

# KILLER'S INVESTMENT

BY ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM



*It looked like the old badger game to Dan—at first. Then he realized the movie star had no motive except to escape a frame-up for murder, herself. . . .*

**F**ROM the corridor outside my apartment stashed a rasping masculine voice erupted. “Dan Turner, you’ve got my wife in there.”

“Open up before I smash this door off its hinges!”

I surged to my pins. Then fastened the stupefied focus on the dainty brunette cutie who was curled like a kitten on my davenport across the room.

For an instant I thought maybe I was about to become the innocent victim of a badger-game squeeze. Hundreds of suckers get roped in by that racket every week in the year; you entertain a girl in your joint, her alleged hubby shows up and fastens the

wrathful finger on you, and you fork out large stacks of geetus to avert a scandal. In my career as a Hollywood private ferret I’ve seen the stunt pulled dozens of times—and the bare idea of falling for it myself gave me a sudden attack of the jitters.

On second consideration, however, I realized my suspicions were as haywire as hailstones in Havana. My gorgeous visitor’s name was Cassie Shelburne, she was a brand new star on the roster of Masterpiece Pix, and she couldn’t possibly be messed up in a shakedown scheme. She already earned copious cabbage for her emoting in the flickers; didn’t need to turn

crooked for the sake of dough. Moreover, she couldn't afford to jeopardize her cinema future by any such shenanigans.

All the same, it looked as if her presence in my wikiup was about to put both of us behind the eight ball. That irate voice in the hallway was popping off again. "Come on, you cheap snoop! Open the door and let me have my wife!"

The Shelburne cookie's piquant face turned as pale as watered milk, and her hazel glims widened in panic as she scrambled to her gams. "It's Jeff!" she whispered frantically. "I—I've got to get out of here before he discovers me!"

I AGREED with her, especially since Jeff had been trying for more than a month to pin a frame on her in order to get legal grounds for rubbing out their recent, hasty Tia Juana marriage.

Not that I'd been making passes at Cassie; the whole affair was strictly open and above-board. She'd arrived about five minutes before; said she had dashed off the Masterpiece lot between late retakes to see me on business. "I wasn't able to reach you at your office today, Mr. Turner," she told me. "And I've *got* to t-talk to you. It's terribly important."

Ordinarily I don't like clients to disturb my beauty sleep; but I made an exception in Cassie's case because she'd looked so worried. Now, though, just as I was getting ready to listen to whatever she had on her mind, hell was boiling over.

I shoved my grey cells into high gear, sprinted over to the black-haired doll and propelled her into my kitchenette where a rear door gave access to a transverse hallway. This short corridor ran at right angles to the main one, like an L, and couldn't be seen from my igloo's front entrance. It ended at a back staircase used mostly by deliverymen.

"Scram down those rear steps, hon," I

whispered. "If you've got I anything to tell me, save it and give me a jingle at the office tomorrow." And I sent her on her way.

Then, not waiting to see if she made the grade, I sped back through my layout to the front door; yanked it open and faked a ferocious scowl. "Okay, slobbermouth," I rasped. "What cooks?"

Jeff Shelburne was a beefy bozo with shoulders a mile wide and a map that still retained traces of matinee-idol good looks in spite of deep dissipation wrinkles. In his day he'd been one of Hollywood's top hams; and even now he was handsome enough to get by as leading man in Class B turkeys for Masterpiece Pix—although his pulling power at the box office had been steadily slipping.

He yowled: "Where's Cassie?"

"I wouldn't know, bub. She's your wife, not mine."

"Don't feed me that stuff, you chiseling son. She's in here and I want her." All of a sudden he swung a roundhouse poke at my profile, the same time raising his voice. "Come on, Estelle—bring your camera and flash. We'll get all the evidence we want!"

I ducked his knuckles; started to paste him on the kisser. But I didn't quite connect, because all of a sudden an unseen roscoe yammered: *Ka-Chee!* from the bend in the hallway. A slug smashed into Shelburne's cranium. He twitched, stiffened convulsively and pitched forward full into my astounded arms.

I leaped backward, let him fall. He was deader than a Jap's conscience before he hit the floor.

HIS carcass hadn't stopped bouncing when I piped a bleached blonde quail barging toward me from a window embrasure in the back corridor where she'd been hiding. She was carrying a Leica minicam equipped with a flash-bulb and

reflector; and there was hysteria scrawled on her painted pan as she fastened the squint on the defunct guy.

For a couple of seconds I thought she was going to pull a swoon. Her horrified peepers bulged, and her cheeks went pasty to emphasize the oversupply of rouge that coated them. She came as far as Shelburne's remnants, then froze. "Oh-h-h, my God—he's been shot—!"

I growled: "Yeah. Why did you do it?" and made a grab for her.

She snapped out of her hypnotized trance, eluded my clutching mitt. Then she whirled her miniature camera at the end of its strap; brought it hissing around in a circle. Centrifugal force blammed it against my temple like a slingshot; took a divot out of my haircut. The impact slugged me to my knees as if I'd been hit with a baseball bat.

As I fell, the yellow-haired wren turned and ran.

I scrambled around on all fours, swimming in a fog of pain. Presently I blinked away the cobwebs, lurched upright, looked for the chick who'd maced me.

She was gone.

Then I thought I heard a sound from the rear hallway. It triggered my groggy reflexes into motion and I went stumbling in the direction of the faint noise, weaving from side to side like a guy at the tail end of a ten day drunk. By now, an assortment of neighbors were poking their smellers from various doors, drawn by the gunfire and the subsequent commotion. I didn't pay any attention to them, though. I had something else on my mind: a bleached blonde cupcake with a minicam.

And I found her around the turn in the passage.

At least I thought so for an instant. There were no bulbs burning in this particular stretch of the hall; and when I dimly discerned a crouching shape in the

shadows I jumped to the conclusion it was the jessie who'd jolted me. I sprang at her, seized her.

"No—please—let me g-go!" she yeepled.

Her throaty tone registered in my fuzzy think-tank; told me I'd made a haywire guess. Then she squirmed, struggled to free herself.

"Cassie Shelburne!" I said. I'd captured Jeff Shelburne's raven-haired wife. Or rather, his widow.

She pulled away from me. "What's happened? What was th-that shot I heard? Why did you g-grab me?" I started to tell her but the words got stuck crosswise in my larynx for a good reason. In nailing her, I'd knocked her pocketbook out of her grasp and it had fallen to the carpet; its catch had come unfastened and its contents were strewn from here to breakfast. Among this scattered collection of lipstick, kleenex, keys and oddments I piped something that put my tripes in a pucker.

It was a roscoe.

I let out a startled snarl, reached for the rod, picked it up by its muzzle so I wouldn't disturb any possible fingerprints on the grip. It was a .32 Colt pocket positive revolver with a swing-out cylinder chambered for six pills. I unlatched the locking mechanism, let the cylinder drop sidewise and saw there was just one shell in the thing; an empty. When I sniffed the barrel I could tell that single cartridge had been discharged recently.

"So," I rasped.

The brunette doll stared at me. "So wh-what?"

"So you creamed your hubby," I said.

And I pinioned her left wrist, hauled her toward my stash.

**A** CLUSTER of tenants stood around Shelburne's husk in front of my doorway, chattering like magpies. I raised

my voice to a bellow that blasted them out of the way; whereupon Cassie copped a gander at her late lamented better half. A terrified shudder rippled through her fragile framework. “Jeff—!” she bleated. “*Dead!*”

“Thoroughly, sis. You got him plumb center.” And I shoved her over the threshold, tripped her into a chair, fastened the watchful eye on her while I unforked the phone and dialed police headquarters for my friend Dave Donaldson of homicide.

Bye and bye he came on the line. “Yeah?”

“Dan Turner caterwauling. Flag your kilts over here to my tepee and fetch a meat basket. Jeff Shelburne just got browned in the hall and I’ve got his wife under glass for you.”

“Wife—?” Dave roared. “What for?”

“She scalded him,” I said, and rang off before he could pour a quart of questions in my ear. Then, as I broke the connection, the dainty brunette doll swayed to her shapely stems; tottered toward me.

“Mr. Turner! You—you d-don’t think I shot Jeff—?”

I got a gasper from the table, set fire to it. “I’m terribly afraid I m do, kiddo.”

“But—but that’s horrible! Why should I risk my career, my future, by d-doing a thing like that? I’ve starred in only two pictures and the p-public seems to like me. I’m a success. Earning big money with a chance for m-more. I’d be insane to throw all that away in one instant—!”

I studied her; felt skitters jiggling up and down my spine as she came nearer. Her perfume assailed my beezer like a shot of hop; her curves were the answer to a castaway’s dream. Everything she was saying about her cinema career was true, too. She’d skyrocketed to the top of the heap in two sudden jumps; might have pulled Tod Topperman’s independent Masterpiece studio into major league status

if this mess hadn’t happened.

But evidence was evidence. I said: “Sorry, baby. The bullet came from that rear hall. I found you there with this gat. It’s got one cartridge in it; a discharged empty. Add it up for yourself.”

“I—I can explain—”

“Of course, if the slug in Jeff’s dome fails to match your heater, you’ll be in the clear,” I said. “But that’s for the ballistics bulls to decide.”

**B**IG droplets of brine spilled out of her optics. “And while they’re deciding, the headlines will scream that I’ve been put in jail on suspicion of m-murder! Even though I’m released later, the stigma will always be on me because of your mistake!”

I said: “What mistake?”

“The g-gun. It’s just a prop. I used it in the retake scene I made tonight before I came to s-see you.”

“*What?*” I strangled.

“Yes. I f-fired a blank on the set.”

“Can you prove this, kitten?” I stared at her.

She nodded woefully. “Anybody at the studio will tell you.”

There was something in her tone that gave me a hunch she was leveling. If so, I’d made a serious blunder that might do copious damage to her rep, even to the extent of ruining her entire future in the galloping tintypes. I certainly didn’t crave that on my conscience if I could help it.

I whirled, blipped into my bedroom, and wedged my tonnage in a set of tweeds faster than a fireman hearing nine simultaneous alarms. In a brace of shakes I had Cassie Shelburne headed for the hallway.

We ploughed through a knot of neighbors and I collared one of them, slipped him some swift instructions. “When Lieutenant Donaldson gets here, tell him I’ve gone to the Masterpiece lot. And

tell him also to disregard the message I phoned him. There's a chance I was wrong."

The guy digested this and nodded. I grabbed Cassie, steered her to the stairs and we caromed down to my jalopy in the basement garage; piled in. I kicked the starter, clashed the gears, rocketed up the ramp and headed for Tod Topperman's studio over on Gower Street in a shower of sparks.

**I**T WASN'T much of a layout; just a couple of cuts above the Poverty Row category. It had a uniformed gate guard, however; and I had to flash my special tin to get by him. A minute later we parked by the one and only sound stage building.

"Will anybody be here, hon?" I said.

She nodded, sobbed.

We barged inside; picked a path over assorted flats, cables and property junk to a lighted boudoir set at the far end of the structure. A red-haired citizen with a pock-pitted puss spotted us, angled toward us, started sputtering syllables around the wet fragments of a cigar stub in his kisser. "Cassie! For the love of cripes, where've you been? You know you shouldn't ought to be gone off the stage when we got scenes to shoot! Time is money in this racket, girlie."

I recognized him, of course. He was Tod Topperman, owner of the unit and Cassie Shelburne's producer. I said: "Hi, Tod. Quit yelping about a little lost time. You stand to lose a lot more than that unless things break right."

"Hunh?" he glued the nearsighted glimpse on me. "Why, hello, Sherlock. What's this you're saying?" Then he seemed to notice the strained expression on Cassie's map for the first time. "Is something wrong?"

"Yeah. Plenty," I grunted. "Tell me. Did this wren trigger a pistol in any of her

retakes tonight?"

He blinked suspiciously. "Sure. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind that. I want proof. How's for giving me a hinge at the rushes?"

"Not now. We got work to do. Can't afford the time."

"The devil with what you can't afford, pal. This is a croakery case. Jeff Shelburne just got chilled in my apartment dump and Cassie's under suspicion."

He gulped: "Good God!" and wheeled, lammed across the set to his single camera. That was the way he did things—cheap and quick, with as little equipment as possible on account of suffering the financial shorts.

He spoke to his cameraman and they opened the magazine, took out an exposed spool of film. Then Topperman brought it over to me. "We don't have our own printing lab, Hawkshaw. It costs less to get the work done at Central Service."

"Okay," I took the round, flat tin. "I'll get them to make a positive print."

**F**ROM behind me a voice rumbled: "You won't unless you work it from a cell in the gow." And I felt the shout of a roscoe jabbing me in the kidneys. "Heist your flippers, wise guy. Consider yourself pinched."

I spun around; stared into the apoplectic features of Dave Donaldson. His glims were full of ire and he wore an expression that would have curdled a gallon of gin.

"Greetings, hero," I said. "Is this a rib?"

"You won't think so when I toss your elbows in the bastille," he lifted a lip. "And jerk your license," he added as an afterthought.

For a minute I figured his stomach ulcers were bothering him again; then I realized he was serious. "What's nibbling on you?" I demanded. "Why put the thumb on me?"

“For obstruction of justice. Aiding a fugitive to escape.”

“You mean Cassie Shelburne, here?”

“I don’t mean Queen Victoria, chum.”

I said: “Don’t be a dope. She didn’t escape; I’ve had her with me the whole time. Moreover, she may not be guilty.”

“Then maybe *you* are. You had her in your flat and her husband came after her. The neighbors told me the things he said when he tried to bust your door down. Maybe you tried to stave off a scandal by rubbing him.”

I made a disgusted mouth. “Of all the lame-brained theories, that takes the trophy. So I creamed the guy. So then I left you a message telling you exactly where to find me.”

“Nuts,” he remarked impolitely. “You probably expected to be gone from the studio before I got here. I just fooled you by arriving sooner than you figured, is all. Now stick out your hooks while I try these nippers on you for size.”

His crazy caper made me sore and his stubbornness gave me a pain in the piccolo. On impulse I measured him as he reached for his bracelets; massaged him on the dimple with a set of fives. He said: “Gloobsh!” and went sprawling, lapsed into a temporary coma.

I grabbed the Shelburne cookie. “Come on, hon!” And I yanked her out of the building, pushed her into my rambling wreck, slid in alongside her. Two more seconds saw us tunneling a large hole in the night, heading for the Central Service Laboratories where a lot of independent movie concerns have their negatives developed and printed.

**E**N ROUTE, I made with the questions. “Look, Cassie. Why did you come to see me tonight?”

“It was about . . . Jeff,” her voice quaked throatily.

“What about him?”

“He . . . he w-was trying to divorce me. You know how we eloped to Mexico three months ago . . . ?”

I said: “Yeah, I remember.” I couldn’t help wondering how the Shelburne ginzo could possibly have yearned to divorce such a gorgeous package.

Cassie continued her tale of woe. “Jeff was drunk when he m-married me. When he sobered up, he regretted it. He was really in love with someone else.”

“How about your visit to my dump?”

She drew a choked breath. “I . . . I was afraid of Jeff. Twice he tried to frame me so he could get evidence for a legal separation. . . .”

“I’d heard rumors about that, kitten,” I growled. “But I always had an idea it was just nasty gossip. He must have been a Grade A heel to try to smear you with a scandal.”

“Whatever he w-was, that was his intention. And if he’d succeeded, it would have washed me up in Hollywood.”

I frowned. “I hope you realize what you’re saying, Cassie. It gives you a definite and plausible motive for plugging the louse.”

“Oh-h, but I didn’t! I swear I didn’t!”

“Then just what *did* you do?”

“I decided to fight fire with f-fire. I made up my mind I’d file divorce proceedings against Jeff before he could make a move against me. That’s why I came to see you. I was hoping to hire you.”

“For what purpose?”

“To sh-shadow him, catch him with his g-girl friend.”

I thought this over; decided it added up to make sense. If I could have got the goods on the guy with another dame, Cassie would have been in a position to beat him to the punch in divorce court. By the same token, there was always the chance he might have filed a cross-suit;

using some faked scandal to mar her movie future. In which case a lot of dirty linen would have been washed in the newspaper headlines.

However, Shelburne's sudden demise had obviated that possibility; removed the brunette wren from the danger of having her name smeared. And this brought me right back to the inescapable fact that she was a logical suspect in his murder. She'd been on the scene, she'd had a cannon, and the blast had been triggered from the general direction of where I'd found her a moment after he got chilled.

I didn't mention these suspicions any further, though. There wasn't any use; she already knew how the setup smelled. Moreover, we were now in the block where the Central Service lab was located—and time was pressing.

**WE BARGED** into the main office, which fortunately was open; the concern operated on a twenty-four hour schedule. I told the clerk what I wanted; handed him the can of exposed celluloid and asked him to jam it through the works in a hurry. When he copped a swivel at my badge he said he'd do his best; and when I slipped him a twenty buck tip he said he'd do even better. Then Cassie and I sat down on a bench to wait.

She cuddled close to me, shivering a little. Her forlorn whimpers needled my protective instincts and I slid an arm around her slender waist.

"Listen, kiddo," I said.

"Y-yes?"

"Whatever happens, I want you to know I'm on your side. I'll do my darnedest to front for you."

"Th-thank you, Mr. Turner. I'm grateful for that. Your f-fee will be paid, I promise."

I said: "Don't be so formal. Call me Dan. As for fee—nuts, hon, this is one time

I'm not working for dough."

She stiffened, then relaxed. "You mean you're convinced I didn't shoot Jeff?"

I patted her. "That remains to be seen. Let's wait until I've looked at the printed reel."

Presently the lab clerk ankled into the office. "Those rushes are ready for projection, sir. Would you care to view them here or take them with you?"

"Here, if you don't mind." Cassie and I trailed him into a projecting room with a miniature screen at the far wall. We sat down while the guy threaded his spool into the machinery; then he switched off the lights, plunged us into darkness as thick as the inside of a Nazi's heart.

Pretty soon the screen glowed with brilliant light and the scene started unwinding. I piped Cassie Shelburne crouching in the middle of that set, registering terror. The .32 pocket positive was in her mitt.

Now a hefty slob appeared, made up as a heavy. Giving out with the villainy, he moved toward the brunette frill as if to throttle her. She raised the roscoe, squeezed the trigger. Its muzzle spat fire and the actor folded, his contorted puss indicating pain.

I felt as if somebody had suddenly lifted Grant's Tomb off my shoulders. "That's enough. Cut," I called to the clerk. Then, in the resulting blackness, I twisted to the chair alongside me where I'd parked the Shelburne sheba. "That clears you, hon. It proves you fired the cannon at the studio—hey!" I yodeled.

The lights had flashed on and Cassie wasn't there. She had silently powdered.

**I BOUNCED** up on my brogans; went flailing out of the projection room like a comet with a burr under its tail. And I gained the street just in time to see my jalopy taking the far corner on two wheels

and a toothpick. The black-haired babe was driving it, pouring on the coal.

Now, what could that mean?

There was only one possible answer. Because of what I'd said to her before that reel was projected, she had an idea I still suspected her. And in sudden unreasoning panic, she'd taken a powder.

I felt sorry for her; but I had a job of work ahead of me and she certainly wasn't making it any easier.

In order to clear her officially, I'd have to put the arm on the real murderer; which was no simple task when you considered the fact that Dave Donaldson entertained a few fool notions about my own possible guilt. Unless I handed him the killer on a silver platter he was liable to throw my elbows in the clink—if for no other reason than revenge because I'd bopped him.

The prospect riled my giblets. I hailed a passing Yellow; had myself ferried back to the Masterpiece lot. There was something I hankered to know, and the pock-pitted Tod Topperman was just the guy who could tell me. So I made for the sound stage where I'd last seen him; but before I showed myself I made plenty sure Donaldson wasn't still hanging around the set.

Luckily enough, he'd hauled bunions and I was able to buttonhole the red-haired producer without being collared. "Hey, Tod," I said.

**H**E PINNED the near-sighted swivel on me. "Cripes, Sherlock—you back again? I should think you'd find a hole to crawl into after slugging that homicide lieutenant!"

"Stew him," I shrugged. "I need information. Look. How important is Cassie Shelburne to Masterpiece Pix?"

"We need her like you need your eyeballs. She's the biggest find of the century."

I said: "Then you'd like to have her out

from under this homicide beef, I take it."

"Yes! I'd be willing to pay you five hundred dollars if you could—"

"Small change," I interrupted him. "I'll accept it, though. Now pay attention. Jeff Shelburne wanted to ditch Cassie, didn't he?"

"Yes. The dope."

"He was goofy over some other pigeon. Right?"

"Correct. A bleached blonde bim named Estelle Kemble. A bim, if you ask my opinion."

I could have hugged the ugly little blister. "Estelle!" I yodeled. "That's the name I've been trying to think of!"

"How come? What's she got to do with this mess?"

I said: "She was with him tonight in my apartment building. She bashed me with a minicam." Then I calmed my voice. "The way I see it, Shelburne wanted to divorce Cassie so he could get hitched to this blonde."

"Okay. So what?"

"So he and Estelle tailed Cassie to my wikiup, hoping she was about to have a tryst with me. Maybe they'd been shadowing her a lot of nights, looking for possible evidence. Anyhow, Jeff figured he had the goods on his frau when he caught her with me. Whereupon somebody drilled him."

Topperman made a bitter mouth. "Yeah. But who?"

"I don't know. I'm pretty certain it wasn't Cassie. Yet the only other person in the corridor was Estelle Kemble."

"You think maybe *she*—?"

I said: "That's what I aim to learn. It's a cinch she had the opportunity; but what was her possible motive? The only way I can find out is by calling on her, throwing a scare at her. At least it's an angle. Can you give me her address?"

He pulled a notebook out of his pocket.

"I think so. She plays bit roles for me once in a while." He thumbed the miniature leaves; found the entry he wanted and mentioned a rooming house address on a side street just off Sunset.

I thanked him; dashed back to my waiting cab. Ten minutes later I fingered the jingle-button of the wigwam I wanted, and a frowsy landlady finally opened up. "Yes?"

"Miss Kemble, please," I said.

The hag sniffed as if I'd waved a helping of limburger cheese under her trumpet. "Estelle doesn't live here any more. I keep a decent house, I'll have you know."

"Meaning the Kemble cutie isn't decent?"

"I wouldn't call it decent to let a married man pay my apartment rent," the landlady remarked in a voice like vinegar.

I said: "So that's the score. She's living in—"

"That Shelburne actor is footing the bills."

"You wouldn't know the exact location, would you?"

"Certainly. I have to give it to the casting directors who call, don't I?" And she slipped me the information I needed.

I turned, galloped to my taxi, told the hacker to make knots. He must have needed a valve grind, though, because it took us all of another fifteen minutes before we dragged anchor in front of a three-story stash on Franklin. And then, as I paid him off, I tabbed two things that froze my ventricles.

The first was a vee-eight coupe parked a little distance up the block: a bucket I'd have recognized with my glims shut. It was my own heap—the one Cassie Shelburne had swiped to make a getaway from the Central Service laboratory. And the second was an official police sedan that whooshed to the curb just as my taxi pulled out.

The prowl buggy's red spotlight was gleaming, indicating an emergency run; and the cumbersome character who emerged from it was Dave Donaldson, with steam issuing out of his pores.

THE instant he lamped me he gave vent to a maniac shriek. "You!" And he hauled forth his Rodney, surged in my direction. "What are you doing here?"

I said: "Hunting a jessie who sails under the monicker of Estelle Kemble. How about you?"

"Estelle Kemble? Jeepers cripes, that's who I'm after! We just got a phone call from her down at headquarters. She confessed croaking Jeff Shelburne out of jealousy; said she was about to dutch herself. I—"

A sickened sensation slammed me in the pit of the elly-bay. "What are we waiting for?" I pinched a contusion on his forearm. "Let's go!"

We pelted buckety-blip into the building; caromed up the stairs. Just as we reached the second story landing, a cannon coughed: *Ka-Chow!* from above us. It sounded muffled, blurred; and then some she-male screamed blue murder.

I gained the third floor in nothing flat with Dave wheezing in my wake. Abruptly an apartment door smacked open at the far end of the hall and a whimpering cutie catapulted into view, looking as if she'd accidentally encountered a convention of ghouls.

"Grab her!" I rasped. "It's Cassie Shelburne!"

Donaldson launched himself in a flying tackle; brought the brunette doll down like a chopped tree. She kicked her shapely gams and squirmed for freedom. "No—please—I didn't kill her—I only came here to accuse her—"

When I heard this I plunged into the flat she'd left. I gulped.

The bleached blonde Estelle Kemble lay sprawled on the rug with a pill through her ticker and a rod near her right mitt. She was as dead as Mussolini's morals.

There was an open window beyond her. I yanked my own .32 automatic from the shoulder holster where I always carry it; hurled myself to the sill and leaned out. Somebody was jumping off the lowermost ladder-rung of the fire escape; hitting the alley's paving. The shadowy figure commenced running.

I took careful aim, squeezed my trigger, sent a slug into the guy's kneecap. "*Got you, Tod Topperman, you murderous monkey!*" I squalled.

**T**HIRTY seconds later, Donaldson and I were in the alley and fastening bracelets on the red-haired producer of Masterpiece Pix. He was down on his haunches, moaning over his maimed knee. "You've crippled me for life—"

I set fire to a gasper, blew smoke in his pock-pitted pan. "Why worry about it? Your life won't last very long after you get fastened to a seat in the smoke-house."

"You—you can't—"

"We've got you dead to rights," I rasped. "Cassie Shelburne was developing into a top-flight star for your quickie outfit. But you stood to lose your investment in her if her hubby smeared her with scandal. Which was what he wanted to do, so he could divorce her.

"Moreover, Jeff also had a starring contract with your company; but he was slipping at the box office. So you decided to blot him out. That would save Cassie from any scandal frame—make her even more valuable than ever. As the widow of a murdered hambo, she would inherit scads of free publicity and her pix would be a gold mine."

Topperman cursed me.

I said: "Tonight Jeff and his blonde sweetie tailed Cassie to my tepee. And you, in turn, followed them. You plugged Jeff and scrambled back to your studio. Later, though, you realized your scheme had backfired. Cassie, your biggest star, was under suspicion.

"Then I came along, asked for Estelle Kimble's address. It gave you a new angle. You phoned headquarters, imitated a woman's voice, impersonated the Kimble quail and confessed Jeff Shelburne's murder; mentioned suicide. Then, having fastened everything on the blonde bim, you came here and browned her as if she'd dutched herself."

He groaned: "How . . . did you . . ."

"How did I guess the truth? My tip-off came from the landlady of a boarding house where the Kimble cupcake used to live. She told me Estelle had moved to this apartment joint; that all her studio calls were forwarded here. In that case, since you occasionally hired her for bit roles, you were hep to her new address. *Then why did you send me on a wild goose chase to the rooming house where she no longer lived?*"

"I . . . I thought . . ."

"Yeah," I growled. "You thought it would give you time to mosey over here and cool her. Which you did. Now we've got you. We've also got the gat you planted by Estelle's remnants. It's probably registered to you; and it will match the slug that dug a tunnel in Jeff Shelburne's think-tank. That makes two kills you'll be answering for."

He nursed his leaking kneecap. "I'll c-cop a plea . . . say I was insane . . ."

"Try it," Dave Donaldson grinned in his kisser. "See how much it buys you."

As a matter of fact, all it bought Topperman was a one-way ticket to the cyanide booth.