

MURDER'S BLUE MOTIVE

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

Dan had little sympathy for the dead woman, and a lot for the girl with the pistol. This seemed the time to take the law into his own hands



For a moment it looked as if both were dead, and it wasn't a pretty sight.

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THERE are times when a private snoop is practically forced to take the law into his own mitts; and as far as I was concerned, this was one of those times. It was early evening when I anchored my jalopy near the isolated bungalow in Laurel Canyon, doused my headlamps, and made sure my .32 automatic was easy in the armpit holster where I always carry it.

Not that I expected to do any blasting if I could avoid it. I realized gunplay would bring the cops into the mess, spill my beans. Naturally I didn't want that to happen; but you can't always tell what's going to pop when you're running the brand of bluff I was about to pull.

Alongside me, Sherry Sheffield shivered and said: "You'll be c-careful, won't you, Mr.

Turner . . . Dan? I w-wouldn't want you to get in t-trouble on my account. . ."

"Sure, babe," I whispered cheerfully. "I've been a Hollywood gumshoe too many years to be caught flat-footed. Besides, aren't you paying me a fee?"

"Y-yes, but—"

"So it's up to me to earn it," I said. "And I'm accustomed to taking chances. Now quit jittering and wait here in the car for me. I won't be gone long—I hope."

She shuddered again. This Sheffield chick was a nifty little brunette. By contrast to the midnight sheen of her hair, her piquant pan looked pale and wan—which was to be expected, considering the pickle she was in. Her career as a singing star in Bannerman Pix, her entire future in the galloping snapshots,

depended on my success during the next few minutes.

Before I clambered out of my bucket and aimed myself toward the lonely Canyon bungalow, I paused long enough to check all my facts. “You’re sure this is the address, hon?”

“Positive.”

“It’s where the Warren dame told you to bring the dough?”

“Yes. Or anyhow she gave her name as Warren when she phoned me. You understand I’ve n-never seen her.”

I said: “She guaranteed she’d have the master discs to slip you as soon as you made the payoff?”

“That’s right.”

I SUCKED a final drag out of my gasper; contemplated the setup through an exhaled cloud of poison. Sherry Sheffield had warbled two phonograph records for a clandestine platter company a year before. At that time she’d been an obscure extra wren struggling to keep coffee and sinkers on the table for herself and her kid sister Margot. The going had been tough and Sherry had jumped at the chance to croon these two songs for a hundred clams apiece. That much geetus had looked like a fortune to her.

It had been tainted cabbage, though, because the ditties were only fit for a railroad smoking compartment. Sherry would never have sung them except for the fact that she was so hard up for coin.

A week or so after she waxed the two blue platters she got her big screen break. A shoestring quickie producer from Poverty Row, a bozo by the name of Mark Bannerman, signed her for a minor role in a Grade B musical opus. She clicked, thanks to her nifty looks and a certain warm huskiness in her voice; and the pic itself developed into what the industry calls a sleeper—a low budget production that hit the box office jackpot.

As a result of this, Bannerman Pix moved up to a position of importance among the independent outfits and the Sheffield cookie became Bannerman’s top star at an ultimate salary of two grand a week—a wage she’d just begun earning this present month. At the start, however, she’d dragged down considerably less.

Even so, out of her first decent pay check she had bought back the records she’d made when she was broke; suppressed them. She was told the master discs had been destroyed. But now some she-male calling herself Dee Warren was attempting to put the blackmail bite on Sherry, claiming to be in possession of the master records and threatening to release them to the Hays office unless a twenty grand payoff was made.

“And I haven’t g-got twenty thousand dollars!” the brunette doll whimpered woefully to me. “But if th-those songs are m-made public, my voice will be recognized and my reputation will be ruined!”

She looked so forlorn I felt like grabbing her in my arms, try to soothe her with a couple of kisses. She was the kind of wren that awakens a man’s protective instincts, particularly a slob of my sympathetic ilk. The brine in her glims got under my rind like termites tunneling in grandpa’s wooden leg, and her doleful sigh filled me full of needles.

I said: “Don’t fret, sweet stuff. The ditties won’t be released to the public.”

“I h-hope you’re right.”

“You can make book on it. I’ll get them back if I have to strew somebody’s clockworks from here to Pasadena.” Then I ankled away from the car.

I REACHED the rustic wikiup, thumbed the bell. Nobody answered; which seemed screwy, because I could pipe lights gleaming inside. On a hunch I tried the door; found it unlatched. I pushed it open, barged silently over the threshold, found myself in a big living room and copped a gander.

Then I choked: "What the—!"

The premises looked as if they had recently been the scene of a wrestling match between a cyclone and a hurricane. Chairs were overturned, books and papers scattered like rice at a wedding, desk drawers yanked out and emptied.

Moreover, there was a red-haired quail sprawled on the rug near an upset table, and the top of her noggin had been lifted by a bullet. And I mean lifted. It was a mess.

I didn't bother to fumble for her pulse. Any dope could see it was useless. And besides, I'd noticed another feminine figure across the room; a dainty blonde number huddled in a far corner, as limp as boiled noodles.

She was Sherry Sheffield's kid sister, Margot.

FOR an instant I figured she was deceased just like the red-haired dame. From where I stood, all the indications pointed that way.

Her golden coiffure was a mussed yellow chaos, but there were no blobs of gore on her; no visible bullet wounds. That was what fed me a ray of hope.

I catapulted to her, dropped to my knees, mashed an ear to her heart. She was warm to my cheek, and I could hear the rhythmic beating of her ticker. She wasn't croaked; merely unconscious. I rolled her over; searched for possible punctures but didn't find any.

Near Margot's right hand there was a pearl-handled .28 automatic that stank of burned cordite when I sniffed its muzzle; and clenched in her dainty left mitt were two busted phonograph discs.

These were made of wax instead of plastic or hard black rubber, which meant they were master recordings. That spelled out the whole story in capital letters. The red-haired bimbo with the hole in her conk must have been the blackmailer, Dee Warren. And the shattered platters in Margot Sheffield's clutch were

obviously the original discs of the ditties her sister Sherry had warbled for some clandestine outfit a year ago.

Everything meshed; added up to make sense. It was all too evident that Margot had somehow found out Sherry was being shaken down; whereupon, to protect the older sister's screen career, she had come here to glom the records and smash them. But Dee Warren must have ankled in at the wrong moment; surprised the little blonde frail in the act and tried to stop her.

Probably there had been a wild fracas, with the two she-males staging a longshoreman's brawl all over the bailiwick. They had scattered the furnishings, wrecked everything in sight. And finally, in self defense, Margot must have pulled her pearl-handled roscoe; shot the other chick. Then, realizing she had committed killery, she'd gone into a swoon.

ACCORDING to my personal notions, the Warren dame had got no more than she deserved. A blackmailer is a louse, male or female. And I couldn't bring myself to let Margot Sheffield take the rap on a kill that struck me as justified. She had creamed her adversary while defending herself in a finish fight; and moreover, she'd been actuated by a desire to protect her sister. If it hadn't been for Sherry's songs she wouldn't have come to the Laurel Canyon cottage in the first place.

I summed up the situation, weighed it against my badge and my private snooping license. According to the terms of my ticket, I'm sworn to uphold the laws and statutes of California; but circumstances alter cases. The golden-haired cupcake had a break coming and I decided to give it to her.

With my handkerchief I started prowling the room, wiping off every smooth surface that might carry fingerprints. Next I picked up the fragments of wax discs and the pearl-handled gat; pocketed them. After a final hinge around the stash to make sure there

weren't any other clues, I lifted Margot in my arms; lugged her out of the wigwam to my parked jalopy. She was a sweet burden, fragile as fine porcelain but a hell of a lot nicer.

Sherry Sheffield bounced out of the coupe like a brunette bombshell when she saw me coming and recognized the wren in my arms. "It—it's Margot!" she gasped.

"Yeah, babe."

"Wh-what happened?"

I said grimly: "Cork the hysterics and keep your emotions under control. Get back in the car; take the wheel."

"But—but why—?"

"We've got to get your sister home before hell froths over," I growled. "There's been a croaking. Don't ask me anything more just now."

Sherry's piquant puss turned seven shades of pale in the gloom; but she got a half Nelson on her panic, obeyed my instructions. I watched as she slid under the steering wheel, kicked the motor alive.

I wedged my heft beside her; held the unconscious Margot on my lap and steadied her upright.

"Okay, Sherry," I said. "Tickle this heap."

She gassed it; headed for her modest tepee this side of Westwood Village. We emerged from the Canyon, cut across town to Wilshire, made knots. And presently we drifted into the side street where she and her sister hung out.

The house wasn't what you might expect for a movie star of Sherry's caliber. Of course she hadn't been in the heavy sugar very long; but even so she'd refused to go in for lavish grounds and swimming pools. Success hadn't swelled her noggin to that extent.

AS SHE braked my bucket to a halt at the curb, I tabbed another chariot parked just ahead. It was a maroon sedan, slinky and swanky, wearing oversized skins that would have made the tire priorities board drool with jealousy. A tall, dapper character bounced out of this gaudy go-cart; made for us.

When he barged in front of our headlights, I got a good hinge at his well-tailored tweeds, his sandy hair, the freckles as big as dimes that speckled his good-natured map. He was Sherry Sheffield's fiancé, Art Melville, a scenario scribbler for Altamount Pix and a swell egg. Sherry tabbed him at the same instant I did; slithered forth to meet him.

"Art, d-darling!" she sailed into his waiting arms.

"Sherry! Where in the world have you been, sweetheart! I've been waiting here for you ever since dusk." He dished her a kiss that would have burned the Hays office to a crisp. At the same time, I worked my way to the sidewalk with Margot in my clutch.

"Break it up, kids," I said.

Melville hung the bewildered focus on me—and on the load of blonde gorgeousness I was packing. "Sherlock!" his jaw dropped a full five feet. "What goes on? What's the matter with—?"

"Fainted," I said. "Get the front door open, Sherry."

The brunette doll complied and I lugged her sister inside, dumped her on a sofa. Her glims were still shut and she was breathing raggedly. Sherry and Melville trailed me into the room.

Before either one of them could say anything, though, I heard the doorbell jingling. The sound petrified me, tightened my gullet. Maybe the cops had caught hep to that kill in Laurel Canyon, I thought. Maybe they'd followed my bucket here to Sherry's igloo and were about to make a pinch.

I said: "Quick—go see who it is. Both of you."

Melville and Sherry scrambled from the room. I poked my features past the doorway just far enough to glimpse them as they ankled to the front portal. Then, as they opened up, I drew a relieved breath.

It wasn't a bull that came in. It was an undersized citizen with an eaglebeak beezer and soft, gentle brown optics. "Hello, Sherry,"

his voice was mild, pleasant. "Hi, Art. Hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

"Wh-why, n-no, Mr. Bannerman," the Sheffield cupcake quavered. "Come in."

I relaxed as I realized the guy was Mark Bannerman, the independent producer Sherry worked for. He was as harmless as a glass of diluted milk—and just about as lacking in color. Not that he was pale; just meek, self-effacing. You could brush elbows with him six times a day and never realize he was chief mogul of a movie studio. He looked more like the tenderhearted proprietor of a low grade hock shop.

ICLOSED the inner door, turned back to Margot, began massaging her wrists. Presently her long lashes fluttered and she pinned the glassy gaze on me; cringed.

"Oh-h-h, please . . . don't arrest me!" she whimpered. Then all of a sudden she twined her arms around my neck. "I d-don't w-want to go to j-jail!"

"Was jail mentioned, hon?"

She clung to me all the tighter at that but time was the essence and I shoved her away and said: "Look, babe. This isn't necessary. I'm no producer."

"You m-mean you're g-going to turn me in?"

"Ix-nay. I mean you've got nothing to worry about. As far as I'm concerned, I don't even know the Warren jane was croaked."

Her peepers widened, blue and bewildered. "You won't arrest me even though I k-killed her?"

"You were trying to save Sherry's career," I said. "That rates a medal in my book."

"But—but—"

I said: "If I've got anything to do with it, you won't even be suspected."

"How c-can you hope t-to—to—?"

"I hauled you out of the Canyon stash and you'll stay out of it. Now give your nerves a nap. They need it."

"I—I d-don't know how to th-thank you."

"Maybe we can think of a way, later." I turned, made for the door, left her; and then I ran into her black-haired sister waiting for me in the hallway.

"Dan!"

"Yeah, Sherry?"

"I w-want to know about Margot. Why she f-fainted. You've got to tell me what happened in that Warren woman's bungalow."

I SAID: "For one thing, the kid got these records back." Then I pulled the busted hunks of wax tout of my pocket, handed them over. "And in the second place, she killed the broad who was trying to shake you down."

The brunette sister flinched as if I'd stung her across the pan. "Killed her? You're ribbing me!"

"I wish I were. It happens to be true." I fished up a gasper, set fire to it moodily.

Sherry moaned: "My own little sister a m-murderess!"

"You mustn't condemn her for it, hon. After all, she went there for your sake. And she killed the Warren quail in self defense."

"Even s-so, it ruins everything!"

"How come it does?" I narrowed my glims.

"Because Mark Bannerman is waiting in the library to see her. He—he promised Margot a role in my next p-picture. She could have had a chance to make a star of herself, the same as I've done. But—but now—" her voice trailed off despondently.

I said: "Hold tight, Sherry. If Bannerman wants to give your sister screen work, okay. Nobody's going to know about the Laurel Canyon mess. I'll cover it up."

"Cover it?"

"I'll keep Margot's name out of it. Yours too."

Her dark optics glistened and two big tears skidded down her wan cheeks. "You—you're swell, Dan. I won't f-forget this." Then she drifted close to me; gave me a quick kiss of gratitude.

I said: “Skip it, kiddo. Everything’s set if you play ball.”

“Wh-what do you want me to d-do?”

“Make an excuse to get rid of Bannerman until Margot’s had time to calm down. Meanwhile I’ll slide back to the Canyon wikiup; make sure I didn’t leave any loose clues.” Then I barged out to my coupe and dug spurs in the ethyl.

It seemed funny for me to be shielding a killer. The idea pinched blisters on my conscience until I considered how much Margot Sheffield deserved all the help I could give her. In fact, I salvaged myself by remembering both sisters had been placed behind the eight ball through no fault of their own. Looking at it this way made me feel a lot better.

I drove into Laurel, stopped about a half block away from the death cottage, started walking toward it. Then, abruptly, I froze in the shadows.

A jane was coming out of the joint.

LIGHT from within the igloo sifted on her face as she turned to close the front door before anking off the porch; and as the glow touched her I copped an amazed swivel of recognition. She was a studio makeup wren and hairdresser named Loline Lamont; a curve some cupcake I’d known a long time. She and I had been on plenty of parties together in the old days when she was just a beauty operator along Hollywood Boulevard—before she began specializing in making actresses look pretty for the cameras.

But what was she doing in that Canyon cottage? How much did she know? And why was she leaving so calmly when she couldn’t have helped lamping the Warren gal’s remnants in the living room? Any ordinary chick would have dashed hellity-blip out of the shanty with a bad case of the screaming meemies—yet the Lamont frail looked as passive as a cold storage oyster.

I started after her. Before I’d taken a dozen

steps, though, a sleek maroon sedan drove up alongside me; stopped. Somebody muttered: “Just a moment, shamus.”

I pivoted; saw a tall and freckled blur of motion lunging in my direction. It was Sherry Sheffield’s scenario-scribbling fiancé, Art Melville.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

He said: “I’m doing this,” and he laid a haymaker on my profile. I wasn’t expecting any such shenanigans from a guy I’d always considered to be a friend of mine; didn’t have time to get set. His knuckles caromed off my chin, rocked my conk back on its hinges. I swayed for balance, tried to shake the bells out of my ears. Then Melville measured me, corked me again, spilled me like a stack of poker chips.

That second one rendered me useless.

WHEN I snapped out of my trance, the Melville monkey was long gone. I blinked the fog from my fuzzy glimmers, couldn’t see any sign of his maroon sedan—nor of Loline Lamont, the cookie who’d barged so calmly from the murder bungalow. I was all alone in the gloomy Canyon street.

I lurched upright, staggered like the tail end of a two-week spree, tried to make a card index of the questions seething in my think-tank. In the first place, why had the Lamont chicken been in that cottage? What, if anything, had she done about the defunct Warden dame? And finally, why had Art Melville tailed me here to Laurel and lowered the boom on me?

Maybe I might find some of the answers inside the bungalow, I told myself. So I stumbled toward it, shoved the door open, barged inside. Then I yodeled: “What the—!”

There wasn’t any corpse in the living room.

For about ten seconds I thought I must be punchy from the slams Melville had doled me. Deceased blackmailers can’t get up and walk away from the scene; yet Dee Warren’s

carcass was definitely gone. And the room itself had been straightened up, the overturned furniture rearranged.

The whole thing was as screwy as hailstones at the equator. I knew Loline Lamont couldn't have taken the corpse away; all she'd toted from the stash had been an overnight bag. Then I considered Melville. Could he have glommed the murdered jessie in his maroon chariot while I was listening to the birdies? Was that the reason he'd dished me a kayo? If so, why?

I tried to analyze this possible theory. Maybe he'd wanted to dispose of the evidence in order to cover Margot Sheffield—his future sister-in-law. But that didn't explain his motive for bashing me, because I was on the same side of the fence; I wanted to shield the blonde doll, too. And I couldn't savvy where Loline Lamont meshed into the setup.

I spotted a cellarette across the room, stumbled to it, found a fifth of Scotch and sloshed a jolt down my intake valve. The instant it hit bottom I felt better; began acting the way a detective is supposed to act.

Out of habit I prowled the wigwam without encountering anything to indicate it had recently contained a cadaver. The only thing that looked like killery was a goeey lump of something in a garbage can under the kitchen sink. I couldn't help remembering how Dee Warren had looked with her cranium blasted, and her red hair sticky with blood. . .

The way things stacked up, you'd think some maniac had performed a cerebral autopsy on the murdered quail. Who? And why? It couldn't have been the cops; there wasn't anything to show they had been here. Besides, police surgeons don't leave a victim's odds and ends in the nearest container.

Then I piped a small fragment of wax record that I'd missed the last time I frisked the stash. When I studied its smooth grooves and took another swivel at the garbage can, a possible answer dawned on me. And I went

catapulting out to my coupe; headed for Westwood.

PRESENTLY I reached Sherry Sheffield's shanty; rang her doorbell. It was Sherry herself who answered; and she was shuddering like a kitten coughing lamb chops. Her cheeks were pasty, their whiteness emphasized by her black hair; and terror crawled in her dark eyes. "Dan . . . th-thank God, you're here!"

I walked in, glued the gaze on her. "What's the matter, hon? What's gone haywire?"

She poked an envelope at me. "This just came by special messenger. Open it. Look at it."

I flipped the flap, dug out a typewritten note and two candid camera prints that must have been flashbulb exposures. The snapshots slugged me like a kick in the bicuspid. I felt my glims popping.

The pix showed the living room of that Laurel Canyon cottage, with the furnishings strewn hither and yon. One print was of Margot Sheffield, her yellow tresses mussed, with a rod in her mitt. The gat was aimed at Dee Warren and you could see a streak of flame blossoming out of its muzzle.

The second snap showed the Warren dame toppling backward with her thatch blown open. Margot was standing to one side, watching her as she folded.

Sherry moaned "Read the n-note. It's . . . horrible!"

She wasn't kidding, either. I scanned the typing; felt a cold chill skittering up and down my backbone.

"Miss Sherry Sheffield:

The enclosed photographs will prove my complete knowledge of your sister's crime. I was on hand when she committed the murder, and I took these pictures for evidence in case of need. I might add that I have concealed the dead woman's body where I can easily lead the police to it if you make such a course

necessary. But you need have no fear of this if you decide to act sensibly. All I ask is two thirds of your weekly salary from now on. Later, you will receive instructions about making the payments. And if you miss a single one, the negatives of these snapshots will be handed to the homicide authorities for proper action, together with information regarding how to find Dee Warren's corpse.

The Eye."

Sherry took the note out of my fingers. "I'll have to p-pay—and g-go on paying the rest of my life!"

"Why will you, babe?"

"For Margot's sake! Can't you see? I can't p-put her in danger of arrest when she was only t-trying to help me!"

I said: "It's a stinking kettle of herring, hon. Right now you drag down two grand a week, don't you?"

"Y-yes."

"If you pay this blackmail bite, it amounts to about fourteen hundred clams—leaving you around six hundred a week out of your two G's. And the ante goes up in proportion if Mark Bannerman raises your wages."

"Wh-what do I care about money when Margot's safety is threatened?"

I took her hands, held them. "Would you like to have me remove that threat?"

"Yes! Oh, God . . . yes, of course!"

"Even if it should mean putting the finger on somebody near to you; someone you love?"

She stared at me as if I'd been talking Sanskrit. Then, suddenly, she seemed to catch my meaning. "Art Melville. . . ! You . . . surely I you don't think. . . ?"

"I asked you a question, Sherry. I want a straight answer."

Her kisser thinned and her glims hardened. "All right, I'll be as straight with you as you're being with me. Yes. I want you to do wh-whatever should be done. No matter who's involved."

THAT was all I needed to know. I said: "Okay, sweet stuff. And I hope to Whozit you won't regret the decision." Then I went back to my rambling wreck; gunned it in the direction of downtown Hollywood as fast as it would travel without flying apart.

Fifteen minutes later I blipped into a second grade apartment building on Yucca, went up to the third floor, tapped on the portal of a flat I hadn't visited in many a moon. It was where Loline Lamont lived; the studio hairdresser and makeup wren I'd seen coming out of the cottage in Laurel Canyon.

Presently Loline opened up, hung the startled swivel on me.

"Wh-why, hello, Sherlock!" she finally found her voice. "What on earth brings you here? I haven't seen you for ages!"

"I get around, eventually," I grinned and barged into the room and tugged her down alongside me on a soft divan. "How's your private stock these days?"

"Some Vat 69 in the kitchenette. I'll get you a snort." She went out, came back, handed me a slug of my favorite juice. She poured another for herself; raised it. "To the good old times."

"We can do better than that," I said.

"All right. To . . . love."

I shook my head. "No. To crime." I made my tone carry a double meaning as I drank.

She said: "Crime—?" and spilled some skee down her chin. Some of the colors spilled out of her face, too. She sipped reflectively until it came back. "Crime! You're always thinking about your business. Why not relax?" And she moved just a little closer, smiled up at me invitingly.

I figured it was good policy to play her little game while I doped out a plan of campaign. Finally I decided on a system of shock treatment; the idea being to lull her suspicions with small talk, reminiscences of our old party days, then scare the liver out of her while I had her all softened up.

The strategy was amusing enough at first.

I reminded her of one gay binge after another, recalling people and places all over Hollywood. All the time I was pouring liquor into her. She was loosening up, beginning to feel real good.

"Danny, boy! You're the same old Danny boy. You know what it takes to—"

She quit in the middle of the sentence because I stung her a wallop across the mush. "I know what it takes to toss your elbows in the cooler!" I snarled.

"Wh-wha-what—"

"You heard me. There's a cell waiting for you up at Tehachapi, sister. And you'll be in it for a long stretch."

She squirmed, tried to get away from me. "I don't get you!"

I SLAPPED her again, left red fingermarks on her puss. "Your game's over, baby."

"St-stop hitting m-me! What g-game do you mean?"

"I tabbed you coming out of that bungalow in Laurel Canyon tonight," I growled.

"You—you—"

"Lay off stalling. I know all about the Dee Warren racket. I know about the master records and I know about the candid snaps. Blackmailing's a penitentiary rap in California."

"You—you w-wouldn't send me up—!"

"Try me and see. You're a dead pigeon unless you come clean with me right now."

She put her arms around me. "Please—don't ask me t-to talk! I'll—I'll do anything you say, Danny, boy. Please—"

"Ah, stop it, stop it," I grunted. "What I want is the lowdown on what really happened in the Canyon."

"But I—I d-don't dare—"

"Okay. Take your choice. If you insist on fronting for this other party you'll do it behind it bars."

She cringed. "What other p-party?"

"The one who's blackmailing Sherry Sheffield," I said sourly. "The shakedown was

based on certain phonograph discs Sherry made a year ago; records she subsequently figured had been destroyed. And she was right; they were destroyed a long while back when she made a payoff to the platter outfit."

Loline widened her frightened peepers. "How d-did you g-guess that?"

"From the busted fragments I found tonight. There was something funny about those pieces. They weren't broken hunks of master recordings. *They were blanks.* There wasn't any sound wave in the smooth wax grooves."

"And wh-what has that got to do w-with me?"

I said: "Plenty. The blackmailer was bluffing when he claimed to be in possession of the genuine discs. He might have collected some dough for a short while; but sooner or later he realized Sherry was bound to learn the truth—that the real master recordings had been melted down long ago. Therefore he needed a stronger hold on her, something that would force her to pay his demands as long as she drew a salary."

"Dan, listen—you mustn't—"

"Quiet," I rasped. "I'll do the talking. I'm telling you what kind of hold the blackmailer decided to get. It was a homicide hold—on Sherry's kid sister Margot. In other words, evidence to show Margot had pulled a croaking."

"P-please, Dan!"

"But that evidence was also framed. It was as phony as the alleged records. It consisted of counterfeit snapshots purporting to catch Margot in the act of scalding a red-haired dame named Dee Warren. But there never was any such person. *You were the jane with red hair!*"

Loline twitched as if I'd thrust a red hot iron against her. "My God! You m-must read tea leaves!"

"No, but I can add two and two; get the right answer *when I see a calves' brain in a garbage pail*—the sort you buy at any butcher

shop. When I tabbed that brain and thought about the fragment of wax record with no sound track in its smooth grooves, the whole plot clicked.”

SHE whispered frantically:
“Look, Dan. We can—”

“Never mind what we can do or can’t do. I’m telling you what part you played in the setup. You’re a studio hairdresser and makeup expert. The blackmailer bribed you to impersonate a woman who didn’t exist—Dee Warren. It was a simple job for you to wear a red wig; and equally easy for you to have a false skull-cap under the wig. Inside that false cranium you placed the calf brain you’d bought from a butcher. When the thing was blown open, it looked as if your own grey matter had been blasted loose.”

“You c-can’t prove—”

I said: “Proof isn’t necessary. You’re going to confess.”

“No! I—I won’t!”

“Sure you will. I might have recognized your supposed corpse on the floor of the Canyon igloo except for the fact that you were lying face down; and I didn’t bother to check on whether you were alive or dead, because I lamped the top of your conk tunneled to blazes—which made me jump to the conclusion you were defunct. The same conclusion the cops will draw if they ever see those snapshots. But when I hand you over to them and they sweat the truth out of you, the whole story will come to light—and you’ll wind up in the gow.”

“Dan—don’t turn me in!”

“I’ve got to.”

“But—but I was just w-working for p-pay. I wasn’t going to g-get any of the actual blackmail money.”

I said: “There’s only one way I’d consider keeping you out of the bastile, babe.”

“Wh-what way is that?”

“Tell me the guy you were working for.”

“You’ll p-protect me if I give you his n-name?”

“Yeah. I promise.”

She opened her tremulous kisser, started to spill. The words never came, though, because just then a roscoe started yammering from the doorway. It sneezed: *Ka-chow! Chow!* and I felt a sledge-hammer chopping at my noggin, driving me on a long journey into solid nothingness.

I WOKE up a long time later on the floor with Loline Lamont’s remainders beside me. A slug had bored a hole through her forehead, genuinely this time, and she was deader than a Jap’s honor.

My own attic pulsed like a toothache where the second bullet had creased me. Nothing but a copious cargo of typical Turner luck had saved me from being undertaker bait, shaking hands with the angels. As it was, I had a new part in my haircut, and one side of my map was caked with congealed blood. Aside from this, I seemed to need very little repair.

I swayed to my feet, yanked out my shoulder-holstered cannon. It was a futile gesture, though; I realized it even before I frisked the flat. Whoever had chilled Loline was a long time gone. The killer had powdered pronto after triggering those two pellets; had lammed under the impression he’d cooled me with the Lamont quail.

But that was where he’d made a serious error. I was alive—and I was thirsty for a big drink of vengeance. I staggered to the phone on the other side of the room; dialed Sherry Sheffield’s number.

Sherry answered in person. “Y-yes?”

I tabbed her husky, unmistakable voice and said: “Hi, Toots. Turner calling. You alone?”

“N-no,” her answer sounded guarded, wary. “Art’s here with me. He can hear. . .”

That was interesting news. I wondered how long the Melville monkey had been there

after slugging me in Laurel Canyon. "When did he show up, hon?"

"Just a little while ago."

"And Margot?"

"She's in the library talking to Mark Bannerman about her role in my new picture. Why?"

I said: "You'll find out," and rang off. I twirled the dial again, got a connection with police headquarters and asked for my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide bureau.

"Lieutenant Donaldson," his growl hit me in the ear.

I said: "This is Turner. I've got a nice fresh bump for you to investigate."

He let out a bellowing yelp. "What, again? I wish you'd retire and go back to Philadelphia. Who's dead?"

"A frail named Loline Lamont. And I almost got a dose of the same gun-poison myself," I tacked on grimly.

"The devil you screech! How did it happen and who did it?"

I said: "Meet me in Westwood right away and I'll feed you all the answers." I slipped him Sherry Sheffield's address, and hung up. Then I heaved my heft out of the apartment and lurched down to my jalopy; souped the life out of it.

MY BRAKES showered spraying sparks in front of the Sheffield igloo just as Donaldson's official sedan came up behind me. He lumbered forth. "Okay, genius. Let's have the dope."

"Hold your horses and keep your rod handy," I snapped. "I think you're about to make a pinch." I led him to Sherry's portal and fingered the jingle button.

Sherry opened up. I grabbed her, hauled her toward the library. Margot and Mark Bannerman and the Melville bozo stared at me as I barged in. Bannerman got a befuddled expression in his gentle peepers, the blonde younger sister turned pale around the borders when she fastened the squint on Donaldson

and his badge, and Art Melville's sandy eyebrows pulled together in a thundercloud scowl as he noticed my arm around Sherry's waist.

"Get your hands off my fiancé," he rasped and moved toward me with his maulies balled.

I said: "Nuts to you and your jealousy, bub. I'm about to thumb a killer."

The instant the words were out of my kisser, Sherry blew her top; turned on me like a brunette banshee. "You double crossing creep! You promised you wouldn't tell—" Then she tried to claw a red network on my puss with her long nails.

I hated to pop her but I had to. I made a loose fist, massaged her on the dimple, sent her sailing backward to land in an overstuffed chair.

"Sorry, babe," I said. "But after I gave you that promise, you released me; agreed I was to do whatever was necessary."

Melville's freckles writhed like red dimes as his face screwed into a raging grimace. "You stinking son! I'll teach you to hit the girl I love!" He picked lip a heavy glass ash tray and tried to bean me with it.

He didn't hurl the thing, though, because Mark Bannerman grabbed his arm. "Don't, Art! Don't—!"

The scenario scribbler shook him off. "Get away from me! I'll kill the louse." Then he froze when he saw Dave Donaldson's service .38 making faces at him.

Dave said: "If you think I wouldn't blast, start something."

"But—but—"

I raised my own voice a notch. "Quiet, dope. This is a murder beef."

"It is not!" Margot Sheffield squalled. "You won't pin a killing on me that never happened!"

I tossed a sour grin at the yellow-haired doll. "Thanks for admitting that much, beautiful. It clears the air, sort of. And it puts you in the grease up to your eyes."

"How d-do you mean that?"

I SAID: “You’ve just confessed complicity in the blackmail setup against your sister. You knew perfectly well you didn’t croak anybody. You knew that whole scene in the Laurel Canyon cottage was a phony. You *had* to know it, because you voluntarily posed for the flashbulb snapshots that purported to show you in the act of shooting Dee Warren. But there never was any Dee Warren. She was a dame named Loline Lamont, a studio hairdresser and makeup wren and wearing a red wig and a false conk stuffed with a calf brain.”

“All right. So she wasn’t really murdered. So you can’t do anything to me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, babe. I can do plenty to you—because Loline did get bumped, later. Just as she was about to spill the name of the guy she was working for. The guy behind the whole shakedown scheme; the only one who could have benefited. The only one who could give you what you wanted, bribe you into plotting against your own sister. In other words, a man who offered you a movie career—Grab him, Dave! He’s getting away! *Nail Mark Bannerman!*”

The colorless little independent studio mogul was scuttling toward the door even as I yeped. And when he realized he was in a jackpot, he pulled a roscoe, triggered a slug in my general direction.

Dave Donaldson’s bullet was a split instant ahead of Bannerman’s blast. The .38 Police Positive roared: *Ker-whang!* and an ounce of lead smashed the producer’s wrist, deflected his aim, then continued on into his soft elly-bay. He squealed like a butchered pig and slowly doubled over.

I said: “That’s what you get for being greedy, pal. You had a gold mine in Sherry

Sheffield but you weren’t willing to pay her what she was worth. So you increased her salary—but doped up a plan to blackmail her out of two thirds of it. No matter how much you might pay her in years to come, the lion’s share would always be returned to you through your secret shakedown racket. Or anyhow that’s how you hoped it would work.”

“God . . . I’m bleeding . . . dying . . . I’m on fire. . .”

“It’ll be worse in hell,” I told him. “Everything might have been fine if you’d stopped at a phony murder. But when you put the genuine chill on Loline Lamont to keep her from talking out of turn, you fixed your own clock.”

He didn’t hear me, though. He was already defunct.

Art Melville stared at me. “I hope you don’t think I was mixed up in this, Sherlock. I slugged you in Laurel Canyon because I’d seen you kissing Sherry—”

“Skip it. I don’t blame you for being jealous. She’s a mighty sweet dish. Send me an invite to the wedding and I’ll call it square.”

Then Margot Sheffield started whimpering. “Sis . . . Sherry, honey . . . don’t have me arrested . . . I let Bannerman t-talk me into the blackmail scheme because I wanted a career like yours. . .”

If I’d been in Sherry’s shoes, I’d have kicked the yellow-haired cookie’s teeth down her throat. Instead she lifted her younger sister off her knees. “I forgive you, Margot.”

I said: “You fool!” and ankled out into the night, drove home, forgot the whole lousy mess by going to bed with a bottle of Vat 69.