

DEAD MAN'S GUILT

By Robert Leslie Bellem



That blow did it. I toppled into the opened grave.

Everybody knew Kilgore had been killed trying to escape from San Quentin. Yet now this girl, who knew all the facts in the case, pleads with Dan to save her from the dead man!

IT WAS raining gophers, golliwogs, and gremlins as I ankled through the midnight with a dripping slicker on my framework, a damp gasper in my kisser, and a maniac problem on my mind. After killing nearly a fifth of Vat 69 in my apartment stash during the course of the evening, it had suddenly struck me that maybe a stroll in the storm might help me solve the puzzle that pestered me; but the farther I walked, the more I realized I wasn't getting anywhere. I still couldn't figure how a cadaver could come back to life and peter a private wall-safe to the tune of fifty grand in sparklers.

Sloshing along, I cursed myself for being a professional ferret when there were so many easier ways of making a living—such as punching rivets at Lockheed or running a welding outfit for a shipyard. While I was at it, I also cursed

Lew Blake, the Paravox producer, for losing that fortune in diamonds; damned my own stupidity in accepting him as a client.

Most of all, though, I swore at the fingerprints which had been found on the steel door of Lew Blake's looted vault in the library of his sumptuous Beverly Hills wigwam. They were the dabs of a hood named Jerky Kilgore, a three-time loser who'd got blasted to his ancestors up at San Quentin a couple of months before while trying to pull a crush-out. Being deceased, how could this Kilgore character have returned from the grave to glom a hatful of Hollywood rocks?

The mystery was about to drive me off my chump; and instead of helping me to think, my walk in the rain was only putting me on the verge of pneumonia. I turned, headed back toward my bachelor igloo;

and then, suddenly, I froze in my tracks. From the dark block ahead of me came a she-male shriek, high pitched, penetrating, full of terror and surprise.

I SAID: “What the—?” and reached for the .32 automatic I always carry in a shoulder holster; started hurtling toward the source of that ugly bleat. I’ve been a private snoop for a long enough time to tab trouble a mile away; and this screech had all the earmarks of dirty doings at the crossroads. Some jane was in a jackpot; and I’m a sucker for damsels in distress.

Sprinting, I gained the far corner and went blipping around the turn; piped a night-owl cab parked at the curb. Its driver was on the sidewalk, leaning over a sprawled form.

The form belonged to a young brunette cupcake with more curves than a streamlined pretzel. At the moment, however, her piquant puss was as pale as watered milk and her glims were walled back until the whites showed. She was wearing a shoddy topcoat and a threadbare frock, and in her general appearance she resembled a quail who’d just been rendered defunct via the murder route.

I waved my roscoe at the cabby. “Did you cream this chick?” I snarled.

He turned green around the fringes. “For the luvva Mike, nix! Don’t say things like that, pal! I never done nothin’ to her. I never even laid a finger on her!”

“Somebody did.”

He moaned: “That’s where you’re wrong. Look. I just lugged a drunk into his flat across the street, see? So I’m comin’ back to my hack when I pass this cutie. She’s starin’ over her shoulder at somethin’ or somebody, y’unnerstand, when all of a sudden she makes with the big yodel and folds like a paper bag. Passes out cold right under my eyes!”

While he was giving me this routine, I

stooped to inspect the brunette filly at closer range; jammed a palm against her soaked coat and felt her heart beating, slowly, irregularly. There weren’t any visible bruises or contusions on her conk, so maybe the jehu was leveling.

“Looks as if she swooned,” I said.

“Hunh? Is that all?” he let out his breath in a sigh of relief. “Gosh, Cap, you had me scared spitless for a minute, wavin’ that gat and accusin’ me of—”

I said: “Stow the chatter, bub,” and hefted the unconscious doll in my arms. She was light, fragile, dainty; a delishful dish in spite of her rain-drenched condition. “Open up your chariot so I can take her where it’s warm and dry.”

“Yeah, sure.” He jumped obediently. “You want I should haul you to a hospital or somewhere?”

“My apartment joint is just three blocks ahead,” I said. “Put some ethyl in the works and show me some speed.”

HE SALUTED, got going. Presently he helped me tote the black-haired wren up to my third-floor tepee and deposit her on the davenport in the living room. I fished a five out of my wallet and handed it over. “Thanks for the lift, cousin.”

“Yeah. You’re welcome. Thank you for this dough.” Then he hesitated. “Before I powder, how’s for tellin’ me your name? Just in case anything comes up, y’unnerstand.”

I said: “I’m Dan Turner, private skulk.” His optics widened with what looked like hero worship. “The dickens you preach! Gosh, I been readin’ about you for years but I never had no idea I’d ever meet up with you. Dan Turner, huh? Well, I’ll be—!” And he hauled bunions.

I closed the door after him, ditched my slicker, and went to work on the senseless jessie. Her breathing was shallow and her peepers were still walled back; but when I

sniffed her kisser, I couldn't smell any trace of alcohol, so I knew she wasn't plastered. In fact, there didn't seem to be very much wrong with her except exposure and shock.

I peeled her out of her soggy coat, warmed a blanket, and wrapped her in it. Then I dribbled a jorum of Vat 69 down her flaccid hatch.

The skee brought results as soon as it hit bottom. She opened her lamps; sat up wildly. A strangling wail came bursting out of her gullet as she glued the foggy glimpse on me; and then she let the blanket slide off her shoulders as she grabbed me. "S-save me . . . !"

"Take it easy, hon," I said. "You're okay."

"But . . . but I'm afraid! You m-mustn't let him g-get me . . . !"

"Mustn't let who get you?"

"Jerky Kilgore!" she whimpered.

I stared at her, my peepers popping like squeezed oysters, and the short hairs prickling at the nape of my neck. "Did you say Jerky Kilgore?"

"Y-yes . . ."

A FLABBERGASTED sensation slugged me. This made the second time within twenty-four hours that Jerky Kilgore's monicker had been flung at me, since it had been his fingerprints they'd found on the door of Lew Blake's looted safe. I felt like a guy having hallucinations.

"Listen, sis," I growled. "Talk sense. Kilgore is defunct. He got plugged to glory two months ago while trying to lam from San Quentin. He was doing a life stretch for shoving a .38 pill down a bank watchman's throat without a prescription."

"I know it," she whispered frantically: "I know he's dead. And yet *I saw him tonight . . .*"

I said: "You couldn't have. How can a

corpse come back to life? You probably lamped somebody that resembled him, is all."

She shivered like a kitten coughing doorknobs. "No! Th-that's the queer part of it. The m-man I saw didn't even look like Jerky, except for his eyes. I'd know th-those eyes anywhere. He stared at me in the rain, and I felt a cold chill going through me. I screamed, and th-then, everything went b-black . . ."

"Whale feathers," I scoffed, although there was a shudder going up and down my own spine. "Nobody can stare at you with a dead man's glimmers. I'll prove it."

"H-how?"

I said: "Doc Wyeth lives in the apartment below. He was head surgeon at the Big House until a month ago when he fell heir to a scad of scratch and retired. He did the post mortem on Kilgore's remainders, so all we have to do is ask him just how deceased the guy was after that attempted crush-out."

She moaned, locked her arms tighter around me. "D-don't g-go away! Don't leave m-me alone! I'm scared Jerky will come here and k-kill me!"

"Why should he?" I humored her.

"Because I'm Rosa Rovella."

THE INSTANT she told me her name, I caught hep to the setup. Rosa Rovella had been the Kilgore mug's moll in the old days, until he gave her the gate in favor of a frill named Margie Thayer—a bleached blonde number who sang songs and did a dance act in a night spot out on the Sunset Strip. And it was this same Rovella quail, now clinging to me like wet string, whose testimony had sent Jerky Kilgore to the bastille. She'd busted his alibi in the matter of that bank watchman's croaking, thus getting even with him for brushing her off.

I set fire to a gasper. "No wonder

you're upset, hon. Maybe Jerky's specter is spooking you."

"N-no. It wasn't a g-ghost. *I saw his living eyes!*"

I unfastened her from my wishbone. "Doc Wyeth will soon disillusion you about that. Wait here." And I barged into my bedroom, picked up the phone, got the desk clerk downstairs to jingle the medico's stash.

You could hear the bell tinkling in the flat below, although it took Doc a long time to wake up and unprong his receiver. Presently his sleepy voice said: "Yes?"

"That you, Doc? This is Turner upstairs."

He gave vent to profane remarks about dopey dicks that roust people from their beauty snoozes. "What's on your mind, Sherlock?"

"I want to ask you something important."

He said: "No, I won't come up and join you in a snifter. Go soak your head." He wasn't sore, though. Just kidding me.

"Guess again," I told him. "It's not an invitation to indulge in spirits. Not the kind that comes in bottles, anyhow."

"What other kind of spirits are there?"

"That's what I'm wondering," I said. "Do you remember a bozo by the name of Jerky Kilgore up in the state gow?"

"Sure I remember him. Why?"

"Was there anything phony about his demise? I've got a lassie up here who thinks she piped him on the street tonight."

"She must be suffering from dementia tremens," Doc made with a Bronx cheer. "Kilgore was very thorough cooled by a bullet in his giblets; by now the cutworms are probably enjoying his eyeballs for dessert."

I said: "You're positive?"

"I ought to be. Nobody claimed his cadaver, so I put in a bid for it and got it; dissected it in my private lab. When I was

finished, I had the pieces buried in a plot I bought for him down here in Forest Sward Cemetery. It was the only way I could repay him for the privilege of probing through his cogwheels."

I said I appreciated the information, apologized for calling at this late hour, and rang off. Then I stepped back into my living room. "You were haywire about seeing Kilgore, sweet stuff," I told the brunette doll on my davenport. "He's not only deceased, but he's also interred in small chunks."

She didn't answer me, didn't even move. Then I noticed that my front door was ajar, and an ugly hunch sneaked up my slacks; nipped me. I catapulted across the rug, took a swivel at the jane.

THERE was a sharp, triangular wound in her chest; crimson gravy was leaking out of it in a thin stream. Some dirty disciple had beefed her with a shiv while I'd been phoning down to Doc Wyeth, and now she was as dead as silent movies.

ILUNGED for the phone again, contacted Wyeth, begged him to come upstairs as fast as his high blood pressure would let him. Three minutes later he barged into my bailiwick in pajamas and dressing gown, his grey hair touseled and an expression of bewilderment on his mush. He took a hinge at Rosa Rovella and said: "Too bad, Hawkshaw. There isn't anything I can do for her. There's nothing anybody can do—except an undertaker."

"Yeah," I snarled. "And that puts me in a crack!"

"How so?"

"She got butched while I was talking to you the first time; but how can I prove it? Moreover, I can't stash her body anywhere, because there's a certain taxi

driver who knows she's here. His testimony will put me in the grease when the law starts asking questions."

Wyeth gave me the suspicious glimpse. "You had no reason to kill her, did you?"

"Certainly not!" I caterwauled. "But in order to prove my innocence, I'll have to put the arm on whoever is really guilty." I grabbed my hat and raincoat; made for the door.

Doc said: "Leaving?"

"And quick! I've got places to go and people to see. Do me a big favor and call my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide bureau; tell him the score. I'll be back bye and bye—maybe."

Then I powdered hellity-larrup down to the basement garage, piled into my jalopy and sent it roaring up the ramp in a shower of sparks. Instants later I was driving through the storm under a full head of steam, going no place in particular but keeping my throttle wide open.

The longer I rolled, the more a certain question buzzed in my think-tank. It kept growing bigger and bigger; finally convinced me that my whole future might depend on the answer. And there was just one way to find out what I craved to know.

I started circling block after business block until I spotted a small neighborhood hardware store. It was closed, of course; not even a night light showed inside, thanks to the dimout regulations along the west coast. I aimed for the alley behind the shop, parked, left my motor running. Then I gumshoed to the back door, tried a few keys from my ring of masters and skeletons until I found one that worked.

Three minutes later I was inside, sneaking around and risking an occasional ray from my pencil flashlight. Presently I located the tools I needed: a spade and a pick. I tossed a ten spot on the counter in payment, glommed the implements of

manual toil and ankled out to the alley again; whereupon bad luck dealt me a bunt on the beezer.

Evidently the hardware dispensary was wired with an electrical protective gadget against burglars, and the alarm must have sounded off at the nearest precinct police station when I forced my way in. In turn, this had caused a radio bleat to go out; and now there was a prowler car in the alleyway. A brass-buttoned hero yeeped: "Freeze, heel!"

I TOOK a long chance, hauled out my lawn heater and triggered a slug past his conk, just close enough to put the fear of Whozis in him. He let out a startled bellow; took refuge behind his buggy. I snapped another shot, this time at his right front retreat. It was practically sacrilege to puncture that skin when rubber's so scarce; but at least the tire could be vulcanized, whereas I might not be so fortunate if the cop made a hole in me.

Moreover, it was necessary to cripple his crate to keep him from trailing me when I got under way. So I made doubly sure; put a pill through his other front balloon. Then I plunged into my waiting bucket, clashed the gears and went away from there like a turpented tomcat; headed for Forest Sward Cemetery over in Glendale.

There wasn't much traffic on Los Feliz, thanks to the storm and the late hour. It wasn't much more than fifteen minutes later when I dragged anchor at the swanky graveyard's wrought iron portals and honked the watchman awake. He came forth, rubbing his glims and muttering.

I gave him a flash at my special tin; waved a twenty beneath his trumpet. "Folding money, uncle," I said. "All yours if you'll listen to reason."

"Twenty bucks is reason enough for

me to listen to anything, mister,” he grabbed at the geetus. “What’s cooking?”

“I want the location of Jerky Kilgore’s resting place.”

He put the squint on me. “Very important?”

“Plenty.”

“Is it worth another twenty to you?”

I fished out a ten. “Split the difference. Take it or leave it, you chiseling old creep.”

He clawed the cabbage out of my mitt, went into his sentry box, consulted some plot charts. Presently he came forth and gave me a pencil-scrawled map on the back of a greasy envelope. “Follow this. You can’t go wrong.”

Then he unbarred the gates and let me through.

I drove along the winding road with my windshield wipers wigwagging and cold shivers playing leapfrog down my spinal column. A graveyard on a rainy midnight is my idea of a lousy place to play games; but the job had to be done if I wished to keep my elbows out of the pokey. So I snailed on in slow second gear, stopping now and then to orient my position by the penciled map; and presently I came to Kilgore’s grave.

For safety’s sake I doused the headlamps; left only the parking lights burning. Then, in the dull glow, I got busy with my pick and shovel; started digging in the water-soaked earth while the storm strickled down my neck in gallon lots.

It seemed hours before I spooned away the last clinging blob of muck and uncovered the coffin. I wrenched at its copper fastenings, pried the lid open—

The casket was empty.

THERE was something weird about peering into that satin lined box without finding any contents. I remembered all the stories I’d ever read

about werewolves, vampires, and zombies—those undead characters who supposedly come out of their graves to raise hell with ordinary citizens. Could Jerky Kilgore have turned into such an impossible monstrosity, roaming the night until he satisfied his yearning for vengeance by shoving a shiv through the brunette Rosa Rovella’s ticker?

The answer was no, of course. I was a dope even to think of any such screwball supposition. There was a more lucid explanation somewhere for Kilgore’s empty coffin and it was up to me to find it, pronto. I scrambled out of that hole in the ground; turned toward my jalopy. Whereupon a black, batlike shape detached itself from the shadows and swooped at me.

I gasped: “What the—!” and tried to duck, but I was a split second slow. I hadn’t been expecting an attack; wasn’t set for it. In consequence, the flitting figure caught me flat-footed; maced me over the noggin with something that felt like the business end of a mashie-niblick. Whatever the weapon was, it took a generous divot out of my haircut and filled my grey cells full of skyrocket. I toppled backward, lost my balance and landed kerplump in the vacant casket.

Then a shovelful of mud caressed me in the kisser, nearly plugged up my schnozzle. I snapped out of my trance; realized I was about to be buried alive.

I surged upright, spitting grass roots; unlimbered my cannon and took aim at the batlike shape that was spading dirt in my direction. “Now then, you stinking son!” I yodeled. And I yanked on the trigger.

Nothing happened because in my excitement I’d forgotten to unlatch the safety catch. By the time I rectified this mistake, the black shadow-figure had pivoted and was racing off through the rain. I lurched in pursuit, screeching like

an enraged banshee and trying to get a fair shot at my quarry. The way things turned out, though, a bullet wasn't necessary. By accident the fleeing form tripped, stumbled, pitched headlong and fetched up with a terrific thud against some departed party's marble monument. There was a brief flopping, the way a turkey beats its wings after the axe has kissed it in the neck; and then silence settled.

I gained the spot, squirted a beam from my torch, saw that the batlike figure was nothing more than an ordinary guy wearing a black rubberized poncho to keep off the storm. He was flat on his features; and the top of his cranium was even flatter where it had bashed against that gravestone. The impact had practically driven his scalp down his throat. He was deader than hamburger.

And when I rolled him over, I recognized him. He was the taxi driver who'd helped me lug the black-haired Rovella quail into my apartment stash!

ONE GANDER at his defunct puss gave me the answer to the entire enigma; or anyhow I figured I could reconstruct the puzzle now. It would take a lot of shenanigans to prove it, though; and meanwhile, time was leaking away faster than sand through a sieve. Something had to be done—but quick.

I hoisted the cabby's limber remnants; staggered back to my bucket and opened the rumble seat, dumped him inside the deck, slammed the lid shut again. Then I slid under the wheel and aimed for the cemetery exit so fast my rear tires smoked like Pittsburgh stogies. Back through Glendale I yammered; then out Hollywood Boulevard and over to the Sunset Strip. In less than twenty minutes I was barging into a night spot known as the Diamond Hat.

I used the side entrance for employees, however; in my muddy condition I might not have got past the head waiter at the front door. There was an elderly yuck guarding this side portal, and I flashed two fives at him. "How about it, grandpa?" I said.

He growled: "I don't savvy the drift, Jack."

"Skip it. I'd like a few minutes with Margie Thayer in her dressing room. You know Margie. A blonde fluff; sings and dances in this drop."

"Oh, yeah. Sure." He took the lettuce. "Fourth door on your left. Better wait a while, though. She's got company."

"Man, woman or what?"

The old guy showed me the snags he used for teeth. "That ain't for me to say. It wears pants, is all I know."

"In Hollywood, pants don't spell a thing," I said. Then I wandered to an alcove, leaned against the wall with my glimmers glued on the Thayer wren's door.

Presently it opened and a chunky monkey ankled out, wiping a smear of lipstick off his smirking yap. He was bald, thick-chested in a tailored tuxedo that must have nicked him at least three hundred onions. But he could afford it. He was Lew Blake, the Paravox producer—one of the biggest shots in the galloping tintypes and my current client, the one whose wall safe had been burgled to the tune of fifty G's in diamonds.

Now, what had he been doing in Margie Thayer's dressing quarters?

Judging from the scarlet goo on his mush and the contented leer in his optics, I could make a good guess. And it all meshed in with the theory I'd formulated; for which reason I didn't brace him or let him know I was anywhere in the vicinity. Instead, I waited until he scrambled; and

then I beat my knuckles on Margie's portal.

"Who is it?" a she-male voice demanded.

I said: "Company, babe," and slid over the threshold.

I PRODUCED my roscoe. "Hi, toots. How would you like to have your vitals ventilated?"

"Wh-what?" she went pale under the rouge. "Wh-who are you?"

"Dan Turner, private snoop."

"I—I'm innocent!" she bleated. "You've got nothing on me, understand? Not a thing!"

I said: "Better wait until I accuse you before you start popping off. Maybe I'm just here for information."

"What k-kind of information?"

"Well, for one thing, didn't you used to be Jerky Kilgore's sweetie before he got sent to San Quentin?"



Her shoulders twitched as if I'd nudged her with a lighted cigar. "What if I was?"

"So I want to know where Jerky is

now."

She made a bitter mouth. "In hell, probably. Everybody knows they burned him down when he tried to escape."

"You lie like a busted gas meter, hon," I reached out, grabbed her. "Kilgore's been hacking a taxi right here in Hollywood no later than tonight. Come on, admit it before you get into serious trouble. And another thing. What's between you and that Paravox mogul, Lew Blake? Did you get thick with Lew so you could case his wall-safe and tip Jerky Kilgore where to find the sparklers he glommed?"

IT WAS a shot in the dark, but it scored a clean hit. Margie sagged like damp laundry; and as she crumpled, she gave issue to a terrible shriek. The following instant I heard footfalls racing along the outer corridor, drawn by the commotion.



There was only one thing to do, so I did it. I leaped toward the dressing room window, raised it, tossed my tonnage over the sill and out into the storm. Then I lunged for my coupe, sent it rocketing

back toward town. Presently I was ankling into Dave Donaldson's office down at headquarters. Dave sat at his desk, looking as sour as a pint of dill pickles. He glanced up, spotted me, leaped out of his chair as if it had been a nest of rattlesnakes.

"You!" he yeped.

I said: "In person. How's your stomach ulcer?"

"Stew my stomach ulcer, you drunken slob. What I want to know is, why did you stab that brunette cookie in your apartment?"

"I didn't. I know who did, though. I've got Jerky Kilgore out in my bucket," I added casually.

He stared at me as if expecting to see me start foaming at the mouth. "Are you crazy? Kilgore's dead!"

"Extremely," I agreed. "He bashed his noggin against a marble headstone in a cemetery less than an hour ago. Come outside with me and I'll prove it."

Dave sidled in my direction. "Okay. But if you're pulling a fast one—"

"I'm not," I told him. We barged outdoors and I lifted the deck of my jalopy's rumble, showed him the taxi driver's remainders. "Meet the Kilgore character."

Dave said: "Now I'm sure you're nutty. This makes the second kill you've accomplished tonight. Stick out your flippers for the bracelets."

"Take it easy," I backed off. "This is really Jerky Kilgore whether you believe it or don't. I know somebody who'll identify him beyond question."

"Who?"

"Doc Wyeth in my apartment building. Let's go ask him. Then that homicide in my bachelor igloo will be all cleared up."

"Oh, yeah? We-ell, okay. I'll play ball with you that far." Then he drew his service .38 and added: "One false move,

though, and it gives tunnels in your tummy."

I closed the rumble seat; drove while Donaldson sat beside me and kept me covered. En route, I told him everything that had happened. Then, in front of my joint, I parked and said: "Help me lug the stiff inside so Doc can put the focus on it. I'm still a little weak from that crack on the cranium I got at the graveyard."

Dave grumbled but complied. Nobody was in the lobby to see us as we toted the corpus delicti up to the second floor; and then I propped the cadaver upright, rapped on Doc Wyeth's panel.

Doc opened up, took a hinge at the defunct cabby and snarled: "Blast you, Jerky, I told you not to come here!" He started to say something else, but the words strangled in his gullet as he piped Dave Donaldson and me. Whereupon he leaped backward and the corpse toppled across his threshold; hit the floor with its profile.

I sprang over the body, into the room. Donaldson followed. Doc Wyeth snatched an instrument case off his table, opened it, hauled out a cannon and aimed it at my vest.

But he never pulled the trigger. Donaldson's .38 was already in action. It sneezed: *Ka-Chow!* and a hot slug smashed the retired surgeon's gunwrist into a splintery mess. Doc dropped his gat and I yelled: "Okay, Dave, nail him. He's the murderer!"

THE REST was routine. After Wyeth had been bandaged and handcuffed, I opened his instrument case. It was full of bright, sharp-edged surgical tools. That is, they were all bright and shiny except one triangular-bladed scalpel that was stained with brown traces. It was the shiv Doc had used to butcher Rosa Rovella in my wikiup a while back.

I also tabbed a chamois sack; and when I opened it, a glittering fistful of sparklers spilled into my palm. They were the rocks that had been glommed from Lew Blake's wall safe in Beverly.

"Which buttons it up," I remarked as I fished out a gasper, set fire to it. Then I blew smoke in Doc Wyeth's pallid puss. "You're a gone goose."

"I—you—you can't—"

I said: "Jerky Kilgore got drilled at San Quentin in a crush-out attempt. You were the prison sawbones, and you reported that he croaked in your hospital ward. You lied. Actually you saved his life; claimed his supposed carcass for dissection purposes. That allowed you to load him in a meat wagon, get him out of the Big House.

Instead of burying him in Forest Sward, you merely planted an empty casket. Then, pretending you'd inherited some dough, you retired from your jail-surgeon job."

He cursed me.

I went on: "Next you made some plastic alterations on Jerky's mush, disguising him. You also entered into a deal with him. He was to peter a lot of safes, split the loot with you. It wouldn't matter how many clues he left on each job, because the cops figured he was deceased and wouldn't put out a dragnet for a dead guy. A blonde wren named Margie Thayer—Jerky's sweetie—was likewise in the picture. Her role was to vamp wealthy victims, find out where they kept their valuables and pass the information along for burglary purposes. That's what happened in Lew Blake's case. These are his diamonds, which Jerky swiped and handed over to you for fencing."

Wyeth's jowls were pasty. "You!"

"Jerky drove a cab to cover his real activities," I said. "Tonight, by accident, he was recognized by Rosa Rovella. She'd

been his moll in the old days. He realized he was in danger if she squealed on him, so he tried to bump her on the street; but I blundered along at that moment and he couldn't pull a kill in front of a witness. Circumstances forced him to help me carry her to my apartment."

"That doesn't prove I murdered anybody!" Doc yowled. "So all right, I'm guilty of being a burglar's accessory; but you won't pin a homicide on me!"

I said: "Guess again. As soon as Jerky left my stash, he came down and reported the whole thing to you. Then you sneaked upstairs to my door, eavesdropped, heard Rosa tell me about recognizing the Kilgore thug. Presently I left her, went into my bedroom to phone you. While I was in the bedroom, you sneaked into my living room; beefed the doll with this scalpel. Whereupon you hurried back down to your own joint in time to answer my ring—which accounts for the delayed response."

Wyeth lost his bluster. "Listen. Can't we square this? I'll let you take the jewels—"

"Quiet, rat!" I rasped. "You think I'd let you bribe me after you tried to have me croaked?"

"Wh-what do you m-mean?"

I said: "When I lammed from my flat, you figured I might pry into what was supposed to be Jerky's grave and learn the truth. So you contacted him, sent him after me with instructions to knock me off. Which almost happened, except that I turned the tables on him and chased him until he slugged his dome against a monument with extremely fatal results. Then I interviewed Margie Thayer; made her admit Jerky was still in circulation. That closed the case except for the slight detail of nabbing you."

Dave Donaldson tugged at the medico's nippers. "Okay. Let's take a ride

to the clink if Hawkshaw, here, is all through with his monologue." And he dragged Wyeth off the premises.

Later I copped a five-grand fee from Lew Blake for returning his stolen rocks, while the blonde Thayer chick took a two

year jolt at Tehachapi Prison for being mixed in the deal. That was the only thing I regretted. Margie looked a lot better in beads and talcum powder than she does in a denim uniform. . . .