

MURDER'S MOUTHPIECE

By Robert Leslie Bellem



For years Ace had been asking for trouble. This time it looked as if he were really going to get it. There were so many people just yearning to send flowers to his funeral that it was hard to find any one who knew him who wouldn't be a suspect if he died suddenly.

THE FIRST thing I noticed about the doomed bozo was the pout he wore on his handsome kisser. Some of it was the thick-lipped condition that comes from too much hot trumpet playing, but mostly it was plain sullenness and conceit. He was embellished in white tie and tails, and his wavy yellow hair had a peroxide sheen that went well with his deep sun-tan; but for all his Adonis map and sleek physique he looked like a seventeen cylinder heel as far as I was concerned.

I said: "So that's the famous Ace Wardman."

Ankling into the Konga Klub alongside me, Florrie Doddridge nodded curtly. "Right," she said in a voice liberally sprinkled with venom. "The biggest louse

that ever waved a wand at a gang of solid senders. The king of the creeps. A musical Judas—but in Technicolor."

Florrie and I then settled ourselves at a ringside table and I fastened the furtive focus on the object of her ire. Ace Wardman was punishing a pony of Napoleon brandy at the chromium bar and casually ogling a trim little filly to his left. The cupcake in question didn't seem to mind this ocular pass he made at her, but her escort looked as sore as a blistered thumb; for which I didn't blame him.

"Lamp the play, Florrie," I whispered. "Ace is on the make, or do my glims trick me?"

My dainty brunette companion copped a hinge. "It's just like him," she answered

through a sneer. “Always asking for trouble—and some day he’ll get it. I’d pawn my rhinestones to send flowers to his funeral, the rat.”

OF course I savvied why she despised Wardman’s tripe. Until a couple of months ago he had been front man for a red hot dance band that had the hep-cats gaga from hell to Hyde Park, and Florrie herself had been the outfit’s indigo canary at a damned nice salary. Now, though, she was out of the important surtax brackets; in fact, she was singing here at the third grade Konga Klub for peanuts. It was a terrific comedown for her, and Ace Wardman was responsible.

The whole story stemmed back to a year before, when the orchestra had first got launched. Almost overnight it had skyrocketed to national fame, mainly due to the way Wardman brandished his baton and tootled a species of rhythmic delirium tremens out of his inspired trumpet. Florrie, however, could be credited for an assist; her job had been to warble torrid ditties while garnished in daring décolletage to give the masculine customers sunstroke.

The combination was hard to beat. Florrie’s voice was a nice rich contralto, like having your ears caressed with warm velvet, and her curves were even richer than her voice. Add Ace Wardman for the benefit of the feminine trade and you had a band riding high in the groove, coining moolah in copious chunks. And then—blam!—right in the midst of all this prosperity, Ace announced his retirement.

“I’m fed up with popular music,” he had stated in a magazine article. “It no longer interests me. I’m disbanding my orchestra and quitting show business forever.” Then he pulled a vanishing act; dropped temporarily out of sight.

Looking at him now, here in this grade “B” Hollywood cabaret, I couldn’t help

remembering what a stinking trick that sudden disappearance had been. Naturally it had crashed the front pages all over the country, but the publicity didn’t help the band a bit. By walking out on his gang, the heel had sabotaged whatever chance they had of remaining in the big time—because what good was Ace Wardman’s orchestra without Ace Wardman? Minus his heated horn they were just another mess of musicians, competent but not superlative. They played the same notes they’d always played, but their sparkplug was gone.

It wouldn’t have been so bad if the guy had really meant his retirement announcement; but within a few weeks he bobbed up on the west coast with a brand new aggregation of swingsters and a fresh batch of headlines. As mysteriously as he’d dropped out of sight he emerged again. Then, having glommed the spotlight with this fancy caper, he proceeded to land a fat three-picture deal with Metromount Productions.

ACCORDING to the gossip columnists, Wardman’s movie contract called for the highest wages any studio had ever paid a newcomer. So now he was about to become a screen star, thanks to the neatest publicity trick in years; his initial opus had already been filmed and was ready for previewing.

“But he may be murdered before he gets a chance to enjoy it!” Florrie Doddridge told me in a flat, anxious tone. “Unless y-you do something to p-protect him!”

I blinked at her. “Did you say murdered, hon?”

“Y-yes.”

“How do you figure that?”

“It’s plain enough, Mr. Turner. Every single member of Wardman’s original orchestra has a grudge against him because he deliberately sacrificed us to further his

own career. C-can't you understand?"

I said: "I'm beginning to get your general drift. You think somebody from the old outfit might put the chill on him for revenge, hunh?"

"Y-yes."

"Are musicians really as tough as all that, babe?"

"Some of them."

"And just where are these potential assassins from his original band?" I asked her.

She waved vaguely toward the Konga Klub's orchestra platform. "You can see what's left of them right here." Her mouth got sour. "Playing for buttons."

"Including you."

"Yes. Including me."

I said admiringly: "You don't look so seedy, kitten. That's a nifty set of threads you're wearing."

"I used to be a dressmaker. I can sew my own clothes. Those fellows in the band aren't so lucky."

Studying them, I had to admit they weren't any too spruce. I moistened my tonsils with a snort of Vat 69 and said: "So all right, the boys are on their uppers. So they're sore at Wardman. So you stopped by my apartment dump and asked me to come out to this gin mill with you because Wardman's taken up the habit of hanging around here. So what is it all about? I mean where do I fit in?"

"I—I want you to look after Ace; bodyguard him without letting him know it. Watch him and see that no harm comes to him," she answered tautly.

I glued the flabbergasted glimpse on her. "You're asking me to guard a guy you hate?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't make sense," I said. "Besides, I charge higher fees than you can afford."

She grinned crookedly. "I'll pay."

"Okay," I said. "My price is fifty bucks a day."

"Then I can hire you for exactly ten days. Which is exactly how long the original band is staying here in Hollywood. We get a booking in Seattle after that, so Ace will be safe then. Fifty dollars a day; ten days. That's five hundred." She opened a bag that matched her costume and started to dig out a slender wad of banknotes.

I stopped her. "Ix-nay. I never accept lettuce from ladies in public. People might get the wrong impression. Besides, the deal isn't closed yet."

"What do you m-mean?"

"I still crave to know why you want me to guard a guy whose giblets you detest. "

She hesitated; seemed on the verge of dishing me the answer. Instead of words, though, it was a sudden yelp that blurted out of her crimson kisser. Her dark peepers were focused on a spot over by the chromium bar and her peachbloom complexion had turned as pasty as waffle batter.

"Ee-ee-aiiek!" she shrilled. "Stop him—before it's too late—!"

I SWUNG around in my chair, took a hasty swivel and saw Ace Wardman grappling with an infuriated citizen. This citizen was the bozo who had looked so sore a moment ago because Wardman had ogled his jessie. Now he was taking steps.

This, however, was not the cause of Florrie Doddridge's terrified yodel. She was staring at a tall, skinny character in a cheap hand-me-down tuxedo—a musician from the band. I tabbed him as Slats McCoy, the outfit's trumpeter; and I also saw that he had raced toward the fracas at the bar and was now employing his cornet as a blackjack. He was trying to beat Ace Wardman unconscious with it.

Instantly other orchestra members began streaming down from their platform

like wasps hunting somebody to sting. I strangled: "What the hell!" and launched myself forward with the general notion of joining the fray, helping Wardman out of his jackpot. After all, I was supposed to be his bodyguard.

He didn't seem to need much help, though. First he landed an uppercut on the infuriated lug whose jane he had tried to impress. The guy dropped to the floor and stayed there. Then Wardman spun around to Slats McCoy, who was trying to knock his brains out by means of a brass trumpet.

"Oh. So you want to get rough, eh?" he snarled at the skinny musician. Then he hung a haymaker on McCoy's prow and McCoy sailed backward like a kite in a cyclone. I arrived at the edge of the carnage barely in time to catch him and keep him from taking a dive in the nearest cuspidor.

But I didn't support him very long. Somebody snatched him away from me; lowered him and began rendering first aid. It was my gorgeous brunette companion, Florrie Doddridge, who did this. I heard her moaning: "Slats . . . Slats, darling . . . !" as she held him in her arms and cuddled him.

That explained a lot of things as far as I was concerned. I realized that the girl was worrying over Slats McCoy. I also tumbled to the fact that she'd been scared Slats might attempt to croak Ace Wardman. That was why she wanted me to guard the Wardman louse; she couldn't stand the idea of her sweetheart becoming a killer.

The puzzle got clear enough in my mind, but my surroundings were growing more chaotic by the second. In fact, hell was festering all over the joint. Scared wrens were bleating hysterically, their escorts were cursing and milling around, and Ace Wardman was backed up against the bar like that famous painting of a stag at bay. In this case the wolves were jive hounds—members of Wardman's former

orchestra. They yapped at him as they closed in, breathing fire and brimstone.

It dawned on me that I'd better earn the fee Florrie planned to pay me. I hunched my shoulders, tensed my shoestrings, bored a path through the crush and reached the handsome louse; shielded him with my hundred and ninety pounds of beef. "Quiet!" I caterwauled. "Everybody calm down before the cops bust in and toss all of us in the gow!"

My bellow did the business. Customers, waiters, and musicians froze in their tracks, quit their chattering; all except Wardman. He had a disposition like vinegar. He elbowed me aside, presented me with a supercilious sneer and rasped: "Who asked you to stick your beak in my business, rube?"

"It's a secret," I said.

"Well, blow. I can handle my own clambakes, see? Suppose you haul your onions out of here before I give you a sample of knuckles."

I debated whether or not I should lay one on his profile for luck. Just as I had about decided to stiffen him, I heard a yelp from somewhere in the crowd; a wheedling bleat full of panic and desperation. "No, Sherlock! Don't!"

"Hunh?" I peered toward the sound.

"You, Wardman—quick, apologize! Make like you're sorry for heaven's sake, or it gives hospitals and plastical surgery. That's Dan Turner you're choosing—positively the toughest private dick in Hollywood!"

Then I tabbed the party giving vent to these agonized accents. He was Bernie Dervish, pint-sized president of Metromount Studios. Bernie was prancing up and down like a midget maggot on a hot rock and I couldn't blame him. After all, he had Wardman under contract for three starring pix; and if I wrecked the rat's

profile, it would be a financial kick in the teeth for Bernie's producing company.

So I held my nettled temper in check; lowered my dukes. Dervish happened to be a friend of mine and I didn't want to rob him of potential profits. Moreover, my job was to protect the Wardman slob, not to pulverize him.

Besides, the instant Wardman heard my name he lost his truculence; stared at me with dawning respect. "You—you're honestly Dan Turner?"

"Yeah," I said, and set fire to a gasper; blew smoke in his puss to show him what I thought of him.

He took it without a protest. "I guess I spoke out of turn," he said. "I didn't realize who you were. Thanks for coming to my rescue."

"Don't tease yourself," I slipped him the glowering glimpse. "I didn't volunteer. I was hired."

His eyebrows went up like startled window-shades. "Hired?"

"To protect you, yeah."

"But who—?"

I said: "Florrie Doddridge," and cast a glance at the lovely brunette canary. She was just bringing Slats McCoy out of his coma, cuddling him and stroking his skinny mush. "You can see what her motive was."

"I'm afraid I don't get it," Wardman muttered.

"That's because you're stupid. McCoy and the rest of your original orchestra are plenty sore at you for the raw deal you gave them; almost sore enough to crave your demise. Florrie didn't enjoy the prospect of McCoy becoming a murderer, so she engaged me to look out for you."

The handsome heel hardened his map. "So they'd like to see me dead, eh?"

"Florrie seemed to think so. Not that she gave a damn as far as you were concerned, but she wanted to keep Slats from dumping himself in the grease.

Evidently it was a good hunch," I added in frosty tones. "You almost got what you deserved."

WARDMAN licked his thick lips; took a worried gander at the joint's customers who were still grouped around trying to steal an earful of scandal. You could see what was going on inside his grey matter: this unpleasant shindig might result in a cargo of sour publicity unless he did something about it pronto. He seemed to be weighing ways and means.

Then he pivoted to face the fidgety little Bernie Dervish on his right; whispered something to the pint-sized Metromount mogul that I couldn't overhear. In response, Bernie nodded and climbed up on a chair. "Ladies and gentlemen!"

The dive got quiet, giving him full attention. In Hollywood it's the size of your job that commands respect, not your height or your chest expansion. And Dervish was an important guy in the galloping snapshots, so his squeaky voice made every glim swing his way.

He drew a quavery breath and said: "My new star, Ace Wardman, wants he should apologize to all of you for this here now uproar. To show he ain't—hasn't got no hard feelings he says he is setting up the drinks for the house, and on top of that he wishes to go even further and would play a trumpet solo, y'understand, with Slats McCoy and the boys if they'll let him."

I stared at McCoy. He was up on his skinny shanks by now, and the Doddridge quail seemed to be begging him to accept the peace offering. Slats looked reluctant; but presently he consented and herded the band back to the platform. He picked up the horn with which he'd whapped Wardman on the cranium a moment ago; gave it to Florrie. In turn she handed it to Wardman, who accepted it as if conferring

a vast favor.

“Thanks, baby,” he smirked at her as he fiddled with the battered brass instrument. He worked the valves, strutted hammily to the tiny stage, bowed, and put the trumpet’s jewel-set golden mouthpiece to his kisser. He drew a breath.

Ker-blam!

It sounded like a giant cracker exploding under a tin can on the Fourth of July; only this was louder and uglier than any firecracker I’d ever listened to. One instant Ace Wardman was ready to emit music. A split second later he pitched forward from the platform with most of his map blown off.

FOR a stunned moment everybody in the night spot was too petrified to move. Then panic slid into the driver’s seat and hell frothed over. The Konga Klub was suddenly populated with screeching maniacs—and no wonder.

I catapulted to Wardman’s prone poundage, rolled him over and came near parting with my pancakes. Where his handsome puss had recently been there was now a portion of raw hamburger soaked in ketchup. I didn’t need a second inspection to know he was deader than the ruins of Berlin.

Florrie Doddridge stared at him over my shoulder and screamed like a bereft banshee. That triggered other screams into motion all over the cabaret, and I knew hysteria would spread like an epidemic of measles if any more she-males got a slant at Wardman’s gory remainders. I yanked a tablecloth from under some citizen’s supper; covered the defunct bozo and then hurtled my heft up on the platform, flashed my private badge.

“Nobody’s to leave until the cops give the word, understand?” I thundered. “This is a case of deliberate killery and someone’s going to inhale gas for it.” I

thrust a finger at Bernie Dervish. “Find a telephone and put in a belch to the law while I sit here on the lid.”

Bernie got his short stems pumping. Then I saw a skinny slug taking out after him under a full head of steam. It was Slats McCoy.

“Hey, you!” I bleeped. “Where do you think you’re going?”

The thin trumpeter halted in his tracks. “I—I was just—I mean I was—what business is it of yours?” And he spurred himself toward a rear door.

I reached under my coat, dug out the .32 automatic I always tote in a shoulder holster in case of emergency. I snarled: “Maybe this will sound melodramatic, pal, but if you take another step I’ll put a dose of poison plumb through your gam, so help me Whozit!”

He teetered on his soles as if trying to decide whether the risk was worth trying. Simultaneously a feminine voice shrilled: “Run, darling—*run!*” Before I could turn to chide Florrie Doddridge for this bad advice, she whammed a fifth of gin at me. The bottle sailed straight for my conk; christened me like a battleship.

Confidentially, I sank.

MY TONSILS were swimming in Scotch when I woke up. I moaned: “Lay off. What are you trying to do, drown me?” Then I pried my bleary binnacles open and lamped the individual who was feeding me alcoholic nourishment.

He was my old friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide bureau; and apparently he and his cohorts had been on deck quite a while in response to Bernie Dervish’s phone call. I surmised this from the fact that most of the groggery’s patrons were gone, while a few remaining survivors were being quizzed and dismissed one at a time by plainclothes snoops. Even Ace Wardman’s mangled corpse had been

carted away in a meat basket, which indicated how long I'd been in dreamland.

As soon as I commenced sputtering, Donaldson said: "Take it easy, fireball. You'll be okay."

"Not if you insist on pickling my clockworks with fluid dynamite," I protested. "How do you expect me to spill the details if you get me fried?"

"You needn't spill anything, Hawkshaw. I've already got all I need."

"Oh, yeah? Such as what?"

He shrugged. "The Wardman dude was croaked by a kind of miniature bomb inside a cornet; a detonator cap or something along that order. It was rigged to explode when he blew through it."

"Anything else?"

"Well, we know Slats McCoy must have cooked up the gadget in advance, since it was McCoy's horn that did the business. Which makes it premeditated murder; motive, vengeance."

I said: "Apparently you haven't wasted any time digging out the dope."

"I never waste time," he gave me a superior leer. "We've also learned that a black-haired babe named Florrie Doddridge clipped you on the sconce with a fifth of juniper juice so she and this McCoy party would lam together."

"You mean she powdered after she beaned me?"

"I do indeed," Dave said. "Which makes her an accessory, and I've got the net out for both of them."

I swayed upright; wobbled uncertainly. My think-tank was as unsteady as my stems; I knew something was haywire with Donaldson's calculations, but I couldn't seem to put my finger on the error. Mainly I hated to think of the Doddridge cookie as an assistant killer in spite of the fact that she'd bopped me with a bottle. After all, that had been only an effort to help her skinny sweetie make his getaway. It proved

her loyalty to McCoy, guilty or innocent; but it didn't necessarily indicate she'd been mixed up in the original scheme to blast Ace Wardman's pan through the back of his noggin.

Or did it?

The way my own thatch ached and throbbled, I couldn't do any straight pondering. Gin always did diffuse my powers of concentration, in or out of a container. So I didn't argue with Donaldson; I merely waited until he got through sounding off his adenoids and then asked him if I could haul hips.

"Sure," he answered me. "Go on home. I don't need you. This is one time where I can get along without your mastermind routine."

I STUMBLED outdoors, shambled to my parked jalopy and headed it into the night. Air streamed in through the open windows, massaged my damaged steeple and took away some of the pain. I could almost feel the swelling as it receded from the size of a basketball to the dimensions of a hockey puck; which, considering everything, was a vast improvement. By the time I ankled along the third-floor corridor of my apartment trap I was feeling almost as good as new—and then, just as I was keying the latch of my stash, a dame drifted toward from the shadows of a hallway window embrasure and my skull began to throb again.

Anybody's cranium might pulsate for a cupcake like this one. She was a slinky blonde doll in a crimson creation that adhered to her like sprayed flame, emphasizing various attractions that didn't need it. There was a bleached glint marring her coiffure, and her makeup was a shade too heavy, but she packed plenty of yumph in spite of that.

"Mr. Turner," she whispered throatily.

I opened my living room door, made

some light and gestured her inside. Then I kicked the portal shut and snatched a handful of her brassy tresses. "Hi, Florrie," I said as the blonde wig came away in my mitt.



She gasped when her own natural brunette locks were revealed. "You—you recognized me!"

"Yeah. You can't fool an expert with a hunk of crepe hair," I said. "What's the pitch, hon?"

"I w-wasn't trying to fool you," she quavered. "It was the p-police—I didn't want them to trail me here. I mean I—I had to see you, and—"

I said: "So you know the law's looking for you, eh?"

"Yes."

"That's fine. You realize you're up to your nostrils in homicide, so you come to me. What am I supposed to do, give a loud cheer?"

She took a faltering step toward me. "Please don't be angry with me, Sherlock. I—"

"Of course not," I growled. "You bash me with a bottle, and then you ask me not to be sore!"

She whimpered: "Listen. I stopped by my apartment just long enough to dig up this disguise from my theatrical trunk and put on a different d-dress. Then I came straight here to wait until I could see you. I knew it was my only chance to apologize, and to ask you—"

"Ask me what?" I fished a crumpled gasper out of my pocket, torched it and dragged the fumes into my bellows. "If it's forgiveness, okay. Skip it. I know why you crowned me with the gin container. You're in love with Slats McCoy and you craved to let him lam."

She took the coffin nail out of my yap, thrust it in her own tremulous lips; puffed nervously and gave it back to me. "Y-yes. I love Slats. And even though I believed he had murdered Wardman, I wanted to stick by him."

"Perfectly natural," I agreed.

She came back with: "But now that I know he's innocent, I've got to g-get help for him."

"Innocent?" I lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, come, now."

"I mean it. It's true. Slats isn't g-guilty."

"What makes you so positive, toots?"

"He told me so himself when we were g-getting away from the Konga Klub. And I believe him. I know he wasn't lying to me. He wouldn't lie."

"A killer will do anything," I said.

"But he's not a killer!"

"Now wait a minute. Earlier tonight you wanted me to protect Wardman because you were scared Slats would render him deceased. Now you reverse yourself."

SHE flushed. "I realize how it must look to you, Dan. But I want you to forget about that. You've got to forget it. You must think the same as I do—that Slats didn't murder Ace."

"And then what?" I demanded.

She gave me the straightforward focus. "You know what I came here for. Surely you've guessed. I'm asking you to help me g-get Slats out of this t-trouble."

"I'm no magician," I said. "I can't work miracles."

"Yes you can. You can do it by finding the real killer. I'll pay you the five hundred d-dollars I offered you in the cabaret; only this time it will be a fee for clearing Slats McCoy."

I shook my head. "No dice. If I took your dough, it would be under false pretenses. Believe it or not, I've got a conscience."

"Meaning wh-what?"

"Meaning I think your boy-friend is guilty as hell."

"You w-won't help him?"

I said: "He doesn't need a gumshoe, he needs a smart shyster. There's nothing I can do."

"Would you change your mind if I show you where you're wrong? Would that m-make a d-difference?" she asked me in a low, desperate tone. Two tears as big as hailstones skidded down her cheeks, cut furrows in the rouge and powder.

I shrugged. "I'll listen while you talk. I don't guarantee to be convinced, though."

She drew a ragged breath. "Ace Wardman was killed by the horn he was playing. It exploded."

"Yeah. I know that much."

"It was Slats McCoy's trumpet."

"Tell me something new."

"A little before the explosion, Slats had tried to knock Ace unconscious with that same instrument. Remember?"

"Sure I remember. So what?"

She smiled wanly. "Would Slats have taken a chance like that if he had known there was a miniature bomb in the trumpet? Would he have used it as a club and risked blowing himself up?"

I twitched as if she'd rammed me in the brisket with a branding iron.

"You see the point I'm trying to make?"

"I see it now, hon. Slats couldn't have been aware of the explosive inside the horn. Therefore he couldn't have put it there. In other words, he's clean!"

"Exactly," she said.

I STARTED pacing the carpet. "Then who could have planted the blast? There were at least twelve or fourteen guys in the orchestra with both motive and opportunity; who possibly had access to McCoy's trumpet—" I stopped short.

"Have you th-thought of something else, Dan?"

"Yeah. Slats handed the instrument to you and you, in turn gave it to Wardman. That makes you a suspect, too."

Her puss got pale. "But—but that's silly!"

"Ix-nay. In a bumpery beef, nothing's silly. You have to go into all the angles."

"Well, then, don't overlook the young couple at the bar. Remember?" she prodded me. "Wardman was making passes at the girl and her escort resented it."

I said sarcastically: "You've got something there. The punk took a poke at Wardman and got knocked down. So meanwhile he had some nitroglycerine in his pocket—the punk, I mean—and then, by sheer coincidence, he planted the explosive in the horn Wardman was going to play. Whale feathers!"

"Maybe it wasn't coincidence," Florrie stuck to her theory. "Maybe he purposely carried a tiny bomb around with him, hoping for just such a chance."

“Why?” I humored her.

She said: “I’m not certain, but I think he was a bit player in Wardman’s first starring picture for Metromount.”

“And?”

“I visited the studio one day when the film was just in its first stages and I believe I recall that very fellow in a night club scene.”

“Tell me more.”

“Wardman bawled him out for spoiling a take, and it finished with the young man going into the mob of extras, losing his bit role to somebody else. He seemed resentful, although I didn’t pay much attention to it at the time.”

I yodeled: “Why didn’t you mention this long ago? Cripes, maybe this is the key to the riddle! What’s that punk’s name?”

“I—I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

“You’d make a hell of a detective,” I complained, and dashed over to my phone; consulted my private listing of numbers. When I located Bernie Dervish’s unlisted connection I dialed it; asked a butler if his master was available. The answer was yes, and presently the Metromount mogul came on the line.

“Who is wanting me?” his squeaky voice inquired.

I said: “Dan Turner at this end. Listen, chum. Just before that ruckus erupted at the Konga Klub this evening, Ace Wardman was casting wolf-eyes at a trim little doll by the bar. Did you notice?”

“Well, more or less.”

“The cupcake’s escort got peeved and took a slap at Wardman, which lit the fuse for an ensuing riot,” I said. “What I want is the guy’s name; the one that started the brawl.”

Dervish said complainingly: “Why ask me?” Ain’t I got enough troubles without—?”

“The bozo was a bit player on your lot, Bernie. I thought I could learn something

about him from you.”

“What I could tell you is absolutely nothing, y’understand, on account I don’t know the guy. Besides, what’s it all about?” he added querulously.

I said: “I’ll explain when I see you. Can you meet me right away at the studio and give me a squint at Wardman’s new flicker? That might help.”

“It might help what?”

“To settle a croakery mess. I’m trying to clear Slats McCoy and pin the kill where it really belongs.”

He hemmed and hawed. “The pix isn’t edited yet. All we have is a preview rough-cut. But come ahead. After all, what have I got to lose?”

I thanked him and rang off; told Florrie Doddridge to stay under cover in my wigwam while I did some detecting. Then I galloped down to my coupe, fed it a charge of ethyl.

FIFTEEN minutes later I was at the Metromount main gate and waiting for Bernie Dervish to show up. His sedan came into view presently and he scurried toward me; conducted me inside the sacred precincts. Bye and bye he dug some sealed cans of film out of the archive vaults and we went to a projection room in one of the rear buildings; a room that looked like a tiny theater, complete with movie screen and equipment.

Bernie operated the machinery personally; fed a reel into a projector and got it unwinding. The screen came alive and I settled down in an easy chair to lamp the worst stinkeroo you ever saw. Ace Wardman had hammed every scene, from the emotional acting demanded by his role all the way down to the commonplace gesture of affixing a mouthpiece to his trumpet—

And then I saw the character I was looking for, the punk who’d started that

riot at the cabaret tonight. He appeared in a brief mob scene, but I tabbed him. "That's the guy, Bernie!" I yelled as I pointed him out. "That youngster in the crowd. Do you recognize him?"

Dervish stopped his projector, reversed it, flashed the same shot on the screen again. "Him?"

"Yeah."

"Let me see. Yes, I think I know him. His name is Frank Lezar if I'm not being mistaken, which I ain't. A bit player. Maybe I could find you his address from the business office if you are wanting it. But why is all this?"

I said: "He's the answer to the Wardman bump."

"Hunh? You mean you weren't kidding me when you said on the phone about Slats McCoy not being guilty?"

"Correct," I growled. Then I headed toward a wall telephone on the other side of the projection room, adding over my shoulder: "And if I can persuade this Frank Lezar punk to tell me all he knows without a mouthpiece, McCoy will be in the clear." And I started dialing police headquarters.

I twirled the gadget twice. There was a metallic click somewhere behind me; whereupon a feminine voice suddenly caterwauled: "No—don't—oh, my God—look out, Dan!"

That screech startled the curds out of me. It was the one development I hadn't anticipated. I hurled myself sidewise and hit the floor with my mush. I was just in time. From the other end of the room a roscoe sneezed: *Ka-Chow!* and a slug spanked into the wall at the precise spot where I'd been standing just a bare instant before. Plaster rained downward.

I rolled; unlimbered my own heater from its armpit holster. I took aim and snarled: "Got you, Bernie Dervish!" Then I shot the smoking roscoe out of the little mogul's mitt. Two or three of his fingers

went with the weapon.

Behind him, Florrie Doddridge was crouched in a corner. She was scared spitless. "Dan—I f-followed you to see what you intended to d-do. I c-came in just as Mr. Dervish pulled his automatic—he was going to shoot you in the b-back—"

I said: "Thanks for the try, kitten. You needn't have screamed your warning, though. I knew he'd try to plug me before I had a chance to make my phone call. I was using myself as bait; planning to beat him to the draw. And I made it."

Dervish was nursing his shattered duke. "My hand . . . oh-h God, my fingers . . . damn you to hell . . .!"

"Quiet," I grunted. "You're lucky I didn't put a pill through your guts, you killer."

He cursed me again. "Killer? How dare you—?"

"It began to dawn on me when you got Ace Wardman's starring opus out of your permanent vaults." I said. "That meant you must have shelved the production and never intended to release it. I wondered why. Then, when you unreel it, I savvied the reason. It stunk. Wardman was an incurable ham. You must have dropped a fortune on the pix; and you stood to lose two more fortunes *if Wardman lived to complete his three picture contract that you'd been silly enough to sign.*"

The brunette Doddridge chick blinked at me. "You mean to say Mr. Dervish killed Ace to keep him from starring in any more Metromount m-movies?"

"That's how it stacks up," I said. "At least it's a logical motive. Once I realized it, I began to hunt for a possible method—and I found one in the movie itself."

Dervish moaned: "You're crazy!"

"Like hell I am! Wardman always used his own trumpet mouthpiece, taking it out of his pocket and placing it in the instrument before playing a tune. It was a

gesture he used all through the picture.”

“So what?”

“So at the Konga Klub tonight Ace was going to tootle Slats McCoy’s horn. But when he raised it to his kisser, I happened to notice it had a gold mouthpiece set with jewels. That was an instant before the blast.

“Okay. An expensive gem-encrusted mouthpiece couldn’t possibly belong to an impoverished guy like McCoy. Therefore it was Wardman’s personal property which he took out of his pocket and inserted in the horn he’d borrowed from Slats.”

DERVISH tried to bind a handkerchief around the stumps of his fingers. The handkerchief turned red in a hell of a hurry. “I’m bleeding to death. I’m dying!” he bawled. “Do something—get me to the hospital for a transfusion!”

“Not until I finish my spiel, bub,” I told him. “Let’s see, where was I? Oh yes; the jeweled mouthpiece. Now, in Wardman’s starring movie he hadn’t used any such gaudy gadget. Consequently the one he had at the Konga Klub this evening must have been new—and it was explosive. Well, who’d be in a position to present him with that kind of bauble? It’s a cinch he wouldn’t buy a mouthpiece bomb for himself, so it must have been a gift from somebody.”

The Doddridge frill said: “You think Dervish gave it to him, is that it?”

“Yeah, a little token from a producer to a star. Dervish to Wardman, with love. With nitroglycerine! Who else stood to gain anything by Wardman’s death? Anyhow that was my hunch and I put it to the trap test. And the trap worked.”

“Trap—?” the movie mogul moaned.

“Sure. I nailed you by deliberately mumbling my words when I said Slats McCoy would be in the clear if that bit player, Lezar, would tell what he knew without a mouthpiece—which is a slang term for lawyer. However, I delivered the line of dialogue over my shoulder so you’d misunderstand it. You thought I said about a mouthpiece, not without a mouthpiece. This meant something entirely different to you, and it frightened you into giving yourself away. You were scared the Frank Lezar punk had witnessed you presenting the jeweled mouthpiece to Ace Wardman, so you hoped to cool me before I could tell my theory to the homicide cops.”

“You can’t prove anything!” Dervish whimpered. “It’s all a pack of lies!”

I said: “The very fact that you triggered your rod at me is proof of your guilt. And unless you confess right now, I’ll take that handkerchief bandage off your mitt, hold you upside down and let all the gravy leak out of your veins.”

“You . . . you wouldn’t! That would be . . . murder!”

I moved close to him, grabbed him. “This is it, Bernie. I’m not fooling.”

“Gosh . . . no!” he caved in. “I’ll talk. I’ll admit . . .”

“That’s more like it,” I said. Then I turned to Florrie Doddridge. “Call the bulls, babe. Then contact Slats McCoy and tell him he’s in the clear.”

Her glims were shining as she went to the phone. “I’ll never know how to thank you, Dan.”

I said: “The hell with your gratitude. What I want is geetus. You owe me five hundred bucks.”