

Careless Corpse

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM



That bogus postman brought Dan Turner a splendid solid whack with a blackjack and it was a highly special delivery—thereby involving the ace movietown hawkshaw with low killery and high finance and dangerous bafflement! . . .



Taking advantage of the quail's surprise, I went into a flying tuckle and died in the general direction of her next gums.

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IN THE private-snooping racket it pays to keep your guard up at all times. I've learned this by bitter experience, but once in a while I forget—and my forgetfulness generally dumps me in the grease up to my tonsils. Take the fake special-delivery messenger with the blackjack, for instance.

It was bordering on midnight when he tapped discreetly at the portal of my bachelor apartment and called: "Special for Mr. Dan Turner," in modulated accents. I was sipping a short snort of Vat 69 for a nightcap, and it never dawned on me that by opening the door I'd be pitching myself spang into the middle of a kill frame. Maybe it was the guy's quiet voice that lulled me. Maybe he was a

hypnotist in his spare time, though I've never heard of a mesmerist functioning through solid woodwork. Anyhow I was expecting a letter that night or the following morning, so I let him in.

I'll give him credit: there was nothing about him to arouse your suspicions. He was a middle-aged, tired looking hombre in a regulation mail carrier's shabby uniform. His eyes were mild behind thick-lensed cheaters, his face had an unhealthy puffiness splotched by what could have been either pimples or boils, and he actually handed me an envelope with my name and address typed on it. He also had a receipt blank and a pencil. "Sign on the third line, please," he said in the same

soothing tone he'd used originally.

I did what a person always does, I took the receipt and the pencil, turned, held the blank against the wall and scribbled my signature on it. My back was to the guy and he had a perfect shot at my cranium.

He teed off.

Boom! An explosion of pain roared through me, blasted me all the way to my shoestrings. Klieg lights made pinwheel patterns in my glims, an atomic bomb took my grey cells apart, and I plunged into a deep black well of unconsciousness. For me it was the end of a chapter.

THE sequel started thirty minutes later. A new kind of pain dragged me back to my senses: a stinging, counter-irritant series of slaps across the mush. There's always something about a smack on the puss that will needle a man's ire, no matter how groggy he may be from a previous pummeling. Particularly if the spanks are delivered by a meaty palm with plenty of heft behind it. I groaned, stirred feebly on the floor, and mumbled: "Cut that out before I kick all the warts off you, whoever you are."

"Aha," a rumbling voice growled. "So you've decided to do the sensible thing and wake up, hey?"

"Who wouldn't?" I said, opening my bleary glims and fastening the focus on a large, scowling character who was stooping over me. As clarity gradually seeped into my scrambled brain, I recognized this beefy individual. He was my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad. "Nobody but a corpse could stay asleep with you whapping him on the complexion," I complained. "Lay off."

"Speaking of corpses," Dave's manner was ominous.

I said testily: "Let's not," and touched the back of my conk where there was a lump the size of third base. "Damn his tripes," I said.

"Damn whose tripes, Sherlock?"

I sat up. "That special-delivery messenger.

He bopped me." I blinked. "Say, what the hell are *you* doing here?"

"As if you didn't know," he sneered.

"If I knew I wouldn't ask you," I said. "Help me up."

"Not yet," he told me grimly, and put the flat of his hand on my chest. "Not until you answer my questions."

"You haven't asked any questions."

"All right, all right, I will. We'll start with this one. Who was Rick Caffrey?"

I copped a puzzled upward hinge at Dave's glum map. It struck me as mildly strange that he would mention Caffrey on this particular night, because only that same day Caffrey had phoned me, hired my professional services, and promised to send me a letter that would explain in detail what he wanted done. The letter would contain, in addition, two hundred hermans by way of advance retainer. At least this was what the man had told me on the phone, and now I told the same thing to Donaldson. "It was Caffrey's note with the dough in it that I was expecting," I said. "Only instead of money I got my noggin blackjacked by a gee in special-delivery grey. Which is all I know," I finished sourly.

He said: "Very interesting, but beside the point. What I asked you is, who was Rick Caffrey?"

"A beard," I said.

"Don't give me double talk."

"What double talk? A beard is a beard: movie lingo for an actor with spinach. Chin foliage. What kind of Hollywood cop are you, not knowing that? When an extra registers with Central Casting he gets classified as to type. If he's got whiskers; he's a beard. So Caffrey is a beard."

"Was a beard," Dave corrected me.

"You mean he shaved it off?"

"I mean he's dead."

AS he said this, Dave, heisted me from supine to perpendicular and gave me a half-spin. The sudden movement, plus the

bruised condition of my conk, made me momentarily as dizzy as a drunk in a revolving door. Then the haze drifted from my peepers and I gave issue to a flabbergasted yelp as I lamped somebody huddled in my favorite easy chair across the room. The bozo was elderly and sported a luxuriant growth of quills from chin, cheeks and lips, a beaver that spread down to his chest and matted soggily there with a dark red-brown ooze of ketchup from the hole where he'd been stabbed. His kisser leered toothlessly, his eyes stared glassily and he would never be any deader if he lived to be a hundred.

"Rick Caffrey!" I yodeled.

Dave said: "That's all I wanted to know, pal. It fits."

"It fits what?" I demanded.

"I got an anonymous phone tip at headquarters a while ago. It was a disguised voice saying I'd find a corpse of that name in the apartment of one Dan Turner, private snoop. So here I am and here you are and here's the corpse, and—"

"And what comes next?" I cut in.

"Next you tell me why you killed him," Dave said.

I tried to wither him with a glance but it didn't work. "You make me tired," I said in disgusted accents. "If the cat has kittens in the oven, it doesn't make them biscuits, does it? Okay. Just because there's a cadaver in my flat, it doesn't mean I'm the killer. That's the trouble with you. Always trying to hang some ridiculous rap on me."

"Not at all," he pouted. "You're a friend of mine. By the same token I can't stand around letting my friends get away with murder. Not even you."

I went to my cellarette, dosed myself with Scotch to blunt the throbbing in my skull where I'd been maced. "Did your anonymous tipster actually accuse me of the bump?"

"Not exactly. He said I would find a dead guy—"

"*He*. So the call came from a man."

"It was a man's voice, yeah. Muffled."

"That narrows it down," I said. "It eliminates the female percentage of the Hollywood population. Now look, stupid. Would I be silly enough to commit killery in my own stash and then render myself senseless so you could make an easy pinch?"

"Maybe you got into a brawl with Caffrey. Maybe he bopped you and you stabbed him, and then after that the blow caught up with you, sort of a delayed-action effect, and you blacked out," Dave preened himself, very proud of his theorizing.

I said: "Whereupon the corpse got up and phoned headquarters announcing his own demise, eh?"

"No. Somebody else must have done the phoning."

"Sure. And that same somebody else is the person you'd better look for. In other words, the special-delivery messenger."

"You mean he conked you and then brought the body into your apartment? Hogwash, Hawkshaw. Nobody but a damned fool would take that big a risk. He'd be seen hauling the stiff into the building. I can't buy that."

I said: "The dead gee could have walked in under his own power."

"A walking corpse? Come now. That's going too far."

"Nuts," I grated. "Use your head. Suppose Caffrey decided to call on me in person tonight instead of sending me a letter. Okay, assume for the sake of argument that he wanted to hire me to guard him against some unknown party who was thirsting for his gore. Suppose this unknown party learned about it, got dressed in a letter carrier's rig and came here ahead of Caffrey, knocking me out and then hiding in ambush until Caffrey showed up. Caffrey walks into the trap and gets stabbed. Having butched him, our fake mailman lams, calls you up at headquarters, gives you the tip, and rings off before you can trace the connection. That way he covers his

tracks and leaves me with a defunct beard in my tepee, to say nothing of a violent headache. Savvy the setup?"

DONALDSON'S fingernails made rasping noises as he scratched at his chin bristles. "It meshes," he admitted. He ankleed to my telephone, dialed homicide, ordered out a technical squad and got the law's ponderous machinery moving. First he assigned some of his minions to the job of checking all genuine special delivery messengers. Then he had a reader put out on KGPL notifying all cars to be on the lookout for a suspicious character in post office grey, which struck me as pretty far south in waste motion. The killer had probably shucked his threads by this time and changed into something less conspicuous.

That's how it is with cops, though: you can't budge them out of established routine. Dave hung up, turned to me and said: "So far so good. The next thing is to pry into the Caffrey guy's private life and find out about his enemies."

I set fire to a gasper; shook my head as I exhaled smoke. "No dice on that one, bub," I told him.

"What do you mean, no dice? We know he had at least one enemy. He was murdered, wasn't he? So all I have to do is go to his home and ask his family—"

"He didn't have any," I said.

"Didn't have any family?"

"Nor home," I said.

Dave glowered. "Everybody's got a home, even if it's only some furnished room."

"Not Caffrey," I said. "He lived in a tree. Or a cave, I'm not sure which." Then, wearily, I added: "For hell's sake, haven't you tabbed him yet? He was a landmark. He was the Hermit of the Hollywoodland Hills."

Crimson surged into Donaldson's map. He goggled at me, then at the corpse, then back at me. "I'll be damned!" he choked. "No wonder I thought he looked kind of familiar. I've seen him a million times on the Boulevard and up

and down Vine Street, walking along in sandals and a hunk of bed sheet."

"He's the one."

"But I didn't tab him just now because he's wearing a suit. It makes him look different."

I said: "Being deceased also makes him look different. Don't let it embarrass you, too much, chum. Policemen aren't supposed to be too bright. What the hell."

This caused Dave's indignation to come to an abrupt boil. "So I'm not bright," he said through clenched uppers and lowers. "The only smart snoops are the private kind, like you. The rest of us are numbskulls. I hope the thought comforts you while you're languishing in a nice clean cell."

"Wait a minute. You can't arrest me."

"That's what you think."

"But I've told you how the thing must have happened. Accusing me is as crazy as pouring gasoline on your Wheaties."

"Nobody's accusing you," he said, he grimly, "I'm just going to hold you as a material witness, until we nab the fake postman. If you're lucky we may pick him up within a week or so. On the other hand, it may take months. However it goes, we'll need you to identify him. And to make sure you'll be on deck I'm going to install you in the bastille."

This, of course, was sheer spite. The hell of it was, he might make it stick; and I didn't crave any part of a raw deal like that. You can't do any detecting in the sneezer; and I had some detecting I wanted to do—pronto. The Caffrey character, a potential client of mine, had been assassinated and dumped on my personal premises, thereby not only depriving me of a fee but also putting me behind a very awkward eight ball. I could almost see the headlines: **FILM ACTOR SLAIN WHILE SEEKING DICK'S PROTECTION. BIT PLAYER MURDERED IN BODYGUARD'S APARTMENT.** It would play hob with my rep as a hardboiled hero. It would ruin my business. I'd be

washed up.

There was only one way out of the mess, as far as I could see. That was to clean up the Caffrey killing, collar the guilty ginzo, and hand him over to justice. I couldn't let the cops beat me to the punch or it would look as if I wasn't big enough to take care of my own troubles. And if Dave Donaldson jugged me as a material witness, my hands would be tied.

I said: "So you're going to hold me."

"Yeah."

"I can't talk you out of it, eh?"

"Not while I'm in my right mind."

Well, that meant I had to jar him loose from his right mind. I shrugged, let my shoulders droop despondently and then doubled my right fist, swung for his dewlaps. The punch connected and he went down on his hip pockets, floundered like a fly swimming in molasses. He was still swimming as I catapulted over his poundage and went out the front door with my coat tails dipping gravel.

I BARRELED out of the apartment building under forced draft; sprinted through the quiet midnight as fast as I could pelt. It would be too dangerous, I realized, to get my jalopy from its stall in the basement garage; Dave would put out a radio dragnet and I'd get picked up before you could whistle Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto. For better or for worse I was afoot and I had to like it.

There was one thing I could be thankful for, though. I knew a few tidbits of information about the late lamented Rick Caffrey which I hadn't told to Donaldson. This was very fortunate indeed, because it gave me a slight edge as I started my investigation. I had a starting place, which was more than Dave had.

For instance, I was hep to the fact that Caffrey's hermit act wasn't as kosher as it had seemed. True, he spent a lot of time up in the hills above Hollywood, communing with the

squirrels and feasting on acorns. That, however, had been largely a publicity gag. It earned him occasional mention in the gossip columns and the fan magazines, and when he wandered down into town he was always good for a stray dollar from tourists who asked him to pose for their kodaks. Moreover, it usually gave him the inside track on studio calls when some director decided he needed an extra or a bit player with facial foliage.

But how did he get those studio calls? And what did he do when it rained? There's no shelter in the kind of trees that grow up in our dinky hills, and the caves aren't equipped with telephones. As a matter of fact, there aren't any caves. I happened to know that Caffrey had a duck-in spot, a cheap sleazy hotel on a side street just off Sunset, to which he repaired when the great open spaces palled on him. It was there that he got his mail and made his phone connections with the various movie lots; and it was there that I headed after eluding Dave Donaldson's clutches.

The walk made a new man of me. My noggin stopped throbbing and my lungs were so full of fresh air they sat up and barked. Presently I gained my destination and barked into the four-story fleabag where Caffrey had maintained a sub-rosa room; made for the imitation marble desk at one side of the dismal lobby. A combination clerk and phone operator was sitting at the switchboard with a receiver to his ear, probably listening in on some tenant's private conversation. He quit, though, when he piped me moving toward him. "Somethin'?" he cocked a supercilious eyebrow at me.

A small sign on the counter read: *Clerk on Duty, Percival Hassard*. "Yeah, Percy," I said. "Tell me the number of Rick Caffrey's room."

He frowned at my familiarity with his front monicker. He was a sleekly barbered bozo, hollow-cheeked and probably in his forties but with a powdered, babyish complexion that tried to look younger. "Caffrey?" he asked.

“Rick Caffrey.”

“You’re sure he’s stopping here? – Sir?” he added reflectively.

“Yeah, positive.”

He went through the motions of consulting some records. “Oh, yes. Mr. Rick Caffrey. That’s Room 209. But I’m not sure he’s in. I just came on duty at twelve. Shall I ring him?”

“Never mind. I’ll go on up.” I let him see my tin. “Cop business, bub. Keep it under your hat.” Then I trudged up a flight of creaky stairs and skulked to Caffrey’s door without being noticed. I got out my set of skeleton keys, found one that worked the cheap lock and let myself in.

Darkness enfolded me as I kicked the portal shut. And then an unexpected dagger of light skewered me in my tracks as I started to turn; drenched me in baleful brilliance. The stabbing beam came from a flashlight in the hands of somebody I couldn’t see because the glare had damned near blinded me even though I wasn’t staring directly into it.

My hearing was okay, though. And there was no mistaking the menace in the she-male voice that said tautly: “Better say your prayers, Mister Caffrey. I’m going to kill you.”

IFROZE, but made a rapid recovery. “Who, me?” I said, and turned directly into the light. “I think you’ve made a mistake. I’m not Caffrey, as any fool can plainly see. Caffrey was old and wore a beard. I’m young, handsome, and I shave smooth. Well, comparatively young, anyhow.”

There was an audible intake of breath, sharp, startled. “I—I thought you were someone else—”

“So you did, sister, so you did,” I grunted. Then, taking advantage of the quail’s surprise, I went into a flying tackle and dived in the general direction of her neat gams. Moreover, I hit them. It was more by instinct than sight, however, because I was still partially blinded by her flash beam. I simply guessed where her

ankles ought to be, ducked low in case she started shooting, and slammed against her with the full force of my hundred and ninety pounds. A moaning whimper escaped her, and down she went in a swirl of silk dress. She squirmed as I squashed her to the carpet; tried to get loose. We wrestled a while, and I won. I got the electric torch from her left hand and prised a small Colt automatic from her right. Then, triumphantly, I edged away and treated her to a spray of illumination.

What I looked at was very soothing to the optic nerves. She was husky, muscular red-head, pretty as a beauty contest winner and shapely as a swimming champion. At a rough guess she was in her smooth twenties, and even in her mussed-up condition she was toothsome enough to be anybody’s pinup queen.

She staggered upright and arranged her attire. “You—y-you—”

“Skip the small talk,” I said. Then I added: “So you were hoping to plug Rick Caffrey, hunh?”

“Y-yes—that is—I mean—”

I said: Let’s take it one step at a time. First, your name.”

“I w-won’t tell you.”

“Oh. Stubborn.” I sidled to a wall switch, flipped it. Now I could do without the flashlight; the overhead bulb was much more satisfactory. I gave the jane a brief glimpse of my special badge. “You can tell me now or you can talk in jail,” I said.

Fear came into her hazel eyes. “You’re a p-policeman?”

“Private. I’m Dan Turner. Maybe you’ve heard of me.”

This seemed to startle the everlasting daylights out of her. “Dan Turner? Then you’re the dirty rat who was helping Caffrey against my fath—I mean—that is—”

“Your father, eh? Now we’re getting somewhere. Go on, tell me the rest of it.”

She clammed up. “No.”

I said: “Look, baby. Whether you realize it

or not, you're in a nasty pickle. It's against the law to threaten people with guns. You could be tossed in the cooler for that. The penalty for murder is even stiffer."

"Murder?" But I haven't m-murdered anyone. Yet."

"Somebody did," I said levelly. "Somebody killed Rick Caffrey in my apartment less than an hour ago."

"No. N-no, oh-h-h, no . . .!"

"But yes. Now the way I see this clambake, Caffrey was engaged in some shenanigan against your father. That much you've let slip. Secondly, you think I was mixed up in the deal. It so happens you're wrong about that. True, Caffrey intended to hire me; but he never told me what it was about, and he was bumped off before I had a chance to talk to him. In other words, his hasty demise left me completely in the dark. Believe it or not."

She studied me. "And you th-think I killed-him?"

"No," I said frankly. "Because you were here in his room waiting for him, waiting to blast him. When I barged in you thought I was Caffrey and threatened to shoot. Therefore you didn't realize he was already dead. So you can't be the one who croaked him."

"Th-thank you."

"Not at all," I said darkly. "Logic is logic. But on the other hand, you were planning to bump him. Why? Because of something he was doing, or going to do, to your father. Whatever it was, it must have been pretty bad. Bad enough, perhaps, to cause your old gent to commit murder."

SHE stiffened but kept her voice even. "That's what I thought you'd say. It's not true, of course."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I know my dad."

"And just who is he?"

She clammed up again. "I've said all I'm going to say."

"Excuse me if I contradict you. You'll talk plenty, angel, before this fish-fry is finished. Either to me, or to the bulls at headquarters. Now just what sort of stunt was Caffrey trying to pull on your father?"

"I d-don't know anything about it." Suddenly she reached into the bodice of her frock, whipped out a thin sheet of paper, crumpled it into a wad and thrust it in her mouth; started chewing vigorously.

That made me sore. I leaped at her, grabbed her, dealt her a stinging smack across the mush and then forced my fingers past her teeth; yanked out the paper barely in time to keep from getting my thumb bitten off like a hunk of banana. I slapped her again. Hard. My temper was frayed around the edges and I was in no mood to make with the chivalry.

She sobbed, deep in her throat. "Please, Mr. Turner—"

"Shut up," I growled, and started to unwad the soggy paper. I could see writing on it; a penciled scrawl that was almost illegible now, and no damned wonder.

The red-haired chick stretched her arms toward me. "Please, Mr. Turner, don't read that."

"Quiet, sis."

"I'll pay you—money—anything you want—"

"Right now I'm not interested in money," I said, and meant it. "Shut up."

There were tears in her blurry peepers, and not entirely from the slaps I'd handed her. "Please—there's nothing in that note. I mean there's nothing that concerns you."

"Oh, sure not," I leered at her. "You just tried to eat it because you liked the flavor. Spearmint no doubt."

"No. I mean—that is—it was just something I got out of that wastebasket over there, and—"

I said: "The hell you utter. You were prowling Caffrey's wigwam here and found a discarded letter connected with the monkey business he was pulling on your pappy, is that

it? And you've got the unadulterated crust to tell me it's nothing that concerns me. Toots, your psychology is abysmal. I wouldn't believe a lie like that if I told it myself. Now pipe down."

"Mr. Turner, if you read that letter I'll kill you!"

"Much obliged for the warning," I said. Then I slammed her down on the sagging bed, whisked out my handcuffs and nipped her wrists after running the link around one of the uprights of the metal bedstead's headboard. "And if you start yeeeping I'll gag you," I added. "With one of my wool socks."

SHE gasped at the thought; subsided into silence. I finished unwadding the sheet of paper and scanned it; tensed when I saw my own name on it, and Rick Caffrey's signature. This was the letter he had intended to send me, special delivery, only to change his mind and visit me in person—a visit that had got him abolished. I read the scrawled words:

"Mr. Turner:

"Enclosed find two hundred dollars as per our telephone conversation. This note will explain what I want done and why I want you to do it for me.

"More than twenty years ago I was a convict on a Georgia chain gang, serving a term for robbing a bank in a small town. My accomplice, several years younger than myself, was a man named Leonard Dolan. I say accomplice, though he was actually in ignorance of what I was doing. He merely drove the getaway car and didn't learn of this bank heist I'd pulled until it was too late to do anything about it. When the cops caught up with us he managed to escape with the stolen money, a sum in excess of sixty thousand dollars. I was captured and sentenced.

"Some time later, Dolan was also captured and convicted, but he never told where he'd hidden the loot and it was never

recovered. Much later, in prison, he informed me that he had really intended to see that the money went back to the bank I stole it from, but he delayed doing it until the heat died. He was afraid he might be arrested with it in his possession, which of course would be just too bad for him.

"Unluckily he got picked up before he could make this restitution. He then tried to make a deal with the authorities, exchanging the money for his own immunity. The Prosecutor refused, thinking the cash would be discovered sooner or later anyhow, and why turn a prisoner loose? So Leonard Dolan joined me on a chain gang, and the swag was never found.

"The following year I engineered a break and Dolan escaped with me. I tried to force him to tell me where he'd hidden the sixty G's but he refused and got away from me. I didn't see him again for more than twenty years, though I know that he married, had a daughter, lost his wife in childbirth and became a highly successful and respected New York banker.

"As for me, I came to California and became the Hollywood Hermit. That bearded character seemed the best possible disguise, and I was right.

"That brings us to the present. A week or so ago I discovered that a certain banker has been sent out here to take financial control of Magnificent Studios. He is Roger Faraday. But Roger Faraday is my old pal Leonard Dolan!"

Having read this far, I copped a squint at the cutie on the bed. "So your name is Faraday, eh?"

"Y-yes. I . . . I hate you, you heel."

"And the front handle?"

"Constance. You're a dirty despicable—"

"Flattery will get you nowhere, angel," I said. And turning my letter over, I read what Caffrey had written on the other side:

“As soon as I saw Dolan-Faraday’s picture in the newspaper I recognized him and got in touch with him by phone, asking him about the sixty thousand dollars which I stole and he hid back in Georgia. It seems he never notified the authorities where to find it, fearing that such an action on his part might be traced to him and result in his re-arrest as an escaped con. This he couldn’t risk, since he had spent years building up his new and respectable name and personality.

“You can see that I had no fear about contacting him, because he can’t squeal on me unless he also squeals on himself. On the other hand, as I pointed out to him, I could turn him in without any risk to myself, because it would be perfectly simple for me to shave my beard and drop out of the Hollywood picture. After all, I have no social or professional position to maintain, as he has. I could go elsewhere and start all over again. I could live the rest of my life very comfortably indeed—if I had sixty thousand dollars.

“And that’s the whole point. I’m not figuring to shake Faraday down for any money out of his own pocket. All I want him to do is tell me where he hid that sixty grand. That won’t cost him a dime, but it will make me a rich man.

“Naturally, to force him to terms, I have had to threaten to expose his past. This is where you come in. There is a bare possibility that Faraday may get some silly idea of stooling on me, even though it would mean sacrificing himself. Or maybe he will try to shut me up permanently. Well, I don’t want to go back to a chain gang and I don’t want to be murdered either. So I’m going to lay low and let you handle the deal. You be the go-between. Get the information for me. I’ll see that you’re well paid.

Rick Caffrey”

I FINISHED reading the letter and stuck it in my pocket. “The damned fool,” I said sourly. “He must have been nuts.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” the Faraday doll blinked at me.

“I’m an ethical guy,” I said. “Everybody knows that. I wouldn’t handle a deal like this for all the coffee in Java.”

“Why lie?” She made a bitter mouth. “When Caffrey phoned dad, he told him you were going to be the go-between.”

“He took too much for granted. I didn’t even know what he wanted to hire me for. If he had braced me personally with any such stinking proposition I’d have busted his neck.”

She narrowed her glimmers at me. “Maybe you did. Maybe that’s exactly what happened. Maybe you killed him because he asked you to take part in something crooked.”

“No, sweet stuff. That’s fast theorizing, but it’s just wishful thinking. You can’t yank your old gent out of the grease with that kind of hogwash.”

“It isn’t hogwash. You can’t deny you asked Caffrey to go to your apartment in person tonight.”

I said: “I did like hell. What gave you that screwy idea?”

“Something else I found in the waste basket,” she retorted. “A message slip.”

I blipped over to the corner, delved into the waste basket under discussion and came up with a rectangle of paper on which was written: *Mr. Caffrey. Please see Mr. Dan Turner at his apartment tonight between eleven-thirty and midnight.*

“Well, hell’s bells and codfish balls!” I yodeled. “I never phoned any message like this. I didn’t phone any message, period. If you want my opinion, this simply drives another nail in your father’s coffin.”

“Wh-wha-what—?”

I leaned down, unlocked the bracelets that fastened her to the bedpost. “It’s pretty obvious, hon. Your dad realized Caffrey had him by the short hairs. And Caffrey had told him I was to be the go-between. So he phoned this message to Caffrey, using my name; lured him to my stash and killed him there after first

getting me out of the way with a bash on the wimple.”

“You’re wrong!” she wailed. “I know you’re wrong!”

I ignored her. “Meanwhile, you got a homicidal notion of your own. You sneaked here to Caffrey’s room and figured to waylay him, not knowing your old man was already attending to the job. Seems like violent ideas run in your family.”

She sat up on the side of the bed and looked woeful. “I admit I—I had a crazy scheme to help my dad by—by d-doing something to Caffrey. But I wasn’t g-going to shoot him. I just wanted to scare him—”

“Maybe so, sis, maybe so. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt on that. There’s no use you going to the gow along with your pappy.”

“You—you mean you’re going to arrest him?”

“But definitely,” I said. “And you’re going to take me to him. Right now.”

“I won’t. You c-can’t make me.”

I grabbed her, lifted her to her feet. You don’t know me very well, toots. You’re going to steer me to your father if I have to twist your arm off and beat you over the scalp with it.” By way of demonstration I applied a mild hammerlock on her, not enough to hurt but demonstrating that I meant business. Then I forced her out of the room and downstairs.

SHE kept quiet until we were drifting through the dismal lobby. Then she tried to pull a fast one. “Help!” she caterwauled to the clerk at the desk. “I’m being kidnaped!”

Percival Hassard leaped nimbly over the counter and made for me, trying to look like a hero coming to the aid of a lady in distress. “See here, Turner, what’s the idea?”

“This,” I said peevishly, and released the red-headed muffin just long enough to feint the guy wide open. He was a sucker for a right cross. I spooned him a haymaker on the prow that knocked him neck over appetite. Meanwhile Constance Faraday tried to run for

the exit. She was a trifle too slow, though. I scampered after her, caught her, shook the bejimini out of her. “One more stunt like that and I’ll start bearing down,” I promised her. “Now be a good girl.” And I escorted her outdoors.

She seemed to know she was licked. “You’re a b-beast. A mean, cruel beast.”

“I’m a detective solving a murder. Maybe that’s the same thing,” I said. “Now where will we find your father?”

She named a swanky apartment hotel on Wilshire, and I managed to flag a cruising night owl cab; boosted her into it and perched my heft alongside her. Riding along, I sat pretty close to her. I didn’t want her to try any getaway tricks. Not under the circumstances. The cards were stacked against me.

They were stacked against her, too, as we found out when we entered the lavish suite where she and her dad were stopping. One gander was enough to tell me she was now an orphan. Her father was deader than minced clams.

IT WAS hard to separate all the mingled first impressions that slammed at me as the Faraday cupcake and I barged into the living room of the costly layout. To begin with, a middle-aged hombre wearing thick-lensed cheaters and an expensively tailored tuxedo was standing in a far corner, his puffy mush the color of paperhanger’s paste and his framework twitching as if he had termites. I recognized him the instant I lamped him. He was Gerald Waxman, one of the toniest attorneys in Hollywood; a lawyer who specialized in movie work, his clients ranging from stars to producers and studio executives. The fees he charged were nothing but enormous, and he hadn’t lost a suit in ten years. Right now, though, he looked as if he’d trade his entire fortune for a chance to get the hell out of that room.

‘You couldn’t blame him much. Beyond him an elderly, grey-haired citizen was roped

to a chair but not feeling any pain because he was defunct. The poor devil had felt plenty of pain before he'd passed to his reward, however. He was stripped to the waist, his feet were bare, and he'd been tortured. There were cigarette burns on his bare chest, and some dirty disciple had rammed sharpened matchsticks under his fingernails and toenails; set fire to them.

Constance Faraday copped one hinge and let out a shrill, hysterical shriek. "Daddy—!" Then, to Waxman: "What have you done to him? You—you—"

"I'm sorry, my dear," the lawyer found his voice. "He's dead. You must be brave."

"Brave?" she keened. "He's dead, and you—you stand there—you killed him and—" She whirled at me. "Arrest him! Take him to prison!"

Waxman looked at me. "Are you a policeman?"

"Private," I said. "What happened here?"

"I don't know. At least I don't know any more than you do by seeing for yourself. I dropped in a few minutes ago to have a little talk with Mr. Faraday—I'm his legal representative in his negotiations to take over control of Magnificent Studios—and I found him just like this. No, not exactly, like this. He was still barely alive. He gasped out something about his weak heart, and something else I didn't quite understand—"

"Let's have the exact words," I said.

"It was . . . let me see . . . it was something like *he made me tell*. Yes, that was it. *He made me tell*."

"That was all?"

"Yes. Then—well, then he died."

The red-haired Faraday doll yelled: "You killed him!"

"Don't be absurd, my dear," Waxman was getting over his jitters now. "Why should I kill him? He was my client. A very valuable client."

"You murdered him!"

The guy got haughty. "I don't have to

listen to that kind of talk."

"Arrest him, Mr. Turner!" the quail yelped wildly.

He gave me a fish-eyed focus. "I wouldn't advise that, sir. Unless you want a damage suit on your hands." He made for the door. "False arrest can make you a lot of trouble."

I said: "Stick around, pal, while I phone in the bleat."

"Don't let him leave!" the Faraday cutie shrieked. "He's a murderer! You can see that! He killed my father!"

Waxman frowned. "That's why I'm not staying. I refuse to stay anywhere and listen to such hysterical accusations." His hand went to the doorknob.

"Ix-nay," I said. "Stay put until the bulls get here."

"No. If you want my testimony, you can reach me easily enough. I live in the building." He started to open the door.

The red-haired Faraday chick scurried to a table, picked up a heavy metal vase. "You won't leave! I won't let you!" she screamed. And she threw her improvised missile.

Her aim was lousy. Instead of hitting Waxman she clipped me on the scalp, spang at the spot where the phony mailman had maced me earlier in the scenario. My knees turned to boiled noodles and my brains got scrambled. I fell down on my profile, and the last I saw of Waxman was a black blur of tuxedo stalking off the premises. Then Constance Faraday hunkered down and started deluging me with her tears, begging me not to die and whimpering that she hadn't meant to bop me.

The hell with that, I thought dreamily. The hell with her apologies. The hell with everything. I was tired. My head hurt. I passed into a temporary coma.

DAVE DONALDSON was shaking me awake, roughing me up, spanking me across the chops. I blinked my peepers open, piped his surly features and said groggily: "Let's go home now. This is where we came

in.”

“Never mind the bright cracks, Sherlock. Snap out of it.”

I snapped out of it, as requested. The fog drifted out of my think-tank and I sat up on my haunches. “What the hell brings you here, bud?” Then I caught wise. I looked at the Faraday wren, who was hovering nervously nearby. “You phoned headquarters, hey, angel?”

“N-no,” she said. “I didn’t have time. You haven’t been unconscious more than a few minutes.”

I mulled this over. “Then Waxman must have.”

“Waxman?” Dave growled. “I wouldn’t know. An I know is I got another of those anonymous phone tips from a disguised voice that said I better rush to this apartment hotel if I wanted to pick up Dan Turner. And sure enough, here you are. With another corpse,” he added bitterly. “Damn’ if that isn’t getting to be a habit!”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “And it’s even a worse habit to make wrong guesses. That dead gee there is a banker named Faraday, this young lady’s papa. I figured he was the one who murdered Rick Caffrey in my igloo, but now I know I was haywire.”

“You were haywire about a lot of things,” Dave’ said in a menacing tone. “Like slugging me on the chin and scrambling a while ago. That’s going to cost you, my friend.”

I stood up experimentally, found I could stay on my feet without too much side-sway. “We can talk about that later,” I said. I aimed toward the door. “Right now we’ve got work to do, a trip to make, and a killer to catch.”

“Just a minute. Not so fast. What—?”

“I’ll explain as we go,” I said. “Come on, get the lead out of your diapers. There’s no time to lose.” Then I added to the chick with the red tresses: “You, too, beautiful. You’ll want to be on hand when we nab your father’s murderer.”

I must have sounded convincing, because she didn’t give me an argument and neither did Donaldson. We trucked down to his official sedan and I told him to drive to the four-story fleabag hotel off Sunset where Caffrey had kept a secret room. “And don’t spare the ethyl,” I said. “This is important.”

“It is if you come up with the guilty party,” Dave said, kicking his starter and clashing the gears. “Otherwise you’ll be in a three-dimensional jackpot and I’m not kidding.”

“I’m not either,” I said, and told him all I’d learned about the clambake. First I gave him a synopsis of Rick Caffrey’s story as contained in the letter he’d never mailed to me; explained how Caffrey and Roger Faraday, the movie financier, had once been jailed in Georgia serving time for a bank heist. I told how Caffrey had recognized Faraday here in Hollywood a few days back, and had put the shakedown squeeze on him—not for dough, but for information as to the hiding place of the sixty grand that had been stolen twenty-odd years ago.

Dave fed a charge of ethyl to hustling cylinders. “Hell, that would be a perfect motive for Faraday to croak Caffrey!”

“No!” Constance wailed. “My dad didn’t—he—he wouldn’t—”

“Right you are, angel,” I said. “Your father didn’t kill Rick Caffrey. That was done by a third character who learned about the caper and craved to cut himself in for the sixty G’s. He cut himself in by cutting Caffrey out—with a knife to the heart. Then the murderer went to your father and tortured him, forced him to tell where the dough was hidden. Remember, those were your dad’s last words, according to Waxman. *He made me tell, he made me tell.* Then he died. His heart wasn’t able to stand the torture-strain.”

“But—but nobody knew—about my father’s p-past.”

DONALDSON berthed his bucket in front of the fleabag. "I'm beginning to get the picture," he said as he latched his brakes. "I see what Turner's getting at. Waxman was your old man's attorney; he would have the story."

The three of us barged into the hotel. "Maybe," I said. "But Waxman's a wealthy guy. Sixty grand wouldn't interest him to the point of making him a double killer." Then I strode straight over to the desk. "Here's your man," I said. "Okay, Percy Hassard, consider yourself pinched."

The sleekly barbered, sunken-cheeked room clerk goggled at me. "Pinched?" he bleated. "What for?"

I said: "Killery. Hang the nippers on him, Dave."

Donaldson hesitated. "Now look. Are you sure—?"

His hesitation was damned costly. It gave the Hassard character time to produce a Luger automatic from behind his counter. He aimed it at all of us. "Nobody's taking me out of here," he said through a tight kisser.

As far as I was concerned, the instant he pulled his roscoe he gave himself away. Only a guilty person would try such a trick, and I knew I'd make a bull's eye. So I took a chance and made another one. My right hand was in my coat pocket, clutching the Colt I had taken away from Constance Faraday up in Caffrey's room. I knew the counter's imitation marble was nothing but thin plastic. I fired through my coat and through the plastic, and I put a slug into Hassard's thigh.

Dave sprang over the counter past me, landed on the crawling guy and mashed him flatter than a bride's first cake. I kept going into the file room, piped a big fat Gladstone bag, yanked it forth and opened it.

Inside the bag I found a crumpled grey uniform: a postman's uniform. I also found a bloodstained knife, some wads of cotton and a cheap makeup kit. "This cinches, it," I said. "He stuffed cotton in his mouth to make his

cheeks look puffy. He used dabs of makeup for the counterfeit pimples or boils on his mush. He wore this grey outfit. And here are the thick-lensed spectacles that completed his disguise when he blackjacked me."

Donaldson stared. "You mean that's the knife he stabbed Caffrey with?"

"I'll lay you six, two, and even it fits the death wound," I said, grimly. Then I peered down at the moaning Hassard. "Want to confess, pal?"

"You . . . cheap shamus . . . I'd like to . . . kill you . . . !"

"You've done enough of that," I said. "And we've got you dead to rights." I set fire to a gasper, blew the fumes in his twisted puss. "The way I see this clambake, Rick Caffrey got too careless in his attempt to put a shakedown on Roger Faraday, the financier whose name used to be Leonard Dolan. And Caffrey's carelessness made him a corpse. He made his original threatening phone call to Faraday from his room here in this hotel. Later he also phoned me and said he wanted to hire me. Okay. I think you must have operated the switchboard when he made those calls. You listened in. It was probably a habit with you; I saw you doing the same thing, tonight, when I first came here."

"Go . . . to . . . hell!"

I said: "By eavesdropping, you learned all about Caffrey's intention to make Faraday tell him where the stolen sixty G's were hidden down in Georgia. You also learned that Caffrey planned to send me a special-delivery letter outlining the details. So all you had to do was give Caffrey a fake phone message, ostensibly from me, asking him to call at my apartment in person. That's why he crumpled up his letter and threw it in the waste basket. It's also why he came to my stash tonight. Meanwhile you disguised yourself as a postman, got to my tepee ahead of him, bashed me, and got me out of the way. Then when Caffrey came, you butched him tonight. But you made bad mistakes."

“Damn . . . you . . .!”

“Your next move, after tipping the cops they’d find a dead bozo in my joint, was to call on Faraday and torture him into telling you the hiding place of the sixty thousand clams. Unfortunately he had a bad heart and died, but that didn’t matter to you as long as you had the information you wanted. You came back to this hotel and went on duty at midnight. But you made several bad mistakes.”

“Such . . . as?”

I said: “When I was dragging Miss Faraday out of here and she yelled for help, you jumped at me and called me by name. Which indicated you knew me; you’d met me before somewhere. That it wasn’t a conclusive piece of evidence, I’ll admit; but it made me

do some thinking. And later, Lieutenant Donaldson got another anonymous telephone tip telling him he’d find me in Roger Faraday’s apartment. Well, look. You were the only person who knew I dragged Miss Faraday out of this joint; the only person who could possibly suspect I would take her to her own apartment, which she shared with her father. Therefore you were the only person who could phone in the anonymous tip to headquarters. And if you were the tipster it meant you were also the murderer. Which I’ve proved.”

“You sure have,” Donaldson said admiringly. “I don’t know how the hell you do it, but you always do.”

“I read tea leaves,” I said.