hide.”

“Oh. So McLennan suggested it, did he?”

“Y-yes. Are you g-going to handcuff me?”

I said: “Not if you give me your word you won’t powder while I make a phone call.” I’d already spotted a telephone by the bed, and now I unforked it; dialed my own apartment stash. Less than twenty minutes had passed since I’d left there, and I was hoping against hope that Dave Donaldson would still be in my living-room recovering from the effects of Sweeney’s violence.

Luck stuck with me. Dave’s blurry voice sounded in the receiver: “Yesh?”

“Turner this end. Listen, Dave, I—”

“You lousy heel!” he erupted. “You mean you’ve got the brass to call me after what your gorilla did to me? Why, damn your filthy tripes!” Then he groaned.

“Ouch, my spine! I think it’s broken.”

“The hell with your spine,” I rapped at him. “Flag your diapers over here to Nick McLennan’s nest with great rapidity. I’ll deliver Lew Russell’s killer to you if you hurry.” Then I gave him the street number and rang off before he could pester me with useless questions. After all, he’d hear the answers soon enough; the drive would take him only three or four minutes if he thumbed his nose at the speed regulations.

Valerie Starr pinned the weary focus on me. “No matter how it looks, I didn’t kill Russell. I don’t suppose that means anything to you, Mr. Turner, but it’s true.”

“Yeah?” I said without committing myself. “Then somebody else must have done it. At least we know he’s defunct.” And I set fire to a gasper; steered her toward the parlor for the payoff.

The payoff had already started when we ankled over the threshold. Nick McLennan sat at a desk in one corner, his freckled mush twisted, his skinny shoulders quivering as he wrote something out on a sheet of paper no whiter than his complexion. Over him stood Sweeney, prodding him with a roscoe the size of a soup bone.

When the quail and I barged into view, Sweeney blinked happily at both of us. “Hiya, Shoilock. So you did find her, huh? Hello, Miss Valerie.”

I said: “Hey, what cooks here?”

“This bozo’s writin’ a confession.” The big hulk indicated McLennan. “He’s the one which bumped Mr. Russell and I’m makin’ him say it on paper. Then Miss Valerie won’t have to go to the cooler, see?”

“That’s no good.” I scowled. “A confession obtained under duress won’t stand up in court.”

“The only thing he’s under is this gat of mine. It ain’t a duress. It ain’t no foreign gun at all, it’s a Colt.” Sweeney

brandished it pridefully.

McLennan spoke without raising his glims from the paper. "Never mind about the duress part. If it'll save Valerie I'll swear I wrote this voluntarily."

"Nick . . . Nick, darling—no, you can't!" the red-haired cookie sobbed. "Even if you did kill him, you mustn't—I mean—we'll fight the charge and—"

PUFFING like a grampus from the haste of his trip and the velocity of his arrival, Dave Donaldson stumped into the room at that precise instant. "Fight what charge?" he demanded heavily. All of a sudden he lamped Sweeney. "Well I'll be damned if it isn't the jerk that busted my spine! Drop that cannon! Drop it in the name of the law!"

"Sure, copper, sure, only you hadn't oughta be so sore at me. After all, I'm just holdin' this rod on the moiderer. Ask my pal Toiner, here. He'll tell you."

I nodded, strode briskly across the carpet, relieving Sweeney of his fowling-piece. "Yeah," I said. "It's true McLennan wrote and signed a confession just now. But he did it because he hoped to take the rap for Miss Starr—which isn't necessary, because she's innocent too. Sweeney's the real killer. Aren't you, pal?" I leered at the hulking ginzo.

"Who, me? He backed off. "Why—?"

"I first began to suspect you when you helped me get away from Lieutenant Donaldson. You seemed mighty damned sure I wasn't guilty. How could you be so certain, I wondered? Then, later, you did your best to defend this Starr doll; and again I wondered why you were so positive of her innocence."

"On account of I liked her," he said. "I got faith in anybody I like."

"That was one of the things that started me thinking," I told him. "You liked her because she'd been pleasant and polite to you. And a while ago you said Lew Russell had threatened to throw acid on her and ruin her beauty. That was how he planned to get revenge on her for the Trocambo clambake. He paid you to beat me up, but he was going to take care of the jane personally."

"Wh-what—"

"I think you must have croaked him when he mentioned what he intended to do. You liked Valerie Starr so much you couldn't permit Russell to ruin her with acid. Therefore you drilled him with your Colt .45—and then, being honest in a halfwitted way, you decided to earn the geetus Russell had paid you. He'd ordered you to load me with lumps and you did it—even though you had already cooled the guy who gave you that order."

He wrinkled his narrow forehead. "Jeest, Shoilock, you sure are clever. But how you gonna prove it?"

"I've got the proof," I said. "When we came here to McLennan's joint I had a trap all rigged. I asked you to keep Nick covered in case he was toting a cannon. Actually I wanted to see if you were toting one. And you were. It was this Colt; and I'll bet six, two and even it matches up with the slugs that sent Lew Russell to glory."

As usual, I was right. They convicted Sweeney of murder; ticketed him to the gas chamber at San Quentin. The day he got sprayed with essence of cyanide was the day Nick McLennan married Valerie Starr.

I was best man. I always am.