

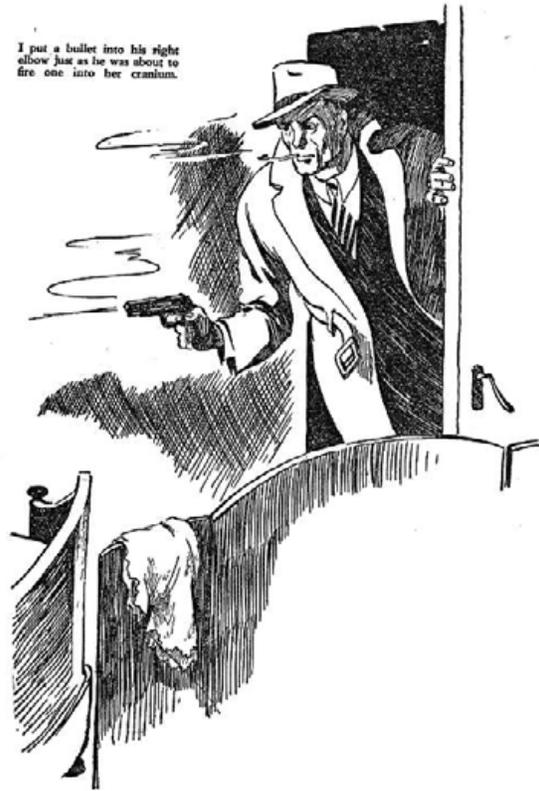
THE COLOR OF MURDER

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

When a man goes on a bender and tries to kill the woman who has made a success of him, an ounce of prevention is called for, Dan figures, or a pound of murder will be roosting on his doorstep.



I put a bullet into his right elbow just as he was about to fire one into her cranium.



I WAS driving home through a midnight fog on the Sunset Strip when a shapely little blonde cutie bounced out of a snazzy café and made a bee-line across the path of my jalopy. She had her skirt pulled up around her so she could run faster, and she was screaming at the top of her adenoids.

I swerved my wheel, slapped on my emergency anchors, missed the yellow-haired wren by a whisker. Then, as I skidded to a stop, I tabbed her. She was Kathie Denniston, current wife of Terry Denniston, the movie ham. And she was scared spitless.

She had plenty of reason to be frightened. From the cafe, her famous-profile husband came pouncing after her like a crazy guy. He was brandishing a

steak-knife, and he was swacked to the nostrils. He yelled: "I'll teash you to meddle in my affairsh! I'll cut your heart out, you nagging harpy!"

That startled the bejaspers out of me, because Denniston was supposed to be on the wagon. After divorcing his previous wife, Diane Ravenne, he had married Kathie; and she had straightened him out, made a new man of him. Up to that time, he'd been on the greased skids. In spite of his top-notch acting rep, no studio would hire him. He was too unreliable; was always going on rip-snorting benders. Sometimes he even had a secret crack at the needle—or that's what the gossips whispered.

Then, just a year ago, he'd married Kathie; and in twelve short months she had

put him back on top of the heap. He had quit guzzling and hitting the hype. He had accepted minor roles; gradually worked himself back to star caliber. Right now he was playing the lead in a new Colorvox production; and if the opus clicked, Denniston would be rolling in geetus. So would the newly-organized Colorvox outfit.

Denniston owed his come-back to his blonde bride. She'd babied him, encouraged him, worked for him like a slave. Now he was showing his gratitude by being drunker than a fiddler's witch; was showing it by trying to open her with a shiv.

I SQUIRMED out of my bucket. At the same instant, Kathie tripped and went sprawling face-downward in the street. The hem of her skirt skidded up to her lacy step-ins and her bare thighs gleamed creamily in the fog. She moaned as her hubby hurtled at her.

I barged into him full tilt, swatted the knife out of his mitt. Then I spooned him a serving of knuckles, smack on the dimple. I put a lot of heft behind that poke. I could feel the jar of it running up my arm to my shoulder.

Denniston's kisser smacked the asphalt. He was out like a match in a hurricane.

I leaned over his wife, touched her shoulder. She screamed: "No—*no*, Terry—don't k-kill me—!"

I said: "I'm not Terry. I'm Dan Turner, private dick." I put my hands under her arms; lifted her up on her feet. My fingers accidentally sank into yielding flesh through her frock, and it felt damned nice. I swung her around to face me. "What shall we do with the ruins?" I asked her, pointing to the unconscious hambo.

She got pale. "You—you've *hurt* him!" she whimpered. She reached out to claw at my puss with her fingernails.

I grabbed her wrists; held her. "He's okay," I said. "Just slightly unconscious from a bash on the button. What put him in the notion of carving chunks out of you?"

Her dainty breasts heaved up and down under the tightness of her silk frock. "He w-was supposed to show up at the studio for some important retakes tonight," she said dully. "When he didn't arrive, they phoned me at home. I t-traced him here to this c-cafe; f-found him with Diane Ravenne . . ."

"His ex-frau, huh?" I said.

She nodded. "He was d-drunk. I tried to reason with him, and he got m-mad at me . . ." All of a sudden her blue glims puddled up. "I know what Diane's t-trying to d-do to him! She w-wants to wreck him; d-drag him back where he used to b-be. . . !"

"You think she's jealous of the way you straightened him out?"

"Y-yes!"

I said: "That is a hell of a note. Let's trundle him down to the studio and try to jam some sense into his noggin." I hefted Denniston in my arms stuffed him into my coupe. Kathie edged in beside him; held him upright. I slid under the wheel and headed for the General Service lot, where Colorvox was renting sound-stage space for their initial effort.

Denniston was still dead to it all when Kathie and I dragged him inside the big sound-stage building. The minute we entered, two guys came scurrying toward us.

One was Sid Sexton, director of the pic and inventor of the Colorvox process. He was a greasy little oaf with a worried expression on his pan and a pair of washed-out, greenish peepers that kept darting around, never fully meeting your gaze. It was rumored that he had been goofy over Kathie at one time; but she'd given him the ozone in favor of this Denniston ham. I couldn't blame her. I'd never liked Sexton.

He was too damned oily.

His partner, Mike O'Connell, was with him. O'Connell was the Irishman who had scraped up enough shekels to back Sexton's new color-photography invention. He said: "Kathie . . . Turner . . . My God, what's happened to Terry? What's the matter with him?"

"He was drunk. I biffed him," I said.

Kathie said: "He t-tried to kill me . . ."

Sexton's whining voice bleated: "Damn! And here we've been waiting all evening to shoot the final scenes! Boy, is this lousy!" He wrung his pudgy hands. "Money running out; just one more reel to put in the cans and now comes this!"

I said: "Quit yammering. Nobody's dead." I turned to Mike O'Connell. "Take Terry out to the shower and dunk him a few times. He'll be okay."

DENNISTON chose that instant to drift back from dreamland. He blinked foggily. "Wha'sh matter?" he mumbled.

O'Connell grabbed his arms. "You're all right, laddybuck. Come along." He led the shambling star toward a door at the rear of the set.

Kathie called out: "B-be . . . careful with him, Mr. O'Connell . . ." I felt damned sorry for her. In spite of the way the hambo had treated her, she still thought of his welfare. That's true love in capital italics!

Sid Sexton seemed to have other ideas. He slid a flabby arm around her and I saw his mitt sneak up toward forbidden territory. "He tries to kill you, and you ask Mike to be careful with him! Better you should let that no-good bum go back to Diane Ravenne, and you marry me!"

She reddened. "Please, Sid. . . !" She broke away from him.

A scowl made deep creases in Sexton's lardy map. "Just remember—if that no-good ever hurts you, I kill him!" he said in

his high pitched voice. "Even if it ruins me. Even if I lose every cent I should make from this picture!"

His mock heroics gave me a pain in the elbow. I turned away—and saw Mike O'Connell stumbling toward us. He tripped over a thick electric cable on the set; almost took a nose-dive into a camera crane. He had a pip of a shiner on his right optic. He yelled: "Turner—Sid—Kathie—!"

I smelled trouble. I grabbed him, supported him on his buckling gams. I said: "What the hell—"

"Terry—he poked me and got away from me! He said he had to get back to Diane!"

Shame and embarrassment whitened Kathie's woeful puss. She whimpered: "Oh-h-h . . . ! So he—he's gone back to her again! She'll ruin him! She wants to ruin him . . . !"

O'Connell turned the blurry focus on me. "Listen, Sherlock. This is damned serious. Denniston is plenty important to us right now. I've put every dime I own into Colorvox. We'll sink or swim on the success of our first pic. We've got to finish it and get distribution soon, because we're just about broke. If Denniston runs out on us, we're washed up; we couldn't afford to re-make the production with another star. And unless Terry's in shape to play his final scenes right away, we'll go under anyhow. Sexton, here, will lose everything. So will I. What the hell could I do with an assignment of patents and no capital?"

I said: "Well?"

Sexton butted in. "You must get Terry and bring him back to us, Turner! You can handle him. You can make him listen to reason. If the picture is a success, we will pay you a fat fee—five hundred, a thousand dollars—"

ORDINARILY I don't take cases on speculation. I like the lettuce laid on

the line. After all, I'm in this game for the dough. I'm trying to save up a retirement fund before some sharp apple prints my name on a bullet. But this time, something made me break my rule. That something was the way Kathie Denniston looked at me; the way she pressed herself close to me and said: "Please, Mr. Turner. . . D-Dan . . . for my sake. . .?"

I felt her perky little breasts brushing against my arm; saw the pleading wistfulness in her blue lamps. I got a sudden yen to grab her, plant my kisser on her lips and try to make her forget all her troubles.

But I didn't. I just said: "Okay, sweetness. I'll do all I can. You go home and see if Terry shows up there." I turned to the others. "O'Connell, you skin out to that cafe and try to locate him there. Sexton, you stay here in case he wanders back to the studio."

"What about yourself?" Sexton asked me.

"I'll have a gander at Diane Ravenne's apartment. Maybe she went home after Terry left her. And maybe that's where he is now." I set fire to a gasper, ankled out to my junk-heap. I headed for the Ravenne cookie's stash.

THE first time I knocked on her door, I didn't get any answer. I rapped again, harder. I heard a scurrying inside the room. Then the door opened. Terry Denniston's ex-wife stared out at me.

If ever there was a she-male devil, Diane Ravenne was it. Her hair was blacker than a midnight in hell. Her optics were dark, deep-sunken, glowing. Dissipation had etched worldly lines around her rouged, sensuous mouth. And her body had a wanton beauty that set fire to a man's blood.

She'd been a star in her day—until alky and a few juicy scandals wrecked her box-

office draw and put her in dutch with the Hays officials. Now she lived in a second-grade tepee and couldn't even get bit parts. But she still had glamour, plus a ton of lure. And it was all on display through the thin negligee she was wearing.

The spiderweb chiffon clung like a desert haze to the lush domes of her breasts; drifted around the voluptuous arches of her hips. I got a good swivel at the smooth whiteness of her thighs, the modeled perfection of her gams. I could understand why so many big shots had fallen for her in the old days.

I said: "Hiya, toots," and barged into her living-room without an invitation. I tossed my hat on a chair; spotted a bottle of Vat 69 on the sideboard. I helped myself to a generous snort.

"Who the devil are you? What's the idea?" she flared.

I took another slug of Scotch, carrying out a plan I had in my think-tank. "Me? I'm the big bad wolf. And I'm looking for Little Red Riding Hood."

Her peepers narrowed. "You're either crazy or drunk!" she said in her throaty, cigarette-husky voice. "I'm going to call the cops."

"Nix, sister," I said. "Just call Terry Denniston."

"Terry—? He's not here!"

I said: "You lie in your teeth! There's his hat over on that table." Which was true enough. There was a hat on the table. It had the initials T. D. on the inner band.

Diane flushed; looked sore as hell. "Okay. So he was here. But he left a little while ago."

"Without his skimmer? Nuts. I think I'll have a hinge at your bedroom."

She stood in front of me, blocked me. "You'll stay out of there!"

"Fine," I grinned. "So Terry isn't here. That's swell. I was hoping you'd be alone. I'm one of your unknown admirers."

Prepare yourself for a lot of heavy admiration.” And I slipped my arms around her waist, bent her backward, kissed the whey out of her.

Her negligee came unfastened in front; fell partially away from her. Her brassiere didn’t amount to a damn in the way of concealment. I put the focus on a large expanse of ivory epidermis, and kissed her again—on the throat.

I WAS pulling a swift one. I figured she’d bleat for help; that the Denniston ham would barge out of his hiding-place and dive at me. But Diane wasn’t the yelping kind. She took every kiss I gave her—and she seemed to enjoy it. She locked her arms about my brisket, parted her mouth, dished me an osculation that tingled all the way down to my garters.

Then I realized I was on the wrong train. Terry Denniston couldn’t have been in the next room; otherwise he’d have ankled out when he got hep to what I was doing. I knew I might as well quit and start looking for him elsewhere.

But when Diane gave me another one of those succulent kisses, I couldn’t quit. I went sailing past that station, full steam ahead; lost all my good resolutions. After all, I’m only human. And this Ravenne quail was teaching me some technical pointers I’d never known before. There was a divan right alongside me. The cushions looked inviting. . .

What the hell. . . ?

LATER she grinned up in my pan and said: “Now, Mr. Detective, will you scam out of here and let a lady get some sleep?”

“How did you know I’m a dick?” I said.

She laughed. “I read the newspapers. Dan Turner’s picture gets printed pretty often.”



I jumped up on my dogs. So she’d had me tabbed from the start! She was a smart wren; too damned smart. Maybe she figured on outguessing me. Maybe Denniston really was in her boudoir. Maybe she thought she could neck me out of the notion of searching for him. . .

“I think I’ll have a gander before I go,” I said. I made for the bedroom door.

She tried to stop me. I gave her a slap across the chops that bounced her half-way across the rug. I opened the door, ankled into the adjoining room, snapped on the light.

I said: “What the hell—!”

Denniston was there, sure enough. He lay stretched across the mussed bed, and his noggin was caved in. He was as dead as confederate money.

I pivoted, made a lunge at the Ravenne wren; grabbed her and hauled her into the boudoir. “So this is why you wanted to get rid of me!” I barked. “You knew Denniston was in here—croaked. *Because you*

croaked him! You were sore because he'd married Kathie; you wanted to get even!"

She sagged. "God . . . no! *No!* He was alive when I left him in here! He said he wanted to sleep off his drunk. . . didn't want to be disturbed . . . I didn't kill him! *I didn't!*"

"You're a liar. First you tried to ruin him by making him fall off the wagon. Then you decided to rub him out. The jig's up, sister."

She cringed away from me. "I didn't kill him! I admit I got him drunk; tried to wreck him. But I only did it because—" Her words soared upward to a keening shriek. Terror slid into her lamps. She stared past my shoulder—

I started to whirl around. I was too late. Something bludgeoned against the back of my cranium. I went blind with pain; slugged the carpet with my beezers.

Another yeeping scream filtered through the roaring in my ears. I felt a limp weight fall on top of me. I didn't quite pass out; but I was just semi-conscious for a few seconds. Then I managed to squirm from under the weight. I got up on my knees.

IT WAS Diane Ravenne's body that had draped itself over me when I was on the floor. I took a swivel at her. The back of her conk was a raw mess of splintered bone and sticky ketchup. She was through with passion. She'd never kiss anybody again. She was deader than Cleopatra.

Somebody must have been hiding in that room with Terry Denniston's corpse. This unknown party had waited for me to walk in; had swatted me and then conked Diane!

The window was open; gave access to a fire-escape. I stumbled woozily to the sill, stared down; couldn't see any movement in the foggy darkness. From somewhere in the street, three floors below, I thought I heard a cry.

Maybe my ears were playing tricks on me. I couldn't be sure. I had a knot on the back of my noggin three sizes bigger than a mock-orange and my brains felt foggier than the night. But that faint wail sounded real.

I climbed out the window; started down the iron ladder.

Finally I reached the alley. I jumped the last ten feet and the pavement came up to slap my soles. I staggered, righted myself, sprinted hellity-blip for the street.

I was just in time to see Sid Sexton hauling Kathie Denniston into his sedan at the curb. His pudgy arm was around her slender body, squeezing her. He was rasping: "This is no place for you. I'm taking you home. . ."

He got her into the car; slammed the door; gunned the tripe out of his motor. The sedan blared off into the mist with fire spitting from its exhaust-pipe.

I yelled, tried to stop him. No dice. I hurled myself toward my own vee-eight; bounced in and kicked the starter. I clashed into second and souped my cylinders.

My left front tire went ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump. It was as flat as a pauper's purse.

I yodeled: "Damn it to hell!" and scrambled out. A roadster drifted up behind me; parked. Its headlights were spotted on me. Somebody said: "Hey, Sherlock!"

It was Mike O'Connell. I scrambled toward him. "What stroke of luck sent *you* here?"

"I couldn't locate Denniston at the cafe," he told me. "Diane wasn't there either. So I came here to see if you'd had any luck. Did you find him?"

"Hell, yes!" I roared as I climbed alongside him. "Head for Denniston's own joint—and don't spare the horse-power!"

"What's up?"

"The hambo and his ex-wife are both defunct!" I snarled. "And I just saw Sid

Sexton and Kathie pulling away from here!”

O’Connell goosed the nuts and bolts out of his engine. “Great God! You mean . . . Kathie conked them? Because she was jealous? Because she didn’t want Terry to go back to Diane. . . ?”

“How the hell should I know? Maybe it was Sexton. He threatened Denniston, remember. He’s in love with Kathie, himself.”

O’Connell stared at me; almost side-swiped a milk-wagon. “Sid wouldn’t do a thing like that! He hasn’t got the guts!”

“Don’t kid yourself. Guys do funny things for love,” I snapped. Then I added: “Stop here at this druggery a minute. I’ve got to phone headquarters, report the bump-offs.”

HE SKIDDED to the curb. I dashed into the joint, wedged myself in a booth, dropped a jitney in the slot. I called the residence number of my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad. When his sleepy voice answered, I said: “This is Turner. I’m swimming around in gore—as usual. A double killing this time.”

“Great cripes—who got bumped?”

“Terry Denniston, the Colorvox star—and Diane Ravenne, his former wife. In her apartment on Franklin.” I told him the address.

He said: “I’ll be right over.”

“Nix. Send a squad. But I want you in another place. I’m going to hand you the murderer on a silver dish. Flag your pants out to the Denniston ham’s igloo, just off Wilshire.”

He started to sputter. I hung up before he could ask me a lot of dumb questions.

I ankled out of the store, back to Mike O’Connell’s roadster. “Let’s go,” I said.

He sent us thundering through the fog; headed for Wilshire Boulevard. We jammed through three stop lights without

even hesitating.

Ten minutes later we went skewering into the driveway of the Denniston house, our tires spitting gravel at the drifting veil of mist. I saw somebody coming down off the porch and moving toward a sedan; a pudgy, waddling shape.

It was Sid Sexton.

I hauled out the .32 automatic I always carry in a shoulder-holster. “Stand still, grease-ball—before I drill for oil in your ellybay!”

The fat slob froze. I dived at him, hit him with a flying tackle. We both went down in a tangle of arms and legs and curses.

He was soft, flabby; wheezed like a grampus. ““What’s the idea—”

“You were at Diane Ravenne’s apartment just now. Don’t deny it!” I snapped.

“So what?”

“Kathie was there, too. You took her away.”

He rolled over on me, his hog-fat weight squeezing the breath out of my bellows. He panted: “Yes. Kathie went there. I know, because I followed her. I didn’t stay at the studio, like you told me. I wanted to see Kathie and talk to her. When I got here to her house, I saw her riding away in a taxi. I drove after her. And when she started to go into Diane Ravenne’s apartment, I stopped her; brought her home. I did not want her to go through the pain of finding Terry and Diane together.”

I snicked handcuffs on his wrists. Then I sprang upright; went catapulting into the Denniston tepee.

I TOOK the grand staircase three steps at a time; saw an open doorway at the front end of the second-floor hall. There was a pinkish light, softly glowing inside the room. It was Kathie Denniston’s boudoir.

I hurtled over the threshold. I put a

bullet through Mike O'Connell's right arm; shattered his elbow just as he was about to fire a slug into Kathie's lovely cranium.

I said: "You've done enough killing for one night, my Irish friend."

He snarled a pain-crazed curse at me. His arm dangled grotesquely; red ink flowed down his sleeve, dripped from his fingers.

Kathie swooned. She looked pale, fragile, gorgeous as she lay across the bed. She was in a gossamer nightie that wasn't much more concealing than cellophane. Her cute little breasts were almost wholly revealed by the low-cut neckline. A shiver crawled up my spine when I looked at her enticing flesh and thought how close she'd come to a coffin. . .

I put the focus on O'Connell. "So you thought you could get away with it," I said. "You figured on bumping Kathie while I was wrestling with Sid Sexton on the lawn. You were probably planning to plant a forged confession-note on Kathie's remainders, saying that she was the one who had murdered her husband and Diane. You had time to write such a note—while you were waiting for me in front of that druggery. While I was phoning the cops."

He said: "I'll get you for this, you stinking snoop!"

"Nuts," I told him. "I've got you dead to rights. You killed Terry and Diane."

"Yeah? Why would I do a stunt like that?"

"For a damned good reason. You were the financial backer of Sid Sexton's color-movie invention. You had a contract with him, to the effect that if he didn't make a successful picture with the dough you invested, his patent-rights reverted to you. You told me that much yourself, back at the studio tonight. You pretended that the rights would be worthless to you if this first picture failed.

"But you lied. You knew there was a

million clams to be made out of Sexton's new color process. And you wanted all the gravy for yourself. If you could stop production on this first picture before it was finished, Sexton would be washed out. You'd get the patents; own the whole damned works.

"You figured out a way to jinx the picture. You went to Diane Ravenne; bribed her to vamp her ex-hubby. You paid her a stack of cabbage to make him fall off the wagon.

"She needed jack. She played ball with you. She horsed the hambo into getting stinko plastered tonight. Then I accidentally barged into the case. I brought Denniston back to the studio; turned him over to you and told you to sober him up."

O'Connell sneered: "Nice going. Then what?"

“YOU deliberately turned him loose from the shower-room behind the sound-stage; gave yourself a black eye to make it look good. You told him to go to Diane's apartment, where he could do as he damned pleased. He was swacked enough to accept your suggestion, not knowing that you planned to follow him and croak him. You'd have bumped him right there in that shower-room, only you knew you couldn't get away with it.

"Denniston went to Diane's flat. She put him to bed so he could snooze off his snootful. When I showed up, she tried to keep me from finding him.

"Meanwhile, you didn't bother to go to the cafe on the Sunset strip. You drove directly to Diane's apartment stash on Franklin; climbed up the fire-escape, sneaked into the bedroom and bashed Denniston's noggin. At that moment, I ankled in. You didn't have time to lam. You crouched in a corner; hid yourself in the shadows.

"When Diane saw Terry lying there

defunct, she was scared she might be convicted of cooling him. So she started to spill her guts; began to tell me you'd hired her to get him drunk.

"That would have involved you up to your ventricles. So you conked me—and then croaked Diane. You made your getaway. Luckily I've got a thick skull, or I'd be shaking hands with Saint Pete by this time."

O'Connell said: "It's a pack of lies. When I drove up to that apartment and saw you with a flat tire, I'd just come from the cafe!"

"Yeah? Quit stalling. All you did was go down the fire-escape and drive your car around the block. You gave yourself dead away when I told you that Denniston and Diane were dead; when I mentioned that Sexton and Kathie had just left. You asked me if Kathie had conked Denniston and Diane. *How the hell did you know they'd been conked?*"

"Why—I—I—"

I said: "That was the tip-off. I hadn't mentioned the method or murder, *but you knew it!* So I set a trap for you. I let you think I was after Sexton. I wrestled around with him; wasted a lot of time before I put

the bracelets on him. That gave you a chance to sneak up here and try to murder Kathie. You were going to make it look like suicide, but I caught you in the act. Now laugh that off."

He choked: "You've . . . got me, I guess. . ." He sagged. Before I realized what he was up to, his left fist darted out. He grabbed for the roscoe I'd shot out of his right duke. He aimed it at me and said: "So-long, smart guy!"

From behind me, a cannon sneezed: "*Ka-Chow!*" O'Connell gasped and went sprawling with a slug through his dream-box. I pivoted—and saw Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad walking through the doorway with his service gat smoking.

Dave said: "Some day I won't get here in time. Then you'll be wearing a wooden overcoat." Then he grinned. "I was standing in the hall. I heard this lug confessing. Thanks, Hawkshaw."

I said: "Go to hell. Drag this carcass out of here. Go downstairs and unlock Sid Sexton's cuffs. I've got to work to do."

"Work—?"

I went toward the bed. "Kathie needs attention. And I think I'm going to enjoy giving it to her."