

# HEADS YOU LOSE

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

*It looked like a gift from Santa Claus left on Dan's doorstep, but, unwrapped, it turned out to be as grisly a thing as anyone could hope not to find.*



I UNWRAPPED the package, opened it, and a human head rolled out in my lap. It was a man's head, middle-aged, partially bald—with a bullet hole between the eyes.

For an instant I tottered on the brink of the screaming meemies. It was late at night and I'd just got home to my apartment stash after a double feature at the Carthy Circle Theater. Keying my front door open, I had found this parcel on the threshold—a bulky, square package done up neatly in brown butcher paper. Naturally I'd picked it up and toted it inside. Then, as soon as I snapped the lights on, I sat down to see

what Santa Claus had brought me.

There were no postage stamps on the bundle; no express tags, either. Evidently somebody had delivered it personally, making sure I'd get it by printing my name across the, tops. *For Dan Turner, Private Detective, Hollywood.* No sender's name, though; and no return address.

I used my pocket knife on the strings; peeled away the brown paper wrappings to disclose a cardboard box. When I opened this, the severed noggin fell spang in my lap and I came nearer to a pass-out than I had been for a long time. Who wouldn't be startled by a thing like that?

I gasped: “What the—!” and leaped off the chair as if I’d been sitting on a nest of cobras. The head hit the rug with a gruesome bounce, caromed halfway across the room like a soccer ball and came to rest, face upward. I swear to Whozis it sneered at me.

**B**UTTERFLIES were fluttering in my clockworks as I lurched to my cellarette for a fresh fifth of Vat 69. I uncorked the bottle, lifted it to my kisser, and drained a jolt past my tonsils. That made me feel a little better, but not much. I was still shivering when I forced myself over to the decapitated conk and picked it up.

There wasn’t any blood around the bullet wound; none at the neck, either. Everything had been washed away, nice and clean. I copped a jittery gander at the colorless features; experienced a nightmarish sensation as I tabbed them.

This was the head of Skinny Fabian, former top-ranking comedian of silent pictures. For years he’d perched on the pinnacle of the pie-throwing slapstick movies; and the way he used to pop his false grinders out of his yap and fold up his mush kept the whole country in stitches. But at the height of his popularity, he’d gone into total eclipse as the result of a drunken jam down in San Diego.

I remembered the headlines well. Fabian had taken some obscure extra jane named Nancy O’Neill on a roaring binge one rainy night; had got her plastered to the scalp. Something happened during this wild party, and the O’Neill chick kicked the bucket. The law had tried to pin it on Skinny Fabian, but a coroner’s jury finally decided she cashed in her chips from acute alcoholism coupled with chronic gizzard trouble or something. Anyhow, Fabian was finally turned loose.

All the same, his number was up in the galloping snapshots. Every studio in Hollywood put him on the secret blacklist, and his home lot cancelled his contract. The stench gave the celluloid coast a terrific black eye for a while, and Fabian was elected to be the goat.

Maybe he deserved it, maybe not. Plenty of stars have gone on parties with extra wrens without damaging any reputations; but in Skinny’s case he had the tough luck to be caught—and crucified. He faded out of pictures; hadn’t appeared in a single film since the stink erupted. He was washed up like the pajamas in a Chinese laundry.

**F**OR a while he went back on a personal appearance tour through his native South America. It didn’t pan much geetus, though, so he returned to Hollywood and presently married a cute brunette quail named Karen Calverson—a filly with a figure any statue would envy. She played bit roles for Altamount; dragged down enough coin to keep herself and Skinny fairly comfortable. For that matter, a rumor floated around that the guy himself had a stack of shekels salted away from the days when he was in the blue chips.

Well, that was Skinny Fabian’s history as I remembered it. So now his map was leering at me from the floor, but the rest of him was conspicuously absent. That was a heck of a way to go calling on an innocent private snoop. I began to get sore; resisted an impulse to kick his teeth in.

“And I’d do that very thing, bub, if you had any feet to kick back with,” I told him. Then I toppled to my telephone; dialed my friend a Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad.

After a while, Dave’s growl sounded over the wire. “Yeah, who is it and why?”

“Turner squalling. I just got a head—”

“That’s nice. So you wake me up to tell me you’re getting ahead. So what am I supposed to do?”

I said: “You’re not supposed to sleep on duty. Besides, this is a different kind of head. It belongs to Skinny Fabian.”

“Oh. I see. He loaned it to you. How’s he making out without it?”

“I wouldn’t know. The head can’t talk. It’s defunct. Somebody chopped it off and sent it to me in a cardboard box. With a slug in it. A bullet hole.”

“In the box?”

“In the head,” I said wearily.

Dave snarled: “Look, Sherlock. Go to bed and sleep it off. I might send you a nice pink elephant, but you’ve probably got a dozen of them already. Now let me alone.”

“Okay. So Fabian’s been croaked and you sit around headquarters playing solitaire. So I’ll cram his conk in the ash can and forget it. Stew you, pal.”

“Hey, wait a minute. Are you leveling?”

“Yeah. Listen closely and you can hear my uppers and lowers chattering.”

“Somebody really sent you Skinny Fabian’s head?”

“That’s the general idea.”

“Cripes!” he yodeled. “You bring that thing down here to my office, understand? Fast!”

“Fifteen minutes. Maybe twenty.” I hung up on the promise, dug a gasper from my crumpled pack, torched it to steady my jangling nerves against the job confronting me. I had to wrap up the parcel again, contents and all—

*What the blazes was that?*

It sounded like somebody moving outside my door. I dragged my .32 automatic from the shoulder holster where I always carry it; catapulted at the portal and wrenched it open.

“Freeze, sister,” I said.

THE JANE was tall, statuesque, blonde. She wore a slinky silk evening gown that stuck to her like sprayed lacquer, and there was a silver fox cape draped from her snowy shoulders. The effect was delicious. But I wasn’t interested. I had a head on my hands.

I wondered how long she’d been in the corridor; wondered if she had been eavesdropping on my phone call to Donaldson. If so, my sudden appearance certainly startled the daylights out of her. She took a squint at my gat and gave issue to a muffled gasp of amazement. Oh-h-h—!

“Yeah,” I shoved my map close to hers, glared into her wide blue glims. “Who are you and what do you want?”

“I—I’m looking for a d-detective named Turner.”

“Take a good look.”

“Are—are you—?”

“That’s right. I’m him.”

“W-well, can I see you a minute? I—I’m worried.”

“So am I,” I said. Then I fastened the focus on her. She did seem worked up over something, at that. She was also gorgeous in a flashy way. Her bright golden coiffure came above my shoulder—and I’m six feet plus. You’d guess her to be in her early thirties, although she wore artistic makeup to knock off a few years. Her shape belonged in an Esquire drawing, not bony like most thin dames, but beautifully proportioned.

She gave me a wan smile. “May I talk to you—inside?”

“No.”

“But—but I’ve g-got to.”

“Tomorrow, babe,” I said. “At my office. Right now I’m up to my neck in mystery. There’s a guy at headquarters waiting for me to bring him something.”

“You can bribe the police later, Mr. Turner. This is important. It won’t wait.”

“It’ll have to.”

She stood at my threshold and said: “Do you always turn away clients this way?” She seemed to be getting sore.

“Not always. Just sometimes.”

“What a man,” she said, and slapped me across the jowls, hard enough to sting.

I blew my top; grabbed at her. She ducked. I caught one wrist, twisted.

“I’ll teach you to slap me,” I growled.

She narrowed her glims. “You had it coming for your rudeness. How would you like me to scream for help and claim you attacked me?”

A hunch told me she was the kind that could manufacture plenty of grief for a man if she took the notion. I said: “Ix-nay. I don’t want a fuss.”

“You’re about to have one.”

“So come in and let’s talk this over,” I surrendered. “Maybe I was hasty.”

“And maybe I’ve got you over a barrel. Which is why I slapped you in the first place, perhaps,” she purred. And she undulated into my living room.

**I** SCOWLED at her. “You must need a snoop in the worst way if this is how you go about hiring one.”

“I was told you were good,” she shrugged. “I wanted the best. I’m not so sure I care to engage you now, though. Not even if you were twice as clever as people say you are. I think I’m going to dislike you very much.”

“Make it mutual and call all bets off.”

“No-o-o . . . on the contrary, I’ve decided to tell you what I’m worried about. I imagine you can probably help my sister if anybody can.”

“Your sister.”

“Yes. She’s Karen Calverson of the films. Altamount, you know. I—why, what on earth’s the matter?”

I wiped the amazed look off my stupid puss. “Is your sister the same Karen

Calverson who’s married to Skinny Fabian?” I yodeled.

“That’s right. And I’m quite upset about her. You see, she’s had a frightful row with Skinny.”

“When?”

“Three days ago. His drunken jealousy caused it. He left the house in a towering rage and hasn’t been seen since. But I’m just a little afraid of him—for Karen’s sake. He threatened to come back and harm her. Kill her, in fact.”

“Do tell,” I said.

She nodded. “I want you to locate him and make sure he doesn’t do anything—well, rash.”

“What’s it worth to you, baby?” I asked her. After all, cash is cash, I and I’m in this racket for all I can I get. A fee in your fist is worth two killers in the lethal chamber, according to my notion.

She opened her expensive beaded bag, hauled out a stack of new twenties. “Two hundred dollars. Is that enough? And I wish you’d stop calling me baby. I’m Chloe Calverson. *Miss* Calverson to you, if you please.”

“Have it your way, hon. Yeah, two hundred will be enough if that’s all you can spare. You want me to find Skinny Fabian for you, huh?”

“If you can.”

I ankled across the room, picked up the guy’s noggin, thrust it at her. “Easy,” I grinned. “Here he is. Or anyhow a mighty important part of him.”

She copped one hinge at the head and collapsed.

**I**T WAS a filthy trick to play on a jane, but I had my reasons. It struck me that this blonde Chloe Calverson might be the key to the whole riddle. Maybe she was the one who’d left Skinny’s conk on my threshold; or at least she was mixed up in the mess somehow. It was stretching the

long leg of coincidence much too far to think she'd accidentally come to me on the same night I received the gruesome package.

Her story meshed with the facts, too. Fabian had got fried; had threatened to bump his wife. So maybe the wife beat him to the punch on grounds of self-protection. Or if the wife didn't bump him, her blonde sister did. Anyway I now had the sister in a deep purple faint, making it easier for me to hold her in case Donaldson wanted to press charges.

I picked her up, toted her to my divan, dumped her. I went to my desk, got a spare pair of bracelets, dropped the key back in the drawer. Then I nipped the yellow-haired cupcake's left wrist to a leg of the divan, blew her a kiss and left her.

In the front room I wrapped up Skinny Fabian's head, tucked it under my arm, had one more shot of Scotch to settle my stomach. Presently I was driving my jalopy to headquarters. And a little later, Dave Donaldson was throwing a wing-ding in his private office.

"Gah-gah!" he yeped. "It *is* Fabian!"

"That's what I told you."

"But who drilled him and chopped him apart? And who sent you his topper?"

I said: "Listen while I spill a theory." Then I fed him everything Chloe Calverson had dished me.

"You think one of the sisters did it?"

"Maybe both of them had a hand in it. Then Chloe came to me in an effort to cover up. By pretending to hire me to hunt for the guy, it would look as if they weren't aware he was defunct."

"It sounds reasonable," Dave muttered. "Except I don't savvy why they sent his head to you first."

"That part doesn't add up to make sense," I admitted. "But I can explain it this way. The sisters didn't know it was being sent to me. Maybe it was brought by

somebody else; someone who was hep to the kill and wanted to tip it off."

Dave said: "Hm-m-m. Could be. You say you've got this sister in your joint now?"

"Yeah. Nipped. She can't powder."

"Swell. Wait until I turn this head over to a medical examiner. Then we'll go see the widow."

He was gone about two minutes. Then we sprinted out to my vee-eight bucket and I made knots. Pretty soon I parked outside the Fabian wikiup in Westwood. "This is it."

AS WE made for the porch, I lamped a blue convertible standing at the curb a few doors away. Somehow I thought I recognized it. I couldn't be sure, though, and there was no point in making a check-up just then. Donaldson and I went to the Fabian portals and I thumbed the bell.

A cute little Chinese maid opened up, gave us the fish-eyed focus with her almond glims. "Yes, sir?"

"Mrs. Fabian, please," I said.

"My mistress prefers to be called by her maiden name, the one she uses on the screen," the Oriental wren said without any hint of accent. "Miss Karen Calverson."

I lifted a lip. "Okay, Toots. Miss Calverson, please."

"Sorry, sir. She is napping. You'll have to come in the morning."

Donaldson, getting his temper in a kink, shoved me aside and flashed his badge. "We'll see her now."

"But—but you can't. Someone else—" The Chinese cookie choked this off and blushed.

I said: "Somebody with her, huh?"

"I don't know anything about it, sir." She was lying like a busted gas meter. You could tell by the way her hand fluttered toward her breast.

Dave got tired of it all. "One side,

girlie,” he growled from down around his insteps. Then he shouldered his way in. I trailed him to a staircase and we started up. Just as we reached the second floor hallway, a roscoe sneezed from behind a closed door. It went: *Ka-chow! Chow!* and was followed by copious amounts of ominous silence.

I said: “What the—!” and hurled my hundred and ninety pounds toward the door in question; hit it so hard I nearly smashed it off its hinges. Simultaneously I drew my .32 and sailed in.

The decorations were all pastel pink—walls, drapes, and even a pink-shaded lamp. Over the heaviness of expensive perfume I sniffed the acrid reek of burned cordite: the unmistakable smell gunpowder always makes. And there was a brunette jessie sprawled on the rug, her delectable young form embellished in costly lounging pajamas.

She was Skinny Fabian’s wife, she had two bullets in her chest, and she was deader than a smoked herring.

**A** CHUNKY, dapper bozo was standing beside her. He had a gat in his mitt, a .38 Colt with steam curling out of its stubby snout.

I recognized him. He was Dwig Ballard, an ace director for Altamount Pix: the guy who’d given Karen most of her breaks on that lot. And now I knew where I’d piped that blue convertible before, the one parked outside. It was Ballard’s heap. I’d watched him tooling it down Hollywood Boulevard many a time.

Dave Donaldson roared: “Drop the rodney, pal.”

The chunky director obeyed, but his mush was the color of watered milk. “Good Lord, you d-don’t think I—?”

“Save the lip for your lawyer,” Dave advised him. “Let’s try these handcuffs on for size.”

“But—but you c-can’t arrest me for something I didn’t do! I’ll be ruined—I’ll lose my Altamount job—my wife will sue me for divorce—”

“You should have thought of that before, bud,” Dave grunted unsympathetically. “You’ve been playing around with this Calverson chick, haven’t, you?”

Ballard blushed. “Yes. I admit that. But I swear I didn’t kill her.”

“Then how-come she’s dead? And you with a heater in your duke?”

“I can explain that. Listen. Karen and I were here. I went in the next room for a minute. Then I heard two shots. I ran in here and saw her th-the way she is n-now. The gun was beside her on the floor.”

“So you picked it up just as we busted in. That’s what they all say when you catch them dead to rights.”

The director made a weird moaning noise. “In this case it happens to be the truth. She must have shot herself—”

“Not twice she didn’t. Once was I plenty. Not even reflex action would explain the second bullet. Besides, you don’t see any powder burns on her, do you? That means she was plugged from a distance. The suicide angle won’t hold water. Now stick out your fins before I dent you on the dome with my cannon.”

Ballard lurched forward, held out his hands. Then he pulled an unexpected fast one. With his left he smashed Donaldson’s service .38 aside. Then he planted a right cross on Dave’s brow and Dave went down on his breeches, not kayoed but temporarily useless.

I plunged at the chunky slug but he got away from me like six pounds of quicksilver sliding through a sieve. As he ran, he scooped up his dropped gat; whipped a lead token at me to drive me back. It was more a threatening shot than an actual attempt to get me, because it

missed me a mile and the miss looked deliberate. Then he whammed out of the room and down the stairs.

When I lunged after him, I tripped over Donaldson's floundering poundage; almost took a nose dive. By the time I got my balance back, Ballard had a long start. Before I got half-way down the steps with Dave wheezing in my wake, the director was out of the house. He slammed the front door after him so hard that the glass panel shattered in a shower of shards.

The slam did something to the latch, too; jammed it. I had a time for myself wrenching the portal open again. Just as I blipped out on the porch, I tabbed my quarry piling into his blue convertible, kicking the starter. Then two more reports blasted the night.

I ducked, figured Ballard was still trying to keep me at a distance until he could start rolling. I didn't hear any bullets singing past my noggin, though. And I noticed something else that seemed queer. The chunky character wasn't driving away. He was resting on his steering wheel, slumping over it.

Donaldson caught up with me and we both pelted buckety-blam to the convertible. I stared and said: "What the-?"

A red ooze was bubbling out of Dwig Ballard's flaccid yap and he wasn't breathing. He was as dead as last Leap Year.

**D**AVE GOGGLED at the gun in the guy's relaxed mitt where it lay on the leather upholstered seat. "Cripes, he cooled himself!"

"Maybe," I said.

"What do you mean, maybe?"

"It's the same setup you noticed in the house. No signs of a powder burn around these two holes in Ballard's shirt front. Also, two shots were fired. From a distance."

"But that would mean he was bumped by somebody else. Somebody hanging around—" As the possibility dawned on him, Donaldson went plunging through the darkness in widening circles, triggering his flashlight. Presently he panted back. A tour of the precinct had netted him nothing but a string of zeros. He said: "What—why—how—?"

"Suppose Ballard was leveling," I suggested. "Suppose he left Karen a moment, and she got scalded while he was gone. Then he dashed back, picked up the roscoe where the real killer has tossed it."

"What killer? You know there wasn't anybody else in that room?"

"We didn't see anybody. But you'll remember Ballard said something about his wife suing him for divorce if we pinched him?"

"Yeah, I remember that."

I pointed toward the side of the wigwam. "Take a swivel. Isn't there a ladder leading up to the window?"

Dave yeped: "For once, you're right! Mrs. Ballard followed him here; tabbed him flinging woo at Karen Calverson. She drilled Karen over the sill but didn't get a chance at Ballard on account of he was out of the room a minute. When he came back, we busted in; so she couldn't pick him off while we were there. Then she laid for him outside, bushwhacked him as he got in his car. Is that the idea?"

"It's a theory," I said. "It matches up with the ladder."

"That's all I need to know. I'm calling out a squad to smoke her out of wherever she's hiding!" He started for the house.

I stopped him. "She's probably sneaked far, far away by this time. Most likely she'll go home, try to build herself an alibi. You take my jalopy and see if you can nab her on her own premises. I'll phone headquarters for you."

"Okay. Stand guard until my men get

here.” He piled into my coupe, tortured it into skyrocket motion; while I legged back into the Fabian igloo, found a phone, dialed the homicide division and reported the beef.

**J**UST as I was hanging up, a sound reached me; as if somebody might be tiptoeing through the rear of the joint. It’s funny when people try to sneak around without making a noise; you’ll notice it much quicker than ordinary footfalls.

I made a flying dive for the dining room where the sound had come from. Then I lamped the Chinese maid. She was stuffing something into a pocket of her uniform and straddling the low sill of an open window in an attempted getaway.

“Going somewhere, Toots?” I said, and glued the grab on her as she made a frantic effort to slither outdoors. I yanked her inside the room; shook her until she was limp. The thing she’d been stuffing into her pocket worked its way out and fluttered lazily to the floor.

It was a small oblong slip of green paper.

I held the jane with one hand; picked up the paper with the other. When I took a hinge at it, I saw it was a check for five hundred clams signed with Skinny Fabian’s monicker and made out to a Miss Violet Chang.

The almond-eyed cutie wailed: “You give that back to me! It’s mine!”

“You’re Violet Chang?”

“Yes.”

“Fabian paid you this half a grand four days ago?” I persisted as I looked at the date on the check.

She nodded. “What business is it of yours?”

“It’s my bump of curiosity, hon. What was the payment for?”

“Wages.”

“You’re a liar,” I told her. “No maid

ever drew down this much scratch unless she was five months behind in her salary. If that had been the case, you wouldn’t have stuck on the job. It’s not human nature. Why did Fabian slip you five yards?”

“Try and find out.”

“Was it for information? Were you stooling on his wife, spying on her and telling Fabian about—Dwig Ballard?”

She flinched, so I knew my wild shot in the dark had scored a bull’s-eye. “N-no!” she lied.

I dug my dukes into her soft shoulders. “Come clean, kiddo. You’re the one that put Skinny Fabian hep to his wife’s double-crossing. That’s what caused the row between them when he got pickled and walked out of the house a few days back.”

“You—you’re hurting me. All right, it’s true. Now what are you g-going to do about it?”

“Ask some more questions,” I said grimly. “Why were you trying to take it on the lam just now?”

“Because I d-don’t want to be mixed up in a murder.”

“Can you tell me how long Dwig Ballard and your mistress were playing around together?”

“About a year, off and on.”

“Did you know Ballard was married?”

“It’s no secret.”

“What kind of dame is his wife? Jealous? Suspicious?”

“I wouldn’t know. I never met her. You think *she* came here to k-kill—”

“Could be.” Sirens sounded in the distant night, getting nearer. “The cops,” I remarked casually.

**A**LL of a sudden the slant-eyed cupcake wrapped both arms around me, clinging like a leech. “Please don’t let them t-take me! I—I jumped parole in New York State a few years ago. I’d been picked up for working in an opium joint. If I’m held



for questioning, they'll find out about me; send me back to prison. Please—*please!* I'll pay you anything! I'll. . . ."

"You couldn't," I said regretfully. "This is a murder case. And if I let you go, I'd hardly expect you to show up later to pay me off."

"Oh-h-h, but I *would!* I promise you I will." She stood on her toes, kissed me with a fervor I've seldom experienced.

If those damned sirens hadn't been coming so fast, I might have thought her proposition over a little more thoroughly; but I realized the coppers would barge in too soon. Moreover, I couldn't allow myself to be persuaded to let the Chang chick scam. After all, how could I be sure she wasn't the killer herself?

Not that the theory made sense; but she might have had motives for the double kill. Certainly she'd had opportunity. And you can't afford to overlook any angles in a murder case. So I knew I'd have to turn her over to the law whether I liked it or not.

It was a tough decision, though. I'm as human as any guy, and I hated to let her know I was going to be responsible for her arrest.

So I pulled a snide trick. I whispered: "Okay, hon. You can go out the window and I hope you make the grade. But don't forget to drop in at my office in a couple of days."

"I'll b-be there." She blew me a kiss, hiked up the hem of her skirt, vanished, through the open window.

Just then the bulls rang the front doorbell. I dashed to let them in. "Quick!" I said in an undertone. "Around the side. Don't waste time. A Chinese jane—lamming."

That's how Violet Chang got collared. She never knew how I'd double-crossed her, though.

MEANTIME, WHILE the cops were nailing her, I set fire to a gasper and ankled thoughtfully upstairs. I had three cases of killery on my mind: Skinny Fabian, his brunette wife, and the wife's boy-friend—Dwig Ballard. They were all linked together somehow, but I didn't know exactly what the connection could be. Maybe I might learn something if I did a spot of prowling.

First I frisked the defunct jessie's room, trying not to look too long at her pathetically fragile remainders sprawled on the rug, the raven hair touseled, the lovely form marred by two bullet holes. No doubt about it, Karen Calverson had been a triple-distilled knockout. You couldn't blame Ballard because he'd fallen for her; and you couldn't blame Skinny Fabian for his jealousy.

Not finding anything important in Karen's room, I made for an adjoining one. It had been Skinny's from the looks of it. I piped a desk; rummaged its drawers.

There was a thick old scrapbook full of faded press clippings dating back to the time when the guy had been a top comic. It also contained pictures—snaps of Fabian in costume and in ordinary clothes. I even found one old photograph of him as a kid with his family in South America: his mother, father, grandparents, a brother exactly the same age, two younger sisters, some uncles and an aunt—the usual old fashioned group photo. But I was even more interested in an empty book of check stubs.

I scanned the last three voucher entries. One was for the five hundred skins paid to Violet Chang. The second was drawn to the P. & S. Hospital in Glendale, two hundred and fifty smackers, in full. The third was to cash—for fifty grand!

Now, why had Skinny Fabian pulled fifty thousand fish out of his personal account before he got his noggin chopped

off? According to the stub, this sum had just about cleaned out his personal savings. There were only a few bucks left.

Before I could do any more prowling, I heard a hell-roaring commotion downstairs. That was the law dragging the Chang cupcake back into the igloo. I found a rear stairway, gumshoed down to the kitchen and out into the night like a sneak-thief. I didn't want to confront the Chinese doll and the cops at the same time or she might get hep that I was the dirty crumb who had put the thumb on her.

Instead, I skulked to the next corner and started hoofing toward town. Westwood was pretty deserted at this late hour, and I must have ankled eleventeen miles before I finally hailed a cruising night-owl cab to take me home so I could quiz the deceased Calverson quail's blonde sister. By now I was fairly sure I had all the puzzle's pieces—only I didn't know how to fit them into place. Maybe Chloe Calverson could help me.

**I** PAID off my hacker in front of the apartment; watched as he rolled away. Then I barged to the entrance; tensed.

A stately yellow-haired dish was coming out of the building—a curvesome number in a clinging silk evening gown and silver fox cape. It was Chloe; but how had she slipped out of the nipper that held her to my divan? *And how long had she been loose?*

I crouched in the shadows; waited until she went past me. Then I reached out, grabbed her from behind, and said: "Hiya, babe."

She squirmed, twisted around to face me. "Y-you—!"

"Yeah. How did you work the Houdini trick?"

Her blue peepers blazed. "By pulling the divan over to your desk and going through the drawers with my free hand

until I found a key that unlocked the handcuffs."

"When was this?"

"Just a moment ago. If I'd thought of it sooner, I would have—" She stomped a sharp French heel on my instep, tried to rake a set of furrows down my profile with her fingernails. "Let me go! What right have you to—?"

"Every right," I grunted. "I'm a private dick. That makes me a cop, sort of. And there's been a shower of shootery all over Hollywood tonight."

"You mean . . . Skinny? I remember now. His head . . . ug-gh! My God, the way you shoved it at me. . . ."

"That was just number one," I said. "Since then, Dwig Ballard got cooled. And your sister Karen."

She stiffened in my clutch. "Karen . . .? Oh-h-h, no! You don't mean that! You can't mean it!"

"Sorry, sweet stuff. Karen's been wafted to her reward."

Chloe's glims widened. Then she keeled again, just as she'd done in my stash earlier.

And even as I tried to revive her, my own jalopy drew up to the curb. Dave Donaldson bounced out; didn't even thank me for loaning it to him. All he said was: "Sherlock, I ought to paste you smack on the snoot."

**I** GAVE him the stupefied glimpse. "What's nibbling on you, bub?"

"You walked away from the Fabian house when I told you to be on guard until my men arrived."

"I stayed. They were there when I left."

"Even so you shouldn't have gone." Then he calmed down enough to notice I had a limber blonde on my hands. "Who in the name of Whozisis that?"

"Karen Calverson's sister. I told you about her, remember? I had her nipped in

my wikiup but she got loose.”

“So what did you do, pop her?”

“No. She swooned when I told her Karen was defunct. Don’t ask me why. Maybe she’s got a guilty conscience.”

“Somebody’s got a guilty conscience, that’s a cinch,” Donaldson growled disgustedly. “And it isn’t Dwig Ballard’s wife.”

“You checked on her?”

“Yeah. Perfect alibi. She was playing gin rummy with pals all evening; hadn’t been outdoors. So she couldn’t be the one who put the chill on Ballard and Karen Calverson.”

I said: “How about the Chinese maid?”

“No dice. Her mitts showed negative on the paraffin test. She hadn’t fired a gun. We let her go.”

“Which leaves us no suspects in the Fabian household except this blonde cutie,” I said. “And she claimed she just got loose from my handcuff upstairs.”

Dave cleared his throat disgustedly. “You haven’t heard anything yet, Hawkshaw. Want to know something goofy?”

“Shoot.”

“I got the surgeon’s report on Fabian’s head. The bullet was pumped into his grey matter *after he was dead.*”

**T**O PROVE it, Dave handed me the medical examiner’s findings. I snatched the paper with my free hand; read it in the dim light sifting down from a lamppost. There was a description of the decapitated noggin: condition of tissues, presence of formaldehyde, color of hair and eyes, so many fillings in the teeth, the clean severance of head from shoulders . . . .

“Here’s the answer,” I caterwauled. “And I’d known it all the time!” I lugged the inert blonde cupcake to my bucket, dumped her in, slid behind the wheel. Donaldson’s bulk sandwiched the jane

between us as I souped my cylinders.

He made plaintive sounds with his mouth. “Could you tell me the secret, Philo?” Then, in an irate bellow: “Or do I have to slam it out of you with my blackjack?”

“The teeth, chump. The teeth.” And I headed for Glendale in a thundering yank. Twenty minutes later we squealed to a stop in front of the P. & S. Hospital. Chloe Calverson hadn’t yet snapped out of her trance, which was probably a world’s record for swooning fillies. She was breathing okay, though, and her heart-beats felt regular. So we left her in my rambling wreck; dashed into the building.

To the receptionist on duty I said: “Pardon my curly tonsils, lady, but I’d like to see a record of all the deaths in this layout during the past three days.” Dave backed up my authority by flashing his shield.

The dame dug into her files, handed me four or five cards. I found the one I wanted: *Ramon Fabianino, 48, male, white (South American.). Entered in dying condition. (Pneumonia). Unable to talk. Died two days later.* Then it gave the date of death, the name of the attending physician, and all that stuff.

I whirled on Donaldson. “Get it? Ramon Fabianino was Skinny Fabian’s name before he came to the States.”

“You mean he kicked the bucket from natural causes?”

“It says here.”

“Then who cut off his head and put a bullet in it and sent it to you? And why?”

Before I could answer, a scream sounded from outside. I pivoted, hurtled out of the hospital with Dave breathing down my neck. As we larruped down the front steps, I lamped a tall guy aiming a heater at Chloe Calverson in my coupe. Chloe was doing the screaming.

I yeped: “Get him, Dave! Before he

does any more killing! *Get Skinny Fabian!*”

Donaldson’s service .38 thundered once. Once was enough. He blasted a hole in the guy’s spine big enough to cork with a derby hat. The guy went down and stayed down. Chloe Calverson quit screeching.

Dave panted: “Did I hear you say Skinny Fabian?”

“Yeah.” We were both running.

“But how can a headless corpse—?”

I rolled the fallen man over. “See for yourself.”

You could have heard Donaldson’s choked gasp all the way to Pasadena. “By golly, it *is* Fabian!”

“Sure,” I said, and shoved my fingers in the wounded bozo’s kisser; pulled out his false grinders. “This proves it.”

The former comedian tried to move but couldn’t. He was paralyzed with Donaldson’s slug in his spine. He whispered: “Curse . . . you . . . you dirty snoop. . . .”

“Save the curses, cousin,” I told him. “They won’t help you where you’re going. The devil knows all the words.” Then I torched a gasper, blew smoke in his pallid puss. “You bribed the Chinese maid to spy on your wife. You found out about Karen and her director, Dwig Ballard. So you decided to croak them both.”

His glassy glims called me dirty names.

**I** BLEW more smoke. “By sheer luck, your brother had just come from South America to Hollywood on a visit; the brother whose age was exactly your own. *In other words, your twin.* I know about this because I saw an old family-group snapshot in your scrapbook. You and he looked alike even as kids. You still did. And he was taken desperately ill on his arrival.”

“You . . . can’t prove. . . .”

“Sure I can. You put him in this

Glendale hospital, where he cashed in his chips. And his illness had given you an idea for the perfect crime—the murder of your wife and her boy-friend without any suspicion falling on yourself. So you registered him under *your* name instead of his own. When he died, your alibi was ready-made. It was supposed to be you, the real Skinny Fabian, who got buried in some obscure graveyard.”

His breathing was getting shallower. “So . . . what?”

“So then you creamed Karen and Ballard tonight. In the meanwhile, though, one cog of your scheme had slipped. You had probably expected some publicity on your supposed death, but the newspapers didn’t even mention it. Why? Because the funeral was held under the family name, Fabianino, and the reporters never connected that monicker with a former comedian in silent pix.”

“Well . . . ?”

“It became necessary to let the world know you were defunct. You exhumed your twin’s corpse, chopped its head off, put a bullet in the noggin and sent it to me. Realizing my rep as a private dick, you knew I’d bust the case wide open. There’d be plenty of headlines announcing Skinny Fabian’s murder, which allegedly happened three days before your wife and Ballard were bumped. A dead man’s perfect alibi! When the heat died down, you probably intended to go back to South America using your twin’s name and passport credentials. You had drawn all your savings, fifty thousand skins, for this purpose.”

“How . . . did you . . . guess?”

“The medical examiner’s report on the severed head gave me my tip-off. First, the presence of formaldehyde indicated the services of an undertaker. Second, the fillings in the teeth—*whereas the real Skinny Fabian had false choppers.* You

used to take them out and fold up your puss on the screen. Therefore, it wasn't your head. You must be still alive, I figured. And you'd paid a check to this hospital in Glendale; which made it easy for me to back-track on you."

"Pretty . . . smart. . . ."

I said: "You must have been lurking around my apartment dugout when we started for Glendale just now. You were afraid I was closing in. You followed; tried to kill Chloe Calverson in my jalopy. And you intended to drill me as I came from the hospital. Donaldson, too. Then you planned to lam."

This time he had no remarks to make. There was a good reason for his sudden silence. He'd quit breathing—permanently. It was Skinny Fabian's final fade-out.

**I** LEFT the clean-up details for Dave Donaldson and the Glendale homicide

department; took Chloe Calverson back home to Hollywood. She had her sister's funeral to arrange; newspaper reporters to contend with. You can't intrude on a chick at a time like that; not even as delishful a blonde as Chloe. So I dropped her off at the Fabian residence and told her maybe I'd be seeing her some day.

Then I went home to my bachelor igloo for a nice long rest. I didn't get it, though. Violet Chang was waiting for me.

Her almond glims were smiling. "I told you I'd make it worth your while to help me, Mr. Turner," she said. "So I've come to keep my word. And I've brought my checkbook."

I unlocked my portal, slid an arm around her waist. "Walk right in, Toots." I poured a pair of snorts from my fifth of Vat 69. "You don't have to be in such a hurry with the checkbook," I said.