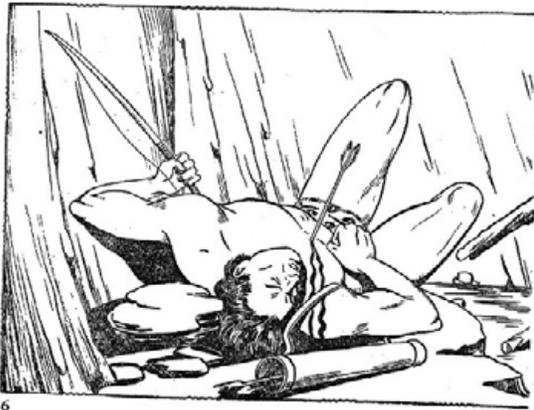


ARROW FROM NOWHERE

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

There was only one man on the set who could have shot the arrow, yet Dan hated to think Jeff could be guilty. Motive tumbles over motive, and suspect waltzes around with suspect—but there still remains the question: Where did the arrow come from?



HE CAME swinging through the property trees like a muscular brown streak, straight toward the cameras that were grinding at the edge of the giant sound stage. I had to give the guy credit; he was plenty good at his specialty. He reminded me of a sleek ape-man as he bounded from branch to branch.

Which was exactly what he was supposed to be. For more than four years Vance Vannister had been playing the leading role in Pinnacle Pic's famous "King of the Jungle" series of which this present opus was the latest thrilling installment. His face was ruggedly handsome, he wore his hair long, and in his tiger skin costume he looked like the answer to an old maid's dream. As I watched his gyrations from the sidelines I found myself envying his athletic



build, his slick gymnastic skill, the tawny sun-tan that made him resemble some mythical bronze god without benefit of grease paint. Even the bow and quiver of arrows slung over his ungarnished shoulder seemed part of him.

There were other things I envied about Vannister, too. There wasn't another actor in Hollywood with as many girl friends. He merely had to smile at a doll and it was practically all over.

"What a guy!" I whispered to Sally Sprague standing alongside me.

Sally made a bitter mouth. She was directing this jungle melodrama; one of the few she-males ever to achieve megaphone status in the galloping tintypes. She'd come up the hard way: secretary to a scenario writer, then script clerk, then doctor of

limping dialogue, third assistant director, and finally a chance at short subjects. From there she made the big jump to feature lengths and a shot at “King of the Jungle.”

She said: “You mean what a heel,” without taking her ice-grey glims off the action in front of her.

I pinned the puzzled focus on her. She was a competent-looking cupcake in her late twenties or early thirties, at a guess; brown hair done in a bun at the nape of her neck, a nice profile, clear complexion, a figure that was just right—although her man-tailored whipcord outfit didn’t do it full justice.

THE Sprague chick and her stunt expert hubby had been my personal friends for a long time; which was why I was visiting this huge Pinnacle set now. When the present scene was finished, I had a date to take Sally and Jeff out to supper. I hadn’t known she disliked her handsome star, though. It startled me just a little.

“In what way is Vannister a heel?” I asked her.

“He gets too free and easy with women where it’s not appreciated.”

“Meaning you, hon?”

“Me,” she said. “Among others.”

“With him it’s a habit,” I grinned.

“Somebody may cure him of it one of these days. Permanently.” Then she added: “Let’s stop this whispering. The mikes might pick it up on the sound track.”

By that time the Vannister hambo had dropped down to earth and was moving carefully through the prop underbrush, mugging into the lenses. As an actor he stank to heaven, but you don’t have to act when you’re a gorgeous chunk of man.

As he skulked closer, Sally nodded a signal. Her husband was perched on a high parallel over the stage, above the camera lines. Jeff Sprague was stocky, bald, the most unromantic looking specimen this side of a hobo’s convention. He knew his stuff,

though. There wasn’t a stunt in the celluloid book he couldn’t do.

Right now he had a bow and arrow in his mitts. He aimed, let fly. The arrow flashed past Vance Vannister’s noggin; missed him by a whisker and twanged into a tree exactly where Sprague had intended it to go.

The handsome ham registered anger; gave vent to a God-awful screech. It was his trade mark, that guttural yelp; just about the only dialogue they ever wrote in the script for him. He slithered sidewise; whereupon the ground seemed to open up and gulp him like a raw oyster.

That was part of the rehearsed action, too. According to the scenario, jungle natives had dug a lion trap—a deep pit camouflaged by sticks and twigs and leaves. Vannister was to fall in this hole, thereby meeting the heroine of the opus.

I’D WATCHED the first rehearsal a while ago. The heroine in question was a cookie named Elayne Lorton, a brunette newcomer to the yodeling snapshots. Some Pinnacle talent scout had discovered her in a middle western circus, signed her up, shipped her to the coast as possible starring material. The studio had cast her opposite Vannister to try her out.

Now she stood in the bottom of the pit as lion bait, trussed to an upright stake with her arms firmly bound behind her, clad in a leopard skin. The idea was for Vannister to drop down beside her, lamp her predicament, untie her, and rescue her from the trap. That part of the action would take place after the cameras had been moved to the brink of the hole for a downward angle shot.

So he took his cue; vanished from view. Sally Sprague started to call: “Cut.”

She never got the word out of her kisser, though, because all of a sudden a terrified she-male scream knifed upward out of the

depths, raw, harsh, shrill enough to peel the fur off a brass monkey. The instant I heard it I smelled trouble. The yelp hadn't been play-acting. It was the McCoy.

I said: "What the—!" and plunged onto the set, reached the pit, squinted down. What I saw sent an ugly sensation slugging clear through me.

The brunette Elayne Lorton was squirming against the wide leather thongs that bound her to the stake. And all the while she was howling: "My God-look-oh-h-h, my God!"

Vance Vannister was stretched out in front of her, handsome as ever in his sun-tan and breech clout. But he was all through with the ladies. The arrows had spilled out of the quiver he carried, and one feather-tipped shaft was sticking out of his manly bellows—the barbed end buried six inches deep. By the time I dropped down to feel his pulse, there wasn't any.

The jungle king was deader than prohibition.

I STRAIGHTENED up, barged to the black-haired cupcake, plucked at her fetters. She sagged against them, which made them all the tighter. "Loosen up, babe!" I rasped.

"I—I th-think I'm g-going to f-faint!"

"Save it for later." I snapped her out of it by feeding her a sharp stinger across the chops. Then, as she stiffened, I snarled: "What happened?"

"I d-don't know! Vance dropped down. Then, suddenly, he was lying there w-with that arrow th-through him!"

"You mean one fell out of his quiver and he skewered himself on it by accident?"

"I tell you I don't know! Maybe it was that. Or m-maybe the arrow was sh-shot at him—"

I blinked at the Lorton cutie. "Shot at him?"

"How can I tell? It all happened s-so

quickly—please g-get me out of here!" Then two different things took place at the same time. First I got the leather thongs unfastened. And second, she swooned in my arms.

Under any other circumstances I'd have enjoyed holding her. But I didn't have time for that now, because there was a defunct actor at my feet and eleventeen dozen assorted faces squinting down into the hole, watching me.

I lifted the inert brunette jessie; passed her up over the lip of the pit. There were plenty of hands willing to grab onto her: bit players, cameramen, sound technicians, juicers. It wasn't every evening in the week they got a chance to get that close to Elayne Lorton. And she was too unconscious to pick her rescuers now.

I piped a bald dome in the throng, with a map under it that was seven shades of pale. "Okay, Jeff. Jump down here a minute," I said.

Sally Sprague's stunt expert hubby landed on the balls of his brogans alongside me. "Wh-what is it? How did it—?"

"That's what I crave to know," I said in an undertone. "Did you twang a barb through the guy's ticker?"

"Me? Good Lord, Sherlock, what makes you ask that?"

"Sally told me Vannister had been making passes at her. She happens to be your wife. You're tops with a bow and arrow. Figure it out for yourself."

A peculiar expression slithered into Jeff Sprague's narrowed optics. "I get it. You're accusing me."

"Not accusing, pal. Asking."

"It's the same thing. But you won't make it stick, understand? You won't frame me for this kill." Then, before I could guess his intention, he brought a haymaker up from around his ankles; planted it on my button.

He tagged me and I didn't even see it

coming; didn't get the chance to duck. My knees turned to boiled noodles and I dropped like a cut rope. I was blacked out.

SOMEBODY dribbled a jolt of cheap bourbon down my Sunday gullet and I woke up strangling. During my slumbers I'd been hoisted out of the hole to stage level with my noggin reposing on a clump of property bushes. I opened my glims, stared into the beefy mush of my friend, Dave Donaldson from the homicide squad.

Dave's headquarters minions were all over the set like an infestation of ants around a heap of sugar. I piped a pair of morgue orderlies loading Vance Vannister's husk into a wicker meat basket, carting him away; saw the Lorton doll on the receiving end of first aid from a police surgeon. Sally Sprague stood nearby, looking grim; but her hubby wasn't anywhere in sight. Evidently he'd lammed after bopping me, whereupon somebody had beefed to the bulls.

Donaldson stopped dosing me with whiskey and said: "That's better, Hawkshaw. I thought you were going to stay asleep all night. What did Sprague tag you with, brass knucks?"

"Just his bare duke," I sat up groggily, rubbed my unhinged jaw. "It was plenty potent." Then I mumbled: "You've got the dragnet out for him?"

Dave nodded. "He won't get far. You think he's the one that fired the arrow, do you?"

"How do I know? Maybe he was just scared the circumstantial evidence would railroad him."

"You needn't be loyal just because he happened to be a friend of yours," Dave grunted. "Friendship and killery don't mix."

I said: "As a rule they don't. But maybe Vannister accidentally butched himself. Maybe an arrow bounced out of his quiver and he fell on it."

"Nuts! His weight would have busted the shaft in that case, or anyhow ruined the feathers."

"All right. If the thing was shot from a bow, Jeff's your guy. I hate to say it, though." I swayed to my pins, fished out a gasper from my crumpled pack, set fire to it. "Could anyone else on the stage have done the dirty work?"

"Nobody near the cameras—which eliminates Sally Sprague and her technical crew. Miss Lorton is out, of course; she was tied to a stake in the pit. Nobody on the set proper, either; the arrow had too much of a downward slant. It came from up high."

"Sprague was on a high platform parallel," I admitted.

Dave scratched his chin-stubble. "That's what worries me, gumshoe. We found another target bow on an electricians' catwalk up near the rafters. Three or four juicers were up there handling the arcs and spotlights. I'm trying to be fair about this." He scowled. "We're holding those guys for questioning."

"I hope you get somewhere. Me, I'm not interested. How's for letting me haul bunions? There's nothing I can do around here, as far as I can see."

HE GAVE me the office and I scrambled. But just as I was circling the set and making for an exit, a voice called: "Dan. Wait a minute."

I turned. Sally Sprague was in an alcove formed by two piles of painted scenery, beckoning to me. She had a queer expression on her map, harried, worried. She didn't look like a competent, self-assured she-male director now. Somehow she seemed more feminine in spite of her man-tailored outfit.

I SAID: "Yeah, kiddo?" and moved toward her.

She gave me the frantic focus. "From where I stood, I could hear what you said to Lieutenant Donaldson. I appreciate the way you tried to protect Jeff." Her smile was a twisted grimace. "It was decent of you, after he'd slugged you so hard."

"I've been slugged before, Sally. I'm used to it."

"You're not sore?"

"Not particularly. If Jeff's guilty, I'm sorry. If he's innocent, he'll go free and I won't hold a grudge."

She took a step closer to me. "That's not like you, Dan, to be neutral. Usually you take sides. But violently."

"Are you asking me to take sides now?"

"I wish you would."

"For or against your hubby?"

"That's a foolish question. I love Jeff. I want him cleared. I can't stand to think of . . . Oh-h-h, Dan . . . isn't there anything to be done for him?" Abruptly she nestled in my arms. Two enormous tears spilled out of her peepers, skidded down her complexion.

I wasn't taking advantage when I kissed her. I was just being friendly.

She seemed to take it that way. "You know what I'm asking you to do, don't you, Dan?"

"I can guess. You want me to go to bat for Jeff, get him out from under the rap."

"Yes. I—I'll pay you your fee. Whatever you say."

I said: "Look, hon. I wouldn't take pay from you. Money, marbles, chalk or anything."

"Meaning just what?" the crooked grin twisted her puss again.

"Meaning you're, first of all, a pal." I proved this by kissing her again. . . . Then I drew back. "And don't ever think you haven't got what it takes to drive a man off his chump. Vance Vannister was crazy about you, wasn't he?" And he had first call on the whole Hollywood crop. Don't underrate yourself."

"Vannister!" her whisper was sharp, bitter. "If I hadn't told you about his attentions, you wouldn't have thought to accuse Jeff."

"I didn't accuse Jeff, hon. I asked him a question and he lost his head, was all. I wish to Whozit I could finger somebody else for the Vannister bump. I'd jump at the chance to do it for free. But—"

"Suppose I give you an angle to work on?"

"If you've got one, let's have it."

"Mike Clancy, my head electrician. He was topside on that catwalk where they found a spare bow."

"Clancy!" I said. "He's seven years older than Noah. His wife must be in her fifties. Don't tell me Vannister was giving her the rush."

"No. They have a daughter though. Kitty Clancy. She plays bits on this lot. Vannister made eyes at her, I know. You've heard of fathers protecting a daughter, haven't you?"

I said: "I'll be a so-and-so!" and swung around on my heel. "Be seeing you, Sally." And I lammed out of the building, made for my parked jalopy, went tearing hellity-blip off the Pinnacle lot.

KITTY CLANCY was a flip, blatant-looking redhead who'd pulled out of the home nest, set herself up in an apartment on Franklin. Or maybe somebody else had helped; her salary wouldn't easily have handled the set-up.

She had sultry glims, a pouting kisser with a cigarette dangling from the lower lip, when she answered to my knock. Helpfully enough, we knew each other casually; we'd met on a few parties but I'd never dated her. I try to steer clear of the gold-digger type.

She said: "Well, handsome, what cyclone dropped you on my doorstep?"

"Hi, Toots." I shouldered past her into the living room. "You alone?"

She grinned wisely. “Not now I’m not.”

I let that pass. I said: “Skip it, sweet stuff. I didn’t mean to insinuate anything. I could use a drink,” I added.

“Why didn’t you bring a bottle, then? My friends always do.”

I saw I wasn’t getting anywhere by pretending to be interested in making whoopee. “So okay,” I said. “So I didn’t bring a bottle and I’m just snooping around.”

“That’s what I thought. Who you checking up on?”

“You, principally. And Vance Vannister.”

“Oh. That louse. Don’t tell me he’s in Dutch or I’ll bust out laughing.” The way she said this made it apparent that she hadn’t heard about the ham’s death. That was to be expected, however. The murder had happened less than an hour ago, actually; and Kitty didn’t look like the kind of dame that nags her radio dials for a news broadcast every fifteen minutes. If she read the papers as much as once a month, it would be strictly for the various gossip columns.

I said: “You wouldn’t mind seeing Vannister caught in a jam, hunh?”

“I’d love it—after the way he treated me.”

“How was that?”

“How does he treat any woman? He’s a quick storm catching you without your umbrella. You get drenched, and you love it. Then all of a sudden it’s over and you’re standing in a cold wind, shivering in the dark.” She ankled to her kitchenette, came back with a fifth of Scotch and two glasses. “I’m buying you a drink, Hawkshaw. Consider yourself honored, because it’s against all my principles.” She poured two drinks.

THE Scotch wasn’t my favorite brand, but it was almost as good. “You stock

nice stuff, babe,” I said.

“It don’t cost me anything.”

“The same for this apartment stash?”

“Good guess.”

“Vannister pays the rent?” I probed.

She laughed harshly. “He’s got the first dime he ever borrowed off some dumb Dora. No, chum. Vannister has nothing to do with this joint. I moved here after he waved me good-bye.”

“You lived at home before that, eh?”

“Sure. I’d hardly had a real date before Vannister. Afterward, when my old man and old lady tumbled to the score, they kicked me out on my elbows. I landed right side up,” she added.



“Your parents don’t care what happens to you?”

“Not unless I drop dead. That’d please them. They’d say it was heaven’s judgment on my sins—meaning vindication of their bigoted opinion. Say, why do I beat my chops to you this way? You must have slipped me a shot of truth serum.”

I said: “Not at all. You’re telling me things I need to know. For instance, that your father wouldn’t care enough about you to take it out on Vannister.”

“My old man? He’s too spineless to walk on his feet. He crawls around on his belly like a worm.” She tensed. “What do

you mean, take it out on Vannister? In what way?"

"The guy's defunct, hon," I gave it to her straight. "Someone shot an arrow through him on the set this evening. We thought it might have been your dad."

"Vannister croaked? *Vance Vannister*?"

"Yeah."

I've been a Hollywood snoop for a hell of a lot of years and I thought I'd seen everything; but the Clancy quail reached down in the grab-bag, pulled out something brand new to me. She started to laugh, weirdly, silently. It was genuine merriment, sardonic and extremely unpleasant to watch. "He's dead and you want to pin it on my sniveling pop! Sherlock, I love you for that. I love you because you've brought me the happiest news I ever had. You and I are going to celebrate. Now." She raised her glass, drained it. "Nails in Vannister's casket. Cyanide for my old man. And. . . kisses for you, handsome. But kisses."

She dragged me down alongside her on the davenport, lifted her crimson yap to mine.

I yelped: "Hey, what the—!" and tried to pry myself out of the tangle.

AS SOON as I could fight free, I helped myself to another snort of Scotch. "You seem pleased in strange ways, babe," I said.

The red-haired wren grinned. She reminded me of a cat purring over spilled cream. "I'll like it even better when you put my old gent in the bastille."

"That probably won't happen. You practically cleared him by the things you told me. If he kicked you out of your home, he certainly wouldn't give a hoot about your boy friend. Not enough to cool the guy, anyhow."

She frowned. "No, I suppose not, come to think about it. But I wish you'd quit calling Vannister my boy friend. That ended

a long while ago, when he took up with his new leading lady."

"That brunette chick? Elayne Lorton?"

"Yep. She's the one that beat my time."

I said: "And from her, the hambo jumped to Sally Sprague—or tried to. Which brings me right back to Jeff Sprague?"

"Why?"

"I'm trying to clear him. He's a friend of mine."

"Well, then, look. Why don't you go see the Lorton jane? Maybe she knows more than she's telling." Kitty smiled knowingly. "Even if she don't know anything, it might pay you to call on her. Maybe she'd like to celebrate Vannister's death, too."

I got my hat, blew Kitty a kiss, scrambled. When I got downstairs and opened the door of my jalopy, Jeff Sprague himself was sitting in it. He had a rod in his mitt, aimed at my favorite adenoids.

"GET in, Turner," he said. "I want to talk to you."

I goggled at him. "How the blazes did you get here?"

"Saw your car as I passed. Come on, snoop. Drive."

I obeyed; couldn't do anything else as long as he had the drop on me. "This is no way to be chummy," I said.

"Nuts to the sentiment. I want to know what was behind something you spilled in that sound stage pit. About Vannister and my wife. I want to know your reasons for accusing me."

"I didn't accuse you, Jeff. I just asked you. And there wasn't anything between Sally and that handsome louse. He made passes; but she brushed them off."

"Who told you?"

"Sally herself. She was leveling. She even hired me to get you clear if I could. She knows you had no cause for jealousy."

"Vannister was pestering her, was he? I

never suspected that.”

“Then you had no reason to bump him,” I said.

He was silent for several blocks. Then: “Sally might have had a reason, though. She’s a funny girl. I’ve seen her blaze up at a lot of guys for getting fresh with her. And hold the grudge, afterward.”

“That’s a normal reaction, isn’t it?” I said.

“Not with Sally,” he seemed almost to be talking to himself instead of to me. “She’s never told me, but I think she must have had a peculiar experience of some sort when she was a kid. Something ugly that warped her a little, inside.”

I took a sidewise swivel at him. “Meaning she’s slightly minus her marbles? Don’t be a dope.”

“Call it a psychological quirk. Tell me, Dan. Do you consider Sally . . . attractive?”

I didn’t like the question, considering that it came from a husband with a gat in his fist. “Sure,” I said warily. “Sure she’s attractive. In her way.”

He said: “And yet you’ve noticed she always wears man tailored clothes?”

“I’ve noticed.”

“She wears them for a reason. She doesn’t want men to fall for her. At home she . . . she’s very different.” He groped for the words. “I’m trying to tell you she never lets her guard down, outside. Tailored suits. No makeup. A director’s job—not a feminine occupation. Sally’s *afraid* of men.”

I kept driving. “So she’s afraid of men. So what?”

“So she could hate any guy who really hurt her. Hate him enough to . . .”

“You’re building up a nice case against her, Jeff.”

He thought this over. “No, I’m not,” he said presently. “I’m just letting you know Sally’s innocent. You see, *I* murdered Vance Vannister. I plugged him with an

arrow because he was bothering my wife. You can take me to headquarters now.”

I drew over to the curb in front of an apartment on North Vine. “Very funny,” I grunted at him. “Very funny indeed. Your noggin might just as well be made of glass, bub. Anybody can see the cogs going around. You’ve come to the conclusion Sally butched Vannister for a psychopathic motive, and you love her so much that you don’t want her to take the rap. So you’re willing to take it for her.”

“No, really, I—”

“It stinks, Jeff. I don’t believe you.”

“The cops will. They’re the ones that count.”

I said: “You really want to frame yourself, do you?”

“I want to take my medicine for something I did.”

“For something you think Sally did,” I corrected him. “Suppose I prove to you she couldn’t possibly have chilled the guy? Would you retract your phony confession in that case?”

“You’ll have to show me.”

“I think I can do that. I was standing directly beside her when Vannister dropped down into the pit. She gave him his cues; but she wasn’t toting anything that remotely resembled a bow and arrow. I tell you her hands were empty.”

“You could be lying.”

I shrugged. “Okay, stupid. See this apartment wigwam? Elayne Lorton lives here. I was on my way to interview her when I found you in my chariot. Now you can come along.”

“What for?” he asked me suspiciously.

“The Lorton cupcake was tied to a stake in the pit. Vannister was croaked before her very glims. I want you to hear what she’s got to say.”

“I’ll go on one condition.”

“Yeah? Name it?”

“Phone the cops. Right now. Tell them

to come pick me up. I'm tired dodging every policeman I see. Then I'll listen to the Lorton girl while they're on their way here. If anything Miss Lorton says will clear Sally, then I'll fight for my freedom in court—take my chances. But if Sally's in the middle, I'll confess until they convict me."

Love does funny things to some guys. With Jeff Sprague, it seemed to give him a martyr complex. For once in my life I was tackling a homicide beef in an effort to save a client who actually craved to take the jolt. The thing was so screwy it gave me a headache.

I said: "Slip me your roscoe and let's go. We'll phone the law from the lobby."

He looked pleased at this. He even gave me a nickel to drop in the slot when I dialed Dave Donaldson.

THE Lorton cupcake was alone in her igloo when I rapped; not only alone but evidently trying to woo forty winks. Her lounging pajamas were of the heavy Chinese silk variety, white and glossy. A midnight waterfall of wavy black tresses fell around her shoulders to make attractive contrast against the pajama jacket and against a puss just about as white.

"Y-yes?" she hung the tearstained gaze on me. Then she spotted Sprague. "*You-!*" she caterwauled. And all of a sudden she flurried at him with her claws digging at his profile.

Her abrupt attack on the guy caught me flat-footed; took Sprague by surprise, too. Before he could duck, she raked a set of furrows down his chops. Ketchup dribbled into his collar as he gasped: "Hey, what—?"

"You k-killed the man I loved!" she yodeled. "You shot an arrow through him! I'll make you suffer for it, too!" She scratched him again, this time on his balding sconce.

I recovered from my flabbergasted

attitude; lunged at her and dragged her backward into the room. She kicked at me furiously but it didn't buy her anything.

Sprague blinked at her as he mopped his leaking features with a handkerchief. "You—you think I did it, eh?"

"I know you did! Who else could have?"

His voice lowered tensely. "Explain that."

"The arrow came from up over the set. I remembered, after I got over my shock. I saw it."

I said: "See, Jeff? Now maybe you'll believe me when I tell you Sally's in the clear."

"My God," the words were thick in his gullet. "My God. The cops are coming. I forced you to call them. I wanted to shield my w-wife. But she doesn't need shielding. She's innocent. And so am I—b-but I'll be railroaded—" He whirled. "I'm getting out!"

For an instant I was on the verge of letting him lam. Then I realized it would make a fool of me. I'd phoned the law, told them I had Jeff under glass. If he escaped, it would poke holes in my reputation big enough to garage a freight train.

Moreover, if he pulled another duck-out it would be another circumstantial evidence of his guilt, false but damning. He'd be much better off in the clink, fighting the case legally while I snooped around for the genuine killer. No matter how you looked at it, and no matter how much I disliked the job, it was up to me to hold him; turn him in.

I made a regretful fist, jumped him, lowered the boom on him. My knuckles massaged him on the whiskers, dropped him like a chopped log. I dug out my handcuffs, nipped his left wrist, started to put the other bracelet on his right while he was taking a count of ten.



Then the Lorton quail shrilled vindictively, circled me, tried to fasten herself on his recumbent poundage. “Now I’ve got him! Now I’ll get even with him for—”

I sighed: “Oh, for gosh’ sake!” and hauled her off. “Why not behave, babe? Sprague didn’t cool Vannister. And even if he did, I can’t see what difference it’d make to you. The ham had already fed you the brush-off.”

“I loved him. He’d have c-come back to me. Let me g-go!”

I toted her into the inner room, tossed her into a big chair. Then, because I’d already used my cuffs on Jeff Sprague, I had to yank a tasseled drapery cord from the window to tie her up.

Even as I finished the job I heard Sprague scrambling to his gams in the front room; lurching toward the door. I dived after him, nabbed him by the free dangling handcuff—the one I hadn’t had a chance to fasten to his right wrist. I copped a gander around but didn’t pipe anything heavy enough to link him to. The furniture was period stuff, pretty flimsy: a Louis the Umpteenth table, some chairs, a chaise longue built for midgets, an escritoire that deserved the name because it wasn’t hefty

enough to be called a desk. It had a scrapbook and a lamp on it, the lamp’s pastel shade matching the carpet on the floor; but nothing around which to click Sprague’s spare handcuff.

So I pushed him into the inner room, attached him to a radiator, right near the spot where Elayne Lorton was trussed like a gorgeous mummy. Then I left, to wait for Dave Donaldson’s arrival at the front door of the flat.

“You two be good children or I’ll slap the nonsense out of both of you,” I said as I barged off. Neither of them answered me. I hardly expected them to.

IN THE living room I fired a gasper, tried to draw inspiration from the fumes. I was convinced Jeff hadn’t chilled Vance Vannister. Neither had his frau. The elderly electrician, Clancy, was equally in the clear on the basis of the story his red-haired daughter Kitty had told me. The Lorton jane had been tied up just as securely in the bottom of the sound stage pit as she was now, which put her out of the running in the suspicion sweepstakes. So who the devil had skewered the vain, handsome Vannister ham?

It would be terrific if his croakery turned out to have been an accident after all, I thought. I started thumbing idly through the scrapbook on the escritoire, looking at the faded press clippings without really seeing them. Suppose an arrow had fallen out of Vannister’s quiver when he dropped into the pit? Suppose he had actually impaled himself on the barb—

My glim fell on a newspaper publicity item dealing with a middle western circus. And as I tabbed it, the front door smacked open; Dave Donaldson lumbered into the room. At the same precise instant there came a she-male screech from inside.

It was Elayne Lorton’s shrill bleep. “Quick—he’s committing suicide—”

Then a hoarse cry from Jeff Sprague, ugly, doom-ridden. I was already catapulting toward the door and yowling for Donaldson to follow me. "Come on, dopey! It's the payoff!"

Dave tugged at his service .38 and wheezed: "Hunh?"

Then I flew through the doorway with my superchargers whining. "Freeze, you she-devil! Get her, Dave. *Get the Lorton cupcake before she pulls another kill!*"

Donaldson triggered from the hip. His roscoe bellowed: *Ka-chow!* and the trussed brunette sagged backward with a slug through her leg. A knife clattered to the floor and rasping moans came out of Jeff Sprague's constricted gullet where the sharp shiv had already nicked a shallow slice, not quite deep enough to reach his jugular. He couldn't get away because he was nipped to the radiator.

"My God! She—she tried to cut my throat with—with her—" his voice trailed off stupidly.

Donaldson looked idiotic. "I fired without thinking. This'll cost me my badge. How could the wren have stabbed this bozo when you've got her arms tied behind her?"

I said: "With her bare feet, pal."

"Wh-wha-what?"

Sprague gulped. "It's true! She—she—"

I said: "I just got the tip-off from a publicity clipping in the dame's scrapbook. She used to be with a small circus before a Pinnacle talent scout picked her up as movie material."

"Curse you!" the Lorton doll howled. "You can't—"

"Oh, but I can, babe," I told her grimly. "Your circus specialty was a peculiar one. You were a contortionist with a side show.

You could do almost as many things with your bare feet and toes as the average person does with his hands."

She called me all the names in the alphabet.

I LET her keep yapping until her mainspring ran down and the slug in her leg began to hurt. Then I said: "You beefed Vannister because he gave you a play and then handed you the ozone. When he dropped into the pit on that sound stage this evening, you had an airtight alibi; you were trussed to an upright stake with your arms tied behind you. But actually your bare tootsies were loose; and they were all you needed. You picked an arrow out of the guy's quiver, rammed it through him—with your educated toes."

"Get me a doctor—I'm bleeding to death—"

"Then, a minute ago, when I had you tied up again, you pulled a shiv from somewhere with your feet; tried to slice Jeff Sprague's throat to look like suicide. It would have closed the Vannister case with Jeff guilty by his own apparent confession—and he'd have been much too deceased to deny it."

"I—admit everything—call a doctor—"

That was all I needed. I turned to Donaldson. "You take it from here, Dave," I said. Then I unlocked Sprague and we ankled down to my bucket, drove home to his stash.

So I took them out to supper, after all. And later I left them; blipped myself to Kitty Clancy's wikiup. That red-haired wren and I had some more celebrating to take care of. . . .