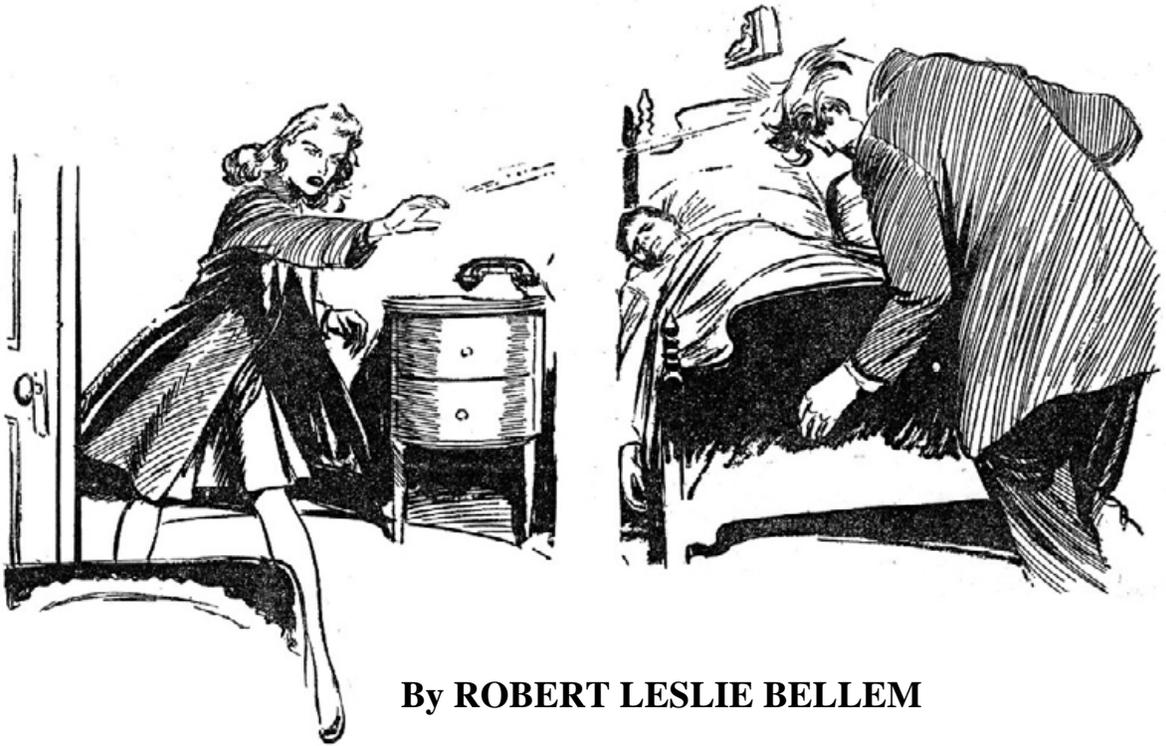


COFFIN FOR A COWARD



By **ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM**

The clean-living young movie star had emoted his final scene in the audible tintypes. He was now knifed deader than a poached egg, and maybe there'd been more in his life than was suspected by his associates. In any case, Dan Turner, having been in at the kick-off of this murder game, decided he'd throw his weight around until the final whistle!

YOU COULD see the kid was crooked. He listed tipsily at his table; lurched every now and then to keep from toppling out of his chair. I couldn't help watching him and wondering what the hell had caused him to get so plastered in public, particularly when his Titanic Pix starring contract contained a no-drinking clause on penalty of having his option dropped.

This was none of my business, of course, but it seemed screwy for him to come to a cafe like Plyman's to do his elbow-bending. Almost every cinema bigwig in Hollywood

dropped into the joint at one time or another during the evening; and I knew it wouldn't take too long for the gossips to spread the news all over town that handsome young Bruce Bonham was on a terrific brannigan.

That kind of rumor, properly authenticated, might well put the kibosh on his career in the galloping snapshots—a career which was just getting under way. Bonham was a comparative newcomer to the screen; had made a smash success in a couple of Grade-B turkeys and was now finishing up a stellar stint in an important Titanic opus that

would land him at the top of the heap. The box office customers had already tabbed him as a typical, clean-living American boy with no vices, no bad habits—the kind you’d want your own son to be. And a lot of people were going to be copiously disillusioned to learn he was tilting the bottle. He beckoned a passing waiter; pointed to his empty glass. “Refill,” he hiccupped.

“But Mr. Bonham, don’t you think you’ve had—?”

“I said refill!”

The waiter shrugged. “Very good, sir.” And he ankled off; came back presently with more giggle juice. Bonham tossed it down his hatch like a guy dying of thirst on the desert—or trying to drown a cargo of grief.

MY OWN TABLE was next to his; and for a while I considered interrupting my solitary supper to speak to him, urge him to powder while he could still navigate. But even as I debated the question with myself, I lost the chance. A jane joined the punk, sat down opposite him and began sounding off in a low, earnest tone.

“Listen to me, Bruce,” I heard her start in. Then her voice lowered to a husky undertone I couldn’t overhear; but her gestures indicated tension, bitterness. And the longer she talked, the sorer she seemed to get—particularly when he apparently refused to pay any attention to what she was saying.

I recognized the wren. She was Janet Moore, the Bonham kid’s co-star in that new Titanic pic; a taffy-haired muffin whose gorgeous exterior concealed a heart as big as a birdseed. You run into plenty of that type around the studios: dames so hungry for movie fame that they’ve forgotten how to be human. And when it came to selfishness, this Moore quail took the fur-lined trophy. She had the face of an angel, the curves of an houri from paradise, and the disposition of a Borneo cannibal.

That’s why I decided to steer clear of

young Bonham, now that Janet was with him. I’d had several encounters with her in the past; knew she hated my tripes. And I didn’t want to start a scene with her. She might tell me to mind my own damned business and emphasize it by baptizing me with a beaker of bourbon.

The way it happened, though, Bonham was the bozo that got baptized. I saw him shake his head stubbornly at the blonde cutie as if refusing a favor; whereupon she stood up, yodeled: “You dirty slacker, you can’t do this to me!” and tossed a brimming jorum of distillery squeezings in his mush.

He gasped, choked, made a lunge across the table at her. “Why, damn your eyes!” he snarled. Then somehow he got his mitt tangled in her taffy tresses before she was able to pull away. He yanked. The artful waves of her coiffure tumbled apart in golden ruins and she let go with a gush of guttersnipe language; grabbed a water carafe, started to bonk Bonham over the conk.

I said: “Hey, nix!” and surged to my pins, catapulted at her. After all, the punk was in no condition to defend himself—and moreover, I hated to see him get messed up in a common restaurant brawl with a twist like Janet Moore. So I nailed her from behind, got my arms wrapped around her. “Lay off, lady,” I growled.

She kicked backward, tried to skin all the rind off my shins with her high-heeled slippers. “Let me g-go! I’ll kill the louse!”

“Not while I’m among those present,” I grunted. Then I twirled her around, bounced her down into a chair so hard her uppers and lowers rattled. Before she could gather her scattered forces, I fastened the clutch on young Bonham, hustled him toward the exit. “Move fast, bub,” I whispered.

He mumbled drunkenly: “Wh-who are you?”

“Dan Turner, private pry,” I said. “Keep going.”

“Why should I? What’s it to you?”

“Plenty,” I told him as I nudged him onward. “It so happens that your employer is a friend of mine—George Reed, president of Titanic Pix.”

“What of it?”

I said: “George sank a scad of salad in your new production and he might drop the whole wad if the Hays office decided to blackball you off the screen for slugging a she-male in public. You wouldn’t want him to be compelled to shelve the opus, would you?”



“It wouldn’t matter to me. I’m washed up anyhow. And besides, Reed carries in—” All of a sudden the guy’s voice quavered off as we gained the front door. Then he choked: “Here . . . here he c-comes n-now!”

I LOOKED AHEAD, piped George Reed barging over the cafe’s threshold. He was a dapper little slug; looked a lot younger than his fifty years. He’d spent twenty of those years in the galloping-snapshot industry; had made himself one of the most respected independent producers in town, turning out three or four high-budget films a year and

releasing them through one of the major studios. Now he had a potential gold mine in Bruce Bonham—but the gold mine seemed to be on the verge of petering out via the alcohol route.

Which would be a bad thing for everybody concerned. And I was hoping it wouldn’t happen. I called: “Hey, George! Lend a hand here. Help me pour this lad home.”

“Good grief, Turner, what’s wrong! What—?”

“Bonham’s fried, is all,” I said. “I just jerked him out of what might have been a nasty scene. Janet Moore tried to crown him with a carafe.”

Reed could move fast when he had to. He pivoted on his heel, made for his sleek sedan at the curb. “Bring him here. We’ll run him to his own apartment.”

By this time Bonham was out on his props. I could see he wasn’t accustomed to jousting with John Barleycorn; and again I wondered what had impelled him to get saturated. I was still wondering when we reached his bachelor flat, stretched him out on his four-poster. But he was too stiff to do any explaining.

Reed said: “See if you can find a bromo in the bathroom, Sherlock. We’ll leave it on the bed table so he can take a dose when he wakes up.” Then, when I barged back into the room a moment later with a blue bottle, he added: “Or rather, you can pour some into him when he’s able to swallow it.”

“Me?” I said.

“Yes. I want you to stay here with him, make sure nothing happens to him.” Then the dapper independent producer steered me into the living room, whipped out his billfold, peeled a couple of century notes from his stack. He shoved them at me.

I said: “What makes you think the kid needs a keeper?”

“Well, you said Janet Moore tried to slug him.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I don’t trust that beautiful little witch,

Philo. She's poison. And she's been sore at Bonham all through the picture we've just finished putting in the cans. She thought his role overshadowed hers—and she was right. He has ten times the box-office attraction that she's got."

"You figure that's why she started the restaurant riot?"

George nodded soberly. "Very likely. There's nothing nastier than her particular form of professional jealousy. With a vixen like her, you never can tell what direction it might take. So I'm asking you to stick around, stand guard. Will you?"

I said: "Sure." After all, it isn't every night in the week a guy can pick up two hundred fish for doing nothing. And I'm in the snooping racket for all the lettuce I can collect. I want to save up a retirement fund before some wise disciple puts a pistol period on my gumshoe career.

Reed thanked me; said he was going back down to Plyman's eatery and try to smother the beef Janet had kicked up. "If I can keep it out of the gossip columns, we'll be okay," he said. Then he added: "If you get hungry in an hour or so you'll probably find a snack in the refrigerator." And he drifted.

AS SOON as I was alone I glommed a quick gander into the bedroom, saw the Bonham punk was resting quietly under the covers. I withdrew, made myself cozy in an easy chair, began burning gaspers and reading magazines.

This got boring after a while, though. So I prowled the premises in search of a cellarette with the idea of helping myself to a snifter of varnish remover; there's nothing like irrigating your tonsils to pass the time away. But there weren't any bottled goods in the stash; not even a cork I could smell.

Which seemed to indicate Bonham wasn't a tippler, ordinarily. Then why had he got swacked to the scalp this evening? Something must have been pestering hell out of him, I

concluded; maybe his studio difficulties with the Moore frail. A setup like that can worry a guy if he's sensitive.

Well, nuts; if I couldn't have a snort I might at least take George Reed's suggestion and make myself a sandwich to compensate for the supper I hadn't finished at Plyman's. I wandered into the kitchenette, found some sliced ham in the Frigidaire. I started exercising my molars.

And then a sound came to me, a cross between a hissing gasp and a muffled feminine bleat. It issued from beyond the living-room, faint, and subdued; and it was followed by pattering footfalls on soft carpet.

I whirled, dropped the fodder I'd been munching; caromed out of the kitchen; I was just in time to pipe Janet Moore as she staggered from young Bonham's bed chamber. She had made passable repairs to her coiffure which had been wrecked at Plyman's, but now it was her beautiful map that was falling apart. Her crimson kisser hung slack, her glimmers bulged like squeezed grapes and her complexion was floury under the makeup she wore. She looked like a doll with a compound case of the horrors.

An ugly hunch bit me on the brisket. I growled: "Hey, what the hell are you doing here? What's cooking?" and made a lunge at her.

But she was too sudden for me. She flipped across the room toward the open front door; picked up a brass book-end en route. She slammed the gadget at me; pitched a perfect strike. It took me full in the features, bounced off my button and rendered me unconscious.

WHEN I woke up, the taffy-haired wren was gone. All I had to show for her recent presence was a lump on my brow the size of a persimmon—and an ugly premonition that all was not kosher with the guy I was supposed to be bodyguarding.

I lurched upright, wobbled toward his

bedroom. He was still sprawled on the four-poster; but his position had altered. Now he lay at a screwy angle with his arms dangling overboard and the covers pulled down. There was something about his stillness that gave me the drizzling meemies. I approached him, fastened the focus on him, spotted a raw stab-wound in his bellows where a shiv had punctured him all the way to the ticker.

The knife wasn't around; but one swivel was all I needed to tell me the bad news. Bruce Bonham had emoted his final scene in the audible tintypes. He was deader than a poached egg.

Internal leakage had croaked him, apparently, because there wasn't much ketchup messing up the bedclothes. What little gravy he'd spilled was already dark, coagulated; which seemed to indicate I'd been stretched out senseless quite a while. And meantime the blonde Moore muffin would have had all the opportunity in the world to go into hiding.

I blipped to the phone in the living-room, dialed police headquarters. "Give me homicide in a hell of a yank!" I gurgled; and pretty soon I heard the voice of my friend Dave Donaldson.

The instant he answered, I said: "Dan Turner broadcasting—and I'm up to my adenoids in a bump-off. Flag your slacks to this address and bring a pork basket." I gave him the street number, the apartment location.

"Who's dead!" he asked me.

"Bruce Bonham, the Titanic juvenile. Somebody butched him while he was sleeping off a snootful." I hung up without mentioning Janet Moore; after the way she'd bashed me with that brass book-end I craved the personal satisfaction of putting the arm on her.

I waited an instant, then called George Reed's tepee. A butler had to get him out of bed, but pretty soon his voice drifted over the wire. "Hello?"

"This is Turner," I said. "I've got lousy tidings for you."

"Lousy tidings—?"

"Bonham's been cooled. Can you tell me where the Moore tomato hangs out?"

His tone thickened with dismay. "Great Godfrey, you don't m-mean she got past you and—?"

"Yeah, I mean exactly that. What's her address?"

He made an audible effort to steady himself; gave me the information I wanted. "She rents a pretty swanky house just this side of the Beverly line on Wilshire. But Dan—are you positive she's g-guilty?"

I said: "Damned positive," and rang off; shambled to the door, went out of the apartment building. Since I'd left my own jalopy parked in front of Plyman's hashery on Vine earlier in the evening, I had to do the next best thing. I flagged a cruising Yellow, piled into it, told the hacker where I wanted to go.

"And gun this skate," I added, flashing my special tin. "I'm on police business." Which was stretching the truth a trifle, but who was going to quibble with me?

THE cabby nodded, scorched his cylinders. We went away from there in a shower of shavings; walloped out Wilshire under forced draft. After a while we drew up before an ornate igloo and I barged forth, asked my cabby to wait for me. Then I made for Janet Moore's front porch.

It was dark there as I thumbed the bell. I stood to one side, pulled my .32 automatic from the shoulder holster where I always tote it. Then the door opened and the blonde chick peered outward. She had a topcoat on.

From the shadows I said: "Going anywhere, babe?"

"Why, no, I'm just getting in . . . Oh-h-h . . . you!" she gasped as she got a hinge at my map.

I stepped up close to her, jammed the muzzle of my rod against her tripes. "Make one wrong move and I'll feed you a red-hot

prescription,” I snarled. And I prodded her backward into the drawing room that resembled an interior decorator’s wishful thinking. Somebody had spent a terrific pile of pelf on the furnishings, not to mention the tapestry drapes and a rug that felt like walking on whipped cream.

I kept the taffy-haired jane covered; glued the glare on her. “Why did you do it, sister?”

“Y-you mean why d-did I hit you with that book-end? I—I was f-frightened. I thought you’d—”

I said: “Skip that part of it. I want to know why you stabbed Bruce Bonham.”

She got pale around the fringes; seemed to shrink four sizes in her threads. “That’s what I was afraid you’d say. I—I knew you’d accuse me. So I—I lost my head, slammed you w-with the first thing I could f-find. Then I d-drove home. Oh-h, please, Mr. Turner, d-don’t look at me th-that way—as if I were a—murderess!”

“How else should I look at you?”

“But—but I’m innocent! I didn’t k-kill him. You’ve got to believe me . . .!”

“I’d as soon believe Hitler’s promise to kiss all the Cohens in Berlin,” I said. “You croaked that punk and you’re going to pay for it.”

“I tell you I *didn’t* do it!” she whimpered; and her voice was so damned earnest I began to wonder if she might really be leveling. From what I knew of her acting ability, I didn’t think she could make a lie sound so completely convincing—but then this was just guesswork on my part.

I growled: “You say you just got home from Bonham’s flat?”

“Y-yes.”

“What were you doing there in the first place?”

“He had phoned me a little wh-while before, asking me to visit him so he c-could apologize for pulling my hair in the cafe. I didn’t w-want to go; I was still sore at him. But he begged, insisted. He said he was lying

down with a hangover but would leave the front d-door open. . . .”

“Nuts!” I sneered. “I was in the stash with him all the time. I didn’t hear him do any phoning—unless he sneaked the call over his bedroom extension while I was hunting a drink.”



He seemed to be asleep, until she touched him and pulled the covers down. Then she saw he was dead.

SHE took a step toward me. “I w-wouldn’t know about that. But I’m telling you the truth. He asked me to come to see him, and I did. I w-walked in; made for his room. He seemed to be asleep . . . until I touched him, m-moved him, pulled the covers down. Then I saw he w-was d-dead. . . .”

“According to that, somebody else must have sneaked in and put the chill on him ahead of you,” I grunted. “And I don’t believe a word of it. I wasn’t in the kitchenette that long.”

“You m-mean you’re going to put me in j-jail?”

I said: “Yeah. Let’s get started.” Whereupon she leaped backward, wheeled, started to run in nine directions at once like a cornered animal. I uncoiled my poundage, swarmed after her, tripped her to the rug. “You want to play rough, we’ll play rough,” I rasped.

She squirmed in my clutch. “Isn’t there . . . anything . . . that will persuade you to g-give me a b-break . . .?”

“I’m bribe-proof,” I snapped. “Now are you ready to go quietly, or shall I drag you by the ears?”

Brine swam into her hazel lamps, spilling over. “It w-wasn’t bad enough for Bruce Bonham to ruin the b-best chance I ever had in p-pictures. Now you’ve g-got to wash me out completely b-by putting me in p-prison . . . unjustly! I w-wish I were d-dead!” And she began sobbing softly, earnestly.

I said: “Stow it, baby, stow it. Maybe the jury will let you off easy.”

“And wh-while I’m being railroaded, the real killer will go free!” she wailed.

“What real killer? Tell me who else might have beefed young Bonham. Name any other possible suspect.”

“Wait a minute,” she seemed to be trying to remember something. Then, as I hauled her to her tootsies, she blurted: “Sam Parkhurst—!”

“What about Sam Parkhurst?”

“He’s an actors’ agent.”

“I know that much,” I said.

“Bonham was one of his clients.”

“Okay. So what?”

“So I saw Parkhurst in that apartment building when I w-went there tonight. On Bonham’s floor. Maybe he was coming out of Bruce’s flat. Maybe he—”

“Look,” I said sourly. “If you’re trying to put the phony finger on this Parkhurst character, it won’t work. Not unless you can show me a damned sound motive. Why should

an agent croak his best client—a bozo that represented copious commissions?”

“Out of spite, perhaps—because he was about to lose those commissions.”

“You mean Bonham was busting away from Parkhurst’s agency?”

She clammed up on me; got a sudden crafty look in her peepers. “Why don’t you ask Parkhurst that? I’m not accusing him. I just say I saw him in that apartment building. You want another suspect; maybe he’s it.”

I said: “Something tells me you’re sending me off on a wild goose chase so you’ll have a chance to powder. If that’s your idea, guess again. I’ll interview the agent, all right; but I’ll make damned sure you’ll be here when I get back.” And I dug out my bracelets, nipped her left wrist, snapped the other cuff to a heavy table-leg—above the cross-piece, where she wouldn’t be able to slide it off.

Then I found a phone book, looked up Sam Parkhurst’s address and blew out to my waiting Yellow.

FORTUNATELY the ten per center lived just a few blocks away. I roused him out of bed, hurled a question at him. “What were you doing in Bruce Bonham’s tepee this evening?”

He stiffened, turned red. “I fail to see where it’s any of your affair. If a man wants to call on a girl—”

“Oh. Visiting a jane, hunh? It couldn’t be that you were paying your respects to the Bonham punk?”

“Me pay my respects to that misguided dimwit?” Parkhurst glared at me indignantly. “Hell, no! If I never see him again it’ll be too damned soon. Any silly lug who’d toss away his future for the sake of his screwball convictions in times like these—well, nuts to him!”

“What about his screwball convictions?”

Parkhurst glued the puzzled focus on me. “Haven’t you heard? He’s due to take his army physical next week and refuses. Calls

himself a conscientious objector. Says he'd sooner spend a term in a federal jug than risk getting called for combat service."

"The devil you utter!"

"Yep. Of course he may be sincere; but as soon as he bleats his beliefs to the newspapers, he'll be washed up in pictures. To say nothing of what his draft board will do to him."

I quit listening as a montage of memories flashed through my think-tank. Having made a dopey decision like that with a war going on, no damned wonder Bonham had got crocked! He'd probably realized the public was going to consider him a coward, a slacker—the very things Janet Moore had called him in Plyman's when she christened him with a jigger of joy-water.

The taffy-haired cupcake might have had more than a patriotic reason for losing her temper, too. She was Bonham's co-star in an important independent opus; but the instant the public found out that the punk refused to bear arms for his country this epic wouldn't draw flies at the box office. In fact, *Titanic* might not even get a releasing deal for it; in which case Janet's juiciest role would never reach the screen.

Then, as I added up all these angles, the answer abruptly kicked me in the teeth. I yeepled: "Murder motive—!" and brushed past Parkhurst; made a grab for his telephone.

Luck perched on my shoulder when I dialed Bonham's apartment number. Dave Donaldson and his homicide heroes were still in the deceased kid's stash, cleaning up details and questing for clues. I got Dave on the wire and said: "Mount your stallion and make like giddyap! I think maybe I've got a surprise for you." Then I gave him the Moore doll's address, told him to meet me there as fast as he could roll.

Parkhurst tried to block me as I arrowed toward his front portal. "Hey, wait a minute! What's this about a murder?"

"You'll find out." I stiff-armed him, sent him staggering. A sixth sense kept telling me

I'd been a chuckleheaded idiot, and this was no time for explanations. I belted out to my cab at the curb and didn't even notice how much clockage was on the ticking meter. I just yodeled: "Back to the house we came from, bub. Fast!"

The hacker stoked his boiler; rammed a whistling hole in the night. Presently we screeched to a stop in front of Janet Moore's wigwam; and as I pelted to the porch I heard a series of repeated thudding sounds from inside—as if somebody might be trying to bust up the furniture with a hammer.

IHIT the front door a hell of a lick; bulged it off its hinges. Then I thundered over the threshold, into the ornate drawing room; pulling my heater from its holster. I said: "What's the big idea, George?"

Dapper little George Reed had a tire tool in his mitt, and I tabbed deep scars on the table leg to which I'd handcuffed the Moore frill a while ago. The taffy-haired cookie was still fastened there; but a few added raps from Reed's tire tool would have splintered the table enough to free her. And now the *Titanic* nabob straightened up, took a startled gander at my gat. "Dan—I was only—"

Before he could push any more words out of his yap he was interrupted by the lumbering advent of Dave Donaldson. Dave surged into the room, piped the nippers on Janet and yodeled: "Is she the one that knifed Bonham?"

"Ix-nay," I said. "The guy you want to pinch is George Reed here. *Nail him, Dave!*"

Reed had already started on a dead run for the door, but my yell galvanized Donaldson into hurtling motion. He hit the studio mogul with a flying tackle, downed him with a hell of a crash.

Then Reed began blating: "Damn you, I'll have your badge jerked far this! I'll—"

"You won't do anything except inhale cyanide at San Quentin for cooling Bonham," I said.

"That's insane! Why should I kill him! I—"

he—”

I fished out a gasper, set fire to it. “You knew the punk was about to announce his conscientious objections to military service. You realized this would ruin him as a movie star, put him in a federal bastile. You had invested so much cabbage in his latest production that you’d be bankrupt if the pic flopped; and you knew it would flop if Bonham branded himself a slacker.”

Reed writhed in Donaldson’s clutch. “That doesn’t prove—”

I said: “It’s your motive for bumping him. Especially since you had insurance policies on him and on the picture!”

“How d-did you find that out?” He got pale around the edges.

“The kid himself tipped me when I took him out of Plyman’s, only I was too dumb to tumble at the time. I told him his drunken brawling might jeopardize his new Titanic opus; whereupon he said, *‘It wouldn’t matter to me. I’m washed up anyhow. And besides, Reed carries in—’* He didn’t finish the word, but I know now what he meant. *Reed carries insurance!*”

The producer’s glims cursed me. “And you accuse me of murder on anything as thin as that?”

“There’s more, chum. I should have realized the truth when I first came here to finger Janet Moore. She said she had just that moment arrived home from Bonham’s igloo, where she’d found the kid defunct and bopped me senseless. Which meant that I hadn’t been unconscious very long; and yet at the time I examined Bonham’s remainders, his ketchup was already coagulated. He’d been dead quite a while.”

“Well—?”

“The answer was plain when I finally added it up. He got croaked much earlier than Janet’s visit—which put her in the clear. But nobody else had been in the flat except you and myself, when we put Bonham to bed. If he was knifed at that time, you were the killer. You dipped your shiv in him when you sent me to the bathroom for a bottle of bromo!”

Reed quit writhing. “Did I?” he asked dully.

“Yeah. Then you went out; left me thinking I was standing guard over a sleeping stew when actually the guy was deceased. And here’s another thing. Janet got a phone call, supposedly from Bonham, inviting her to come see him—but he was dead when this call came in. Therefore he couldn’t have made it. So you must have impersonated him over the wire. You wanted to lure this blonde cutie up to that apartment and make her the fall guy.”

He smiled faintly. “If that’s true, why would I be here now? Why was I trying to release her handcuff from this table?”

“So you could talk her into lamming,” I said. “You figured to scare her by telling her she was a cinch to be convicted for the kill. That way, if she powdered, it would seem like a confession of guilt.”

Janet piped up: “That’s exactly what he did! He told me I had to run away—”

“Forget it,” I said, and unlocked her nippers. “You’ve got nothing more to worry about, baby.”

“But this guy has,” Dave Donaldson growled. And he yanked Reed to his gams, hustled him forth toward the long trail that led to the gas chamber.