

FOCUS ON DEATH

By ROBERT
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Outlined as he was before the blazing laboratory, he had no defense against the bullet that punctured his kerosene tin.



They were making a cowboy picture, and of course the Indians' arrows had all been blunted. Nevertheless it was an arrow with sharpened tip that came out of the welter of battle to kill the lovely star!

LOWERED the boom on that counterfeit cowboy. I had to because there was no other way out of a nasty situation. I popped him full on the jaw, put all my weight behind the blow. His legs lost their starch, his eyes walled back and he sat down on the floor, looking silly.

His name was Tim Windsor and he was a bulky fellow, all duded up in high heeled boots, Angora chaps, checkerboard shirt, and a ten-gallon Stetson. He'd caught me red handed in the act of putting the frisk on his portable dressing trailer and he came at me with his fists balled for action. If his first roundhouse haymaker had connected, my head would have gone sailing merrily through the dawn's early light.

As it was, I rolled with the punch; retorted with a copious dose of knuckle tonic. This drained all the truculence out of him. I blew on my hand and said: "Sorry, but you'll have to admit you asked for it."

He blinked at me foggily. "Who the blazes are you?"

"Dan Turner is the handle. You may have heard of me. I'm a private skulk in Hollywood and adjacent points."

Outside, dull grey daylight was beginning to leak over the distant serrations of the Sheep Hole Mountains. Tim Windsor's dressing trailer was part of a Paratone location unit that had bedded down in the Morongo Valley this side of Twenty-nine Palms.

The movie troupe, with Windsor in the stellar role, was about to start making spectacular exterior sequences for Mike Mazurkian's latest horse-opera thriller—an opus which was to be complete with wagon trains, cowpokes, pioneer scouts, Indians, and the inevitable United States cavalry. Rehearsal of the first big scene was scheduled to commence as soon as the sun peeped over the hills.

TEN minutes before, I'd lamped Windsor stealing away from his portable quarters; and it had seemed like a good time for me to sneak in there and glom a gander. I hadn't expected him to return so soon or I wouldn't have risked it; the truth is, I'd thought he was probably going forth on a date with some extra wren. I must have been wrong,

though, because he came back within less than ten minutes; caught me flat-footed.

Now he staggered upright, rubbed the bruise on his brow, and favored me with an ugly glare. "Turner, eh? I figured you for a common sneak-thief. If I'd known who you really were, I'd have bent a gun barrel over your scalp!"

"Anything personal?" I inquired.

"Plenty. I know why you're here. I'm wise to your game."

I was startled. "The devil you snore!"

"Sure. You wanted more evidence to back your shakedown play. You're the heel who's been bleeding me, threatening to inform my wife I had a crush on Trixie Trask."

He was barking up the wrong stump on that one. I hadn't even known he was overboard for his pert little brunette leading lady—whose husband, Steve Trask, was chief sound technician for the unit. I started to say so.

He didn't give me the chance. "You got fooled," he sneered. "Trixie and I are washed up. I just went out to tell her so. If you spill one word of this to my wife, I'll kill you!"

I realized he was hotter than a pawnshop pistol about the matter, and I didn't blame him. He had a swell frau and three nice kids; and evidently had slipped temporarily by falling for the Trask doll. That would be an easy thing to do; I'd been on a few parties with Trixie myself in the old days and she was a gorgeous number.

The way things stacked up, Windsor still loved his family; didn't want them hurt. Therefore he was breaking off his infatuation for Trixie Trask and craved to hush the whole episode. I felt a little sorry for him: I was almost tempted to tell him my real reason for being on location with Mike Mazurkian's unit and snooping around in strange dressing rooms . . .

WITHIN RECENT months several quickie outfits had hit the nation's silverscreens with shoestring western pix in which a lot of exterior mob scenes had looked suspiciously like shots swiped from Mike Mazurkian's expensive productions. Mazurkian, an Armenian with a genius for turning out smash hits, was fit to be tied.

Of course, in these stolen scenes, the camera angles were different and the shots themselves had been spliced into less elaborate stories. But nuts, one cowboy opus is pretty much like the next; and if a Poverty Row independent company can pirate some footage of a cattle stampede or Indian fight without cost, this footage makes the quickie pic a lot easier on the independent producer's bankroll.

Mazurkian, an old drinking crony of mine, had ankled into my office a few days before; spilled his grief on my shoulders. "Every time I toss forty or fifty grand into a big outdoor sequence, some bootleg photographer steals it from a distance by using a hidden camera with a telephoto lens. Then he sells the action to a cheapie firm; and before my own production is even ready for cutting, there's a quickie released containing all my best scenes!"

"How can scenes be glommed?" I'd asked him.

"They use the stuff as backgrounds in process shots featuring their own ham stars. And I can't trace the leak. The Poverty Row guys aren't members of the MPPDA, so I can't take measures against them within the association."

"Couldn't you sue?"

His round, swarthy map clouded. "What can I get from bringing a gang of bankrupts into court? Besides, they'd claim they bought these stock shots from individual cameramen for cash. I can't subpoena their books; they don't keep books."

"Where do I fit in, Mike?"

"Go on location with me. Find out what

rat in my troupe is tipping the bootleggers when and where I plan to shoot a spectacular sequence. Then we can grab the bootleg camera crew and have the deadwood on them: the pirated scenes on their undeveloped negative."

"Got any idea who's selling you out?"

"I sort of suspected Tim Windsor but I haven't anything definite on him. He's sore because I didn't tilt his pay the last time I picked up his option; but that's just a hunch. There's a thousand bucks in it for you if you take the job; another if you nail the pirates."

I said: "You've hired a hawkshaw, chum."

SO I went on location in Morongo Valley; and ever since midnight I'd been sniffing around the camp, prowling for clues. I hadn't found any, thus far.

I said to Tim Windsor: "You're all damp. I'm sorry to hear you're being blackmailed, but I'm not the shakedown artist. If you had a crush on Trixie Trask, that's your business."

He seemed to sense that I was leveling. "Then what were you doing here in my trailer?"

"Routine inspection. Yours wasn't the only one. I was looking for something I didn't find." I held out my mitt. "No hard feelings for that bop on the jaw I gave you?"

"Okay," he shook hands. "Skip it."

As I barged outside and made for Mike Mazurkian's big private tent to report no dice, the mountains reminded me of a reclining giant with a hangover. The giant was sick at his stomach; popped up a huge red maraschino cherry and felt better. It was the sun coming up. I started to scratch at the flap of Mazurkian's tent.

It opened ferninst my features and a brunette quail scuttled forth, wearing cowgirl costume and looking startled when she blammed into me. She was Trixie Trask, the pic's leading lady—a small bundle of

delishful dynamite, pretty as a Petty painting, fragrant as a department store perfume counter, diminutive as a Dresden doll, and spunkier than a regiment of Commandos.

She proved this by beating me to the verbal punch. Ordinarily a wren coming out of a bachelor's tent should have registered embarrassment; but not Trixie. "Step aside, please," she said tartly. "And stop ogling me."

I said: "I wasn't ogling, babe. I was just wondering. Look. Don't be so distant. After all, you and I used to be chummy before you hung a Mrs. on your name."

"All right, so we were chummy. So that's dead and buried. I don't like your expression. Wondering, were you? Well, don't." And she turned, pelted to the costly trailer she shared with her technician hubby, Steve Trask.

When she'd vanished, I barged into Mike Mazurkian's canvas shanty. I didn't tell him I had just met Trixie, though. "Hi," I said.

The tubby Armenian blinked at me. So did his sports jacket. It was the loudest piece of material this side of a block buster bomb dropping on Berlin. "Hi. Learn anything, Sherlock?"

"Nothing so far," I said. "I didn't find a thing in Tim Windsor's trailer to link him with the pirate camera setup. Maybe you were haywire about him."

"Maybe. Keep trying in other directions. I'm rehearsing an important take this morning and I don't want it chiseled."

I nodded; wandered back to my own shelter. Short of organizing a posse to frisk the foothills, I couldn't see how I was going to put the arm on any hidden photographers. The rough boulders offered plenty of concealment for such an outfit; places you couldn't spot from the valley in a month of Easters. It looked as if I'd bitten off more than I could chew.

Well, if I couldn't chew, I could at least

swallow. And I'd brought some fifths of Vat 69 with me in case of snake-bite. I ducked into my tent and said: "What the—"

Trixie Trask was perched on a chair, wafting me her coziest smile.



"HELLO, HANDSOME," she said pertly.

I scowled at her. "Scram."

"Don't be mad at me, Hawkshaw. I'm sorry I was snappy with you a while ago. I came to apologize."

I set fire to a gasper, made a sour mouth around the smoke. "Who do you think you're kidding, Toots? I know why you're buttering up to me. You're scared I'll tell your husband I lamped you coming out of Mazurkian's igloo."

Her piquant puss reddened to the lobes of her ears. "I was afraid you'd put a wrong construction on that. Mike and I were merely going over the script of today's takes."

"Okay. So what?" I growled.

"Promise me you w-won't mention it."

I said: "What's in it for me?" just to needle her. I really didn't care what she did; but I was sore because of the way she'd acted a while back. It would do her good to squirm a little, I decided.

She looked at me with mild revulsion. “Oh. So you want me to make you an offer. Well, all right, heel; will you trade your silence for some information?”

“It depends on the information, kitten.”

She said: “Quit fencing with me. I know why you’re here with the unit. And I can tell you exactly where to lay your hands on a certain pirate camera.”

I fastened the flabbergasted focus on her. “How did you know that was what I’m hunting?” I strangled, feeling like a guy who went fishing for minnows and hooked a whale.

“I knew because Mike Mazurkian told me.”

“Hm-m-m,” I said. “Could it be that you’re the one who’s been tipping information to the scene-snatchers?”

“No.”

“Then how can you tell me where to lay hands on the bootleg camera?”

She got a stubborn look on her puss. “Don’t prod me too far, gumshoe. I won’t reveal the source of my knowledge; but I will put you on the right track in exchange for your promise not to say anything to Steve about my being in Mazurkian’s tent. Is it a deal?”

“It’s a deal, babe. Spill.”

She spilled. She described a certain conformation of peculiar rocks east of the location spot; told me I’d find a guy there with telephoto equipment. I figured she was in cahoots with this anonymous camera bozo and was handing him the double cross to save her own skin from another kind of situation. That would be characteristic of Trixie. With her, Trixie always came first and to hell with everybody else.

Which was jake with me. I never question Lady Luck when I’m hitting the jackpot. I’d never intended to tell Steve Trask that I had seen his wife ankling out of Mazurkian’s quarters; it was no skin off my elbow. But if she wanted to buy my silence

with information, that was swell, too. I listened.

Presently, when her verbal mainspring ran down, I shooed her outdoors and fed myself three quick snifters of Scotch squeezings to fortify myself for my forthcoming sortie versus the camera pirates. I stepped from my tent—

Ka-blam! Something that felt like the Rock of Gibraltar hit me on the sconce, clouted me to dreamland. As I toppled, I made a subconscious clutch at the citizen who’d maced me. My fingers snagged tweed cloth, which tore. Then I passed out.

I WOKE up in the unit’s hospital tent with a knob on my noggin the size of a barrage balloon. The troupe doctor was telling me I was okay, thanks to the thickness of my skull.

“Yeah,” I sat up woozily. “A thick skull is the main qualification of a private snoop.” Then I piped Mike Mazurkian standing nearby, “Hey—”

He held up a swarthy, pudgy mitt. “Take it easy. Don’t get excited. Just tell me who hit you and I’ll take care of him in a very rapid way.”

“That’s the worst of it,” I snarled. “I didn’t tab the louse. But I’ve got some dope for you on the scene bootleggers. You’ll have to arrange the nab, though; I’m not well enough.” Then I told him where the pirate outfit was located.

His eyes gleamed with excitement. “How did you find out?”

“Trixie Tra—never mind how I found out. Send some tough boys into the hills and make the grab. That should be enough to satisfy you.”

He nodded. “Just as you say.” He went out.

I rested in the hospital for half an hour, then decided I was almost normal. I shambled from the surgery, moseyed over to where Mazurkian was starting rehearsals on

his important scene. This was to be an Indian attack on a wagon train. Pseudo Sioux were to ride their ponies at the outfit, shooting arrows tipped with suction cups; later the redskins would be driven off by the timely arrival of a cavalry troop. Mazurkian insisted on running through the entire routine before he would allow a camera to begin turning.

I hunkered, watched. Steve Trask, Trixie's sound-technician hubby, was fiddling with a rifle microphone; aiming it at the beleaguered wagons so he could pick up the dialogue spoken by Trixie and Tim Windsor. This rifle mike was a gadget resembling a series of steel tubes of varying length, all bunched together like so many shotgun barrels. By aiming it at the players, you could pick up their spoken words from quite a distance away—without much extraneous noise creeping onto the sound track. For that reason it's better than a parabolic mike, which collects everything.

Trask trained the dingus on the wagon being used by Trixie and Windsor as a barricade. That struck me as odd; since this was only a rehearsal, not a take. On the other hand, the cameras also were being focused; so maybe it was Mike Mazurkian's idea to have everything ready when rehearsal was over.

As I watched, I noticed that Steve Trask kept his left duke in the pocket of his loud tweed sport coat. A sudden hunch nipped me. I took a closer hinge.

Trask's pocket was torn; the flap missing.

I blipped back to my tent, looked on the ground. Sure enough, there was the hunk of cloth I'd torn off the character who had conked me a while ago. And this ripped fragment matched the pattern of Trask's tweeds!

So the sound expert was the guy who'd crowned me. But why? Had it been jealousy because he'd piped his wife in my quarters? Or was he the stool pigeon who was mixed

up with the pirate camera outfit?

I'M no mind reader; and my think-tank was still too scrambled for jigsaw puzzles. I went back to watch the rehearsal, hoping a stroke of genius would come my way so I could unravel the riddle. When Mazurkian's tough boys returned from the foothills with the scene-snatcher, I might put some pressure on the captured crook; make him name his accomplice here in the unit. In the meanwhile I was content to wait.

The action commenced. Indians came war-whooping and galloping at the wagon train, shooting their harmless arrows at their paleface enemies. Guns bellowed; dames screamed. Then I heard a yelp that didn't sound like playacting. It was raw, harsh, ugly; brought me upright in a thundering yank.

Mike Mazurkian also seemed to sense trouble. He grabbed a hand microphone and bellowed: "Stop!" over the loudspeaker system. Then Tim Windsor came sprinting toward us, looking as pale as wash on the clothesline.

"G-God!" he panted. "Mike—Steve—Turner—come quick! I need—it's—I mean Trixie—she's—"

I plunged past him with Steve Trask racing along in my wake. We reached the wagon train; froze.

The brunette Trask cupcake was sprawled motionless with an arrow through her breast; a genuine arrow with a sharpened tip. Ketchup was seeping from the wound and her peepers stared weirdly at the sky without seeing it. I didn't have to feel her pulse to know she was deader than Hitler's conscience.

THE KETTLES of hell boiled over when I announced that she was defunct. Trask gathered his wife's remainders into his arms; sobbed over her. Mike Mazurkian looked as if he might be going to be sick. The Indian

warriors went nuts, started jabbering and pointing to their quivers and proclaiming to all and sundry that none of them had fired a real arrow. They carried nothing but the kind with suction-cup tips.

Then the sound technician blew his top. He lowered Trixie to the ground; hurled himself at the mounted redskins. "I'll kill every stinking one of you! You murdered my wife—!"

I clipped him on the button; felled him. There was enough bedlam without having him add to the panic. To Mazurkian I rasped: "This is for the San Bernardino county authorities. Better contact them and get Trixie's husk to the hospital tent while I try to establish peace and tranquility."

That was easier said than done. And just when I thought I'd quieted the mob, there came a fresh eruption. Out of the distant foothills came three brawny prop men dragging a pasty-faced punk, roped and hogtied. One of this guy's captors carried a movie camera.

"We caught him," the one with the camera told me grimly. "He was taking telephoto shots of the rehearsal."

I said: "He was alone?"

"Yeah."

I made a snatch for the confiscated camera as an idea began to hatch in my grey matter. "Thrust the dirty creep in my tent; strap him to the cot so he can't powder." Then I aimed myself at the portable hospital layout.

Steve Trask was weeping droplets of brine as big as watermelons over his late lamented better half. Tim Windsor and Mike Mazurkian were off to one side, looking grim. The Armenian spotted me. "This smashes my pic to hellangone," he snarled. "I'll have to scrap every scene Trixie appeared in; re-shoot with another leading woman. There goes my budget!"

I gave him the vinegar glimpse. "Is that all it means to you? Don't you realize this is

croakery?"

His swarthy mush reddened. "Well, naturally I'm sorry she's dead. I didn't intend—"

I drew him outside; beckoned the handsome Windsor hambo to join us. "Look, you guys. It's not nice to speak unkindly of the deceased; but let's face facts. Trixie's private life was pretty hectic. She liked flirtations; maybe they were innocent, maybe not. Windsor might know."

Tim stiffened. "That was washed up. I told you so this morning."

"How about you, Mike?" I asked the director. "I caught her coming out of your igloo."

"We were going over the script, was all," Mazurkian growled. "What are you driving at?"

I shrugged. "Okay. Let's just say she was indiscreet. She even paid my tent a visit. Suppose her husband was jealous? Suppose he misjudged her and thought she was two-timing him? Maybe he bumped her for that reason. At least I'm fairly positive he was the one who bashed me at sunrise, right after Trixie left my quarters."

"Ridiculous!" Mazurkian scoffed. "The man's wild with grief; any fool can see that. And it's too real to be an act. Besides, while he may have slugged you, he couldn't have killed Trixie. I was standing alongside him when it happened. She was a good hundred yards away from us; and he didn't have anything remotely resembling a bow and arrow at the time."

TIM WINDSOR nodded violently "Sure. It was one of the Indians who shot a real arrow by mistake."

I said: "But the head prop man claims he went over every arrow before they were doled out. They were all tipped with suction cups. This is murder and I think I know the answer." I then turned toward the camera

setup. “Impound that rifle microphone. It may tell us plenty when we take it apart.”

“Take it apart?” Mazurkian twitched as if he’d been prodded with a red-hot poker.

“Yeah,” I said. “Maybe one of those tubes will prove to be a surprise. There may be a spring-propulsion mechanism in it—something that could shoot an arrow wherever the tube happened to be aimed.”

Mazurkian started giving me an argument. “I’m not going to tear down an expensive piece of equipment on any such screwball theory. After all—”

“You mean you don’t want the killer nabbed?” I hung the suspicious gander on him.

His glims wavered. “Well, sure I want him nabbed.”

“Then do as I say, because I think I can prove my conclusions plumb to the hilt. With this.” And I tapped the confiscated camera I was toting, the one that had been taken from the pirate in the foothills.

Mazurkian looked befuddled. “I don’t get it.”

I said: “Look. The scene-snatcher stole a telephoto shot of the whole episode from that spot up there where those rocks make a V. Unless I miss my guess, his lens would pick up your camera setup as well as the rehearsal.”

“Why would he film our camera setup? It would spoil the scene for him.”

“He couldn’t help getting it from that angle,” I explained. “He probably planned to mask out this part of it when he peddled his footage. He won’t have a chance to do any masking now, though. I’m going over to your portable lab where you develop your daily rushes. I’m going to have this bootleg reel printed. Maybe it will show Steve Trask releasing an arrow from his rifle mike.” And I toddled away from the hospital tent entrance, leaving Windsor and Mazurkian staring after me.



I never saw who hit me, but before I went down I'd get myself a handful of tweed cloth.
I never saw who hit me, but before I went down I'd got myself a handful of tweed cloth.

THE PORTABLE laboratory was an oversized truck trailer equipped with a fortune in apparatus. The guy in charge happened to be a friend of mine, luckily. I handed him the camera, told him what I wanted. He said: “Sure, Sherlock. Come on inside while I run the spool through the soup.”

We entered the trailer and he shut the door after us. The interior got as dark as the middle of an eight-ball. Under the faint glow of a hooded red bulb he switched on, we went to work on the pirated reel. Moments snailed by.

And then, suddenly, I smelled smoke. “Hey!” I whispered. “Is there a back door out of here?”

“Yes. But you can’t open it unless you want this film fogged.”

“Stew the film!” I yodeled. “Grab a hinge at that!” And I pointed to a licking tongue of flame seeping up the trailer’s main door.

In another instant the whole lab would be a roaring bonfire. My trap had worked—and I was the bait. My mind flashed back over

the whole mess, including the conversation I'd had with Mazurkian and Tim Windsor outside the hospital tent while Steve Trask wept over his defunct wife inside. I remembered the tone I'd used, pitched to carry a good distance. And I recalled Mazurkian's refusal to dismantle the rifle microphone.

I hurled my tonnage at the lab's emergency exit; and as I went plunging out into daylight I yanked the automatic I always carry in a shoulder rig. I went blamming around the laboratory trailer.

Somebody was still stooping by its main portal, pouring kerosene on the blaze he'd touched off. Nobody else was in sight. I triggered my rod, sent a slug into his kerosene can. I said: "*Got you, Tim Windsor!*"

THE COWBOY ham went pale under his grease-paint. His left mitt flashed to one of his holstered .44 hoglegs, hauled it from its leather. He didn't aim it at me, though. He put its muzzle to his chest, used his thumb on the trigger. The Colt yammered: *Ka-Chow!* and didn't sound like a blank cartridge. A spasm of pain contorted Windsor's pan and a sudden splotch of crimson gravy stained his checkerboard shirt. He sagged.

Mike Mazurkian came waddling toward the burning lab. My film-developing friend jittered at my elbow as he lamped his equipment going to glory in a shower of sparks. Out of the hospital tent pelted Steve Trask, drawn by the uproar.

I torched a gasper, stared down at the moaning Tom Windsor. "You skewered Trixie, bub," I said. "During the rehearsal you glommed an arrow, removed its suction cup, sharpened the tip. *You stabbed her with it.*" I blew smoke in his map: "An English author named Chesterton first figured out that particular paradox. He illustrated that if a dagger can be thrown like an arrow, by the

same token an arrow can stab like a dagger."

"How . . . did you . . . guess . . . ?" he choked.

"Logic. The Indians were sure they hadn't shot any practical arrows; the head prop man backed them up. It then rested between Steve, who might have discharged the barb from his rifle mike, or yourself, who might have done the stabbing from close range. You were the only one close to Trixie when she was rubbed out.

"I could attribute a possible motive to Steve. Jealousy. I likewise dreamed up a plausible reason why you might cool the wren. You'd had a flirtation with her and later got blackmailed for it. This morning you told her the romance was washed up. I think maybe she came back at you by admitting that she herself was the shakedown artist—and she wouldn't turn you loose unless you paid her off plenty. She was that kind. Money-hungry. Probably she was the one who was tipping the camera pirate to Mike Mazurkian's location scenes, accepting a cut of the geetus when the bootleg footage was peddled to the quickies.

"Anyhow, either you or her husband bumped her. You to stop a blackmail scheme or Steve because he'd been double-crossed. Then I got a piece of luck. The camera pirate was nabbed. I cabbaged his camera and baited a trap. Can you still hear me?"

"Yes . . ." he whispered. It sounded pretty weak. He was slipping his moorings.

I hurried through the rest of it. "Standing outside the hospital tent, talking to you and Mazurkian, I theorized that the scene-snatcher had caught the whole murder episode with his telephoto lens. I said this loud enough for Trask to hear, inside the hospital. Whichever one of you was guilty would be scared of what the bootleg reel might reveal. Maybe it would show the arrow coming from the rifle mike; or maybe it would show you stabbing the jane.

"I figured the guilty guy would pull some

stunt to prevent the film from being developed. Well, fire was the stunt that was pulled—and you're the one who set that fire. Therefore, you were the killer. You confessed it by plugging yourself in the bellows."

He coughed up a gob of red soapsuds. "It's . . . all true . . . but please . . . don't let . . . my family know . . ." Then he shuddered and quit breathing.

I took a hinge at Steve Trask. He didn't look so grief-stricken now that he knew the

truth about his departed wife. "I'm sorry I bashed you this morning, Turner," he said quietly. "Trixie only got what was coming to her."

Mike Mazurkian turned to direct a mob of extras and prop men who were squirting fire extinguishers on the blazing lab trailer. "It was all an accident!" he yelled at the troupe in thunderous accents. "Windsor's death and Trixie's. An accident understand?"

They understood. And that was how we left it.