

DAUGHTER OF Murder



The gat bellowed again. I groaned and hit the floor.

There are some things a daughter ought to know about her own mother—including how she died. Dan had some doubts about both would-be heiresses, but no doubt about which one wanted to kill him!

AS A rule, when I park my jalopy in the basement garage under my apartment stash I usually ankle up the inside stairway to the main lobby of the joint, then take the U-drive elevator up

to my wigwam on the third floor. But this time I changed my habits and got a hell of a surprise.

It was after midnight and I was fairly well oiled on Vat 69, so I decided to barge

around the block a couple of times. Maybe a walk in the ozone would blow the fuzz out of my grey matter, I figured. Anyhow, I started strolling; whereupon I piped this red-haired wren on the fire escape.

I don't know what made me look up at that particular moment, but when I did, I spotted the jane. She was climbing down the iron ladder; and just as I copped a startled swivel at her, the moon came out from behind a cloud bank.

I said: "What the hell—!" and felt my temperature soaring into the higher brackets. And no damned wonder. The chick's entire wardrobe consisted of a pair of thin chiffon panties and a brassiere of tissue-paper texture!

For an instant I thought I was having the heebie-jeebies. In the first place there wasn't any blaze; therefore the quail had no business being where she was. And in the second place she looked almost too delicious to be genuine.

Her bare gams were sleek, tapered, creamy; her hips had a gorgeous lilt in those skin-tight scanties. The moonlight kissed her perkily mounded tidbits through the gossamer brassiere; danced across her piquant puss and made glints in her wavy auburn coiffure. Even at that distance I could see she was something extra special in the way of youthful she-male yumph.

But why was she horsing around on those rusty rungs, lowering herself from the fourth floor to the third?

Even as I watched, she gained the third floor landing where there was an open window. She hesitated, then lifted the sash two feet higher; straddled the sill and vanished inside.

I almost swallowed my gasper, fire and all. Because it was my bachelor flat she'd entered!

Which didn't add up to make sense. I was positive I didn't know the frill dressed or undressed. From tresses to tootsies I

hadn't recognized a damned thing about her; yet I'd certainly seen plenty of what she owned in the way of charms.

You don't catch a beautiful, unpeeled burglar breaking into your igloo every night in the month. When you do, it's only human to try and find out what the hell's cooking. So I sprinted buckety-blip for the entrance to the building; larruped into the elevator cage and wafted myself upward. On the third floor corridor I gumshoed toward my portal.

IT OPENED at the exact instant I reached for the knob. I tensed as the carrot-thatched cupcake staggered out over the threshold into the dimly lighted hall. Then she glued the panic-stricken glimpse on me.

She moaned: "Oh-h-h-h. . . ?" and closed her greenish peepers; collapsed in a dead faint.

I caught her as her knees buckled; lifted her in my arms. My hand accidentally contacted a yielding little mound of sweetness as I held her; and the resilient warmth sent thrills crackling through my nooks and crannies. If the babe hadn't been deep in the heart of a swoon I might have started getting ideas.

As it was, I restrained my wayward impulses; toted her back into my living room. She was a tiny, fragile dish, light as a feather and seductive as hell. Her pallid pan was young, innocent; its whiteness emphasized by the flaming masses of hair that made a wavy frame for her features and shoulders. Add skin the smoothness of milky velvet and curves like a picture from *Esquire* and the result was really something to gander.

I made a light, deposited her on my davenport, leaned down to take a whiff of her breath. There wasn't any trace of whiskey fumes, so I knew she wasn't plastered. She'd passed out from fright,

not John Barleycorn.

In my bathroom I dampened a washcloth, brought it back and laid its cold wetness on her forehead. Her long lashes fluttered and she opened her glims. Their emerald color looked even greener now.

She whimpered: "Wh-where am I? Who are y-you. . . ?"

"You're in Hollywood, hon," I said. "And I'm Dan Turner, private snoop. Now suppose you give me the lowdown. What are you doing in my joint?"

She sat up; and for the first time she seemed to realize her lack of threads. She grabbed a pillow, hugged it against the rising mounds of her whatchacallems. "I . . . I'm sick! I've b-been . . . drugged. . . !"

The way her crimson kisser was working, I thought she was on the verge of coughing up her caramels. I dashed over to my cellarette, sloshed a jolt of Scotch in a glass, made her dribble it down the hatch. The skee seemed to settle the butterflies in her clockworks. "Th-thank you," she choked.

I said: "That's okay, sis. Feel like talking now?"

"Th-there isn't t-time to talk," she swayed upright. "I—I must get to my mother. She's v-very ill—"

"Maybe I can take you," I suggested. "Where is your old lady? And who is she?"

"She—she's Margaret Corwin. Perhaps you know her."

I stared at the red-haired cutie. "Are you trying to tell me you're Virginia Corwin?"

"Yes."

Her answer made me as sore as a picked blister, because I figured she was trying to take me for a sleigh ride. "Don't hand me that ap-cray," I growled.

"Wh-what do you m-mean?"

"I happen to know the real Virginia Corwin arrived in Hollywood this

afternoon. She's at her dying mother's bedside right now," I rasped.

I WASN'T kidding, either. I'd been reading it in the newspapers, hearing it on the radio. Margaret Corwin, the grand old lady of the galloping snapshots, was kicking the bucket from a lingering illness. Up until two weeks ago, nobody had even suspected her of having a grown daughter who was being educated in a convent college down in South America.

Then, when the Corwin dame learned she didn't have much longer to stick around, she'd told about her she-male offshoot. As a result, the docs fired a radiogram to South America; sent for the filly. What followed was something the headline writers like to call a Race With Death.

Virginia Corwin had booked passage north on a Pan-American Clipper. Bad weather delayed her along the whole damned route, so that she was ten days reaching the United States. Then she'd grabbed a transcontinental airliner for the west coast, only to run into fresh grief. There happened to be an air-raid alert in California that week, and the Fourth Interceptor Command temporarily grounded all incoming and outgoing commercial planes.

Consequently the daughter had shifted to a streamliner train and continued toward Hollywood. Meanwhile, old lady Corwin had dispatched her business manager eastward to meet the girl's rattler in Albuquerque. The business manager, a guy named Ted Bradley, obeyed orders. He boarded the train at Albuquerque; accompanied the wren back to California. He took her directly to the bedside of her famous mama, whom she hadn't seen in twelve years.

And now this chick with the green glims and red hair was trying to tell me

she was Virginia Corwin!

I said: "Sing another tune, kiddo. That one's off the beam a mile and a half."

Brine leaked out of her peepers, spilled down her woeful map. She dropped the pillow she was holding against her tidbits; fastened the grab on my coat sleeve. "Listen!" she pleaded frantically. "You've g-got to believe me! You're the only person I c-can turn to. . . ."

"How come I am?"

"You say you're a p-private detective. Well, then, you must help me. You *must!*"

I said: "Whistle the patter. Spill the story." After all, it wouldn't cost me anything to hear what she had to say.

She drew a deep breath that pouted out her firm little thingumbobs. "A m-man got on my train at Albuquerque. He told me he was my m-mother's representative."

"Ted Bradley?"

"Y-yes. I allowed him into my compartment. Shortly after the train pulled out, he g-got me a glass of water. I began to feel queer—sleepy. And th-that's all I remember until I woke up just a little while ago in a strange room. Everything was d-dark. My c-clothes were g-gone. Nobody was around. . . ."

I said: "Then what?"

"I climbed out a window, onto a fire escape. I went down one floor and c-came in here. Then you c-caught me."

"Are you saying your mother's business agent slipped you a mickey, stashed you in the flat above mine? I don't savvy why he'd pull a stinking stunt like that."

She made a bitter mouth. "I do. You see, my mother is . . . rather eccentric. She never believed in banks. She always bought negotiable Government securities with her savings; lately it's been war bonds. And it was her idea for me to reach her before she . . . d-dies, so she could g-give them to me personally."

"So you think this Bradley louse doped you to get you out of the way," I said. "You think he's palmed off some other quail in your place, is that it?"

"Y-yes. He knows my mother hasn't seen me in twelve years—knows she's t-too far gone to see through the deception. Her vision is clouded. . . . Anyhow, the scheme would work for a little while, as long as he could keep me under cover. And South America is too far away for an immediate checkup."

I said: "Hm-m-m. If Bradley and the imposter jane get their claws on your mother's bonds, it won't matter if you turn up later with proof of your identity. By that time Bradley and the wren will be long gone—with the geetus."

She nodded forlornly. "And I w-won't get to see my mother before she d-dies!"

I SCOWLED thoughtfully. I'd never liked Ted Bradley, although I'd bumped into him plenty of times around Hollywood. He was a tall, angular bozo with shifty optics and a furtive way of talking out of the side of his kisser; but I'd never tabbed him to be heel enough to go in for kidnaping and embezzlement.

A suspicion sneaked up my pants. Maybe this red-haired frill was needling me, feeding me a cargo of fertilizer. I decided to put her to the test.

I sat down on the divan, yanked her alongside me, slipped an arm around her pliant waist. Then I mauled her backward against the upholstery, dished her a kiss that would have sent twitches and twitters into a marble statue.

She gasped, struggled, tried to get away. Her dainty tiddley-winks surged on my shirt-front in a hell of a thrilling manner, even though it was anger rather than pash that made them turbulent. I quit being thrilled, though, when she twisted one mitt free and grabbed up a metal ash

tray, bounced it off my noggin.

“You-you swine!” she panted.

I let out an anguished yelp, rubbed the lump that suddenly festooned my conk. Then I forced a grin to my puss and said: “I apologize, hon. Pardon my horny exterior. I was just trying you out, was all.”

“Trying me out—?”

“Yeah. Had you been kidding me about yourself—if you’d been some ordinary movie frail with an ulterior motive—you’d have responded to that kiss I spooned you.”

“I—I don’t think I understand.”

I said: “On the other hand, a young jane fresh from a convent school would react exactly the way you did. Now I’m satisfied that you’re the genuine Virginia Corwin.”

“You-you m-mean you’ll help me?”

“Damned right,” I grunted. “I want you to stay right here in my igloo, see? Don’t leave, no matter what happens. I’m going out to see what’s simmering.”

She gave me her promise, and I barged forth; powdered down to my bucket in the basement and headed out Wilshire in the direction of Owen Jarrett’s wikiup in Westwood.

This Jarrett guy was one of the biggest legal moguls in the cinema colony; an attorney who’d sent me a lot of cases from time to time. He was a square shooter—and he happened to be the dying Margaret Corwin’s lawyer.

It took me quite a while to roust him out of bed. When he finally came downstairs he looked as grumpy as an abscessed tooth. “What the hell’s the idea, Sherlock? Don’t you know it’s past one o’clock in the morning?”

I fished out a gasper, set fire to it, grinned at him. Even in pajamas and robe he had a compelling look that proclaimed culture, brains, shrewdness—everything it

takes to make a top hand in the barrister business.

“Cool off, mouthpiece,” I told him. “I’ve got to talk to you about something damned important.”

“Such as what?”

I said: “Have you met Margaret Corwin’s kid?”

He nodded. “Saw her at the Corwin house this evening. Arranged the transfer of the old lady’s securities.”

I felt as if he’d kicked me in the elly-bay. “Damn it to hell, you’ve given those bonds to the wrong filly!” I yodeled. “She’s an imposter—and she’s probably lammed by now, along with that no-good schlemiel, Ted Bradley!”

Jarrett gave me the fish-eyed focus. “Are you drunk or something, Hawkshaw?”

“Hell, no, I’m not drunk! Look. A chick busted in my dugout tonight. She tells me she’s the real Virginia Corwin. Bradley met her train at Albuquerque; drugged her and put the snatch on her. Then he substituted some other quail to impersonate her. That’s the one you handed those securities to!”

He gasped like a gaffed porpoise. “My God!” he whispered. Then he added: “But how do you know this red-head isn’t lying?”

I caressed the knot on my cranium where she’d maced me with a metal ash tray. “She proved she was leveling,” I said reminiscently.

“Then something’s got to be done, Dan. But quick!”

“Yeah,” I agreed with him. “The question is, *what?*”

HE STRODE up and down, goosing his grey matter. “We’ll have to get hold of this fake daughter; keep her from leaving town with the bonds. We’ve got to hold her until we can check with the

convent school in South America.”

“Sure,” I said. “But we don’t dare actually arrest her until we’re sure she really is a fake. So how can we prevent her from taking a powder?”

Jarrett wore another path in the rug. Then he said: “As long as she and Bradley think the *real* Virginia Corwin is safely under cover, they’ll take things easy. But if they find out their prisoner has escaped, they’ll know the jig’s up. They’ll beat it.”

“So what?” I growled.

“You go back to your apartment, Philo. Tell the green-eyed girl to return to the apartment above yours where she was held captive.”

I said: “I catch. When Bradley takes a hinge to see if she’s still under control, he’ll find her there. He won’t get suspicious. That’ll give us time to dig into the mess.”

“Right. So get busy. And I’ll cable South America for a photograph of the genuine Virginia Corwin. Once we have that, we’ll know who’s who.”

I nodded, ankled back out to my rambling wreck and dynamited it back home. My delightful auburn-haired visitor was still there, waiting for me.

I told her the score, handed her a spare roscoe from my bedroom. “Take this and go back upstairs, babe. If anybody comes in to see you, make like you’re still drugged. But in case of trouble, start squirting bullets. Got it?”

Her kisser quivered. Then she squared her liling shoulders, drifted toward me. Before I realized what was coming, she dished me a chaste kiss of gratitude. It wasn’t much more than a quick peck; but it made my tonsils sizzle like pork chops in a frying pan. That’s how she affected me.

While I was still panting, she turned; glided to the window. I switched off the lights as she lifted a graceful leg over the

sill, shinnied to the fire escape. She started climbing, and I watched her from below as she finally disappeared in the apartment over mine.

I waited long enough to pour a jigger of soothing syrup down my neck. Then I went out, piled into my bucket, headed for the dying Margaret Corwin’s palatial wigwam this side of Beverly.

THERE were a lot of cars parked in the driveway when I dragged anchor. One of them was long, somber, black: an undertaker’s wheelbarrow. It looked ominous. And I noticed another chariot, too; a gaudy maroon convertible that pulled away as I arrived. The guy at the rudder was the Corwin dame’s business manager, Ted Bradley. I tabbed his shifty peepers and rodent profile just before I cut my headlights.

He had a blatant blonde cutie with him; a jane I recognized. Her name was Vicki Ellery, and I recalled a scrap of scandal I’d recently heard about her. She was separated from her hubby, an Altamount cameraman, and he was trying to get something on her so he could sue for divorce. From the look of things, this Bradley bozo was evidently the other man in the triangle.

I ducked so Bradley wouldn’t spot me; waited until his convertible turned the far corner. Then I ankled to the front porch of the Corwin tepee; rang the bell.

Presently a brunette jessie opened up, hung the icy swivel on me. She was a nifty number, rather young, with a self-assured expression on her olive-ivory puss.

“Yes?” she lifted a plucked eyebrow.

“I’m Dan Turner. I came to pay my respects to Margaret Corwin.”

“Thank you,” her tone was cool, unemotional. “My mother passed away a little while ago.”

The news didn’t surprise me much,

considering the hearse in front of the stash. I said: "Oh. Then you're Virginia Corwin?"

"Yes."

I yanked out the .32 automatic I always carry in a shoulder holster; jammed it up against her resilient left bonbon. "You're a gah-damned liar," I grunted. "And if you let out a bleat there'll be a double funeral."

She went pale around the fringes; tried to back off. "Wh-what—what do you—"

I GLUED the grasp on her wrists, yanked her off the porch to my parked coupe, shoved her in. Then, still keeping her covered with my rod, I rummaged my other mitt in the glove compartment; located a roll of adhesive tape.

I tore off some strips, gummed the black-haired quail's kisser so she couldn't yell. Next I drew her struggling arms behind her; taped them together. And finally I hiked the hem of her skirt northward, peeled the sheer nylon hose down off her shapely gams. I twisted the stockings into a makeshift cord around her ankles. It was damned interesting work while it lasted. My fingers tingled every inch of the way.

There wasn't time for me to enjoy it, though. I slid in under the wheel, shoved off. Presently I stopped in front of a night-owl druggery, barged inside and phoned my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad.

He was on the swing shift that week, and his voice sounded sleepy when he came on the line. "Well?"

"Dan Turner yapping. Listen. Margaret Corwin croaked a little while ago."

"That's too bad. But it's near time. She's had both feet in the grave for a month."

I said: "Sure, I know that. She couldn't have lasted much longer in any case; but

I've got a sneaking hunch she was nudged to her reward a bit ahead of time. Maybe by a discreet jorum of poison."

"*What's that?*" Dave's bellow almost bent my eardrum into a pretzel.

"You heard me, chum. It's just a guess on my part, see? But it fits the rest of the mess I'm working on."

"What mess?"

Instead of explaining the details, I said: "Better contact the undertaker who's in charge of her remainders. Have a post-mortem. If I'm right, I'm hoping to hand you her murderer in a few hours." And I hung up before he could delay me with a deluge of dopey questions.

I BELTED back to my vee-eight; bounced in beside the trussed brunette doll. If the hate in her glims could have turned to bullets, she'd have punctured me in a dozen places. As it was, I just grinned in her mush; kicked the starter.

By now it was past two o'clock in the morning. That was jake with me. There's nothing like quizzing somebody in the wee hours; a person's guard is usually down at such a time, and occasionally you learn things they don't want you to know.

At least this was what I had in mind as I started rolling toward a certain bungalow on Curson Street. I was figuring on firing some verbal shots at the wren who lived in that cottage—the yellow-haired frill named Vicki Ellery, the one I'd tabbed riding in Ted Bradley's gaudy maroon convertible a while back.

Pretty soon I set my brakes in front of Vicki's shanty; locked my brunette prisoner in the car. I made for the Ellery quail's front door, thumbed the bell.

I was lucky. It was Vicki Ellery herself who opened up, stared out at me. Bradley must have brought her home directly after pulling away from Margaret Corwin's joint, because she was already embellished

in a gossamer nightie; had cold cream smeared all over her worldly lineaments. Her bleached hair hung down her back like a metallic waterfall.

It was attractive, though, if you didn't mind the peroxide tint. And she had a figure lush enough to fit a sultan's harem—voluptuous hips, columnar thighs and stems, billowing breastworks that swelled against the nightie's low-cut sheerness. With the light behind her, you could pipe every silhouetted detail through the thin silk.

We'd met on two or three parties, so of course she recognized me. "Turner! What are you after?"

I shoved by her, into the living room. She pattered after me, her map looking strained, scared, under the cold cream. Once more she asked me what I wanted.

I took a chance, let go with a lie. "Your hubby hired me to get divorce evidence for him, hon. You've been horsing around with a lug named Bradley."

Her cushiony beauties lifted sharply on an indrawn gasp. "It—it's not so!"

"Don't kid me, babe," I said. "I'm wise to the setup. And I'm not too damned interested, one way or the other. After all, your husband only paid me a hundred skins for the job. If you're willing to raise the ante I might listen to reason."

Her optics narrowed. "You'd sell him out if I paid you more!"

"Maybe."

"You chiseling creep!" she grated. Then she softened up. "How much is your price for a double cross?"

I said: "Mention a figure. Say five hundred?"

She twitched. "You know damned well I haven't got that kind of dough. But I might get it from Ted—I mean—" Her map went red under its smear of grease.

"That's okay," I chuckled. "Sure, get it

from Ted Bradley. Is he here now?"

"No!"

"But he was here last night, and night before last?"

"What if he was? You can't prove anything, even if I admit it. Sure he was here. And I'll see him again tomorrow night. You can have your payoff then if you'll wait that long."

I said: "It's a deal," and blew her a kiss; ankled out. I had learned what I wanted to know.

BACK in my bucket, I grinned at the brunette jane who was squirming against the adhesive tape that bound her wrists. "It won't be long now, sweet stuff," I promised. And I headed for my apartment dump.

There I untied her gams, prodded her inside. The lobby was deserted at this unholy hour, so it was no trick to whisk the wren up to my quarters. I bounced her on the davenport, unfastened the tape from her sullen yap. "But remember, if you yelp I'll beat all the fur off you," I said grimly.

She didn't yelp. She just cursed me with her peepers.

I leaned over her. "Now look, sister. I'm hep to the play. Ted Bradley substituted you for the real Virginia Corwin so you could glom her old lady's securities."

"Smart, aren't you?" she curled a lip at me.

"Wise enough to know I'm in this game for the dough. Cut me in for a slice of your take and maybe I'll let you get away with the steal."

She put the speculative focus on me. "Ten grand?"

"Fifty."

"Why, you crooked burglar!" she gasped. "That's almost half of what we're . ." Then she seemed to realize she wasn't in a position to bellyache; so she changed

her routine. “Would you be satisfied with twenty thousand dollars and . . . other considerations?”

“It depends on the other considerations,” I ran my optics over her curvesome them and thoses. The neck of her satin blouse had got ripped during her struggles with me when I’d taped her in my jalopy; and now I could tab the upper halves of her full, rounded doo-dads nestling in the lacy cups of an uplift bandeau.

She whispered: “You know what other considerations I mean,” and twined her arms around my brisket; drew me downward so she could clamp her succulent kisser on mine. A jolt of voltage shot through me when she parted her lips. . .

. . . Well, what the hell? She was a crook; but she was a damned alluring one. And I was setting the stage for a climax; baiting a trap for her to fall into. With luck, I’d also catch her partner—if I played my cards right.

So I started playing them; led off with every ace in my deck. I lowered the passionate boom on her, mauled her until she moaned for mercy. My mouth stormed at her eyes, her shoulders, her throat. She began wringing and twisting on the upholstery. . .

Presently I made an excuse, left her. When I closed my bathroom door. I eavesdropped; heard her sneak to the front portal of my stash. She didn’t get away, though because it was locked; I’d seen to that, and I had the key in my pocket.

Next she tiptoed to my phone, lifted the receiver and dialed a number very quietly. I grinned, got a bottle of mercurochrome out of my medicine cabinet and spilled a splotch of it on my shirt; covered the stain by closing and buttoning my coat. Then I ankled back to the living room.

BY THIS time the brunette chick had finished her phone call; was on the davenport again, waiting for me as if she’d been there all the while. Her glims held frank invitation; and I knew there was some time to be killed before the fireworks commenced. So I barged over to her and resumed pitching woo where I’d left off. . .

And then, about fifteen minutes later, my front doorknob rattled. I catapulted off the divan just as a roscoe sneezed: *KaChow* from the outer corridor. The slug ripped through the door’s lock, shattered it. The portal burst inward at the exact instant I caromed to the light switch and flicked it off.

In solid darkness the unseen gat bellowed again, blasted a streak of flame across the room. I groaned, slumped, hit the rug with my hundred and ninety pounds.

As I went sprawling, a flashlight blazed in my map. I had a hell of a time controlling my eye muscles, but I made the grade; forced myself to stare glassily into the beam. Then the brunette cupcake leaned down, yanked my coat open, saw the red stain above my heart.

“You plugged him clean!” she whispered harshly. “He’s leaking like a sieve. Let’s scam!”

A man’s voice answered: “Okay. I’ve got the bonds. We’d better go up and take care of that Corwin brat. Then we’ll blow.”

Footfalls pelted out of my igloo before any of the neighbors got wide enough awake to investigate what was going on. The instant I was alone I surged upright, plunged at the window and hurtled out onto the fire escape; started climbing.

I gained the open window on the next floor; went over the sill and into a pitch-dark room. “Virginia!” I whispered. “Virginia Corwin—where are you? It’s

Turner.”

“Over here in th-the c-corner. . .” the red-haired filly moaned. “Wh-what’s happening? I heard shots.”

I located her, crushed her close to me. She was a gorgeous armful of trembling, fragrant sweetness, all the more thrilling because she wore nothing but those gossamer step-ins and tissue-thin brassiere. I didn’t need a light to sense her attractions. I could find them by instinct.

ALL of a sudden I heard the door being opened. A switch clicked and the overhead bulb glowed. I shoved the Corwin cutie down behind me; shielded her with my bulk as I whipped out my automatic. Then I faced the two people who’d just entered—the brunette imposter jane and her masculine companion.

I said: “Freeze, rats. *Drop that cannon, Owen Jarrett!*”

The austere attorney popped his peepers at me. “My God. . . you knew. . . you trapped. . .”

“Yeah, mouthpiece,” I growled. “Your goose is goosed. Some mercurochrome on my shirt made you think you’d croaked me; but instead, I came up here to lay for you. Now I’ve got you by the ventricles.”

“But—but how—”

I said: “You gave yourself away when I talked to you earlier tonight. I told you about a quail coming to see me, claiming she was the genuine Virginia Corwin. I didn’t describe her, though. *And yet when you spoke of her you called her the red-haired girl with the green eyes.* Nobody but her kidnaper would have said it. So I knew you were the guy.”

He sagged in his threads like a punctured balloon.

Then I fed him the story as I saw it. “Poor old Margaret Corwin sent her business agent, Ted Bradley, to Albuquerque to meet her daughter. But Bradley had a heavy date that night with his sweet patootie, a blonde named Vicki Ellery. So he asked you to make the Albuquerque trip in his place.”

Behind me, Virginia whimpered: “Ye-yes. Th-this is the man who met me.”

“Sure, hon,” I said. Then I hung the focus on Jarrett again. “You agreed to do Bradley this favor on account of you saw a chance to glom the Corwin securities—more than a hundred grand. You met Virginia’s train at Albuquerque, doped her, substituted your brunette cutie in her place. Ted Bradley never knew the difference. Naturally he figured the wren you brought with you was the genuine daughter. And he didn’t dare tell anybody he’d stayed in Hollywood while you made the Albuquerque jaunt, because he was afraid of Vicki Ellery’s husband.”

Jarrett made a growling noise in his gullet; lunged at me. “You stinking snoop, you won’t get me—”

I bashed him in the teeth, knocked him colder than an Eskimo’s tonsils. Then I fed his brunette accomplice a loose-fisted swat on the dimple that sent her to dreamland. This taken care of, I moved to the phone; dialed Dave Donaldson.

“Turner broadcasting. What’s new?”

Dave said: “Cripes, Sherlock, you were right. Margaret Corwin was poisoned. Strychnine.”

“That’s what I thought. And I’ve got the pair of lice who chilled her. Come on and waft them to the bastille; they’re stinking up the premises,” I said.