

POISON PAYOFF

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM



Things had been so dull in Dan Turner's private-eye business that he didn't know where his next murder was coming from. But the dainty little manicurist named Malloy thought she knew—and it turned out she was right. And she and Dan were going to be more intimately involved than they imagined! . . .

I HUNCHED my tonnage into the little chair at the glass-topped manicure table in the rear of the barber shop; thrust my fingers at Molly Malloy seated across from me. She grasped them and dunked them into a bowl of warm, sudsy water. "Too hot, Hawkshaw?" she asked.

"Just right," I said, and fastened the admiring focus on her. She was a nifty little red-haired number, pert and Irish and gorgeously contoured under her crisply starched white linen frock—a freckled Dresden doll whose frank green glims and warm smile reminded you of Summer sunshine on an emerald lake. Ordinarily I do my own fingernail whittling, but there were times when I gave the job to this dainty Malloy muffin just because I drew a thump out of having her hold hands with me.

She started snipping with her curved cuticle scissors. "How's the private-detective business?" she made with the small talk. A faint hint of brogue added lilt to her musically modulated voice.

"Lousy, thanks," I said. "It's getting so I don't know where my next croaking's coming from."

"I do—maybe."

"Hunh?" I said, startled.

She looked at me from under long dark lashes. "Or rather, it might be that you could stop one from happening."

"What the devil do you mean by that?" I dished her the flabbergasted gander. "Is this a rib?"

"Far from it." She hesitated briefly. "Listen, Dan, you were plenty decent to me six months ago. I haven't forgotten."

I SAVVIED what she meant by that remark. Her younger sister had

committed suicide the previous June under damned unpleasant circumstances; there had been an unnamed man mixed up in it, some dirty disciple who'd jilted the jane and left her with nothing to live for. As a result of my pipeline to my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad I'd managed to keep most of the less fragrant details out of the newspapers; but I hadn't used my influence with any idea of future reward. Now I shrugged a shoulder at this red-haired manicurist cutie. "You don't owe me anything, hon. Forget it. I've told you before."

"No. I'm not the sort that forgets. I think I can steer you into a fat fee."

"Yeah? Whistle the tune."

"Well, it's Kenneth Carver. Know him?"

I nodded. "Heard of him. Wealthy middle-aged playboy. Married a movie bit player named Ethel something-or-other a while back, a brunette with everything except a reputation!"

"That's him. He thinks he's being slowly poisoned."

"How come you know so much about it?"

She selected an emery board. "I go to his penthouse twice a week; do his nails. He unbosomed himself to me. He suspects his wife of feeding him slow poison to get rid of him so she can inherit his money and marry an Argentine conga teacher named Rico Gallo."

"Anything to it?"

"I don't know. Carver's really sick. And he'd pay generously to find out what ails him. The doctors say it's his heart, but he won't believe them. He's already had any number of private dicks on the job and fired them all when they couldn't pin anything on anybody."

"Hm-m-m. And so?"

"So I mentioned your name to him night before last when I was giving him a

manicure. I gave you a big build-up, told him you were the best in Hollywood. He said for me to ask you to come and see him."

"Well, thanks, kitten," I said. "Nice of you to cut me in on the gravy-train. I appreciate it."

She finished buffing my talons to a gloss. "Don't mention it. I owe you a lot more than that."

I feasted my peepers on her piquant pan and thought of several ways in which she might pay me what she figured she owed me. She wasn't that kind, though. She hated men since the jilt-inspired suicide of her kid sister. I'd made a few tentative and hopeful passes at her from time to time, but I hadn't got to first base—much to my genuine regret.

Well, anyway, it was decent of her to drum up trade for me when I needed it. I grinned, got up, paid her, and tipped her. "Carver will be expecting me, then?"

She nodded.

"I'll go and see him right away." I took a slant at my strap watch; almost five in the afternoon. I ankled out of the barber shop, wondering whether this Kenneth Carver bozo was really being poisoned—or whether he was merely ill, burned out from too many excesses in his red-painted youth. It didn't matter, one way or the other. The guy had dough and I sniffed a healthy retainer in the offing; that was what counted. Moreover, if the case turned out to be on the up-and-up and I managed to scuttle an actual killery plot, it would stick one more feather in the cap of my reputation as a first class ferret. I piled into my jalopy and got going.

I felt healthy—then.

ALITTLE later I rode an elevator to the tower penthouse of a swanky apartment stash on Franklin near Vine, and thumbed the buzzer. Presently the portal

opened; but instead of a butler or footman or maid I lamped a raven-haired quail looking out at me. She was damned attractive in a blatant and artificial way, although her pancake makeup was thick enough to slice like cheese. I remembered seeing pictures of her in the drama and society sections: she was Ethel Carver, the former bit actress now married to the rich ex-playboy who thought he was being croaked by inches. She was embellished in a gossamer negligee, and you could see more of her through the gauzy garment than good taste called for.

“Mrs. Carver?” I said unnecessarily.

“Yes.” Her cigarette-husky voice sounded suspicious. “Who are you? What do you want?”

It seemed odd to me that she had answered the door herself, instead of allowing a servant to do it. I kept my curiosity out of my tone, though. “I’m Dan Turner, private pry. I’d like to speak to your husband if you have no objections. I’d like to talk to him, even if you have.”

“Come in.” She stood aside for me to pass, and I caught a whiff of the expensive perfume she affected: heady stuff that suggested downy cushions and dimmed, rose-colored lights. She closed the door, led me into a small, comfortably-furnished library. “Sit down, please,” she indicated a leather-upholstered, modernistic divan.

When I settled my heft, she approached me with a sinuous gliding movement that made her negligee ripple intriguingly. “I suppose you’re here about my husband’s insane idea that he’s being poisoned?”

I nodded; there seemed no point in lying. “Yeah.”

Her dark glims glittered. “Listen. Mr. Carver is a sick man; but it’s his heart, not poison. That’s tommyrot. And today, his doctor warned me his condition is really serious—dangerous. It must not be

aggravated by such things as interviews with private detectives.”

“Meaning you don’t want me to see him?”

“Meaning I’ll pay you five hundred dollars to forget you ever came here.”

I gave her a cautious inspection and didn’t like what I saw. Liquid black optics; thick, heavy, unplucked brows and long midnight lashes—significant of easily-aroused temper, usually. Lips full and blood-red over tiny white teeth that looked as sharp as a cannibal’s—and everybody knows a cannibal can’t be trusted. Neither could this Ethel Carver cookie.

I grinned. “Thanks, I’d rather not play that kind of game. After all, your hubby more or less sent for me in a roundabout sort of way.”

“Stubborn, aren’t you?” she purred.

I shrugged, set fire to a gasper. “Not exactly stubborn. Just puzzled. And interested,” I added. Which was true. At the beginning I hadn’t thought much of the case; it had seemed merely a chronic invalid’s unwarranted suspicions. But now, things shaped up a little differently. This brunette chick, despite her outer calmness, appeared more than a little nervous; seemed entirely too anxious to keep her ill spouse from being interviewed. She’d even answered the door herself, to get first crack at any caller. That looked haywire. So did her hinted bribe.

She glided closer, her negligee swishing silkily as it clung to her slinky body. “So you won’t take a thousand dollars to forget the whole thing?”

I chuckled through an exhaled cloud of smoke. “Boosting the ante, eh? Sorry, toots. You threw snake-eyes.”

“Then—what is your price? Every man has one.” She sank down alongside me on the divan, leaned against my shoulder.

I gave her the supercilious sidewise

focus; realized she was trying to tantalize me into a state where I would agree to scam in exchange for a few kisses. “No dice again,” I leered. “You haven’t got what it takes.”

That needled her. Apparently she entertained the dizzy notion that her beauty was irresistible, and when I brushed her off, she erupted like a wildcat. “Why you lousy stinking flatfoot!” she yodeled indignantly, and whapped me across the chops.

The slap stung and I resented it. Smarting, I grabbed for her wrists and started to twist her into a pretzel; but before I had a chance to make the first bend in her gorgeous anatomy the ceiling came crashing down on my cranium. Well, anyhow it felt like the ceiling, and whatever it was it bashed me out of my wits.

I DIDN’T stay senseless long. Waking up, I knew damned well I’d been blackjacked; but from the speed of my recovery and the small dimensions of the lump on my scalp I knew the sap had been swung by a character whose strength hadn’t matched his intentions. Whoever he was, he may have hated me to pieces; but he hadn’t hit me hard enough to make it register permanently.

I was on the floor, peacefully resting on the ankle-deep rug; and when I opened my peeps I discovered I was alone. The Carver dame was no longer in my midst and I piped no trace of the blackjack artist, either. I did hear voices from an adjoining room, though. One of them was Mrs. Carver herself saying: “Rico, you shouldn’t have done th-that! Suppose you’ve k-killed him. Oughtn’t we go b-back in and see if he’s st-still alive, or—”

“He ees far from dead,” a wrathful Latin baritone answered sullenly. “I deed not strike heem good enough to break



I edged over into space, perilously dangling above all that emptiness.

hees skull, more’s the peety. When I saw heem mauleeng you, I would gladly have sleet hees throat, the peeg!”

“Mauling me? You fool! He’s a private detective! Kenneth sent for him. I tried to bribe him to go away; he refused. So I was trying to vamp him; I can’t afford to let him talk to Ken—you know that. But now you’ve ruined everything by sneaking in here and—”

“Nonsense! Notheeng have been ruined. We weel call the police and have them come here. We weel accuse thees man of being an intruder—of commeteeng assault on you.”

“I—I hope it works, Rico! Come on—let’s get to the telephone before he comes to.”

I heard the library door close after

them; now I was alone. I got up on my pins, slowly, unsteadily. There was a knot on the back of my conk and I had a headache built for a hippo, but otherwise I seemed okay except for the anger that seethed through me. Evidently I'd stepped into something pretty smelly, and now that I was knee-deep in it I didn't intend to be included out. Not until I'd repaid that bash on the bean, anyhow.

I started for the closed door of the library; but halfway there I changed my plans. Behind me there was a French window leading out to the roof-garden terrace that surrounded the penthouse. If I went out that way I might find an entrance to another part of the apartment; perhaps come face-to-face with Kenneth Carver and have a conference with him, a council of war. It was worth a try.

I barged through the window, into the gathering dusk.

Farther along I piped another window; a room toward the rear of the penthouse. I ankled toward it, making no sound; reached it and entered. Now I was in a bedroom; a man's bedroom, from its appearance. An open closet revealed dozens of expensive hand-tailored suits, and nearer there was a masculine looking bed with gaudy pajamas freshly laid out on the counterpane. These weren't the things that petrified me in my tracks, though. I glommed a flabbergasted swivel at the walls, did a double-take, felt my glims bulging. "What the hell!" I gasped in an astounded whisper.

YOU COULDN'T blame me for being astonished. From the floor up, all four walls were papered with love-letters! There were hundreds of them in an infinite assortment of sizes and shapes, all neatly arranged in a sort of overlapping mosaic pattern, some white, some tinted various shades of pink and green and purple.

There were letters written in backhand slant, in bold forward flourishes and in irregular scrawls; the inks ranged from black through blues, reds, browns, variations of violet—the whole damned spectrum. Some of the notes were even done with lead pencil; and after the missives had been pasted to the wall they'd been covered with a sort of lacquer preservative, clear and shiny like a skin of cellophane.

I've heard of unsuccessful authors papering their walls with rejection slips, and investors using worthless oil stock the same way; but this love-letter routine was the damndest job of interior decorating I'd ever laid a peeper on.

The instant I started scanning some of the messages I realized they all had one thing in common. They'd been written by she-males and were addressed uniformly to somebody named Ken. Therefore this was Kenneth Carver's bedroom—the bozo who thought he was being poisoned. And the letters were his trophies of a misspent life, a permanent record of his romantic conquests and discards. Fascinated, I let my gaze flit from exhibit to exhibit; studied a chronological history of Carver's love affairs dating back fifteen or twenty years and gradually leading up to recent months. The guy's scope was terrific and his interludes would have stocked a harem. Now, as a result of some peculiar psychological quirk, he had an open history of his past on his bedroom walls so he could sleep surrounded by his wolfish memories. Reading some of those forlorn complaints from heartbroken wrens he'd abandoned gave you a stunned sensation, as if you'd been sandbagged.

Abruptly I stiffened as I heard a sound outside the room's closed door. It was a feminine whisper; Ethel Carver's whisper to her Argentina conga teacher, Rico Gallo. "He's bound to be around

somewhere! He couldn't have got away." Then the doorknob rattled.

I knew what that meant. They'd discovered I was no longer unconscious in the library and they were on the prowl for me after having phoned for the cops. I whirled, darted silently to the window, ducked out into the gathering darkness of the rooftop terrace. With what I'd just learned I realized I had a hell of a big job confronting me; a job that had to be handled with as little interference as possible. I didn't want to face Carver's brunette wife again; not right now. Nor did I crave to spout a lot of unnecessary and awkward explanations to the bulls when they arrived in response to the dame's bleat.

I leaped toward the roof's stone balustrade; straddled it. Below, a yawning chasm of murky gloom led to the street several stories below—a murderous drop. But there was a coping on the outer side of the balustrade, wide enough for a guy to stand on. I went over the side, muttering swear words under my breath. Three feet below the coping, directly under me, was the opened upper half of a window on the building's top floor, beneath the penthouse. I edged over into space, my hundred and ninety pounds perilously dangling in emptiness. Clinging with my aching fingers to the coping's edge, I started swinging myself, my brogans describing a widening arc. "Be a detective," I snarled to myself. "Be an acrobat at the same time. Never a dull moment." Then I let go.

I just barely made it. My gams shot into that open window below me and I caught at the upper part of the sash-frame; then I twisted and wormed myself into the room. There were splinters of wood in my mitts from the sash-frame and my chin was skinned a little; it would hurt to shave for the next few days. I was safe, though.

That was the main thing.

I stuffed the front of my disarrayed shirt back into my pants and hitched up my belt, drew a ragged breath of relief. Then I flicked on my pencil flashlight; saw I was in a vacant apartment. Luck was roosting on my shoulder and no mistake! I made for the door, emerged upon a corridor, went to the elevator and rang.

A cage shot up past me and it was crammed with cops in uniform and plainclothes. They were the headquarters dicks that Ethel Carver had phoned for.

I grinned thinly, fired a coffin nail and waited until the elevator descended again. It stopped for me, wafted me down to the street floor. I ankled out into the early night, piled into my parked jalopy and got the hell away from there.

A LITTLE later I was rapping my knuckles on the portal of Molly Malloy's tiny igloo in a bungalow court on Curson. From within, there came the red-haired manicurist's lilting voice: "Wait a minute. I'm putting on my face."

I relaxed a while; then the door opened and the Malloy muffin admitted me. Her emerald optics widened. "You!" Then she smiled, beckoned me inside. "I w-wasn't expecting to see you so soon again, snoop."

"Yeah," I said. "It's an unscheduled visit. I was hoping I could talk you into doing me a favor—and maybe saving a guy's life."

She drew her brows together. "A favor? What do you mean?"

Seeing her in a simple feminine dress instead of the crisp, impersonal white smock she always wore at the barber shop almost made me forget what I'd had on my mind. No doubt of it: Molly Malloy was a sweet dish; but I forced my thoughts back into less enticing channels. "Look," I said slowly. "In the first place, when are

you scheduled to go to Carver's penthouse to give him another manicure?"

"Why—tonight. Around seven o'clock."

That was a nice break. "Swell," I said. "I was up to see him a while ago but his frau wouldn't let me get near him. She and that Rico Gallo ginzo put the slugs to me; tried to frame me with the law. The way I figure, she wouldn't have done that unless there was something stinko going on. She's scared of me, obviously; scared of any private snoop, for that matter."

Molly exclaimed: "Then—then Mr. Carver's right in his suspicions? You think his wife is poisoning him? And—and maybe you can pin it on her?"

"Looks that way. As to pinning it on her, I don't know. But I've got to have a talk with the guy himself, which is where you enter the picture."

"H-how?"

"Well, you'll be doing his claws a little while from now. In the meantime I'll pull a fast one; trick Mrs. Carver into leaving the tepee. While she's gone, you'll be alone with the old creep. I'll come to the joint and buzz three times. You'll let me in. That'll give me my chance to interview him. Get it?"

"Yes. I understand and I'll do it. If you want to wait while I change back into my smock, you can drive me over there. It's almost time." Then, when I nodded okay, she left me and went into her bedroom. "I won't be long," she promised through the closed door.

"Right. I'll pack your kit and tools." I drifted to the table where her manicure outfit was laid ready to be stowed in a small, fitted leather case; busied myself with buffers, files, scissors, and bottles. Presently, when I'd finished, I snapped my fingers; went over to the red-haired chick's boudoir and called through the portal: "I guess I won't wait for you after

all, kitten. I've got to do my stuff to get Mrs. Carver out of that penthouse. Do you mind?"

"No, it's all right," her dulcet voice came back to me undisturbed. "I'll take a bus."

I said: "That's a sweet child. Be seeing you," and barged out of the bungalow; got in my bucket and drove until I spotted what I was looking for—a druggery with a pay station phone. Entering this, I riffled the directory; located the Carver penthouse listing and dialed it.

A cigarette-husky drawl answered my nickel. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Carver, please."

"This is Mrs. Carver."

"Hi, toots," I said. "Dan Turner on this end. You remember: the guy you tried to shove behind the eight ball a while ago."

"What is it you want?" she got sharp, wary.

"A private gadfest with you, baby. Something tells me the time has come for us to do a little financial business."

She hesitated an imperceptible second. "I don't think I understand you, flatfoot."

"You will when I see you."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Unless you crave a cargo of grief, you'll follow my instructions. I want you to meet me at the southwest corner of Hollywood and Vine in exactly one hour. Bring your South American hard guy with you if you like. But be there or hell will pop." And before she could give me an argument I rang off.

DURING THE next sixty minutes I was busier than a Jap regiment surrounded by two dozen United States Marines. I spent this hour in the chemical lab of a guy I know who specializes in analyzing organic and inorganic substances, stains, samples, and similar criminal clues. The report I got from him

shook me to the toenails in spite of the fact that I'd already suspected the truth even before I went to him. It was one time when I genuinely hated to have my suspicions confirmed.

As long as it had to be that way, though, I realized I'd better start doing something about the situation. Ignoring the date I had made with Ethel Carver on the corner of Hollywood and Vine—a date I hadn't intended keeping anyhow—I headed my coupe in the direction of the Carver apartment joint on Franklin. Soon I was giving the penthouse buzzer three quick jabs, my prearranged signal.

Sure enough it was Molly Malloy who opened up. I tipped her an inquiring swivel and said in an undertone: "Where's the Queen of Sheba, hon?"

"Mrs. Carver? She went out some time ago—just after I got here. She seemed nervous. I'm alone here with her husband—and he's expecting you."

I trailed the Irish cutie into a big living-room, plotting as I went. Over on the other side of the room a thin, sallow, middle-aged character sat in an easy chair, nervously nibbling a fingernail; a perfect specimen of an elderly wolf dying of dissipation or something. He looked up from under shaggy brows. "Huph? You're the private detective, I suppose?"

"Yeah. Dan Turner's the name. How are you, Mr. Carver?"

"I'm sick. Any fool can see that."

"Sure, sure," I said soothingly. "Even I can see it. Your heart, of course?"

"Heart, hell! I'm being poisoned!" His burned-out mush contorted in a wrathful snarl. "My wife's killing me—only I can't prove it. I have my food analyzed, my medicine tested; I even keep my private drinking-water under lock and key. But she's poisoning me just the same, damn her soul!"



I regarded the guy with instinctive dislike. There was something slimy about him, corroborating his former rep as a callous Casanova. I kept my opinions to myself, though. "Why should your wife poison you, pal?" I asked quietly.

"Because she's in love with another man!" Then Carver's bleary lamps grew crafty. "But she's got a surprise coming to her. If I die, she thinks she'll inherit my money. Well, she won't! I've made a secret will, leaving everything to charity."

That gave me the germ of a sudden idea. "Why don't you divorce her if you're so suspicious of her?"

"I would in a minute if I had the evidence I need. But so far, I've never been able to get the deadwood on her."

I leered knowingly. "Maybe I can help you. Listen. Write a note to her right now. Tell her you're feeling better and have gone for an auto ride; won't be home until late. Pin it on the front door."

The old goat glared. "What's the idea?"

"You'll see. Do as I say. I've got a hunch this is going to work out pretty slick." I kept my fingers crossed when I said it.

“Is that so?” Carver sneered nastily. “Well, remember this: if your hunch doesn’t work out, you don’t get a dime!” He reached for pen and paper, scrawled the note I’d advised. I took it, pinned it outside the front door of the penthouse; then I gestured to Carver and the Malloy cupcake, led them out to the terraced roof garden surrounding the apartment. All three of us concealed ourselves near the window of the library; crouched down, waiting.

A LONG time dragged by. Then, abruptly, I heard the click of a lock. Two people walked into the library: Ethel Carver and a swarthy, handsome ginzo who was obviously Rico Gallo, although this was the first time I’d ever got a gander at him. On our last meeting he’d sneaked up behind me and maced me groggy.

Now I watched through the window, while alongside me Carver and Molly did the same. Within the room, Gallo swept the brunette Ethel into his embrace. “At last we are alone, my sweet!” he breathed ardently; “I shall kees you unteel we are drunken weeth ecstasy—”

She pushed free. “You fool! Maybe that note is a trap! Kenneth may be watching!”

At my elbow in the outer darkness, Carver gave vent to a vengeful snarl; leaped upright, plunged into the room and faced the Argentine conga expert.

“You wife-stealing rat!” he roared, and aimed a punch at Gallo’s swarthy puss.

It connected with enough power to send the Latin staggering—although that wasn’t much of a tribute to Carver’s wallop. On general appearances Gallo looked like a guy who could be staggered by a good swipe with a feather duster. He recovered his balance, bent down in a defensive crouch as Carver made for him again.

What happened after that was almost too fast for the eye to follow. Carver swung a roundhouse haymaker which missed. Simultaneously the South American’s right mitt flashed upward, the fingers clawing under the back of his own coat collar. From this place of concealment he whipped forth a throwing knife from its sheath at the nape of his neck. He threw the shiv with a smooth, flowing gesture—and it buried itself in Carver’s gullet.

Gore gushed. Ethel Carver yeeped shrilly. Gallo, panting, stepped backward and gave Carver space to fall down, which the older bozo promptly did. At the same instant I fastened the grasp on Molly Malloy’s wrist and whispered: “Here’s the showdown, hon.” Then I dragged her through the French window and we smashed into the room like two stones from a slingshot; exploded from the gloom of the rooftop terrace into the brightly lighted penthouse interior.

The brunette Carver dame started to emit another shriek, while Gallo pinned the flabbergasted focus on me and seemed temporarily paralyzed. I produced the .32 automatic I tote in an armpit holster for emergencies; brandished it. “Nobody moves,” I announced grimly. “One twitch and this hog-leg speaks its piece.”

“Mr. T-Turner—!” Carver’s slinky wife choked. “You—”

“Yeah, I was hiding outside. I lamped the whole routine. Quiet,” I added. Then, to the Malloy muffin: “Lean down and feel Carver’s pulse.”

She obeyed, trembling; and from the look she darted up at me I knew what the score was. Hell, I’d known it even before that. You can’t stay alive with a dagger impaling your windpipe. “Oh-h, Sherlock,” Molly whispered. “He’s—he’s—”

“Don’t bother to say it,” I growled.

Then I lifted a lip at Ethel Carver. “You’re a widow now, toots.”

“No!” she breathed unsteadily. “No, he—you—” She turned to Gallo. “Rico, you—you’ve k-killed him!”

With that, I surged at the conga expert; yanked a set of handcuffs from my back pocket and stabbed them at his wrists. Before he knew it, he was nipped, and a stupefied expression came into his panicky optics. He shook his dukes and rattled the bright steel links between the bracelets. “You can’t do thees to me!” he caterwauled.

“Think of that,” I sneered.

“But—but eet was self defense, *señor!* He was tryeeng to keel me and I—I had to protect myself!”

I WHIPPED him across the countenance with the muzzle of my rod, flattening his smeller and drawing a blurt of ketchup. That paid off for the way he’d maced me earlier in the scenario. “Yeah,” I grated. “Self defense. Tell it to a jury. See will they believe it. Hey, Molly,” I spoke over my shoulder to the red-haired manicure cutie. “Find a phone and call the bulls. Get my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad over here and tell him to bring a meat basket.”

“Y-yes, Dan,” she said, and scurried off. From an adjoining room you could presently hear the quick clicking of a telephone dial. Over this sound Rico Gallo started bleating at me.

“Wait, *Señor* Turner! Eef you weetnessed thees thing, you know I was forced to do eet! Carver would have keeled me eef I had not stopped heem weeth the first weapon handy—”

“That’s the trouble; it was too damned handy,” I said, and fed him another whack on the wattles with my fowling piece. “American courts always fling the book at knife throwers; it’s a form of bumpery

that’s frowned on up here north of the border. You’ve got yourself in a jackpot, bub!”

He bled some more. “But—but—”

“And besides, look how it happened,” I kept pouring the grief on him. “You were protecting yourself, sure; but against an injured husband. You glommed his wife’s affections, which gave him every right to attack you; the unwritten law. In brief, you bumped him while he was defending the sanctity of his home; and oh, brother, how the prosecuting attorney will use that!”

Molly Malloy came back into the room. “The police are coming, Dan.”

“You got hold of Dave Donaldson?”

“Yes.”

Then the Carver dame took a step toward me. “Is—is there any way we can fix this, flatfoot? For money?”

“You mean by bribing the cops? Better not try it.”

“I meant by—by bribing you.”

I gave her the indignant gander. “I guess you’ve forgotten what I told you a while ago, so I’ll say it again. You haven’t got what it takes to buy me off, baby.”

“Okay,” her shoulders drooped, then straightened as she favored the Gallo ginzo with a resigned smile. “Never mind, darling. They can’t charge you with anything, bigger than manslaughter, no matter what Turner says. And that only means a few years in the penitentiary at the most. Maybe it won’t even be that bad; with the money I’ll inherit from Kenneth I’ll hire the best lawyers in town. And there’ll still be plenty left over for us to live in luxury when you get out of pris—”

“Hold it,” I interrupted her. “To my extreme pleasure I crave to puncture your gorgeous day-dreams. You aren’t going to inherit any of your hubby’s geetus.”

“Wh-what?”

“You heard me. He made a secret will

leaving everything to charity.”

“Oh, no! No, you’re lying!”

“I’m telling you what he told me. It’s straight goods. Under ordinary circumstances you might bust that will in probate court; but these aren’t ordinary circumstances. You had a boy friend on the side, which was why Carver cut you off in his will. And this boy friend stabbed him to his ancestors. I’ll lay you six, two, and even that the will stands pat and you don’t get a jitney.”

HEARING THIS, Gallo blew his top. “You tramp!” he yeped at the brunette frill. “Eet was the cash I wanted, not you! I feegured he would deevorce you and make a generous alimony settlement; that was why I made the love weeth you. But now—now—damn you, I never weesh to see your painted face again! Een fact, I weel feex eet so nobody else weel want to see eet, either!” Then he jumped her and commenced slugging her with his handcuffed mitts.

I let him get in three healthy pokes; then I nailed him smack on the dimple with an uppercut that doused his lights. And just as he fell, Dave Donaldson came sprinting into the room with a herd of harness coppers at his heels.

“Hi, chum,” I greeted him. “There’s your cadaver and here’s the killer. Take him away and salt him down.”

“Yes,” Ethel Carver snarled. “Take him away and salt him down. And I’ll testify him into the gas chamber even if I have to go to jail myself.”

It was just about the easiest pinch Donaldson ever made.

LATER, I helped Molly Malloy into my jalopy and drove her home to her bungalow court on Curson. “Satisfied, hon?” I said.

“Y-yes. That is, I—well, I mean—”

She hesitated. “There’s something I—I’ve got to tell you, Hawkshaw.”

I said: “Maybe *I’d* better tell *you*.”

“What do you mean?”

“Six months ago your kid sister Ditched herself,” I said slowly. “She committed suicide because a man did her dirty. He jilted her and married somebody else. Well, tonight I found out who that guy was.”

“Dan, you—you—”

“His name was Kenneth Carver. His bedroom walls are papered with love letters from fillies he fiddled with, fooled and flung overboard. Among those letters were some from your sister. I read them, so don’t contradict me.”

“I—I—”

“So I got a hunch that you knew he was the louse responsible for her suicide. I also got a hunch that maybe you were the party who was poisoning him; motive, revenge. Moreover, it was theoretically possible that you hoped to pin this poisoning on the dame he married when he jilted your sister. That would give you a double-barreled vengeance. It might even explain why you drew me into the case; you subtly tried to make me believe it really was Ethel Carver administering the death-doses.”

“Please, Dan, I—”

I said: “The next question was the poisoning method. How could you, an outsider, slip him the stuff? Well, you manicured him twice a week—and he was a nervous guy, a guy that chewed his fingernails. Get it, kitten?”

“Good heavens,” she whispered dully.

“I took advantage of you while you were dressing to visit him this evening,” I said. “I packed your manicure stuff in its fitted case when you were in your boudoir. While I was doing it, though, I took samples from each bottle of polish, cuticle-softener and so forth. I spilled a

few drops of the various liquids on my handkerchief; then I made an excuse, left you, rushed to a laboratory where they make analytical tests. What do you suppose I found?"

"Poison. There's not much use denying it now, is there?" she said in a bleak monotone.

I tossed out my anchors in front of her stash; parked and cut the ignition. "No, hon, there's no use denying it. You were croaking Kenneth Carver by degrees. That's why I did what I did."

"I—don't understand."

"Sure you do. In one or two more treatments you'd have bumped the old blister, as he richly deserved. But that would have made you a murderess and sent you to the smoke-house, which you *didn't* deserve. Therefore I rigged a grand climax finale so Carver would depart this mortal coil by some other method."

She stared at me. "You—you knew Rico Gallo would—"

"Yeah, I figured he might turn out to be a shiv expert. I had heard him mention throat-slitting in connection with my own gullet, and I guessed what would happen if

the conditions were right. Ken Carver merely got what was coming to him, the way I see it. He was doomed anyhow, one way or the other; so I arranged to put him out of his misery—and get you out of the grease at the same time. So now Gallo takes the rap, Ethel is minus her love affair and her inheritance, and you're in the clear."

The Irish quail touched my arm. "How c-can I ever pay you?"

"You can't. Just skip it."

"Will you come in with me and . . . and . . .?" she gestured toward her cottage, and there was something in her voice that said she wasn't going to be a man-hater now. "At least come in and have a d-drink and let me th-hank you . . ."

"No dice, sweet stuff," I said regretfully, and gave her a gentle shove out of my chariot. The plain truth was, I didn't feel like risking a drink with a jane who was so damned familiar with poisons. "Some other time, maybe, but not tonight. You see, I've got to get home to my apartment stash and remove the polish from my nails."