

KILLERY IN THE CARDS

By JEROME SEVERS PERRY



That beef-blowing movie-studio detective, Little Jack Horner, attended his boss's card party, at which various guests were being cheated, to find a card-expert corpse—with two knives in it—created in the dark almost under his nose, and then it became a dangerous job indeed!

Illustrated
By
Max Plaisted

Little Jack Horner reached down and dragged Monahan from the water.

AFTER JOHN J. HORNER had pummeled it several times with a meaty fist, the door was opened by a butler whose sallow face indicated that he was probably suffering from a stubborn liver disorder. Even the darkness of the Hollywood night could not conceal this jaundice, nor did it hide the guy's supercilious disapproval as he looked along his nose at Horner's bulky dimensions and

unpressed tweeds. "Yes, my good fellow?" he intoned in a nasal whinny which betrayed sinus trouble, adenoids, or both.

Haughtiness, you had to concede, was the occupational characteristic of butlers, but this one carried it to extremes. Horner curbed his impatience, though. "Thanks for the compliment, pal," he growled indulgently. "First time in years anybody's called me a good fellow. You must be new

around here.”

“Quite new. You, ah, wanted something?”

“Yeah. Conduct me to the clambake.”

The butler’s eyebrows took off in a northerly direction. “Clambake?” he sounded pained.

“All right, then, the barbecue and card party.”

“Oh. The, ah, barbecue and card party.”

Horner’s temper began to simmer. “Stop padding the dialogue,” he said ominously, in a voice like distant thunder. “This is Lew Quarrie’s residence. Check?”

“Yes, but—”

“Lew Quarrie, head man of Epicure Pictures. Check?”

“Mr. Quarrie is in charge of Epicure Studios, yes.”

“And he’s throwing a card party this evening. Check? With charcoal-broiled venison steaks as a starter?”

“The meal is over. Cards are now being played.”

“Okay, either take me to the scene or step aside and I’ll find it myself. I know the way. Been here lots of times.”

“You, ah, have an invitation?”

With a patience entirely foreign to him, Horner fumbled in his pockets. “Hm-m. I had one. Must have mislaid it. Horner’s—the name, John J. Horner. I’m on the payroll.”

“Oh, an employee.” The butler seemed to think this undignified. “Perhaps you had better go to the tradesmen’s entrance in the rear. Though I’ve been working for him less than a week, I’m quite sure Mr. Quarrie is not the sort of man who would invite a mere empl-aw-wrr-r-rk-k—!”

THERE was a good reason for the guy’s sudden choked cry. Horner had him by the throat and commenced vigorously to throttle him. “I don’t allow flunkeys to get fresh with me, Jeeves.”

“Not Jeeves. Glug. Asbury. Glug.”

“When you speak to me say sir,” Horner insisted peevishly. He pressed a heavy thumb into a soft windpipe.

The thumb was very effective indeed. “Asbury, sir,” the butler gasped. “Glug!”

Glowering darkly, Horner released him. “All right, now let’s start over again. I am John J. Horner and I wish to be conducted to Lew Quarrie’s card party. Check?”

“Yes . . . sir.” The man rubbed his bruises, then abruptly drew a wheezing breath. “John J. Horner. Oh my gracious! Could you be the one they call Little Jack Horner?”

“After the nursery rhyme.” Horner nodded. “Not that the nickname has anything to do with my size. I’m far from little, as any fool can see.”

“You . . . you’re Horner the studio detective?”

Horner bristled instantly. He disliked being called a detective because in his mind detectives were synonymous with cops and he held the firm conviction that all cops were lice. “Never use that word to me,” he made a menacing gesture. “I’m not a detective, I’m a beef blower. A beef blower is a man who blows down beefs, or, in plain language, quells trouble. That’s my job. I quell trouble for Lew Quarrie.” His lumpy face became bleakly truculent. “And now, pal, the card party if not the barbecue. There is going to be trouble requiring my services.”

Visibly awed, Asbury bowed him into the house and nervously piloted him through a series of rooms, any one of which could easily have doubled for Pasadena’s Rose Bowl. A motion-picture magnate’s prominence in the community is measured by many yardsticks, one of the more important being the opulence of his living quarters. In this extravagance, Lew Quarrie deferred to no man. Horner, crossing acres of velvety carpet, cynically mused that if

Quarrie ever lost his berth as boss of Epicure he could convert his home into a hotel, thus solving Southern California's housing problem.

The grand tour ended at a rear patio, hard by a swimming pool slightly smaller than a yacht harbor. Though the venison had been eaten, savory odors lingered; while the dappled waters of the pool reflected a myriad varicolored lights from Oriental lanterns hung in geometric patterns overhead. Card tables were scattered around the patio, all of them in use and most of them grouped along the pool's near edge. One, however, was set apart, close to a bank of hydrangeas, the arrangement being a study in the social strata of Hollywood class consciousness.

The distant tables served writers and directors, men who earned anywhere from a paltry thousand to two thousand dollars a week. Stars whose names were box office magic and whose incomes ranged as high as five thousand a week glittered and preened themselves at the intermediate tables. Producers and executives breathing the rarefied atmosphere of the ten-thousand-dollar brackets played their various versions of gin rummy still closer to the hydrangea bushes; while at that table which was set apart in solitary state you found three very special guests honored by being seated with the host himself, Lew Quarrie, regally remote upon the proud pinnacle of his importance.

The pinnacle was figurative. Literally he had a dictionary on his chair; by sitting on this he gained a height which nature had denied him. When you saw Quarrie for the first time you experienced an acute sensation of anticlimax. He was small and shrunken, a man with a face like a hatchet. It was a peaked face, sharp and narrow, so that it seemed to be a profile even when viewed from the front. His black hair had a Simonized gloss, his eyes were a pair of

shoebottoms set too close together, and his mouth was as petulant as a spoiled baby's.

Ten years ago he had been known as the Boy Genius, among other things. In those days he had been an arrogant, brash young man fighting his way to the top. Now he was there, but no longer so young and certainly not so fighting. The arrogant brashness persisted, though, which made him a person you could never learn to like.

DISLIKING him thoroughly, John J. Horner caught his eye, cocked an index finger and whispered: "*Pss-sst*. Come here."

Quarrie reddened and looked around to see if anybody had witnessed this flagrant breach of protocol. Employees of Epicure were supposed to remove their hats and bow three times at the mere mention of Quarrie's name, but Little Jack Horner had never learned to conform.

Still crimson, Quarrie slid off his dictionary and angled in Horner's direction. "You're late."

"Try docking my salary." Horner's growl was quarrelsome. "Is the stage set for the fireworks?" he added.

Quarrie chewed at a fingernail and seemed disappointed by the flavor. "The stage has been set for quite some time," he said. A fretful note came into his voice. "I've just been waiting for you to get here."

"Okay, I'm here. Touch off the fuse."

Quarrie hesitated. "Do you really think we ought to go through with it? After all, this thing is dynamite. I don't want a riot on my hands. If somebody gets hurt—"

"Look," Horner interrupted him. "This was all your idea to begin with. If you had the guts to start it, have the guts to finish it."

Quarrie drew himself up to his full five feet nothing. "Don't use that tone of voice on me. I'm your employer."

This Horner willingly admitted. "Yeah,

you're my employer. Also you've dropped close to a hundred grand the past couple months at gin rummy. Check?"

"Well, yes."

"And several of your friends have lost even more."

"Yes, but—"

"You suspected some shenanigans. You asked me to do something about it. I did. I sent east for an old chum of mine, Pat Monahan, the card expert. You introduced him around as a big Wall Streeter and mingled him with the nabobs, so he could get a line on whatever was going on, if anything. So all right, now he claims he has the fancy work spotter. Tonight he's going to announce it and finger the sharpshooter."

Quarrie looked unhappy. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"Why?" Horner scowled at him. "It won't be an arrest. A pinch would mean publicity, and publicity would leave all of you open to ridicule for being suckers. But you're keeping the whole mess quiet. You won't even demand restitution. All you want is the cheater exposed, humiliated. And that's what you'll get. What is there to be afraid of?"

Quarrie's small beady eyes turned toward the table he had just quitted. Of the three persons still sitting there, one was a girl; an extremely pretty brunette girl whose physical attractions were very emphatic indeed. Her name was Carol Kendall and she was an Epicure starlet whom Quarrie was grooming for bigger and better things. "I'm in love," he mumbled.

For Quarrie this was neither unique nor unusual. He was always falling in love. John J. Horner gave him a satiric leer. "Again?"

Quarrie seemed too preoccupied to take offense. "This time it happens to be the real thing." He gazed fondly toward the Kendall girl. "She's the sweetest, love liest—"

"All right," Horner broke in wearily. He had encountered these symptoms before. "She's sweet, lovely, wholesome, innocent, beautiful and built. The built part I'll buy. But how in hell does that affect this card-cheating scenario?"

"She's been one of the big winners."

HORNER called fervently upon heaven to lend him strength. "Do you mean you suspect Carol Kendall of dealing 'em off the bottom?" he demanded, disbelief in his voice. "Why good God, man, she loses as fast as she wins. Even I've been able to tell that, as little attention as I've paid. True, she rakes in lots of chips. But they get away from her. The trouble with you is, you've got an evil mind."

"I have no such thing!" Quarrie made an indignant mouth. "I'm as trusting as the next man. There have been times when I was too trusting."

"Oh. Afraid you'll get burned again, eh?"

"Not at all. Even if Carol *has* been cheating, it won't change the fact that I love her. And when we're married, it won't be necessary for her to cheat; I'll keep her supplied with all the cash she'll ever need. It's just that I don't want her exposed to possible disgrace. It would spoil everything. A man in my position couldn't afford to marry a known card sharper. People would talk."

Quarrie spread his hands, palms upward. "I'd sooner let the whole thing slide; not rake up any stink."

Horner peered at him with disfavor. "Are you sure she's guilty?"

"No, I just suspect it."

"Have you asked Pat Monahan?"

"He won't tell me a damned thing," Quarrie sulked. "He claimed he needed tonight's games to make certain. Now he's all set to blow off the lid, only I don't know which way it'll blow. Naturally if it blows

Carol's way, I'll hate myself." He drew a silk handkerchief from the breast pocket of his biliously green sport coat and, mopped his brow with it.

The patio lights went out.

Quarrie's sudden plaintive cry was heartrending. "Oh, no!" he babbled. "No. For the love of gosh, somebody do something. I made a mistake and gave the signal!"

John J. Horner was quite aware of this, for he had helped confect the routine. All the Oriental lanterns were controlled by a single master switch, so that the entire swimming-pool area could be plunged into darkness by the flick of a finger. In addition, a baby spotlight had been placed slightly to one side of the hydrangea bushes, its lens focused upon Lew Quarrie's table. The signal was Quarrie's handkerchief, which, when drawn, would cause a footman to douse the lanterns and switch on the baby spot so that its beam was directed theatrically at Pat Monahan, the card expert.

All of this now happened, as prearranged. First came the darkness of the overcast night, unrelieved by moon or stars. Then the spotlight stabbed at Monahan, seated at Quarrie's table. Monahan, a smiling, chunky man with thinning sandy hair, stood up.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I have a confession to make. You were told that I was a Wall Street broker. I am not. I am an investigator of cheats. Specifically, card cheats."

Murmurs rippled around the patio, reminding Horner of an orchestra tuning up for a concert. He had a hunch the concert would be pretty brassy and percussive, like something by Shostakovitch or Stravinsky.

MONAHAN went on smoothly: "In recent months many of you have lost a great deal of money at gin rummy. You

have lost it in games which were supposed to be friendly. They were not friendly games. I can assure you."

The tuning-up murmurs grew in density. "Stop him!" Lew Quarrie moaned. "Somebody stop him before he goes too far!"

Little Jack Horner, in a stage whisper, informed Quarrie that he worried too much. "After all, he may not be going to name Miss Kendall. And if he does, the hell with her. You wouldn't want a female crook sharing your bed, board, and illustrious name."

"Damn my illustrious name!" Quarrie either missed the sarcasm or ignored it. He moved away from Horner at a jogtrot.

Monahan kept on with his speech in the limelight. "I was hired and brought out here to the coast by the man who is your host this evening, Mr. Quarrie. He made it possible for me to play cards individually and collectively with all of you, so that I could detect any cheating that might be taking place. It is with regret that I now inform you I did discover cheating. In the vernacular of sharpers, a person who stacks the cards and deals either from the bottom or middle of the deck is called a mechanic. You have been bilked by not one mechanic, but—"

The spotlight died.

John J. Horner concluded that Lew Quarrie had reached the spotlight's control switch, and he cursed Quarrie bitterly for extinguishing its white glare. In another instant the lanterns would be turned on and Pat Monahan would be commanded to shut up before he got to the point of mentioning names. Meanwhile you could hear the sounds of movement through the darkness, restive guests stirring and audibly talking about this abrupt interruption. Chairs scraped on tiles and there were other soft dragging noises, as of shoes shuffling. Somebody loudly called for lights. A

woman giggled nervously; another said she never did like the dark, and what the devil was this, a gag?

Men were grumbling, and somebody struck a match. Monahan had halted his speech in mid-sentence, nor did he resume it when the Oriental lanterns suddenly glowed to life. Horner, staring, uttered a startled oath as soft varicolored glow illuminated the patio. The reason Monahan had not resumed his speech was, simply, that Monahan was no longer standing at Lew Quarrie's table. He wasn't anywhere in view. He had vanished.

Carol Kendall was on her feet, looking toward the pool. Horrified panic was in her keening: "There . . . he . . . he's—"

THE CRY galvanized Little Jack Horner into instant action. He lunged forward, his beefy fists balled and his unruly red hair upstanding. He wasn't quite fast enough for a rescue act, though. A younger and more agile man beat him to it. This agile guy was Tod Leslie, fourth, member of the quartet at Quarrie's table. Leslie was a tall, lithe leading man in Epicure "B" pictures, principally Westerns requiring less histrionic ability than athletic prowess. He had a face as handsome and clear-cut as a cameo, a wide pair of shoulders and a merry go-to-hell smile which, to Horner, was completely spurious and therefore infuriating, possibly because the women fell so hard for it. In any event, Leslie called: "Yoicks! Man overboard!" and, peeling off his coat, dived head-first into the pool, cleanly, cleaving the water and making scarcely a ripple as he went under.

A few feet beyond, a dark figure floated. That was Pat Monahan, feebly struggling; or perhaps his movements were more like a series of convulsive twitches. It was impossible to determine how he had come to be where he was; he might have fallen in by accident, or he might have been

deliberately pushed. You couldn't tell; and John J. Horner was not interested in that phase of it at the moment. He wanted only for the card expert to be fished out—fast. If necessary, he was prepared to do the fishing personally.

In this, however, he was forestalled by the swiftly swimming Tod Leslie, who stroked to the floundering Monahan, grabbed hold of him, and swam with him to the pool's border. Here he supported his now-inert burden until Horner reached down, seized a limp arm and tugged. In another instant Monahan lay dripping and motionless on the tiles, his mild blue eyes wide open but not seeing anything.

He saw nothing because he was dead. From his right side, fairly far down, the handle of a steak knife protruded. The haft of a second steak knife stuck out of his chest, just over the heart, a nightmare indication that this was a case of multiple murder. It was murder twice committed, but with only one victim. Knives designed for barbecued venison had been put to uglier use.

Pandemonium followed. And then, less than five minutes later, John J. Horner found himself looking into the menacing muzzle of a .38 automatic.

CHAPTER II

Theories

DURING the course of his many years as an Epicure beef blower, Little Jack Horner had faced firearms more than once. Though melodramatic, the situation held no novelty for him.

Asbury said: "Freeze." Then he quickly amended: "I mean freeze, sir." Very likely he was remembering the uncomfortable sensation of Horner's thumb pressing into his, Asbury's, windpipe just little while ago. Apparently it was not a pleasant

memory. "Please freeze," he said earnestly.

Horner obligingly froze, first putting aside the telephone he had started to dial. He scowled ferociously at the sallow butler. "What's the idea?"

"Mr. Quarrie's orders," Asbury said. "Sir."

Horner made an irritable gesture. It was wasted, though, for there was nobody in the room to see it except Asbury, who did not appear impressed. "So the little creep sent you after me to keep me from calling the cops, eh?"

"He expressly instructed me to prevent your using the phone," Asbury whinnied adenoidally. "I trust you won't take it as personal, sir."

"You're damned right it's personal," Horner's resentment loudly exploded. "What the hell else but a personal reason would Quarrie have for—?"

"I mean it's not personal on my part," Asbury clarified his position. "I am only obeying orders. It's not my wish to incur your enmity, I assure you."

"Then lay that pistol down and get out of here. Otherwise you won't just incur my enmity, you'll incur some severe bruises and contusions."

Asbury said he was very sorry indeed, but nothing doing. "Mr. Quarrie does not wish you to make any calls. Therefore you shall not make any calls." He brandished the automatic. "My familiarity with sidearms is somewhat limited, but I understand a slight pressure on the trigger inflicts severe damage if the weapon happens to be aimed at someone. May I remind you that this happens to be aimed at you?"

Horner needed no such reminder; he had excellent eyesight. He also had a morose respect for guns in the hands of novices. For the moment he was stymied and knew it, and mentally he called down

maledictions on the head of Lew Quarrie for instigating the stalemate.

IT WAS a typical Quarrie trick. Immediately after the discovery that Pat Monahan had been twice murdered, Horner had shouted down the ensuing uproar and then started for the house to notify the law. Lew Quarrie, however, had stopped him, demanding that the phone call be postponed pending arrangements. Quarrie said he had his guests to consider. They were prominent people, all of them. They could not afford to become involved in a homicide investigation, lest the attendant newspaper notoriety play hell with their careers. Even if they emerged unsullied, there was the card cheating angle to think about. Making public the fact that Pat Monahan had been slain while on the verge of pinpointing a card sharper would automatically disclose that these movie bigwigs had been victimized; had been suckers for a flim-flam game. At all costs, Quarrie said, this had to be suppressed.

"You can't suppress it without suppressing the whole thing—including the murder," Horner had pointed out.

That, Quarrie countered, was exactly what he had in mind. He wanted no cops on the job, at least until he had time to think it over. For answer, Horner had indignantly shoved him away and walked into the house, seeking the nearest telephone. Before he could dial it, though, Asbury appeared with the .38.

Thus the matter now stood. Meantime, from outdoors, you could hear the mumble of excited voices in general conference, followed by a hasty exodus of guests and the sounds of automobiles rapidly going away. Presently Quarrie himself came indoors, relieved his butler of the gun and said: "All right, you can go now. I'll take charge."

Asbury left. And John J. Horner's face

was dark with anger as he glared at Quarrie. "You dizzy little two-bit Napoleon, do you really think you can get away with this?"

"I've done pretty well thus far," Quarrie preened himself. "I sent everybody home," he added with obvious satisfaction.

"A fat lot of good that will do them. Or you. The police will round them up in jig time for questioning."

Quarrie smiled. "Ever hear of witnesses being coached?"

"You crazy dimwit—!"

"Not crazy. Clever." Quarrie's smile broadened. "Everyone has agreed on a story to tell. It's a very simple story. They saw no murder committed, period. That's unanimous. A solid front."

"Cops have ways of breaking solid fronts," Horner said grimly. "Usually it's done with lengths of rubber hose."

Quarrie admitted that he had heard of investigations being conducted in that manner. "But first there has to be something to investigate."

"You think murder isn't something?"

"Of course. Still, a murder presupposes a corpse. I'm wondering how you intend to convince the police there was a killing here tonight."

Little Jack Horner got it, and his eyes grew smoky. "You didn't!" he whispered harshly. "You wouldn't. You're not as insane as that. You wouldn't hide the body."

"What body?" Quarrie's tone was a challenge. "Show me a body. I dare you. It was his defiant confession that he had hidden the corpus delicti, and the very nature of the act was a commentary on what Hollywood did to a man's sense of values. Lew Quarrie's ten years of supreme reign over the destinies of Epicure Pictures had so warped his judgment and distorted his perspective that he considered himself superior to the law. He thought he could

conceal the fact that a murder had been committed on his patio. He thought it was perfectly okay to dispose of a corpse according to his own capricious whim. He thought he was God.

Moreover, he stood a fair chance of getting away with it. His erstwhile guests, in self protection, would back him to the limit, first to avert being smirched in a homicide scandal, and, second, because Quarrie was too big to buck. Anybody who dared cross him could count on reprisal—and Quarrie's enmity was something to be avoided at all costs. Consequently he could enforce cooperation from everyone who had attended his card party this evening. Everyone, that is, except John J. Horner.

HORNER said slowly: "Is it Carol Kendall you're fronting for? Is that the way of it?"

"Why, damn you—"

"Never mind the righteous wrath," Horner overrode him. "When a man tries to cover a killing, it's because he has a reason. You told me you're in love with the Kendall girl."

"Yes, I am. But—"

"You also told me you suspected her of being a card cheat."

"Now wait a minute," Quarrie said.

"No. Let me finish. Assume she *was* cheating. Assume Pat Monahan was going to put the finger on her. They were both at the same table when he started to make his speech. To stop him from naming her as the card mechanic, she knifed him. Is that what you're thinking? Is that why you don't want an official investigation? Is it Carol Kendall you're trying to protect?"

Quarrie's narrow face was mottled. "I don't have to take that kind of talk from you, Horner."

"Okay, then take a different kind. Maybe you're the murderer."

"Wh-wha-what—?"

"Maybe you switched off the spotlight and then sneaked over to Monahan; stabbed him so he wouldn't disgrace this girl you want to marry."

"You fool," Quarrie said. Then he said: "You're fired."

Horner disregarded this. "Or here's still another theory," he continued in a voice as cold and dispassionate as a wind from the polar voids. "There, were two knives in Monahan, and he was thrown into the pool to die. Dragging him to the pool and pushing him in would be pretty tough for a woman to do, especially a small woman like Miss Kendall. I can't quite see her managing that."

"Now you're being sensible," Quarrie brightened.

"But I *can* see her using one of the knives, the first one. Also, I can see you arriving at the table, not knowing she had stabbed him. I can see you driving the second knife into him and hauling him to the pool and dumping him before the lights came on."

"It's a lie!"

"Maybe. Maybe not. If it's true, if it actually happened that way, then you and the girl are equally guilty. Which would be funny, in a sense; because if you'd only known she had already stabbed him, you wouldn't have had to bother using the second knife. You could have saved yourself the trouble. You could have let her take the rap alone. Instead, you'll share it with her."

Quarrie was sweating. "You're making it all up. And you're making it up all wrong. It wasn't like that at all. Carol's not the sort of girl who would kill a man in cold blood or any other way." He waved the .38, wildly. "As for accusing me, that's the damndest silliest thing I ever heard of. I was nowhere near that table when it happened."

"You say."

"I'm telling you the truth. I was over by the lights, to turn them back on."

"Or to make sure they stayed turned off until Monahan was murdered," Horner said.

"You're fired. Get out of here."

HORNER sneered at him. "Put me out. Try it." He advanced truculently. "Use the gun, why don't you?"

"Don't tempt me."

"You wouldn't dare. You haven't got what it takes."

"Now listen, Horner—"

"You listen. Pat Monahan was a friend of mine. You asked me to bring him out here and hire him for a job. I did. Now he's dead." Horner's mouth was a thin line. "He's dead, and in a way, I'm the one who's responsible."

"Blaming yourself won't bring him back to life," Quarrie said jerkily.

"No. But I can do the next best thing. I can, square accounts by catching the murderer. Or murderers, if it's as plural as I'm inclined to suspect. Meaning you and Carol Kendall."

Quarrie licked his lips. "You quit saying that. I didn't kill him and neither did Carol. Hell, why aren't you accusing Tod Leslie? He was sitting at my table, too."

"That's a thought," Horner said. "Maybe I'd better work on him a while. Thanks."

"Now cut that out!" Quarrie shrieked. "Damn it, I didn't mean I thought Leslie was guilty. I was just pointing out how ridiculous your theories are. Good lord, it was Leslie who dived in the pool and fished Monahan out. A murderer wouldn't have done that. If Leslie had stabbed him he'd have left him in the water to die. Anyhow, it won't buy you anything to work on him."

"Why won't it?"

"Because he agreed to tell the same

story all the others will tell: that there was no murder.” Quarrie had made the full circle and was back at his starting point. “There can’t be a murder without a corpse. And there is no corpse. No corpse, no murder.”

Little Jack Horner stalked Quarrie and backed him into a corner. “We’ll see about that,” he said, and wrenched the .38 out of the smaller man’s skinny fingers. He then placed a calloused palm against Quarrie’s face and pushed. Quarrie’s head struck the wall resoundingly, and for a while he seemed to be having trouble with bells ringing in his ears. As a result of this, Horner was enabled to stride from the house without the slightest hindrance.

Within twenty minutes he was standing over the prostrate form of Ted Leslie, absently kicking him in the kidneys.

CHAPTER III

The Corpse

YOU CAN kick a man in the kidneys just so long, and then either his kidneys cave in or he does. Leslie, whose B-picture screen valor was above reproach, seemed to value his health more than he valued his reputation for courage. “Cut it out,” he said to John J. Horner. “I’ve got enough. You’re killing me. I’ll talk. I’d be a fool not to.” He arose from the floor of his bachelor-apartment living-room, rubbed himself, winced, and added: “Besides, I don’t owe Quarrie anything. My contract’s up with him and I’m starting an independent production unit of my own. Only way I’ll ever make the big jump to A pictures. Quarrie would keep a man in B’s until he grew a long white beard.”

Horner, nodding his agreement to this, regarded the actor with speculative eyes. “Then you don’t feel any loyalty toward the little creep, huh? That’s good. You

should have said so when I first walked in. Then I wouldn’t have had to push you around.”

“You didn’t give me a chance,” Leslie complained, wryly. “Not that I’m making an issue of it. What do you want to know?”

“Everything. We’ll start with the kill. You are willing to testify there was one?”

“If you insist.”

“I insist,” Horner said sternly. “Now then, what happened to the corpse?”

“There I can’t help you. I was soaking wet from diving in the pool after Monahan. As soon as the council of war was over and we all had agreed not to talk, I came home here. Whatever took place after that, I wouldn’t know.”

Horner made no effort to conceal his disappointment. “That’s bad. Without Monahan’s body we’ve got no case to take to the cops. Not that I like cops, but picking a murderer out of twenty or thirty guests is going to be a tough assignment for one man. I ought to have some help.”

“You’ve got help,” Leslie smiled his go-to-hell smile. “Me.”

“What the hell can *you* do?” Horner asked, morosely.

“I can tell you some things you may not know.”

“Such as?”

“Well, remember I was at Quarrie’s table. The lights went out and presently I heard a grunt. That must have been Monahan, as he was stabbed. But before that, I hadn’t heard anybody coming close to the table. No footsteps.”

Horner said: “Wait, let me get the picture. Quarrie was arguing with me; he’d left his table to talk to me. You and Carol Kendall and Pat Monahan were there—”

“I thought you’d catch my drift.”

“You’re accusing the Kendall girl?”

“I’m just saying she was in a position where she could use a steak knife on the poor guy.”

“But she’s hardly big enough or strong enough to have dragged him to the pool and dumped him in.”

“Maybe Quarrie took care of that part, after he gimmicked out the spotlight.”

HORNER rubbed his massive chin. “Could be. Maybe he used that second knife as he hauled Monahan to the pool. If so, it was only because he realized the girl was guilty and wanted to make sure a thorough job had been done. And if she really was guilty, her motive must have been to protect herself from disgrace. Which means that she was the card cheat, the one Monahan was going to put the finger on.”

“I was coming to that,” Leslie sounded smug.

Little Jack Horner glowered at him irritably. “I came to it a long time ago. I laid it in Quarrie’s lap for size. Naturally, he denied it.”

“He would,” Leslie said.

“Sure, why not? He knows nothing can be proved without a body. For the moment, he’s sitting pretty.”

“But Carol Kendall isn’t,” the actor flashed his teeth.

Horner liked neither the teeth nor the guy who wore them. “If you’ve got something to spill, spill it. Skip the build-up. Just let me have the punch line.”

“She used to deal blackjack on the *Rex*,” Leslie said.

Horner’s memory harked back to the middle 1930’s when a fleet of gambling ships had ridden at anchor five miles off the coast—a fleet whose activities had subsequently been scuttled by county and State authorities. The *Rex* had been the gaudiest of the group, if not the most unsavory. “You’re sure?”

The actor lifted a shoulder. “I was a deck-hand on that tub.” Again he gave with the teeth. “Carol Kendall wasn’t her name

then. She was about eighteen, nineteen, which makes her twenty-seven or twenty-eight now. That’d be about right, wouldn’t you say? Anyhow she dealt blackjack. It was quite a while after that before the movie bug bit her. Of course I’m not saying the games on the gambling boats were crooked. I’m not saying the dealers were all mechanics. If any of them were, though, it stands to reason Carol could have learned the tricks of the trade. And once you learn them, you never forget them. Or do you?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Horner said thoughtfully. .

“You can guess. And you can take it from there. I wouldn’t be surprised but what I’ve given you enough ammunition to let you locate your pal Monahan’s corpse.”

“How?”

“Tell Quarrie what you know about his sweetie. Threaten to go to the gossip columnists with it unless he—” The doorbell buzzed spitefully. “Now who in hell could that be?” Leslie strode across the apartment’s living room and opened the door. “Yes?”

TWO VERY large and very serious-looking men pushed in, ignoring Leslie and confronting John J. Horner. Though big, they were not as big as Horner; but on the other hand, they both had revolvers. And badges. The badges made them cops. Their plainclothes made them fly cops.

“Horner?”

“That’s me.”

“I’m Cunningham of homicide. This is Binheimer, also of homicide. Do you have a friend named Monahan!”

“I had,” Horner said.

“He’s staying with you? In your house?”

“He was.”

“Past tense, I notice. I’ll ask you to come with us.”

Horner bridled. "Come with you where?"

"As if you didn't know," Cunningham said. "The guy's cute, eh, Binheimer?"

Binheimer produced handcuffs. "He'll look cuter in these." He approached Horner, warily. "Let's not have any trouble, big boy."

"Is this an arrest?"

"Yes. Put out your wrists."

"Not until you tell me what I'm charged with."

"Murder. I told you we're homicide."

"Meaning you've found Monahan's body," Horner said.

In unison, Cunningham and Binheimer said yes. Cunningham added: "Right where you left him when you killed him. In your house. In the bathroom of your house. Fully dressed, in a bathtub full of water, though why you did that after you stabbed him I'm damned if I can figure."

Horner could figure it. He could see Lew Quarrie transporting the body, or having it transported, to his, Horner's, modest bungalow. He could see Quarrie, maliciously planting it in a tub full of water so that nobody could prove it had previously been immersed in Quarrie's swimming pool. Horner had spoken of pinning the murder on Quarrie and on the girl, Carol Kendall. So, now Quarrie had cleverly turned the tables.

"Hey, wait a minute, you guys," Ted Leslie said.

The two cops briefly flicked their eyes at him.

Leslie said: "You can't arrest Horner for a murder that happened tonight. He's been here in this apartment with me since six o'clock."

"Has he?" Cunningham's voice had a jeer in it. "And what made you think the murder happened tonight?"

"Why, I—that is, I—"

"As a matter of fact, nobody's sure just

when it happened. By soaking a stiff in cold water you take out the body heat, fast. A thing like that makes the time of death sort of hard to establish. Could have been tonight; could have been this afternoon. You want to alibi him for this afternoon, too?"

Leslie reddened. "Well, I—"

"Nice try, pal," Horner growled at the actor. "But all you did was put your foot in it."

Binheimer said: "I'll buy that. I guess we better take both of them along, eh, Cunningham?"

"Yeah." The handcuffs glittered, and one snapped around John J. Horner's massive left wrist. The other encircled Leslie's less massive right.

Horner's eyes were smouldering coals. "One thing I'd like to know. How did you trace me here to Leslie's apartment?"

"A tip," Cunningham answered. "A tip from the guy who found that corpse in your bathtub and phoned in the report to headquarters."

"Yeah," Binheimer put in. "Fellow named Asbury."

CHAPTER IV

The Woman Again

THERE were a great many policemen in Little Jack Horner's bungalow when he arrived there with Tod Leslie fettered to his wrist. The cops weren't the only ones contaminating the house, though. A bitter scowl crossed Horner's lumpy face when he spotted the jaundiced Asbury. "Well, flunkey," he snarled.

The butler saw him and sniffed haughtily. He then saw Leslie attached to Horner's arm by means of a steel link, and did a ludicrous double take. Wisely, however, he asked no questions concerning this. In fact, he himself was pretty busy

answering the questions being fired at him by a homicide lieutenant who had a bald head and extremely flat feet.

Asbury acquitted himself very well indeed, considering that every word he uttered was a lie. He said his employer, Lew Quarrie, had despatched him here to Horner's house on an errand, the nature of which was confidential but which had to do with Horner's failure to show up at a barbecue and card party given by Quarrie that same evening. Horner interrupted the story by shouting: "I was there. You know damned well I was there."

Disregarding him, Asbury continued that he had rung the Horner doorbell but received no response. He had then tried the knob, and found, to his surprise, that the latch was off. Moreover, a light was burning somewhere inside the house. With a fine display of bogus embarrassment, the butler confessed that he had entered the house. "On impulse, you understand," he hastened to assert. "I realized I was overstepping the bounds of propriety." He said his curiosity had got the better of him.

"What did you expect to find?" the bald lieutenant demanded.

"Shall I really tell you, sir?"

"If you know what's good for you."

"Well, I thought perhaps I would find Mr. Horner drunk."

Horner, a fairly abstemious man by Hollywood standards, swore that he was being maligned past all endurance. Nobody paid any attention to him.

The Asbury saga went on. He had walked inside, the butler continued, and had moved toward the light. This, he discovered, came from the bathroom, where he found Monahan's corpse in the tub. He, Asbury, had immediately telephoned the police and had waited here for them.

"Is that all?" John J. Horner asked in a tight voice.

"Yes," Asbury said. "Sir."

The "sir" had a sneer in it, and a glitter in the butler's eye disclosed that he was still remembering Horner's thumb pressing into his windpipe. It was a score now repaid.

Horner said with a deceptively casual air: "You waited until the cops got here. Check?"

"Check."

"And then you sent them after me. Check?"

"Check."

"You tipped them that they'd probably find me in Tod Leslie's apartment. Check?"

"And how did you guess I might be in Leslie's apartment?"

Asbury fell into the trap. "Why, because I overheard you telling Mr. Quarrie you were going to see Mr. Leslie and work on him."

"When did I tell Quarrie that?"

"Tonight. You remember?"

Horner pounced. "So I was in Quarrie's house tonight?"

"Of course."

"But you just said Quarrie sent you after me because I failed to show up at his card party."

CONFUSION visibly seized Asbury and shook him, so that he gave the impression of a man who vibrates. "Why, I—er—ah—" He turned to the bald lieutenant. "Make him stop heckling me. He's got me so loused up I can't think straight."

"I can see that," the lieutenant said ominously. "There's more here than meets the eye." He regarded Horner with a perplexed expression. "Let's hear your side, of it."

Horner decided that this was no time to withhold facts. Starting from scratch, he told all. He began with the card games.

“Lew Quarrie and his set play for pretty high stakes. Some of the folks were getting clipped too close to the skin, including Quarrie himself, and he asked me to take steps. I took them by importing Pat Monahan, a card expert and a friend of mine. Tonight Monahan was about to pinpoint the sharper when the lights went out and he was stabbed. Twice. With two knives. And dumped in the pool.”

Horner then grudgingly gave credit to Tod Leslie for diving into the water and rescuing Monahan. “Only Pat was dead when we pulled him out. I tried to call headquarters but Quarrie and Asbury stopped me—with a gun. Meantime Quarrie sent his guests home after he’d coached them to dummy up. He also hid Monahan’s body, so that if I did call copper I couldn’t be able to prove there’d been a murder on the premises. Later, obviously, he had the corpse brought here to my house, to embarrass me.”

“Embarrass you. That’s an understatement. I don’t believe a damned word of it,” the lieutenant stated flatly.

Horner said: “Ask Leslie, here. He saw it all.”

“Not me,” the actor shook his head. “I was nowhere near Lew Quarrie’s place tonight. I was home all evening, as I’ve already informed your two detectives. Cunningham and Binham, I believe their names are.”

“Not Cunningham and Binham,” Binheimer protested. “That’s wrong. It’s Cunningham and Binheimer. *I’m* Binningham. Damn it, I mean I’m Binheimer.” He hesitated, as if to make certain of this, and then a sudden thought seemed to strike him. “Say, listen, you,” he aimed a finger at Leslie. “You *did* claim you’d been in your apartment since six o’clock this evening. But you also said Horner was with you all that time.”

“Did I?” Leslie did the teeth trick,

letting them flash as he smiled. “Come to think of it, you’re right.”

“Damned right I’m right. So what I want to know is, if Horner was with you in your apartment from six o’clock on, how could he be at Quarrie’s house like he says he was, with this dizzy Asbury accidentally backing him up?” Binheimer’s voice was reproachful. “The whole thing’s so confused a man don’t know whether he’s coming or going.”

Cunningham said: “Somebody’s lying.”

“Everybody’s lying, except me,” John J. Horner growled. “Leslie was just trying to help me out of a jackpot,” he added, giving the actor a look of begrudged gratitude.

This resulted in Leslie being released from the handcuff which joined him to Horner. “Not that you’re out of the woods yet,” the bald homicide lieutenant told him. “Maybe you were only trying to help Horner out of a jackpot, as he says. But giving him a phoney alibi is perjury.”

Horner said: “Not perjury, pal. He wasn’t under oath. He wasn’t testifying. He was just talking.”

“All right, then, obstructing justice,” the lieutenant retorted waspishly. “I can hold him for that.”

“You can, but do you want to?” Horner made a placating gesture with his left hand, from which a loose manacle now dangled. “I’m the guy you want. And I’m the guy you’ve got. Leslie’s little white lie hasn’t altered the situation. He tried to do me a favor and it failed. The hell with it.”

THIS debatable eloquence had a perceptible effect on the lieutenant. With a practised palm he rubbed his bald scalp until it acquired a very high polish indeed. Then he addressed Tod Leslie in the tone of a man who confers a magnanimous boon: “Okay, you can scam.”

“Gee whiz, thanks,” the actor’s teeth were positively blinding this time. “Gosh all Friday, thanks.” He was overdoing it, Horner thought. The ham in him, probably. The good old jaunty counterfeit college try. Looking for a curtain line. He turned his smile upon Horner. “Well, don’t take any wooden blackjacks.” He went out. He seemed a little tired, a man who had been playing juvenile leads too long, a B picture hero who aspired to heights he would never quite reach. Horner felt a brief pang of sympathy for the guy; for all guys caught in the relentless rut of mediocrity. He then dismissed the thought. He’d have to watch his step or he’d be getting downright sentimental.

He jingled the dangling handcuff. “Look, lieutenant, there’s something I think you ought to know.”

“There’s a lot of things I ought to know,” the homicide man rasped. “And you can start telling them to me right now.”

“Not here,” Horner said. “Privately.”

“Secrets, hunh? I don’t keep secrets from my subordinates. I like things open and aboveboard. Talk, mister.”

“Outside,” Horner insisted. “Just you and me. Otherwise, no. I mean it. And time’s growing short.”

The lieutenant seemed to suspect that something nefarious lay behind John J. Horner’s obstinacy. “I get it,” he sneered. “You’d like me to take you outside so you could swing on me and cop yourself a sneak getaway.”

“Not at all.” Horner extended his left arm. “Here’s this cuff on me. Wear the other one yourself and we’ll be fastened together. Then I can’t get away from you.”

“Hm-m-mm. That sounds reasonable.”

“It is reasonable.”

The homicide lieutenant fettered his own right wrist to Horner’s left. “All right, let’s go.” They walked outdoors, their departure watched with misgivings by all

the policemen gathered in the house. Asbury was another who did not seem very happy by the turn matters had taken, although he voiced no protest. He probably realized nobody would listen to him anyhow.

On the front lawn, the lieutenant said: “Get talkative.”

“Yes. Well, here it is. You know the old French saying about crime? *Cherchez la femme.*” Horner then translated this. “Look for the woman.”

“I’ve got a diploma too,” the lieutenant said. “Scranton Correspondence School. Don’t fling your education at me, brother.”

“Excuse it. What I mean is, there’s a woman in the case.”

“So I gathered. What, woman?”

“Lew Quarrie’s fiancée, name of Carol Kendall, a starlet on the Epicure lot. She was at the card party tonight. She used to deal blackjack on the old *Rex*. It’s possible that Pat Monahan was about to pin a cheating rap, on her and she knifed him to keep him from mentioning her.”

“Still insisting the kill happened at Quarrie’s and not in your bathroom, hey?”

HORNER nodded gloomily. “You’ve got to believe that or it all falls apart. Assume Miss Kendall stabbed Monahan. Assume Lew Quarrie stuck the second knife in him and dumped him into the swimming pool. Assume the corpse was later brought to my house and left in a tub of water to cover the fact that it was already soaking wet.”

“And assume you’re crazy,” the lieutenant said.

Regretfully, Little Jack Horner thrust his free right fist into the side pocket of his coat, where reposed the .38 automatic which he had taken from Lew Quarrie earlier in the evening. Drawing the weapon, he rammed it into the lieutenant’s ribs with sufficient force to elicit an agonized grunt.

"I guess I've got to convince you the hard way, pal."

"Listen, you—you can't—say, where the hell did you get that rod?"

"It's the one Asbury covered me with when he kept me from putting in a call to headquarters. I told you about that. Later Quarrie took over. I persuaded him to give it to me. My persuasion may have been a trifle rough, but it got results."

The lieutenant was tense. "But when Cunningham and Binheimer arrested you, didn't they frisk you?"

"I'm afraid they neglected that detail," Horner said, affably. "I hope you won't hold it against them," he added in pious tones.

"I'll break them. I'll bust them back to harness—"

"You'll take a ride with me first," Horner said.

"Now see here—"

"In your car," Horner went on, darkly. "Since I had to leave mine parked in front of Leslie's apartment when Binheimer and Cunningham pinched me and brought me here."

"I won't—"

"Look. I'm on the spot," Horner said. "You're trying to hang a murder charge on me. This is my one chance to get out from under, by capturing the person who's really guilty. I intend to do just that. Or at least I intend to try. If I'm lucky it will work out. If I'm unlucky my hide will be nailed to the wall. And one other thing: I despise cops. Taking it all into consideration, I wouldn't hesitate to shoot you if you crossed me. Now suppose we take that ride we mentioned."

"I can't drive when I'm handcuffed to you."

"You've got a key, haven't you?"

The homicide man suddenly grinned. You could see him attempting to suppress the grin, but he failed. He reached toward

his hip pocket with his unfettered left hand.

He was trying for his gun, of course. Horner placed a ponderous foot on the lieutenant's toes and said: "Better not, pal. I've noticed you already have flat feet. If I bear down, you'll be a cripple. Check?"

"Check," the lieutenant muttered sullenly. He quit trying for his gun and got out his keys instead. Using one of these, he took himself out of one handcuff and Horner out of its mate. The two men then went to a police sedan at the curb and climbed in. Presently they were rolling away, the lieutenant driving and Horner sitting beside him, keeping him covered.

Horner made conversation. "By the way, pal, what's your name? Seems as though you should introduce yourself, as close as we've been to each other."

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," the lieutenant sounded bitter. "Especially after that Cunningheimer-Binham-Binheimer-Cunningham-Binningham routine a while ago."

"Go on," Horner urged him. "Tell me anyhow."

"Okay, damn it. My name's George."

"George what?"

The lieutenant made a sour mouth. "George Bunninghammer."

CHAPTER V

Star Billing

YOU went up a winding road into the hills above Hollywood, a road that seemed to spiral like the white stripe on a barber pole. All around you was darkness and the clean fresh smells of night-time: green things growing; the heady fragrance of lemon verbena and citrus blossoms, a hint of salt tang from the not-too-distant Pacific and occasionally a sharper pungent whiff of wood smoke from somebody's open air barbecue. All the houses had

patios and barbecues; these were even more commonplace than swimming pools. Little Jack Horner's nostrils twitched as the smoky odors drifted into his memory, like trigger mechanisms.

He thought, angrily, about Lew Quarrie's patio and pool, and what had happened there tonight. He thought of a chunky, smiling man with thinning sandy hair, a guy named Pat Monahan who would smile no more. You never like to lose your friends. It's worse when you lose them through death by violence. And you yourself are partially responsible for that kind of loss, it isn't pleasant to contemplate. You have a feeling you want to do something about it, something vindictive.

"She lives in that house ahead, Lieutenant Bunninghammer."

"Call me George," the lieutenant grumbled.

"All right, George. The house that sort of sticks over that sloping cliff is where Carol Kendall lives. Park on the shoulder at the inside turn."

George parked as instructed. "Now what?"

"We walk," Horner said. "Softly."

"Listen, I don't go for this softly stuff. I'm a policeman. I wear a badge."

"I'm a private citizen. I wear a gun. I wear it in my dainty little fist. Notice? So we walk softly."

They got out of the sedan and walked softly. Carol Kendall's house, while by no means a mansion, was considerably larger than a tourist cabin. It was larger than twenty tourist cabins put together, though if you compared it to Lew Quarrie's home it seemed very moderate indeed. It clung to the hill's tilt as if affixed there by means of Scotch tape, but Horner doubted that anything less than a major earthquake could dislodge it. Horner had an abiding faith in the ability of California contractors

to triumph over the law of gravity. They did it all the time.

"Now what?" the lieutenant demanded, reaching the flagstoned walkway which slanted down to the house proper.

Horner peevishly whispered: "Quiet. We go down."

They went down. "Now what?"

"We prowl."

"What for?"

"A way in."

"That's burglary," the lieutenant was fretful.

"It's an arrest," Horner answered. "I hope."

"But without a warrant, I can't—"

Horner jabbed him with the automatic. "Stop splitting hairs," he said curtly. "This is no time to be technical. We're going in, trusting that Miss Kendall is at home."

"And if she isn't?"

"We'll wait for her."

They had now come to the inevitable patio, a small one gouged out of the side of the hill but nevertheless a patio. It merged with a sort of roofed loggia at the building's westward exposure, the wall of the house at this point consisting of a huge picture window of clear plate glass.

Unfortunately, monk's-cloth drapes were drawn shut inside this overside showcase so that you couldn't look into the living room; but dim warm light seeped through the monk's-cloth. This, Horner thought, was a promising sign.

HE needed all the promising signs he could find, he reflected dourly. Unless the hunch he was now playing paid off, he was going to be in an extremely nasty jam. Lew Quarrie had placed him in the jam by planting Monahan's corpse in his, Horner's, bathtub. In addition, Horner was guilty of kidnaping an officer of the law, to wit, Lieutenant Bunninghammer. A man with a name like Bunninghammer was

bound to be a sourball on general principles, and a sourball cop was even worse than the ordinary kind. All told, Horner's future looked bleak unless he managed to pull a rabbit out of the hat.

The hat in question was Carol Kendall's house. Horner tiptoed toward the rear and felt that luck had begun to smile on him. He found French windows giving upon a bedroom, and one of the windows stood ajar with only a copper screen behind it. Horner's pocketknife ruined the screen, at the same time doing the blade no good. He decided that a dulled blade was small enough price to pay for what he needed.

He reached through the slash, unfastened the screen and swung it on its hinges. Behind him, Bunninghammer whispered direly that breaking and entering was just one more charge to be added to the counts Horner already had against him.

"Yeah," Horner agreed with considerable rancor. "Tonight I'm a fool for felonies." He went into the bedroom, and Bunninghammer breathed down his neck all the way. They both stole through foreboding darkness, making no sound, and presently they came to the living-room doorway.

In that living room, two persons were talking. Though you saw neither of them from Horner's position, you could eavesdrop upon a woman's nervous, shaky: "Why *should* I write and sign a confession for you?" It was Carol Kendall's voice.

"Because I'm forcing you to," a man said arrogantly. Then the Napoleonic imperiousness in his voice grew audibly wheedling. "Besides, I'm not going to use it against you; I'm not going to the police with it. I just want it for protection. Sort of an insurance policy until we're married."

The girl said: "Married? I don't intend to marry you. I loathe you."

"You'll get over that, my dear. Marriage is our only safety." He chuckled.

"A wife can't testify against her husband; a husband can't testify against his wife. Now write out the confession like a nice girl."

"No."

"Write it. Write that you cheated at cards."

"You're—hurting me."

"Then write it. After all, it's true. And then write that you killed Monahan to keep him from exposing you."

"But I didn't kill him," she whimpered. "You did."

"True enough, but write it anyhow."

John J. Horner roared: "Don't do it. He'll murder you the minute your signature's on it." Horner then launched himself across the threshold, gun in hand, and drew a steady bead on a very startled actor. "Got you, sucker," he said to Tod Leslie.

"Wh-wha-what—?"

"This is a cop with me," Horner indicated Bunninghammer. "We both heard you admit you killed Monahan. We heard you trying to extort a phony confession from Miss Kendall. You probably figured to knock her off, make it look like suicide, and plant the confession note on her body. Take him, lieutenant."

BUNNINGHAMMER seemed confused, but not too confused to click handcuffs on Leslie's wrists. Leslie jangled them. "Wait. I can explain. I—"

"The votes are all in and counted," Horner said with finality. "Two things put me on your trail. First, your anxiety to give me an alibi. That alibi was also an alibi for yourself. Second, you told me you were about to start an independent movie production unit of your own, so you could make the jump from cheap Epicure B pictures to expensive A's. That would require money, lots more money than you'd possibly be able to have saved on your Epicure salary. Where was it coming

from? Well, card cheating might furnish it.”

“It was Carol who cheated. Not me,” Leslie’s eyes were restless and furtive as he tried to cast his guilt on the brunette Kendall girl.

Horner said: “You both cheated.”

“Listen, Mr. Horner,” Carol Kendall said. “I—”

Little Jack Horner waved her quiet and continued to speak his piece at Leslie. “I’m guessing now, but I think it goes like this. You knew Carol had once dealt blackjack on a gambling ship. Using that knowledge, you blackmailed her. You threatened to wreck her career in pictures and ruin her romance with Lew Quarrie by exposing her past.”

“That’s exactly what he d-did,” the girl said.

Horner nodded. “I thought so,” he said to Leslie. “You forced her to cheat at gin rummy, for big stakes. As fast as she won the money, though, she lost it, thereby keeping herself clear of suspicion. The fact is, she lost her winnings to you. And you were doing some cheating yourself, so the cash would pile up faster. If I’d had any sense I would have realized this tonight when Monahan had you and Carol at Quarrie’s table, as special guests. He wanted you there so he could finger you.”

“Did he?” Leslie smiled. It wasn’t a toothy smile, though. He seemed suddenly too old, too weary, for jauntiness.

John J. Horner felt tired, too. It had been a trying night, a night he would remember for a long, long time. “Maybe you realized Monahan was going to pinpoint you,” he said to the actor. “I

imagine you were pretty desperate. There had been barbecued venison and the steak knives were handy. And sharp. Monahan was in the spotlight, starting the speech that would spell your finish. Then Lew Quarrie, the damned fool, doused the spotlight—a chivalrous gesture for Carol Kendall’s sake. In the darkness, you stabbed Monahan, dragged him to the pool and threw him in. He was a friend of mine.”

“I saved him. I dived in and rescued him.”

“No,” Horner said woodenly. “You saw he was still twitching, still alive. You dived in, all right, but while you were pretending to rescue him, you stabbed him with the second knife. Through the heart. That time you made sure he was dead. It’s the only way it could have happened. And it’s the reason I persuaded the cops to turn you loose. I had a notion you’d come here and try to put yourself in the clear by framing and killing Miss Kendall. And I was right.”

“Looks like I’m licked,” Leslie squared his shoulders. “Well, let’s go, officer. For once in my life I’ll get star billing. In the gas chamber.”

Bunninghammer started to take him away. Little Jack Horner’s cynical voice halted them, briefly. “Lieutenant.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t forget Lew Quarrie. He moved the body to my house, remember? He tried to foul up a homicide investigation. Even for a guy as important as he is, that’s illegal.”

Bunninghammer said grimly: “I’ll take care of Quarrie.” And in this promise, Horner found a great deal of satisfaction indeed.