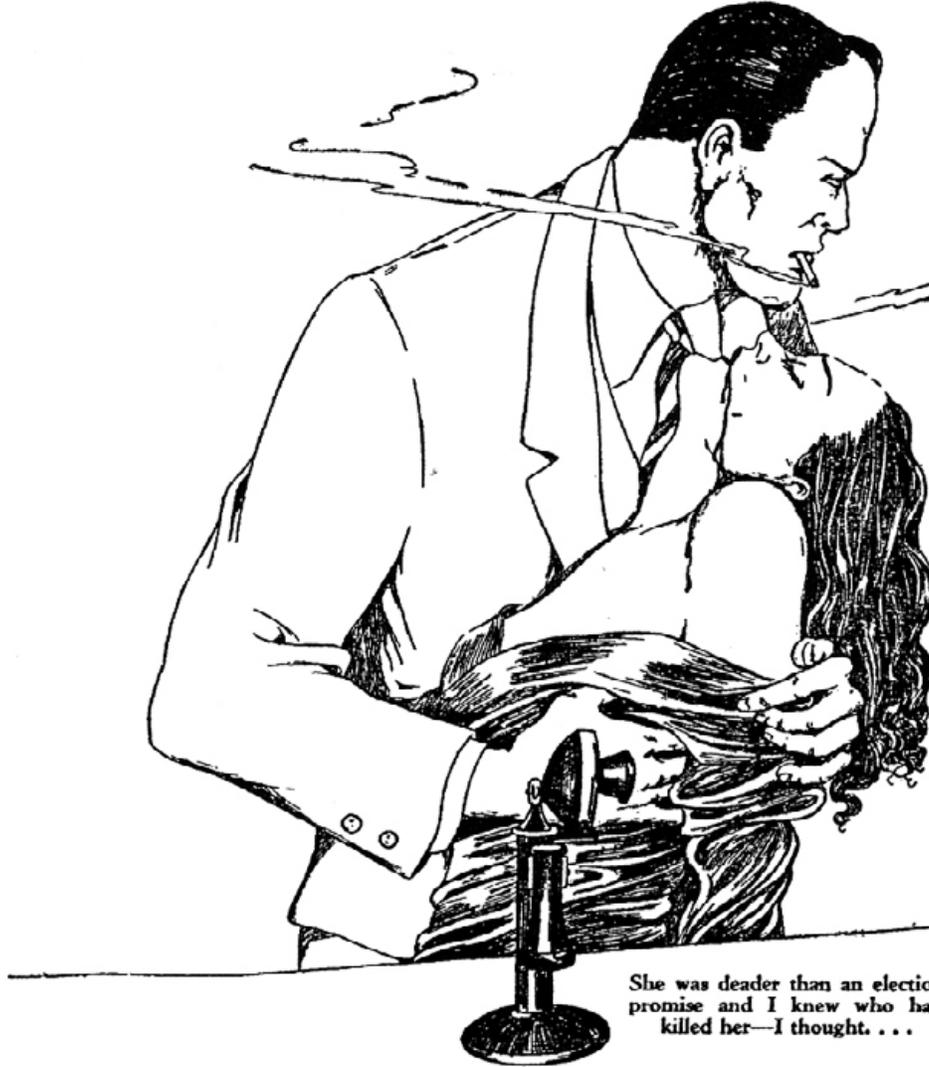


DEATH ON LOCATION

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM



She was deader than an election
promise and I knew who had
killed her—I thought. . . .

A camera never lies about a murder it has recorded. But a murderer can lie, and it's up to Dan to discover who knifed the heroine of the desert pic while she was bathing in her dressing tent.

IT WAS hotter than the hind hinges of hell and my puss felt like a fried egg. The rolling dunes of the California desert stretched as far as the eye could reach; reflected heat was like a blast-furnace.

I heard a shot.

At least it sounded like a roscoe

sneezing "ka-chow." It had a muffled quality, though, as if deadened by many thicknesses of cloth. I popped my noggin out of my tent; looked around. Nobody else seemed to have heard anything unusual. The *Desert Lust* company was taking its noon-day layoff; lunch was just about ready in the big brown mess-tent.

I wondered if the heat had finally driven me screwy. Maybe I was just imagining things. I caught myself wishing to God I hadn't come down here. The *Desert Lust* troupe was an Altamont unit on location in the sand-dunes half-way between Yuma and Indio. If it hadn't been for Jack Hanegan I'd never have accepted the assignment. Imagine, me, Dan Turner, Hollywood private snoop, prancing around in a Bedouin costume before the movie cameras, along with about three hundred other extras!

But Jack Hanegan had been insistent. He'd offered me a fat fee, and I'd fallen for it.

Hanegan was the director of the *Desert Lust* opus. He was tall, red-haired, efficient; also, he'd had a bad case of jitters.

He had barged into my Hollywood office the week before. I'd given him a shot of Scotch and said: "What's on your mind?"

"Plenty. How would you like to be an actor?"

I grinned. "Be your age!"

"I'm serious!" he persisted. "There's a thousand bucks in it for you, Sherlock."

I said: "That's different. Whistle the patter."

"It's this damned desert picture. Ever since we started production, things have gone wrong. Schedules have been shot to hell; whole cans of film have been fogged after exposure; cameras have gone haywire. About the only thing left is for Peg Burleigh and Clifford Kimball, my two co-stars, to get bumped off!"

As a prophet of disaster, Hanegan batted a thousand that time—but of course I couldn't read the future. I just poured myself a drink and said: "Coincidence or deep-dyed plot?"

"Damned if I know! But think this over: Supertone is also shooting an

Arabian story. I understand it's a lot like ours. The first one to release will cash in on the gravy train; the second one won't even draw flies at the box-office."

I fed him another slug of Vat 69. "So what?"

"So this," he said bitterly. "I'm drawing sixty grand a year and my contract's up this month. The studio's got my elbow in a sling and the skids are being greased for me—unless I get *Desert Lust* into the cans ahead of competition."

I said: "What's that got to do with me being an actor?"

"Everything. It's worth a thousand clams out of my personal pocket if I can save my option. I'm taking the troupe down to the Imperial Valley on location next Monday. I can finish up the final exterior shots in two days. I want you to come along as a common, every-day extra. Nobody will suspect your real identity, and you can keep an eye peeled for trouble. In particular you're to watch Clifford Kimball, my male lead."

I raised my brows. "Any reason to suspect him especially?"

"Kimball's a hop-head. I don't suspect him of any dirty work; but if he goes on a morphine bat I'm sunk. He's supposed to have taken the cure—but somebody might slip him a shot, get him started again."

I said: "Clifford Kimball and Peg Burleigh go for each other, don't they?"

"They used to. But Peg tossed him out when he started using the needle. That's why he took the cure. He's trying to get in with her again."

It sounded interesting to me. So did that thousand-buck fee. I said: "Okay, Hanegan. I'll go on location with you."

He'd written me his personal check for a grand, right then and there. And now, here I was in the middle of the desert, hearing things.

THE moment I pegged the noise that sounded like a muffled shot, I popped out of my tent and looked around. Everybody seemed to be over in the big brown mess-tent. I took a gander in the other direction. Up at the far end of the camp was Peg Burleigh's canvas-walled portable dressing room. I tabbed somebody come out of her quarters.

It was a tall man. I couldn't see his map. He was in costume—a flowing white-and-green burnoose and a wrapped red turban. I recognized the outfit. It was the one worn by Clifford Kimball, the Burleigh wren's co-star and former sweetie. His face was turned away from me as he ankled off around a corner of the encampment.

I grinned. Evidently Kimball was back in Peg's good graces. I strolled toward her canvas-walled shack.

Just beyond it, on the outside, I piped a jane. She was an extra—and she had the niftiest shape you'd ever want to look at: rounded hips, slender body, nice firm breast through the thin gauze of her Arabian dancing-girl's costume. She had red hair, a provocative puss, and she was twisting her lithe body in a slow, sinuous dance, all by herself there in the terrific sunshine.

When she saw me she blushed, quit dancing. She ran toward a camera-truck, fiddled for a minute with the controls of a big, steel-jacketed camera.

I said: "Hello, sweetness. Rehearsing?"

"Y-yes. Just r-rehearsing." She turned and beat it. I watched the way her body undulated as she walked away. "Not bad!" I said to myself.

Then Jock Hanegan strolled up. He saw me; but he pretended not to. Instead, he lifted the canvas flap over the entrance to Peg Burleigh's portable dressing room and stepped inside. Just out of idle

curiosity I peered in over his shoulder. Then I said: "What the hell—!" and leaped in after him.

He was standing there, white-faced and gasping like a gaffed fish. I gasped too.

There was a big tin tub of water at the far end of the cabin. Peg Burleigh was sitting in the water, almost naked. The water was stained red. There was a round crimson hole in Peg's back; ketchup still welled from it, trickled down her milky skin into the water.

She was as dead as an election promise.

I punched Hanegan to one side, leaped forward to the tin tub. I grabbed the Burleigh cupcake in my arms, lifted her out of the bloody water. Her soft flesh was still warm to my touch, and her glims stared horribly into death.

I laid her on a cot, felt for some trace of heart-beat. There wasn't any. I looked around. At the back of the canvas-walled portable room, there was a long rip—slashed by a sharp knife. The rip was big enough to admit the figure of a grown man.

I whirled on Hanegan. "Do you realize what's happened?"

He was silent. He just stared at his defunct leading woman's unclad remainders like a guy in a trance.

I pinched a bruise on his arm. "Snap out of it!" I snarled. "This is murder!"

"M-murder?" He didn't seem to grasp the idea.

"Yeah, murder. And I saw the slob that did it!"

"W-what?"

I said: "You heard me. I heard a muffled shot, a few minutes ago. I looked out of my tent, tabbed a bozo coming from this one. It was Clifford Kimball. He evidently sneaked in on Peg while she was taking a sponge-bath. He slashed a hole in

the rear canvas wall. He shot her in the back—probably through a wadded cloth to muffle the report. Then he barged out the front way as cool as billy-be-damned!”

Hanegan licked his whitened kisser. “Kimball? Good God!”

I said: “Come on. We’ve got to catch him before he gets away!”

Hanegan suddenly came to life. He grabbed my arm. “Listen Turner. This’ll wreck everything for me! If we let it out that Peg is dead—if we grab Kimball—then *Desert Lust* will never get finished.”

I SAID: “What of it?” and slipped out of the folds of the white Arabian burnoose I was wearing, so I could reach the .32 I always carry in a shoulder-holster. Then I said: “Let’s go!”

He held me back. “Turner—you’ve got to listen to me! I’ve got to get this picture completed or I lose my job. Grabbing Clifford Kimball now isn’t going to bring Peg back to life.”

“It’ll put his asterisk in the gas chamber,” I barked.

“But he can’t possibly get away. We’re fifty miles from nowhere. He couldn’t make it across the desert by himself. He’s as safe here as if he was in jail!”

I said: “So what?”

“So this! I’m directing the final scenes of the picture this afternoon. Mostly mob stuff. Peg Burleigh wasn’t to appear in any of it. Give me a break, Dan—keep this murder quiet and let me finish my picture. We’ll pretend we haven’t discovered anything about the—the m-murder. Peg won’t be missed. And Kimball won’t suspect we know of her death. As soon as the last scene is shot, we’ll grab him.”

I shook my head. “No dice, Hanegan. It’s too dangerous. The louse might lam.”

He dived into his pocket, extracted a fat bill-fold. “Another thousand for you, Hawkshaw—if you’ll give me a break!”

I thought it over. After all, I’m after the geetus, first, last and always. Also, there couldn’t be much harm in doing what Hanegan asked. I could keep an eye on Kimball until we were ready to put the bracelets on him. I said: “Okay. Give me the dough. I’ll play ball.” I put my burnoose back on.

He handed me ten centuries. We went out through the rip in the back of the portable dressing-room.

The company was just finishing lunch in the mess tent. Hanegan went forward to get things started. I nosed around, looking for Clifford Kimball. I couldn’t find him. I began to worry.

I walked past a little tepee. A voice said: “Just a minute!”

I whirled, saw a jane looking at me from the little single tent. It was the red-haired cutie who’d been rehearsing her sinuous Oriental dance outside Peg Burleigh’s canvas-walled dressing room. She was smiling at me.

I WENT inside her wikiup. She dropped the flap. I glued the glimpse on her. She was damned easy to look at. She’d removed her Arabian costume, and all she had on was a thin wisp of brassiere and a pair of skin-tight silk step-ins. Her skin was as smooth as vanilla ice cream.

She said: “I—I wanted to talk to you a minute.”

“What about?”

“About—what you saw a while ago. That dance I was doing.”

“It was a nice dance. Do you do it in the picture?”

“N-no. That’s what I wanted to tell you. I—I’m just an extra girl. I was just—sort of fooling around. I didn’t think anybody was watching me. If any of my friends found out, they—they’d tease me.”

I looked at her some more. I began to have ideas. I said: “So you want me to

keep my mouth shut about the dance, is that it?"

"W-would you?" she begged coquettishly.

"I might—if you'd be nice to me."

She blushed. Then she looked me over. "That wouldn't be so hard to do, Handsome!"

I took a step toward her. Then I remembered my business. I was supposed to be outside, looking for Clifford Kimball. I said: "Maybe you'd let me visit you in Hollywood some time?"

"Maybe." Then she added: "I'm Aline Witmer." and gave me her home address in Hollywood.

I grabbed her and kissed her on the mouth, for luck. She knew how to kiss, too. I got a bang out of the way she did it. But there wasn't time to go any further, right then. I went out of her quarters before my ideas carried me too far.

I saw a guy walking down between the two rows of tents. My heart leaped. He was wearing a white-and-green burnoose and a red turban. "Kimball!" I whispered to myself, and started trailing him.

THEN he turned around. He wasn't Clifford Kimball, after all. He was Jeff LaRash, a Hollywood stunt man—Kimball's double in the present pic. I remembered him from the day before, when he'd performed a particularly difficult bit on horseback in place of Kimball, who couldn't ride worth a damn. Of course his costume was the exact duplicate of Kimball's; which was what had thrown me off, made me think he was the Kimball hambo.

I searched the crowd, tried to locate my real quarry. I felt a touch on my arm. I half-turned. Jack Hanegan was beside me. He looked as if he'd just seen a ghost.

He spoke out of the side of his mouth, without moving his lips. "Don't let on I've

said anything to you, Turner. But for God's sake follow me—quick!"

I pretended not to notice him. I let him get ahead of me, then I trailed along. He led me out beyond the fringes of the movie camp and over a big sand-dune. Concealed from the encampment on the other side of the white dune there was a huddled shape. Hanegan pointed to it. "G-go look!" he rasped.

I slid down the far side of the dune. I said: "What the hell—!"

The huddled shape was a man wearing a white-and-green burnoose and a red turban. He was lying face-downward in the hot sand, arms outflung. A gat was grasped in his clenched right duke. There was a scrap of paper in the left.

I rolled the body over. It was of Clifford Kimball, there was a bullet-hole in his right temple, and he was deader than petrified wood.

Hanegan said: "I—I just found this. I came running after you. What do you suppose—?"

I wasn't listening to him. I was prying the deceased actor's stiffening fingers loose from that scrap of paper.

Hanegan choked: "Wh-what does it say? What is it?"

I read it to him. "*To whom it may concern,*" the note began. "*I killed Peg Burleigh because I loved her and she refused to take me back. Now I am going to join her in death.*" It was signed with Clifford Kimball's signature.

"God in heaven!" Hanegan bit out. "Now my picture is messed to hell!"

I said: "Go on back to the camp. Get everybody to work. Shoot whatever scenes there still are to take. But shoot 'em over in the other direction—keep everybody away from here. I'll tote Kimball's carcass back to Peg Burleigh's tent and stash it there until we're ready to announce the murder and suicide."

He looked at me. He didn't seem able to express his gratitude in words, but his peepers were plenty eloquent. He turned, scrambled around the dune.

I WAITED quite a while. Then I lifted Kimball's corpse on my shoulder. He had been tall, thin, and he wasn't very heavy. I didn't have any trouble lugging him back to the deserted camp.

I shoved his remnants in through the rent at the back of Peg Burleigh's portable dressing-cabin without being seen. I rolled him into a corner, beside the cot on which Peg's beautiful white corpse rested.

The Burleigh quail's steamer-trunk was open near the front of the canvas cabin. Just on a hunch, I went over to it, rummaged around. Then, suddenly, I found something. It was a worn envelope. I opened it.

There was a document inside. It was a marriage certificate, and the date on it was ten years old. It certified that two people had been joined in holy wedlock. *And their names were Margaret Burleigh and Jefferson LaRash!*

That floored me. I stared into the dead doll's glims. So she had been the wife of Jeff LaRash—the stunt-man who had doubled for Clifford Kimball yesterday! And then, abruptly I remembered seeing LaRash today in a costume identical to the one worn by Kimball—green-and-white burnoose and red, wrapped turban.

I whistled. Then I dug into that worn envelope again. There were two more papers in it. One was a formal bank notification of the return of a check which had been made payable to Peg Burleigh, and which had been refused because of insufficient funds. The other was a divorce decree, indicating that she and LaRash had been legally severed six years ago.

I put all three documents back in the envelope, shoved it into my pocket

beneath the white burnoose I was still wearing. I sneaked out of the Burleigh chick's canvas dressing-room and beat it to my own tent. I slipped out of my burnoose and turban; took a long swig of Scotch. Then I stepped outside. The camp was still deserted. I found my jalopy, got in, headed for Indio, hell-for-leather.

It took me something under forty minutes to get there. I slammed on my brakes before a drug-store and leaped inside. I plunged into a steaming telephone booth and put through a long-distance call to a friend of mine in the business offices of Supertone Studios.

I talked to him for maybe three minutes. Then I hung up and flung myself outside, back into my bucket. It had taken me less than forty minutes to drive from the movie camp to Indio; it took me just thirty to get back to camp. I hit seventy-five most of the way.

THE Altamount unit was just getting into camp when I arrived. I spied Jack Hanegan, beckoned to him. He followed me behind the mess tent. I said: "Listen. Don't spill anything about that murder and suicide just yet. I've got an idea."

"Idea?"

"Yeah. Maybe Clifford Kimball didn't kill himself. I've got a hunch that confession note of his is a forgery. I've got an idea he was creamed, the same as Peg Burleigh was."

"But—who—?"

I said: "Keep everything quiet. Hold the company here—pretend you'll have to shoot some retakes tomorrow morning. And stay away from me until I give you the signal."

He fixed the puzzled gander on me. Then he nodded. "You're running this, Turner. I hope you know what you're doing."

"I think I do. Now scram."

He scrambled. I waited a minute. Then I strolled along the camp until I came to the tent occupied by the red-haired cutie, Aline Witmer, the one who'd rehearsed that sinuous Oriental dance outside Peg Burleigh's tent.

I scratched on the canvas flap and said: "Anybody home?"

The Witmer cookie opened the flap on a crack. She'd removed her costume, exchanged it for a light dressing gown of thin red silk. It bulged open at the front. I said: "Hello, baby. Are you as lonesome as I am?"

She said: "Maybe," and let me in.

"Do you drink anything?" I asked her.

She grinned. "Yes. Anything."

I pulled out my flask of Vat 69; found two paper cups. We had a snort together. Then I gave her a gasper and set fire to mine with the same match. She blew out the flame.

I said: "Know what that means?"

"No. What?" she asked me provocatively.

"It means that you want to be kissed."

"You must be a crystal-gazer, Handsome," she said. So I grabbed her, kissed her.

It lasted a long while, that kiss. I put lots of technique into it. So did she. We were both panting a little when it was over. I ran my fingers along smooth skin. She quivered. "Is there any more Scotch in your flask?"

I said: "I think so." We killed what remained of the Scotch. Then I kissed her again. Hard....

AFTER a while I said: "You ought to have quite a career in the movies, baby."

"Should I?"

"Yeah. You've got what it takes—in generous quantities! Ever have a screen test?"

She stared at me in a funny way. "What are you getting at?"

"Nothing. I just asked."

"Did—did they discover about that movie-camera?"

I perked up. "What movie camera?"

Then I remembered. "You mean the one you turned on when you were doing that dance this morning?"

She blushed. "Then they *did* find out!"

"Maybe they have; maybe they haven't. But I was wise all the time, of course. You switched on the electric motor that ran the camera, didn't you? It was grinding out your picture while you were dancing."

She nodded. "I—I saw it there on the truck. Nobody was around. I started it running; did my stuff before the lens. I—I thought that maybe when the film was developed, they'd see me and—and wonder why the shot was made. Of course I knew it would be snipped out of the picture; but maybe someone would want to know who it was. I thought it might get me a break in pictures—"

"Maybe you'll get your break, baby. I've got to go now." Then I walked out on her. She looked surprised as hell.

I was grinning to myself. I'd found out something I wanted to know.

Jack Hanegan was standing over by the mess-tent. I ankled past him. He said: "Found out anything?" from the corner of his kisser.

"Keep your shirt on. Wait till dark," I grunted.

He turned away from me. I barged down toward the canvas-walled cabin where the bodies of Peg Burleigh and Clifford Kimball lay concealed. I looked around, smiled, torched a gasper. Then I went into my own tent and waited for night to come.

Supper was served to the whole troupe at dusk. When the meal was over, darkness

had fallen. I signaled to Hanegan. He trailed me to the outskirts of the camp.

I said: "Listen. Kimball was croaked by the same person who rubbed out Peg Burleigh. Kimball's murder was a plant; the confession note was forged. The killer did that to clear his own tracks. He figured that the discovery of Kimball's body and the note would close the case; nobody'd think to look further for Peg's murderer."

"But—how do you figure—"

"Did you know Peg was married at one time to your stunt-man, Jeff LaRash?"

"What?"

I said: "Yeah. She divorced him later. Then she took up with Kimball. By luck, her ex-husband was hired to double for Kimball in this picture you're making. Maybe LaRash still loved his former wife; maybe he was jealous of Kimball. He could easily have sneaked into Peg's tent, browned her as she bathed. Remember, I saw a guy coming out of her quarters. I couldn't tab his pan, but he was wearing a green-and-white burnoose and a red turban. That's what made me think it was Kimball. But it could just as easily have been LaRash. And I intend to find out."

"H-how?"

"Come along. I'll show you."

He followed me through the darkness. I said, "Where is LaRash's tent?"

Hanegan pointed it out to me. We strolled slowly up to it. There was a lantern lighted inside, and I could see the stunt-man's silhouette on the canvas. I raised my voice high enough for it to carry inside the shelter. I said: "Yes. The man who murdered Peg Burleigh had everything mapped out to a gnat's whisker, but he didn't count on one thing."

"What was that?" Hanegan asked, following my lead and pitching his voice high.

"He didn't count on Fate. There happened to be a camera perched on a

truck to one side of the front entrance to Peg's portable cabin. Some dizzy extra girl got a wild idea. She turned the camera on, then did a close-up dance before the lens."

"You mean—"

"The guy that killed Peg Burleigh was dressed in a costume identical to the one worn by Clifford Kimball. He walked out of Peg's front door, as bold as brass, but keeping his face turned away from the camp. Anybody seeing him would naturally think it was Kimball. Then, to cinch it, he shot Kimball and planted that fake confession-note. But what he didn't realize was this: that camera was grinding away—and it was focussed on the front door of Peg Burleigh's private dressing quarters!"

"What?" Hanegan cried out.

I said: "Yeah. The murderer didn't know it, but movies were being made of him as he came out after killing the Burleigh dame. That camera is still standing where it was this morning—it wasn't used for this afternoon's sequences. All we've got to do is get the film out of it, develop it, and we'll see the killer's map."

I pulled Hanegan away from LaRash's tent before he could answer me. Then he whispered: "Is—is that true? You think we've actually got a picture of LaRash coming out of Peg's cabin?"

"Sure."

He said: "Wait here. I'll go get a cameraman. We'll have him open the magazine of that camera and get the reel!" He turned, loped off.

I LOOKED back toward Jeff LaRash's tent. The light had gone out inside it. I grinned, catapulted at the camera-truck that was still standing opposite the Burleigh jane's quarters.

I reached it; crouched in the shadows. I tensed; heard footsteps sneaking up behind me. Something whistled through the air—

something hard.

I ducked. The butt of a roscoe smashed past my ear. It just barely clipped me on the shoulder; hurt like hell. I uncoiled my gams, pivoted, leaped for a dark shadow behind me.

The guy grunted when I slugged him. He was as strong as an ox; almost as tall as I am—which is plenty tall. He grabbed me, tried to pinion my arms. I could feel his hot breath in my kisser. He raised one fist to smash at my prow.

I jerked sidewise; jammed my heel on his instep. He yelled. I caught him a stiff poke in the teeth, felt the skin of my knuckles split wide open. He staggered backward and I laced him again. This time I connected to his button. And when I connect with a guy's button, it turns off his lights.

My bozo went down for the count.

I whipped out my flashlight, sprayed it on his puss. I said: "Well, Hanegan, I guess that's that!"

LATER, when the Indio cops got there to take the director away, I explained to them. I said: "Hanegan himself had been putting the jinx on this picture, *Desert Lust!* He knew he was going to be fired by Altamount anyhow; and he'd been accepting bribes from Supertone. They'd offered him a job with them—provided he saw to it that *Desert Lust* didn't get released on schedule time. Supertone wanted their own Arabian pic to hit the theaters first."

I lit a coffin-nail and went on. "But Peg Burleigh caught on to the deal, somehow. And she started blackmailing Hanegan. He gave her a check—and it was no good. The bank returned it. That's what

first put me wise, when I saw a paper among her things. It was a notice that a check signed by Hanegan had been turned down. Then I went to Indio and phoned a friend of mine at Supertone. He admitted Hanegan was coming to work for them."

I grinned. "That was the tip-off. Hanegan cooled Peg to shut her mouth—and to ruin the picture. He wore a costume exactly like Clifford Kimball's when he shot her. Then he killed Kimball, for no other reason than to close the case. He planted the forged confession on Kimball's carcass. That the stunt-man, Jeff LaRash, was Peg Burleigh's former husband was just pure coincidence—but I used it to trick Hanegan. I told him about the movie camera, and it scared the bejoseph out of him. I knew it would. He practically confessed when he tried to slug me and steal the reel."

As a matter of fact, Hanegan did confess. He saw that the evidence was all against him, and there was nothing else to do. He even told why he'd hired me to go on location.

He wanted me around as an expert witness, so that I could testify that Clifford Kimball had killed Peg Burleigh and then committed suicide.

Later, when they opened the Bell and Howell, they discovered something I'd suspected all along. It was empty—it didn't have any film in it. Something had gone wrong with the mechanism, which was why it had been shoved off to one side: wasn't being used.

But that didn't prevent Jack Hanegan from sniffing cyanide at San Quentin. I didn't attend the ceremony. I was busy making hay with the red-haired extra wren, Aline Witmer.