

# A Kill for the Shill

By Fergus Truslow



*Billy Watson's first Hollywood role seemed slated to be his last. For his casting director was a revolver and his producer a kill-mad gunman. And Billy had to write new lines in blood-red ink or win state's cyanide Oscar.*

LISCOMB'S words boomed at me as if he were shouting down a barrel. "Gonna play ball, you lousy little shill?"

It's hard to say no when you're flat on your back on the floor of a cheap hotel room with a big killer's high-heeled boot rammed into your guts. The words stuck in

my throat.

But I got it out. "No!" I choked. "I'm an actor, not a blackmailer!"

Oh Gosh, I thought. *This is happening to me, Billy Watson. My hair is going grey with waiting for a chance at a Hollywood bit part, and when it comes it's a phony. . .*

Liscomb, a rangy, black-haired movie

cowboy, sat down on the edge of the bed and sucked on his reefer until it glowed. His big, steely fingers folded my copy of *Variety* into a paper strap an inch wide.

“So you’re an actor?” he chuckled.

The folded paper cut through the air, licked along my neck like a hot lash. “Damn you!” I whispered.

“An actor, huh?” Liscomb licked his lips. “You’re a shill—a come-on man for a cheap carnival pitch. That’s what I found you doing, ain’t it?”

I winced. “That’s only while I’m waiting for a break.”

Liscomb wasn’t grinning now. I could see little green flickers deep in his eyes. He forked greasy marijuana smoke out of his nostrils.

“An actor, only you won’t act,” he sneered. “For old times’ sake I offer you a bit part when you been in town less’n an hour. An’ you turn’ up your nose.”

He leaned down and blew reefer smoke into my face until I gagged. Then he jammed that high-heeled boot into me and kicked, hard.

A cold, black breeze seemed to blow over me.

When I woke up I just lay there, looking at him. I was remembering the carnival circuit rumors about how Liscomb had killed a railroad dick by red-lighting him off a show train in the Mojave. Another time he’d thumbed an eyeball out of a small town cop’s skull.

The scales wavered. My self-respect hung on one side. All I knew about Liscomb hung on the other.

He showed a pure killer streak when he’d been on one of these reefer rodeos.

I hoisted the white flag. “OK” I said. “I’ll play ball.”

**I** GOT to my feet slowly, dusted off my suit of banker’s stripe and straightened my tie. I stand a little under five feet. The

words I’d just said seemed to shrink that by a foot.

Liscomb sat there grinning. “Where’d I tell you this guy Melton is staying?”

“Glenshiel Arms,” I said. “Apartment 224.”

My throat felt dry and tight. Well, I’d run Liscomb’s dirty errand, then lam out of town without touching a dime of the money.

Liscomb tossed the rest of the setup at me. “Here’s all you need to know. James Melton is a broker from back East. Never been out here to the Coast before. He’s loaded, dirty with moola. My partner’s got him all softened up for the touch.”

“What do I have to do?”

The movie cowboy leaned forward, his eyes cold as a barracuda’s. “The deal was for me to go to Melton’s apartment for the payoff this afternoon. But I’m ad-libbing in a frill of my own.”

“You mean I haul in the hay for you, collect the blackmail payoff?”

“No. You go to Melton’s apartment instead of me, but act scared of hidden mikes arid cops.”

“That much is easy, anyway,” I told him bitterly.

Liscomb ran a red tongue over his lips. “Even if he offers to pay off, you don’t take it. You say for him to bring the dough along where he’s goin’ this afternoon. Tell him to give it to a messenger, the cowboy singer in the white sombrero. That’s me.”

“You?”

“He don’t know it yet, but we’re gonna meet. That’s all.”

*Sure, I thought. That’s all. If the law crashes in, I’m the principal, and you’re only a pee-wee accomplice.*

“What name do I use?” I asked aloud.

“You don’t. You use a time.”

“Come again?”

“You use a time, stupid!” Liscomb snarled. “We figured that out, me and my

partner. You ring Melton's bell in the foyer of the Glenshiel at exactly four twenty-eight this afternoon. Not thirty seconds sooner or later. At four twenty-eight. That's so he knows who it is. The door will buzz and you go up in the elevator. Apartment 224 is first on the right on the second floor. The door is unlocked. You don't knock. Walk in."

"That all?" I asked.

"Gimme your leather."

I handed him my wallet and he ripped out the selective service registration card. "You know how long you'd last on any carnival lot without a draft card." he grunted, tossing me the wallet.

"Yes, I know," I sighed.

My ears were singing. A funny, tight, twisted feeling had set up housekeeping right behind my eyes. But it was no use. I learned a long time ago I couldn't tear big guys to pieces with my bare hands. You've got to fight with the weapons you're born with.

In my case it's acting.

Liscomb let up another Mary Warner and reached for his guitar. "After the blow-off you get your draft card back. Now scram. You'll have an hour before punching that bell. Play, it right, an' maybe, just maybe, I won't kick a lung outa you."

**A**T EXACTLY four twenty-eight I walked into the foyer of the Glenshiel Arms and pushed the button under James Melton's card on the brass panel.

The inner door buzzed back, made me jump. I walked into the empty lobby, took the automatic elevator and got off at the second floor.

Apartment 224 was next to the elevator. I checked the number twice before I touched the knob. My hand was so sweaty it slipped in my grasp.

I shut the door behind me. The room

was empty. A blaze of afternoon sunlight made highlights on walnut furniture, and brought out the soft glow of a green-and-gold Oriental rug.

"Hello," I said. My voice sounded like a stranger's in my ears.

No answer. The smell of burnt feathers tainted the air. I swallowed hard. All of a sudden the beating of my own heart sounded loud.

The bedroom door was half open.

"Hello," I said again, this time louder. I walked toward the door with my stomach gone A.W.O.L.

A man's feet stuck out over the edge of the bed. Two steps more and I stood in the doorway.

The man on the bed was small, about my size, only younger, and with black, curly hair. His brown eyes were wide open, with a wondering look as if he were trying to figure out how the blue-rimmed hole in his forehead had gotten there.

For a long second I stood still. I couldn't remember how to breathe, but my brain photographed every detail.

The back of his head lay in a red mush of blood and brains on the pillow. On the floor was another pillow, crumpled with a black spot in the middle of it, and a .38 Colt automatic. The explained the smell of burnt feathers.

A green silk dressing gown hung over the foot of the bed. On a chair a dark suit had been laid out neatly, ready to wear. A calendar on a bedside table showed the wrong date.

All this I took in before I could force myself to step over beside the bed and touch the dead guy's hand. He was still warm.

I had hold of ten thousand volts and knew it. *Out of here, chum!* I told myself.

I'd hardly covered ten feet of the ten furlongs of Oriental rug between me and the hall door when somebody punched the

buzzer and knocked at the same time.

Cops! I knew it as well as if I could see right through the hardwood door. It was no surprise to my brain, but the rest of me reacted like you do when you step into an icy shower.

There was no other way out of that apartment, either. You could feel that about the place, even while the knocking at the door came again, louder, coppier.

Every guy to his weapon. The trapped rat uses his teeth. The gungel reaches for his rod. With me it's acting.

I whipped back into the bedroom, grabbed the green silk dressing gown off the foot of the bed, slid into it, and was out in the living room with the bedroom door shut behind me when the law burst in.

"Yes, yes," I remarked testily. "I'm coming!"

**T**WO city dicks stood there, open-mouthed. One was short, fat, reddish complexioned. He walked back on his heels.

The younger, taller dick wore grey gabardine and black-and-white shoes.

I gave them a look of indignation, letting my eyes pop a little. "Well," I snapped. "What's the meaning of this?"

What the hell, I'd been working the same gag on the town clowns wherever a carnival pitch drew squawks from suckers, hadn't I?

The fat, red-faced dick spoke up. "We're from the detective bureau. We've got a tip that—"

"How do I know you're police officers?" I cut in.

That was pure flattery. To my eye they might as well have been wearing blue uniforms and blowing whistles.

The red-faced dick flashed his buzzer. "You Mr. James Melton?" he asked uncertainly.

"Who did you think I was?" I asked

with deliberate unpleasantness.

Somebody spoke through the open door from out in the hall. "I can vouch for Mr. Melton, although we've never met. He's my broker."

I looked at the guy who had spoken. My mouth fell open. I shut it again, quickly, before flies could get in.

Doug Drake, the rising young movie star! You couldn't miss the unruly brown curls above the Adonis profile the camera and the dames simply ate up!

A little blue-eyed woman in a brown, tailored job stood beside him.

"Come in!" I managed to gasp. Drake and the woman stepped in. I gave the cops the slow burn. They took the hint, sidled toward the door. "Excuse it, Mr. Melton. Our mistake," the red-faced dick whispered, perspiring.

I nodded curtly and shut the door behind them.

Doug Drake spoke up. "Nice to know you in person instead of by wire, Mr. Melton. I want you to meet Miss O'Quinn. She lives right here in the Glenshiel Arms. Miss O'Quinn, Mr. Melton."

"Mary O'Quinn, the agent?" I gulped.

The little, blue-eyed woman smiled. In spite of a few threads of grey in her hair, she looked as smooth, hard and polished as a new chestnut. "You've heard of me?"

"Who hasn't?" I shot back, too quickly.

A broker wouldn't know that this lady ten-percenter handled the cream of the Hollywood character actors. You learned that by reading *Variety* in cheap hotel rooms and dreaming of the break you'd get some day.

I corrected my mistake. "I mean, you're Doug Drake's agent, aren't you?"

She shook her head. "He's not in my stable now. But I signed him up when he first came to town as plain Anthony Wheeler. Now he's Doug Drake. I'm proud of my part in that."

Doug Drake gave her the famous slow, smile that melts the dames for miles around, and patted her arm. He turned to me. "We've come to take you to the party, Mr. Melton."

"The party?" I said, as if my mind were full of big-time financial deals.

He glanced at his watch. "Yes, it's nearly five o'clock," he warned. "We'll wait while you finish getting ready."

"I'll be right with you," I said and gulped.

The minute the words were out of my mouth I heard the crackling noise of my bridges burning behind me. It was root hog or die, now.

I WENT into the bedroom, shut the door, and leaned against it. My legs were quivering a little. From here on out Billy Watson was James Melton, broker, and a newcomer to Hollywood.

One of the ways to sink into a new part is to dress for it. The suit laid out on the chair caught my eye. It took me maybe one minute to skin into it and find it a perfect fit.

I patted the pockets to find out about myself. Item one: A billfold, well padded with lettuce. I lifted the folding money out gingerly and dropped it on the chair. A murder rap would be plenty without carrying a dead guy's money away.

Item two: An envelope with a real estate agent's name printed on it and a key inside. I kept that.

Item three: A gold watch and chain. It went on the chair with the dough.

Nothing else. No clues. And clues I had to have if I ever wanted to smell sawdust and hear carnival barkers again. Otherwise I'd probably hear the soft plunk of that cyanide egg dropping into a jar of acid under the chair in a certain little room at San Quentin.

After that comes something that doesn't

smell like petunias.

The loose-leaf calendar on the bedside table stared me right in the face. It said November 16.

This was November 15.

Somebody had torn off the top leaf—maybe because of writing on it, I thought.

Looking close you could see the impress of pencil marks. I dipped my fingers in a dirty ashtray and smudged them across the calendar. Now the pencil impress appeared in pale lines.

"Wishing you a happy and discreet fourth anniversary," somebody had written on the calendar leaf for November 16.

I tore off the smudged November 16 leaf, put it in the billfold, and went to the bathroom to wash my hands.

Seen in the mirror above the bowl, James Melton, broker, looked as if he'd been through the mill. Too much of the whites of his eyes showed. A tight pucker of lines on his forehead told how hard he was thinking.

I shut my eyes, drew a finger down slowly from the hairline to the bridge of my nose. An old Swiss actress taught me that trick.

Then I dried my hands and went back out to the living room.

Doug Drake hoisted his lean length from a chair. Mary O'Quinn got up, too. She looked cool, sure of the armored front she put up against Hollywood.

"Ready?" Doug Drake asked.

"All set," I said.

I would have said it. the same way to the hangman . . .

WE HIT the party with a splash like three raindrops getting hep to Niagara Falls. Nobody paid us any attention.

The long barbecue tables stood under leafy green walnut trees, backed up in a corner angle of the high, white, brick wall

that surrounded the estate.

A whole quarter of beef sizzled over olive-wood coals in a pit dug in the lawn. You could smell its juices dripping on the red coals and going up as steam.

The biggest and noisiest part of the crowd eddied around the table of drinks where a butler handed out booze.

Doug Drake hauled me over to the butler, got me a Manhattan, introduced me to a clacking, skinny, blonde woman. Then he vanished from my ken.

"I'm the Martha Hayes of Hayes Real Estate and Rentals, Mr. Melton!" she shrilled. "Why, you don't look at all like the charcoal sketch of you I hung in the master bedroom!"

I choked on my Manhattan. "What?" I sputtered. "Oh, that sketch—why—"

"I hope everything suits you, Mr. Melton!" she cooed excitedly. "I tried so hard to get everything just as your letter of instructions said. Even down to the recipe for drinks you sent!"

"Thanks, that's wonderful," I told her, with a strange, sinking feeling in my gizzard. I shook her off and she vanished into the human whirlpool.

My finger crooked at the butler got him away from the table of drinks for a minute. "Who's giving this party?" I whispered.

He looked at me with a dead-and-buried gleam of amusement in his eye. "Why you are, Mr. Melton, of course!"

I clutched the edge of the table for support. "Will you repeat that?" I gulped.

"It's a housewarming party, Mr. Melton," the butler explained. "Oh, you'll get used to Hollywood, sir. It just takes a little time."

I ran my finger around the inside of my collar. "I'm beginning to believe that."

"Do the cocktails meet your approval, sir? I followed to the letter the recipe you sent on."

He patted his pocket. It gave me an

idea. "Let's see it," I demanded.

He fished forth a draggled leather and handed me a piece of paper. I stuffed the scrap in my pocket. "Thanks. Now which way is the master bedroom?"

He glanced at the long, low California ranch-house at the end of the lawn. "Through the living room, first on your right, then last on the left, sir," he told me.

A cowboy musician was wrestling with a bull fiddle twice his size near the barbecue tables. A couple of other musicians in western togs wandered about as I crossed the lawn to burgle my own house. An uneasy hunch that Liscomb might be somewhere in the offing intruded itself, but I didn't have time to worry about that.

A record player boomed soft swing for three or four couples dancing in the living room. I went right on through, first door on the right, last on the left, and found the master bedroom.

There on the wall, looking me right in the optics hung a portrait of a face I'd seen before. Dark eyes, curly hair, everything but the blue-rimmed bullet hole in front of the red mush of brains and blood behind.

I reached for it. It was just a simple, casual charcoal sketch signed "James Melton by Tony Wheeler," but to me it could be deadly as a cobra.

If a shrewd eye got a gander at this sketch before I could hide it . . .

I had my hands on the frame when a woman's voice spoke quietly, behind me. "No," she said.

I spun around. Mary O'Quinn stood there with a nasty little blue-steel .25 automatic leveled at my turn-tum.

She swung the hall door shut. "You handle the part well," she said in cool tones. "Who are you? You're not Melton."

"I don't know what you mean," I said with offended dignity. "And how dare you brandish a gun in my—"

“Relax. I know a good job of acting when I see it.” She kept the muzzle steady. “Now do you talk to me or to the police?”

A CARNIVAL shill has to add up human nature in a flash. Mary O’Quinn wore armor. From the toes of her trim little shoes to the top of her smooth chestnut head, where the first threads of grey showed, she was a skeptic.

But deep down in her eyes, where Hollywood couldn’t get at it, I saw the hunger you can find in a tough little pavement Arab’s eyes. It’s the hunger to believe, just once, in Santa Claus.

I gambled everything on that look in her Irish blue eyes. Leading off with Liscomb’s reefer jag and methods of coaxing, I gave her a quick picture of the setup.

When I finished the muzzle of the .25 was wavering. “That’s all, I guess,” I added brokenly. “There’s a phone over there on the table if you want to call the—”

“Cut the corn,” she broke in. The snub-nosed automatic vanished into her brown suede purse. The purse snapped shut. “All right. You’ve got a break. What are you going to do with it?”

With a sigh of relief that came all the way from the soles of my shoes, I hauled out the cocktail recipe in James Melton’s handwriting, which I had hijacked from the butler. “Here’s my first real lead,” I told her.

We spread the smudged calendar leaf for November 16 I’d stashed in my billfold beside the recipe and compared the handwriting. “His, all right, in both cases,” I opined.

“What of it?”

“It means Melton sent somebody a message on a calendar leaf for today, November 15. Wished them a ‘happy and discreet fourth anniversary.’ ”

“I don’t see how that proves—” she began.

“It doesn’t, yet. But it’s going to,” I told her. “Look.” I fumbled through the pockets of Melton’s suit until I found the envelope with the key in it, shook the key out into my palm. “Somewhere around here there’s a mighty interesting skeleton in a family closet. The sooner it’s aired out, the sooner I can quit being a dead broker and go back to being a live carnival shill.”

“I’ll tag along,” Mary O’Quinn remarked, “just to make sure nobody crosses you up on that last item.”

Leaving the charcoal sketch of the late lamented James Melton under the bed, we made a quick tour of the house, ending up in the living room.

“Not a locked door in the place,” I said grimly. “If I don’t find . . .”

The words died unspoken as my blood turned to ice water. One of the swing fanciers in the living room had switched the radio over to the broadcast side. A radio voice was blabbing about a murder, a swell new, Hollywood murder.

I stood there frozen, listening to the words that would drop the deadfall on my neck.

Not Mary O’Quinn. She eased up alongside the radio and pressed the right button, clicked the news voice off.

She came back. “That means you’ve only got minutes, now,” she whispered. “The police will trace you here by phoning Doug Drake’s studio and finding out where he is.”

We stepped out the front door. The sun had gone. Dusk crept in under the leafy walnut trees to mix with the smell of wood smoke. Up in the blue sky a little cloud the size of a baby’s shirt tail turned pink.

You couldn’t ask anything better, but the way I felt I might as well have been alone on a narrow steel girder, thirty floors

above the street, with a sleety February wind hunting the marrow of my bones.

One slip and good-by.

"Could be there's a locked door in the garage or servants' quarters upstairs," I said in a voice that surprised me it was so calm.

"I'll take the servants' quarters," Mary O'Quinn whispered quickly. "You take the garage. Hurry."

The garage doors were closed. I went around to the side, got in that way.

**J**UST as my fingers touched the light switch I spotted an orange dot in the darkness and got a whiff of marijuana. The lights clicked on.

That was a mistake. Liscomb sat there on an apple box in his black and orange shirt and white sombrero, looking at me. He was still on the muggles, but he'd graduated from reefers. He smoked a king-sized torpedo, now.

"Billy boy!" he whispered.

The green flickers in his snaky eyes were king-sized now, too. Ropy saliva hung on his teeth when he grinned at me.

I backed toward the door, fumbling for the light button. Liscomb's fancy, high-heeled boots gritted on the floor as he got up off the apple box stretching like a big sleepy cat.

The marijuana saved me. His timing was shot. I snapped off the lights, slid out, slamming the door, just as his two hundred pounds of crazy muscle crashed against it. Inside I could hear him fumbling around, hunting the knob.

Mary O'Quinn met me on the lawn while I was still cursing my knees for going shaky on me. "Nothing upstairs," she reported.

"Nothing downstairs either." I didn't tell her about Liscomb.

Her eyes narrowed. "Have you asked that real estate woman, Martha Hayes,

about this? She handled the deal for Melton, you know. Even to furnishing the place and throwing this housewarming."

"It's worth a try," I admitted.

We cornered the blonde Hayes dame against a table. I hauled out the envelope with the key in it. "Er, uh, Mrs. Hayes. I find there's a key I don't quite place. Is there something locked up?"

"Oh, don't you recall?" she yelped. "The estate-keeper's lodge. You gave strict orders on the telephone when you leased the place just four months ago today. You have the only key."

Mary O'Quinn's eyes met mine as we moved out of the crowd. "Four months ago today!" she whispered.

"Wishing you a happy and discreet fourth anniversary," I mused. "Well that's one way of putting it."

"The papers," she said quickly. "The newspapers. If we could get hold of the L. A. papers for—let's see—"

"Last July 15th."

"Right," she nodded. "I noticed piles of salvage papers on the curbs all along the street when we drove up. I'm going to bribe the neighborhood kids to dig for July 15 copies!"

She started away, stopped, looked at me like a worried cat with an extra kitten.

"I'll be O.K.," I told her. She smiled and went on.

I wasn't scared. My knees trembled like a bridegroom's, my tongue nailed itself to the roof of my mouth, but I wasn't scared.

I'd always wanted to stroll about my own broad acres in the cool of the evening, hadn't I? And now I was doing it, I wasn't I? Sure.

The estate-keeper's lodge, a stucco box with living quarters and garage in one unit, stood off by itself behind a cypress edge.

The windows had been boarded up. The whole place was locked tighter than a drum. I had to go round it twice before I

found a lock my key fitted. My shoes gritted on gravel at every step.

I turned the key until it clicked, pushed the door open just wide enough to squeeze in. The beating of my heart seemed to echo in the musty darkness.

After a couple of centuries of fumbling I found the light switch. The car, a light convertible, stood there under a canvas hood. I knew what I'd find when I looked at the radiator grill. But I forced my hands to take hold of the canvas just the same and lift.

Ten seconds was enough. I dropped the canvas again. My stomach writhed away from my belt buckle. I couldn't get out of the musty smelling place quick enough.

It happened just as I stumbled across the door sill. A pencil of orange fire jetted from the cypress hedge. At the same time something hot fanned my neck, and the flat sharp crack of the shot echoed off the wall.

I fell forward, rolling on the gravel, while footsteps faded on the other side of the hedge.

I got up, dusted off James Melton's tailored pants, and went back to the party. I wasn't scared anymore, just tired. I wanted to get the dirty job over with.

MARY O'QUINN met me near the tables, where the crowd had thinned a little. "I got the papers, look out for cops!" she said in one breath, nudging me.

The two city dicks who'd nearly nabbed me at the Glenshiel Arms had crashed the party. I saw them nosing through the crowd.

"Tell the butler to throw food and drinks into them," I whispered. "I know cops. If I keep, in plain sight they'll figure they can eat first and pinch me later."

Liscomb's white sombrero hovered in the shadows. I heard the plunk of his guitar. He'd spotted me.

At the table nearest the angle of the

high wall I found a seat in full view of the crowd. Mary O'Quinn tossed some split kindling on the blaze in the fireplace built into the wall and settled down beside me. "What did you find in the estate-keeper's lodge?" she queried.

"Never mind," I countered. "See what hit-run cases the city had in the early morning hours of the fifteenth of July. Look in the evening editions."

She rattled through the papers. "War workers on Sunset, youth in Van Nuys, seventy-year-old woman killed on Cahuenga."

"Any other old people?"

"No."

"Then that's the one."

I stood up on the bench. "Ladies and gentlemen!" I called.

Everyone looked up, but the noise of eating, drinking, and chit-chat went on.

"Mr. James Melton regrets he cannot chaw beef with you tonight," I informed them. "He had a date with a slab in the morgue!"

That got them. In the silence you could have heard a pin drop. In the background Liscomb's guitar twunked out *Red River Valley* faintly. He was there, waiting.

"Mr. James Melton," I said, looking down the double row of faces that the firelight showed me, "Mr. James Melton wasn't quite the newcomer he pretended to be. He made a trip out here to the Coast just four months ago. He went for a ride with a pal, I believe. They had an accident—drove off and left an old lady dead in the middle of the street."

The guitar stayed in the background, like a soft accompaniment. I was glad Doug Drake and the two city dicks sat between me and Liscomb.

I gave them the rest of it. "That night James Melton let a badly frightened pal out and drove his car away to hide it.

"He hid the car so well the frightened

pal never found it. A couple of days ago Mr. James Melton came back to Hollywood, tried blackmailing the old pal, and got paid off with a lead slug."

The firelight played on tense faces. Liscomb's guitar never faltered. I had the reefer-whacky thug hanging on every word.

"So far so good," I remarked cheerfully. "But the scared pal who knocked off Mr. Melton had to have a sucker. So he laid a trap. The sucker was told to come to the Glenshiel Arms at four twenty-eight. The minute he buzzed from the foyer, the scared pal burned Melton down and kited, leaving the sucker to hold the bag.

"I was that sucker, ladies and gents. *But the killer laid the trap for somebody else!*"

A guitar string snapped, loud as a shot in the silence.

Doug Drake cracked. He was on his feet, shaking like a leaf, the clean-cut lines of his handsome face blurred now, and twisted, in the red firelight. A flat automatic lay in his hand.

"Damn you!" he gasped. "You—you've ruined me!"

A harsh, choked voice cut in; "No, *I'm* gonna do that! Frame me, would you? Why you—"

Liscomb towered above Drake from behind, reached out and clamped a big handful of steel fingers on his shoulder.

Doug Drake, his handsome face twisted in a snarl, turned and triggered the automatic. One, two, three four times he smashed lead through Liscomb's chest before the city dicks could reach him.

THE clicking of the taximeter sounded like music to my ears as we topped a hill and Hollywood's lights spread out below us. I was seeing Mary O'Quinn home. In my pocket was a signed contract, hot off the stove. "You really think I can get a few bit parts in the flickers?" I asked for the umpteenth time.

"I know it," she assured me. "Now will you tell me something? How did you know the killer was Doug Drake?"

"Remember the charcoal sketch of Melton?"

"Yes. In the master bedroom."

"It was signed 'Tony Wheeler' and you told me yourself earlier that Drake's real name had been Anthony Wheeler. He knew James Melton long before either of them ever came to Hollywood."

"Go on, don't stop there."

"If he knew the real James Melton, why didn't he call my bluff? Only one answer to that, he expected to find his partner, Liscomb, in the trap. Maybe he thought Liscomb would shoot it out with the cops and get rubbed.

"When he found me, he knew there'd be two of us alive to stand our word against his in court. So he had to lie low until he could see how the cards would fall. Of course he's the one who took a shot at me tonight when I found the hidden car."

I looked at her. "Now you tell me something."

"What?"

"How did you know I was an actor?"

Mary O'Quinn laughed. "It's not in the contract," she told me, "but I'm going to darn those holes in your socks."