

BLIND MAN'S FLUFF

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM



When a lethal trap is ready to be sprung, blind Griff Borlund hears whispers in the darkness—whispers that rise to a roar of violence as a fetching blonde meets death!

"Quiet!" I said. "Cook that caterwauling where were you when the alarm?"

CHAPTER I

MIDNIGHT AT NOON

A PINT-SIZED redhead opened the portal to my ring. She had a firm, sun-bronzed little body, generously endowed with curves and skimpily garnished in a two piece white silk swim suit. She had a lot more curves than she had swim suit. A few inches less silk in the halter and Bikini shorts would have made her eligible for membership in a nudist colony. I decided that when briefer bathing togs were designed for the trade, I wanted to be where I could see this doll wearing them.

She listened to my name, smiled, said I was expected and took me through the house

out onto the rear patio, beyond which a blue-tiled swimming pool sparkled in the noonday sunshine. As swimming pools go here in Hollywood, this one wasn't so vast. You couldn't launch an ocean liner in it. A yacht, maybe, but not an ocean liner. I've seen bigger bodies of water lots of times. Lake Michigan, for instance.

The red-haired cutie tilted her head back, put her hands up to her kisser, cupped them for a megaphone and sent a call projecting skyward in a voice that would always sound dulcet regardless of how much she strained it.

"Hey, chief," she yodeled. "The private detective you sent for is here. Name of Nick Ransom."

Hard by the pool's deep end there was a diving tower not quite as lofty as the Empire

State Building. A way up on its topmost level a husky, hairy-chested guy was poised, getting ready to concede the law of gravity. He flexed his knees a time or two, testing the springboard's feel.

"Be right there," he rumbled in basso profundo tones that rolled like thunder in an empty barrel. Then he dropped a stone, cocked his noggin, listened attentively to the splashy bloonk-sound of the stone hitting the water's surface. An instant later he arched himself out into space, arrowed downward.

It was a clean, professionally executed dive. I couldn't have done it better myself, even back in the days when I was a stunting expert in the studios—before I liquidated my Risks, Incorporated organization and switched to the snooping racket. The hairy-chested hombre plunged into the drink, headed for the bottom like a hot knife stabbing through a firkin of butter. And throwing about as much spray.

I watched him go down, reverse himself, come up and break the surface, his black hair as sleek as a wet seal's. As he started to swim toward the far side of the pool, his exhaled breath whooshed around the questioning word: "Maggie?"

MAGGIE, it appeared, was the redhead's name. "Over here, boss," she answered very distinctly. And when the guy churned around, began stroking in the direction of her reply, you suddenly realized he needed the guidance of her voice because he was blind.

Unless, of course, you'd already known it. As I had.

Everybody in the flickering snapshots knew about Griff Borlund. He was one of the industry's ace scenario scribblers, a movie dramatist who dragged down fabulous weekly cabbage despite his handicap of blindness—or maybe because of it.

Having lost his sight in college, he had developed a compensatory keenness of hearing, including an abnormally sensitive ear

for nuances of speech; a phonographic ability to capture and reproduce the way people talked. In consequence, when he dictated a script he crammed it with the kind of dialogue producers dream about but seldom obtain. Borlund's pix paid off in box car numerals, even though the poor bozo never got to see his brain children emoting on celluloid.

He didn't seem to mind this. He lived in opulent splendor, surrounded himself with the prettiest secretaries this side of a sultan's harem, worked only when he felt like it and spent most of his time sunning his tonnage to a mahogany brown or dunking it in the filtered blue waters of his patio pool. He looked very satisfied with life as he came up smiling, dripping, and hoisted himself to the bordering azure tiles.

"Ransom?" he said. "Glad to meet you. I've heard a lot about the way you operate." He cocked his noggin, listening; located me by my breathing, probably, and thrust forth a substantial right paw. "Nice of you to come."

I shook with him. I stand six-feet, plus, weigh a hundred and ninety. Also I pride myself on keeping in fairly decent shape for my age; but when I got my hand back it felt as if I'd run it through a sausage grinder. The fingers were numb, the bones were crushed and I expected the nails to drop out any minute. Borlund had the grip of a gorilla.

Not that he was trying to show off, impress me with his manly muscles. He was just a guy who didn't know his own strength, very likely because he couldn't see the damage he inflicted.

I massaged a little circulation back into my knuckles, sternly repressed a whinny of pain, and said: "From now on my pals can call me Lefty."

"I beg pardon?"

"Skip it," I said magnanimously. After all, who was I to hold a grudge against a prospective client? Especially a client as high up in the chips as this Borlund beezark. I forced a forgiving gesture, remembered it was

wasted on his useless optics, canceled it and decided I had better get down to business. By way of starting the ball rolling I glanced at my strap watch and remarked: "Hmm-m. Twelve-thirty."

"Half past noon," he said quietly. "Except for the warmth of the sun it could just as well be midnight to me. One of the penalties of blindness. But you're not interested in that. You're wondering why I sent for you."

"Yeah, sort of."

He turned slightly. "Maggie?"

"Right here, chief."

"Where are the other girls?"

"I gave them the afternoon off. I told them you said no dictation today."

And the servants?"

"Likewise."

He nodded. "Good. That's for you, too. Scram, dumpling."

"Aw, boss! And me in my scantiest garments to make a hit with the handsome Ransom." She grinned at me impudently.

Borlund said: "If I'm any judge of your batting average you've already made your hit. Most likely a home-run. Speaking of home-runs, run along home. I want to probe some highly confidential information out of Mr. Ransom about the detective profession for my next screen play. Scoot, sweet."

"All right, if you're going to get stubborn about it. Maggie Sullivan's no gal to hang around where she's not wanted. Sullivan, that is," she repeated. "First name really Maggie, not Margaret." Either she had something in her eye or she deliberately winked at me. "Listed in the phone book, in case anybody's interested." And she skipped off, vanished inside the house, slammed the back door after her.

BORLUND smiled faintly. "The perfect secretary, Maggie. But no inhibitions."

"On her it looks good," I said with approval. "On her anything would look good."

"That's the only type I hire. It lures my

friends. Without visitors a man in permanent darkness could grow very lonely." He groped for a deck chair, tested it to make sure it wouldn't collapse under his weight, lowered himself into it. His voice lowered too; took on a cautious quality. "Are we quite alone now?"

I looked around. "Yeah. No eavesdroppers, if that's what's on your mind."

"I have many things on my mind, none of them pleasant. Ransom, I'd like you to do me a favor. Don't get too chummy with Miss Sullivan. Disregard that hint she dropped about you phoning her for a date."

"Oh-oh. She's your private property?"

"I wish she were," he said, and from his expression you could tell he was crazy about the red-haired wren. Then he made a sardonic mouth. "A fat chance I'd have with a girl like her. There's nothing romantic about a blind man."

I didn't get it. "Now wait. If it's strictly platonic between you and the chick, why give me this hands-off routine?"

"Because. . ." He hesitated, then took off at a tangent. "Look, Ransom, I lied about wanting your advice on a script. That was to keep Maggie from guessing my real reason for consulting you."

"Your real reason being what?"

"I have an investigation for you to make," he said. "Maggie's the one I want investigated. That's why I'm asking you not to get too friendly with her. You'll do a better job if you handle it objectively, with no emotional involvements."

I said: "Maybe you've got something there. What is it I'm supposed to dig up about her?"

"She's in some sort of trouble, something ugly, something connected with a criminal. I want to know what that connection is. I want the criminal's name!" He stopped short, scowling.

I studied him skeptically. For my dough, associating a lovely muffin of Maggie Sullivan's caliber with a criminal pitch was

sillier than stirring Lysol in your iced tea. But it wasn't my dough, it was Borlund's. When a guy of his affluence wants to hire a detective, the detective doesn't engage him in debate. So I tried to keep an open mind; waited respectfully for him to continue his spiel.

Instead, he said sharply: "What was that noise?"

"Noise? What noise? I didn't hear anything."

"Wait here," he said, and came up out of the deck chair; headed unerringly toward the house, missed the back door by less than six inches, found it, opened it, barged in. Then a sudden feminine shriek sounded inside, high-pitched, hysterical, terrified. It ended with an abrupt, crashing thud.

Silence settled, thick as clotted gore.

I choked: "What's going on?" and sprinted past the pool, across the patio; catapulted into Borlund's stash with my coat tails dipping sawdust. Then, in mid-stride, I froze.

There was a jane on the floor and she was deader than chopped bait.

CHAPTER II

BALCONY DROP

GRIFF Borlund's house was built in the shape of a hollow, two-story square. Its center was a sort of indoor courtyard paved with waxed red tiles and roofed high overhead by countless panes of unusually thick stained glass. This glass skylight was tinted green, so that it filtered the sunshine to a watery color and gave you a sensation of walking along the bottom of an aquarium.

The watery effect was emphasized by plant life. Potted palms, shrubs, vines and dwarf trees were ranged along all four walls in the somber green half-light like seaweed growing in a fish bowl. A wrought iron Spanish balcony ran around three sides of the square, halfway up. It made an openwork corridor from which you went into the various

second floor rooms. From this balcony an iron-and-marble staircase led down to the ground floor level where the furnishings consisted of some painted iron benches, tables and chairs scattered to mingle with the potted vegetation. The air was heavy, humid, dank with the smell of moist earth and peat moss and green lush foliage. But the blonde on the waxed tiles was all through inhaling it.

She lay directly under the left balcony with her head at a crazy angle—the angle that always means a busted neck. And even before I felt for her pulse, I knew she was a goner. I also realized she'd either fallen or been heaved off the balcony. The impact of the drop had fractured her past all vulcanizing.

Borlund stood blindly at the foot of the staircase, breathing audibly and making pawing movements with his hands. His map looked flushed, purplish, in the green-filtered sunlight, and his mouth was twisted into a grimace. Out of it words spouted like steam out of a geyser.

"What is it?" he ranted. "*Who* is it? What was that crash? Answer me, somebody. Speak up! Oh, what a fool I was for dismissing everybody today. Blast my no-good eyes for not being able to see! Talk to me, somebody! Ransom! Ransom--where are you? Is that you, Ransom? Say something, you hear me? Tell me what happened!"

I said: "Quiet. Cork that caterwauling." Then, as he recognized my voice and pivoted toward me, I added: "Where were you when she screamed?"

I—I—here by the stairs—I'd just come in—who are you talking about? Who screamed? What was that crash, that thud? Did somebody—fall?"

"Yeah," I said. "A blonde. A tall slender blonde in a sweater and slacks."

His fingers twitched. "That—that must be Florence Byrne. One of my typists. Is she—young?"

"About twenty-four. She'll never be any older."

"You—you mean she's—dead?"

"Deceased, yeah." I moved to the staircase, squeezed past him. "Stay here," I said. "If you hear anybody trying to lam either by the front or back door, yep for me."

"I don't understand. Wait. Where are you going?"

Ignoring him, I took the steps four at a clip; barreled along the balcony and started prowling the upstairs rooms. I didn't find anyone. There was a pair of binoculars in a window embrasure overlooking the patio but they didn't tell me any more than the empty rooms did.

I wasted ten minutes, threw nothing but snake-eyes and headed back downstairs to finish my searching job. That was when I discovered Borlund was no longer with the defunct quail. During my absence a substitute had replaced him.

The substitute was a guy I knew and I disliked. Herman Herkimer was his name. He was a fox-faced, feisty little shyster with shifty glimmers and a pious voice as oily as axle grease—the kind of lawyer who warbles hymns on Sunday and robs his clients of their gold inlays the other six days of the week. Legally he always managed to keep his fingernails clean, but he had the ethics of a jackal and the rapacious greed of a scavenger shark. Senior grade.

HE WAS stooping over the blonde cookie's body, fumbling around. But when he heard me sailing toward him, he straightened up, whirled to face me. He was just in time to save himself from being grabbed by the collar, yanked end over appetite.

"Ah, Ransom!" He gave me an unctuous leer, beat me to the conversational punch. "No doubt you're wondering what I'm doing here. I can explain in very few words." Then he made with a glib gush of oratory while his peepers darted furtively, refusing to meet mine. "I was a guest of Mr. Borlund's at a

little party last night and I mislaid my cigarette case. I dropped by to see if it had been found. Imagine my dismay at arriving in the midst of such a regrettable tragedy." He clucked his tongue. "Most deplorable. Most distressing. Most unfortunate."

I said: "And mighty nice timing on your part. It's a new twist when an ambulance chaser gets on the scene ahead of the ambulance. You must carry a portable crystal ball. Where's Borlund?"

"Now hold on!" His narrow mush darkened. "I don't like being called an ambulance chaser. Just in case you don't know it, that's libel."

"Slander," I corrected him. "And just in case you don't know it, bub, there's a law against touching or moving bodies until the cops make their official examination. Where's Griff Borlund?"

"I wasn't moving the body. I was merely attempting to, er, determine the cause of death while Mr. Borlund is in the library notifying the authorities as I advised him to do."

"Are you sure you didn't send him out so you could do a little solitary snooping?" I sneered.

Quivering indignantly, he squalled: "Confound you, Ransom, I don't have to take your filthy insinuations!" And he aimed an awkward haymaker at my dewlaps.

He didn't have the heft for it. I side-stepped, rammed a forefinger into his midriff, doubled him over. Then I fetched him an open-handed spank across the chops. He must have had a glass jaw; the slap knocked him in a huddled heap, out cold.

"Let that be a lesson to you," I remarked on the off chance he was playing possum. "Never pick a quarrel with a buzz saw." Then I went hunting again.

By happenstance it was the library I blundered into first. In its oak-paneled coolness, Griff Borlund was just hanging up a telephone. He cocked an ear. "Is that you, Herkimer? The police are on their way to

investigate the accident.”

“It’s not Herkimer, it’s Ransom,” I said. “Herkimer is temporarily indisposed. And what makes you so sure the Byrne doll’s demise was an accident?”

He paled. “You mean you—found someone hiding upstairs?”

“No,” I grunted sourly. “I drew blank. But I haven’t frisked the downstairs rooms yet.”

Somehow my answer seemed to ease his mind. “You won’t have to. It’s already been done. Thoroughly.”

“Hunh?”

“After all, Ransom, I’m not entirely stupid. Although you didn’t tell me, I realized why you dashed to the second floor. Quite obviously you were looking for somebody who might have pushed Florence off the balcony.”

“Yeah.”

“If there was such a person, perhaps he’d already sneaked downstairs before you entered the house. Maybe I hadn’t heard him. Maybe he took advantage of my blindness, slipped by me, went into one of these first floor rooms. You probably thought of that when you told me to yell if I heard anyone trying to get away.”

“Come to the punch line,” I said.

“A moment after you raced upstairs my front doorbell rang. It was Herkimer. I let him in, explained the situation. He searched this entire lower floor—and found nobody. Very well. If you found nobody upstairs and he found nobody downstairs, then there was no murderer. Florence fell accidentally.”

I said: “You left a hole, pal. When Herkimer rang and you let him in, a character hiding in a side room could have tiptoed over to the rear door and scrambled behind your back.”

“Preposterous!” he said peevishly. Too peevishly. “Miss Byrne wasn’t the type of girl to have enemies. It’s crazy to imagine any man wanting to kill her.”

“Why limit the field to men?”

BORLUND’S map got pallid again. “I—don’t know what you mean.”

“Look,” I said, and set fire to a gasper. “All your employees had the afternoon off: secretaries, typists, servants. Maggie Sullivan said so.”

“Leave Maggie out of this, Ransom.”

“In a pig’s knuckle,” I growled. “Let’s assume Maggie didn’t go home when you sent her. Assume she came in, got dressed, then lingered to do something she shouldn’t do.”

“Such as what?”

“I wouldn’t know. Prowling, prying, stealing.”

“You stop that kind of talk!” he roared.

I rode right over his bellowing. “Assume she thought the joint was deserted. But she was mistaken. Florence Byrne had stayed in the stash, too. Florence catches Maggie doing something off-color. She threatens to blow the whistle. Maggie heaves her over the balcony railing—renders her defunct to shut her up.”

“Blast you, Ransom, you’ve got no reason to accuse her!”

“Hold it,” I said. “I’m not accusing, I’m theorizing. I can’t prove any of it. All I know is, you wanted to hire me to investigate the Sullivan muffin. You said she was mixed up in something criminal. Or anyhow connected with a criminal. And spang on top of our gabfest, bumpery occurs.”

Sudden droplets of sweat popped out on Borlund’s forehead. “I was afraid you’d bring that up. I want you to forget it. Forget I talked to you about Maggie. I didn’t mean it. It was just a—joke. A gag. A rib.”

“Oh, come now.”

“Miss Byrne’s death was an accident,” he insisted desperately. “Let it go at that. Pretend I only consulted you about a scenario. I’ll make it worth your while.”

I said: “Concealing evidence could win me a canceled license, pal.”

“Evidence? You’ve got no evidence. All you have is something I said in confidence. You can’t even prove I said it. It’s my word

against yours. Give Maggie a break, Ransom. She's innocent. Don't make her suffer for something she didn't do."

A sudden thought nibbled at my brisket. "There's only one way you could be so positive. That's if you heaved the blonde cupcake overboard yourself, personally."

"No!" he choked. "I—I didn't!"

"Or maybe you'd like to pin it on Herkimer," I said.

From behind me a voice grated: "That's going too far. First insults, then you knock me unconscious. Now you plan to frame me for homicide." It was the Herkimer jerk. He'd ankled into the library, heard my sarcastic crack. "I'm fed up."

I wheeled around. I was a mite too slow. He clouted me on the conk with a potted plant and knocked me stiffer than frozen custard.

CHAPTER III

BLIND MAN'S FLUFF

WHEN I came awake, I had the horrifying conviction that I was dead and buried.

I was stretched out supine in what seemed to be the narrow confines of a coffin. My hair was full of loam, peat moss and fertilizer. I couldn't feel any worms feasting on me, but sprigs of tropical fern were sprouting out of my ears to prove I'd been a long time planted. But why, I wondered fretfully, had the undertaker stuffed a gag in my yap and trussed me with loops of rope around my wrists and ankles?

Another thing that perplexed me was the steady, pulsating headache that throbbed through my thatch, particularly around the area where there was a swelling the size of second base. Corpses aren't supposed to have headaches, I reflected. Therefore I couldn't be a corpse. I'd merely been buried alive.

Buried alive?

I did a double take, tried to sit up, banged my noggin on the lid of the casket and gave myself another lump to match the original one. The impact brought my memory back like a tidal wave in a bathtub. I remembered Maggie Sullivan, Griff Borlund, and the blonde Florence Byrne who'd become extinct from falling off a balcony. Finally I remembered Herman Herkimer, the shyster who'd bopped me with a flower pot, festooned me with ferns, installed me in my present pitiful predicament.

Herkimer. I swore a fervent oath that if I kicked the bucket I would gird my loins in ectoplasm, haunt the little creep out of his wits. And if I lived to escape the doom currently confronting me, I would rend him limb from sinew, strew his fragments all over Hollywood like confetti.

The coffin lid opened. A worried voice said: "Ransom?"

Griff Borlund was leaning over me. I wasn't in a casket after all—it was a linen chest in a storage room. Burling around the gag in my mouth, I sat up and battled at my bonds. I got nowhere. The ropes were too stout, the knots too tight.

"Thank goodness you're all right," Borlund said, groping down to touch me. "You—you *are* all right, aren't you?"

I cut loose with an assortment of verbiage fit to blister the brass off a binnacle at thirty paces, but nothing came out except mumbles and grunts. Presently I ran shy of wind and subsided like a faulty firecracker.

"I know how you feel," Borlund said sympathetically. "And I'd like you to understand I had nothing to do with Herkimer knocking you unconscious—though I confess I took advantage of it after it happened. Under the circumstances it seemed best to keep the police from seeing you, talking to you."

The glare I gave him should have shriveled him down to the dimensions of a midget, only being blind he couldn't see the

sparks and brimstone flashing from my peepers. Lucky him.

He said: "The men from headquarters have come and gone. Miss Byrne's body has been removed. Herkimer stated that he and I were in the patio when she fell; that nobody else was here. Which means the verdict will be accidental death. There will be no further investigation."

"That's what you think," I tried to say. It sounded like: "Bap glop moopling," which didn't make much sense even to me.

He went on: "Now that everybody's gone, including Herkimer, I want to release you; make amends. But on certain conditions. You are not to make trouble for Maggie Sullivan. You will forget what I said about hiring you to investigate her. You are not to volunteer any information to the police. Should they question you, you will say you gave me some technical advice on a script and left before the accident happened."

"Mph foob gleuple!" I panted. "Fleegh!"

"Remember, there's nothing you could prove even if you tried," he said. "With Herkimer to back me, we can make you out a liar no matter what you testify. On the other hand, your silence is worth a thousand dollars to me—nuisance value. Well?" And he fumbled at my gag, removed it.

HE HAD me bottled and he knew it. I knew it too. I could sing to the bulls until hailstones fell in Hades, and nobody would buy a word of it. Moreover, there was always the possibility that the blonde tomato's tumble really had been an accident. Maybe I'd been wrong about it, although I didn't think so. Time alone would tell. Time—and some undercover snooper on my part.

I said: "Okay, wise guy, you just bought a deal." But I had my mental fingers crossed when I said it. Hush money or no hush money, come heat or high tide, I intended to ferret into Maggie Sullivan's personal affairs—probe for the alleged criminal connection that Borlund

had hinted at in our talk by the swimming pool. Then I would trace that connection, see if it led anywhere near the deceased Byrne quail.

I also planned to stir up a little grief for a rat entitled Herkimer while I was at it. And if the backfire scorched Borlund too, so much the better. I can be as vindictive as the next heel when I'm pushed too far. Today I had been pushed too far, and no paltry thousand fish could poultice my ire. Somebody was going to do a lot of repenting. The hard way.

With the blind bozo's grand in my pocket and resentment seething in my tripe, I ankled out of the stash. As I made for my coupe parked across the street, I wondered what would be the best angle to tackle first. Then I got an unexpected break of luck in the shape of a stranger drifting up the Borlund walkway.

He was a tall, nice-looking young punk, freckled, hatless and sporting a butch haircut, as if his barber had switched from scissors to a dull lawnmower. When we came closer to each other, he took a gander at me and stopped.

"Aren't you Nick Ransom?" he said.

"Yeah."

His smile revealed strong, even white choppers. "I thought I recognized you from pictures I've seen in the newspapers. How did you make out with Griff?"

"What do you mean, how did I make out?" I rumbled truculently. "And who the devil do you think you are, asking me questions? Just because you've piped my pan in the daily blats, that doesn't give you quiz privileges, junior. In my league it doesn't even spell an introduction."

"Oh," he said, and reddened. "Sorry. I'm Donald Keenan. Griff Borlund's nephew. I teach at the school for handicapped kids he endowed last year." He smiled again, apologetically. "Naturally I'm interested in what you think about Maggie and the whispers."

A hunch began to blossom in my aching

cranium. I said: "Maggie and what whispers?"

"Why, the talk Uncle Griff overheard last night. Or am I being indiscreet in mentioning it?"

"Not at all," I said quickly. It was evident that he was just now getting home and wasn't hep to what had happened to the Byrne frail. It was equally plain that he knew something about Maggie Sullivan—something I might pump out of him if I used a little diplomacy. "How's for taking a ride with me, chum? There are a few points I'd like to discuss if you've got time."

He looked puzzled. "Well, sure, if I can be of any help."

He let me steer him to my jalopy, and a moment later we were rolling nowhere in particular while I prospected for information.

"About Maggie and the whispers," I said. "Dish me up the dope, Donald."

"Hasn't Uncle Griff already told you?"

"Let's just say I'm testing you to make sure you're really in his confidence."

"Of course I'm in his confidence! Otherwise, how would I know about the murder conversation?"

I WAS so startled I almost sent my bucket climbing up a pepper tree. "Murder conversation?" I said when I recaptured some of my aplomb. "Suppose you amplify that."

"All right. It all hinges on Griff's abnormally sharp hearing. Last night he had quite a few guests, ten or more. I wasn't there, but later he told me he'd inadvertently overheard a couple in the butler's pantry, one whispering: 'But that would be murder!' and the other saying: 'We're in it too deep to back out now, Maggie, we've got to do it.'" The Keenan punk looked at me. "Have I got it right? Does that match up with Uncle Griff's story?"

"You're convincing me," I said ambiguously. "What else can you add to it?"

"Well, the only Maggie there was Maggie Sullivan, so obviously she was one of the

whisperers. The other could have been anybody, man or woman. You can't identify a whisper no matter how keen your ears are. Being blind, Griff couldn't see who it was. And when he reached the pantry they were gone."

"That's all you know about it?"

He shrugged. "That's all there is to know. I suppose you've already guessed that Griff is in love with Maggie. That's a why he decided to hire a detective, stop her from getting mixed up in a murder; save her before it's too late." He paused thoughtfully. "Mr. Ransom, do you think there's really anything to it? I mean, could it have been some screwball practical joke, Maggie and some guest playing a trick on Uncle Griff?"

"Anything is possible," I hedged. The longer I could keep him from learning that killery had already happened in the Borlund igloo, the more use I might make of him. "But whether the whispers were a joke or on the level, they've got to be tracked down. Which is where you can help me if you're willing."

"Help you?" he looked eager. "How?"

I parked, took out pencil and notebook. "First let's have the names of everybody at the party last night."

"But didn't Griff give you a list?"

"Yeah," I lied. "I just want to make sure he didn't omit anybody. Two memories are better than one."

He swallowed it. He rattled off the information I needed. Herman Herkimer was on the roster, of course; the shifty little shyster had admitted being at the Borlund shindig, had used his allegedly mislaid cigarette case as an excuse to come back there today. But I didn't mention this to the Keenan punk. I just let him give out with the guest list while I jotted the names in my notebook.

'Barring Herkimer, those names meant nothing to me—yet. There wasn't a single one I recognized. But at least I had something to work on—something tangible. I had a lot more to work on than Borlund would want me

to have, I reflected grimly. And the irony was that I'd milked it out of his own nephew.

I said: "Thanks, buster, you've been a big help. Now I'll commence ringing doorbells."

"You're going to call on all those people?"

"Yeah. Maybe I can trick one of them into making a slip about being in the butler's pantry last night with the Sullivan doll. I hope you won't mind walking home from here," I added.

He made a move to get out of my kettle, then stopped. "I suppose I'm being cheeky, offering suggestions to an experienced detective like you, but—well, why not start with Maggie herself? You don't have to stay away from her just because Griff asked you to. If you could take her out for cocktails and get her a little tipsy, she might say something that would give you a lead." All of a sudden he was the complete eager beaver. "And while you've got her out, I could be searching her apartment for clues." His enthusiasm drained away as abruptly as it had bubbled up. "I sound like a dime novel, don't I?" he said through a blush. "Sorry, Mr. Ransom." He opened the car door.

"Hold on," I said. "Don't be so modest. I'm always receptive to good ideas."

He widened his glims at me. Then he changed his mind about getting out and settled back in the car. "You really think it might work?" he sounded boyishly amazed.

"It's worth a try. Tell me her address."

He did. I clashed my gears, eased out my clutch and made with the ethyl. Twelve minutes later I berthed my buggy opposite an unpretentious red brick apartment tepee on Franklin—and lamped the red-haired Sullivan doll barging from the lobby arm in arm with a sawed-off, unctuous little character whose face would have looked natural on a fox.

He was Herman Herkimer. And before you could whistle Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto, a waiting taxi wafted them away.

CHAPTER IV

DICK ON THE DUCK

OF COURSE I should have known better. I should have called copper right then and there. I should have lit a shuck for the nearest pay station phone, invested a nickel, put in a scream for my friend Ole Brunvig of the Homicide Division. I should have dumped all the facts in his lap, let him carry the ball from there.

Ole had the whole police force at his disposal. He could have tossed out a dragnet for Maggie and the shyster. He could have stretched out the long, protecting arm of the law and prevented the next kill from happening.

Always assuming, of course, that I could have made him accept my unsupported theories.

That was the trouble. Ole was a hard cop to convince—unless you showed him incontrovertible proof. I had no such proof to show him. Griff Borlund, blind though he was, had cleverly hogtied me from the very start. With Herkimer's help he had fastened the big fix on Florence Byrne's death, jockeyed me into a corner where the bulls wouldn't believe she'd been murdered even if I swore to it on a stack of cookbooks nine miles high.

So I elected to play it solo, unless you counted what amateur assistance Donald Keenan might give me.

He spotted Maggie and Herkimer at the same instant I did, and his peepers popped like squeezed grapes. "Ransom, look over there across the street! Maggie and that man! It's Herman Herkimer. My uncle's lawyer. There they go in that cab!"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't bust a gasket, junior."

"But aren't you going to follow them? Shadow them?"

I said: "The street's too narrow for us to make a U-turn. I'd have to go all the way to

the next intersection and they'd be far, far gone by that time. In fact, they're long gone now. Which is a break for our side, maybe."

"How do you mean?" he demanded, with heat. "Uncle Griff hired you to find out who was whispering with Maggie in the pantry last night, didn't he? So Herkimer was one of the guests. So if they're together now, doesn't that indicate they're guilty?"

"It indicates we've got a free hand," I said. "Which we'd better use while we can. Are you still willing to burgle Maggie's wikiup?"

"Why—yes."

"You'll be taking chances," I warned him. "You don't know how long she'll be out with Herkimer. She may come home and catch you at it."

He frowned. "I—I'll risk it."

"Oke," I said, and gave him a gimmick off my key ring; showed him how to force locks with it. I also coached him briefly on the technique of hunting unlikely hiding places for evidence. "If you step on it you ought to finish your frisk inside an hour. An hour and a half at the most."

"I'll do my best. Where will you be?"

"Making like a private dick," I said, and glanced at my strap watch. "It's twenty of four now. I'll be back here around dusk—say five to five-fifteen. You wait right here and I'll pick you up. Right?"

He nodded, edged out of my jalopy, scurried across the street; darted into the apartment building. That was my cue to whiz away from there under full steam.

My first port of call was a Thrifty druggery where I thumbed through a phone book, located Herman Herkimer's law office. Next I headed for the Altamont lot, badged my way past the gate guard, paid a visit to a friend of mine in the property department, a bozo who owed me a favor. He discharged it in the form of a duffel bag, a gas mask and a small chemical smoke bomb, loaded, pressurized and ready to function.

I then sloped next door to the Colossus

studio and repeated the maneuver—except that this time the party owing me a favor was a chick in the wardrobe and costume section. From her I wangled a black rubber raincoat and a fireman's helmet. Thus equipped, I phoned Herkimer's office.

A stenographer said no, Mr. Herkimer was not in. She couldn't tell me whether or not he'd be back until tomorrow. No, there was nobody else who could help me with a legal problem; Herkimer operated with no partners, no law clerks. She couldn't do anything for me herself; she was only a typist. Would I care to leave my name, make an appointment?

I said: "Never mind," and disconnected. Then I piled into my vee-eight and made knots in the direction of Herkimer's legal layout.

HIS suite was on the third floor of a building near Hollywood and Vine. With my borrowed props in the duffel bag I scouted down the corridor, found that Herkimer occupied two connecting offices. The first was a reception room, with the shyster's private sanctum adjoining it. This private room's door was closed, locked, but its transom was open, which was all I needed.

I unlimbered my smoke bomb, triggered it and tossed it neatly over the transom. A moment later I burst into the waiting room and made with the spurious excitement.

"Fire!" I yodeled to the prim, bespectacled stenographer, and pointed to the gouts of greasy smoke pouring around the edges of the connecting door to Herkimer's office. "Fire! Take to the tall timber! Run for your life!"

She leaped from her desk like a hen whose eggs have unexpectedly hatched out crocodiles. Giving issue to a terrified yeek, blammed full tilt toward the window as if determined to commit suicide. I caught her, spun her around, shoved her to the door. "Phone the firemen!" I yammered as I rammed her over the threshold. "Turn in the alarm!"

Obedient as a buck private listening to a

five-star general's battlefield edict, she sprinted along the hallway faster than jet propulsion. I waited until she blipped around a bend and vanished. Then I calmly locked the portal against possible interruption, got the gas mask out of my duffel bag, donned it and pelted into Herkimer's private quarters.

By now the smoke was thicker than boarding house gravy. I got my bearings, fumbled my way to the bomb, switched its valve shut. This accomplished, I opened a window to clear the air and went to work on Herkimer's filing cases.

I didn't have much time, so I moved fast. I scattered papers like birdseed in a canary's cage; finally came upon a fat manila envelope marked "*Borlund.*" It was swollen with folders, all gravid with documents which I didn't dare examine now—my time was rapidly petering out. In fact it had already petered out. Down on the street, sirens were moaning like banshees in anguish. Nearer, you could hear the heavy tromp of booted feet approaching. The fire department had arrived on the job.

I yanked off my gas mask; got the long black rubber raincoat and fireman's hat from the duffel bag, put them on. The mask, the smoke bomb and the Borlund folder I crammed into the bag. The bag I stuffed under my raincoat, making me the fattest looking firefighter this side of a slapstick comedy. Then I ducked down under Herkimer's desk.

In a moment there came a splintering crash from the waiting room. That would be the smoke-eating heroes gleefully bashing the locked door to toothpicks with their axes. I heard them troop into the suite, destroying the furniture as they came. Now they entered the rear office where I was hiding. They milled around like a herd of moose.

I joined them. They didn't even tab me for a stranger in their midst. Who stops to count noses when there are desks, files and chairs to be reduced to kindling? To make myself less

conspicuous I even borrowed an axe and whacked out a little destruction myself.

Then, presently, I slipped out into the corridor under cover of the confusion; saw a door at the end of the hall that was marked: "*Men.*" That was for me. I scuttled into the rest room, shucked off hat and raincoat, wadded the bogus costume into the duffel bag and was no longer a fireman. I was a private pry with a golden opportunity to peep at the papers I'd purloined.

I got them out, studied them. One document was the contractual agreement by which Griff Borlund had endowed a school for handicapped children. It set up the fund whose interest would pay the school's expenses in perpetuity.

It also stipulated that Borlund's nephew, Donald Keenan, was to have a lifetime job teaching dear kids their vowels and consonants at a salary guaranteed to keep him in Cadillacs until his beard grew down to his shoestrings. Generosity, it's wonderful—especially with a touch of nepotism for flavoring. Under that setup the Keenan punk had what amounted to an annuity the size of the First National Bank.

THERE was also a last will and testament in the envelope. Its terms flabbergasted me, particularly when I read the amount Maggie Sullivan would inherit in the event of Borlund's decease. She got practically the entire residual estate, minus a few cash bequests to Keenan, the servants and employees, and a healthy chunk to Herman Herkimer for legal services. Herkimer was also to be executor. In addition, he was to administer the fund which endowed the school.

I could almost see the avaricious little shyster with his rapacious hands in that dough all the way up to his elbows. I could see him—

I did see him!

He came panting into the rest room, lamped me standing there scanning the Borlund files. His furtive glimmers widened as he recognized what the papers were. Then he flew apart like a two dollar shotgun.

"Thief! Robber! Police!" he caterwauled. "Help!" And he plunged at me, clawing, grabbing, snatching.

I swatted him aside, darted to the door, opened it and saw an oncoming horde of uniformed cops. You always find cops around the scene of a fire even when the fire is only a false alarm. Hearing Herkimer's howls, these bulls made for me on the swoop.

Arguing with them was out of the question. Arguing with Herkimer would buy me even less. He was bent on fingering me, installing me in the bastille, giving me no chance to make with the plausible explanations. That I wanted like a hole in the head. Freedom was what I needed—freedom to gather up the loose ends and make a tidy package to hand to headquarters.

So I pivoted, darted back inside the white-tiled gent's room. I stiff-armed the squalling shyster and knocked him upside down. He landed in a plumbing receptacle, sent up a splash like the Johnstown Flood and loudly announced that he was drowning. I refused to believe this. It was too good to be true. I didn't even have time to make it come true by flushing him down the drain.

Instead, I leaped to the window, opened it, saw that it faced an air shaft about eight feet square. There was another window directly opposite. I climbed out, summoned all my stunting memories, launched my heft across the shaft and hit the other window with my knees and elbows bunched, my body curled into a ball. I was a hundred and ninety pounds of flying projectile. I was an acrobat shot out of a cannon. I was a forward pass to the coffin corner.

I hit my target, crashed through the pane and landed in a malodorous broom closet

combing jagged shards of glass out of my eyebrows.

Somebody tried to bag me with a blind pot-shot. A police .38 sneezed: *Ka-Chowff!* and the slug ricocheted around the broom closet like a hornet looking for a place to sink its stinger. I bleated piteously and fell on my schnozzle.

"Got him," I heard a voice remark with satisfaction. "Let's go sweep up his pieces."

Which gave me maybe thirty seconds respite while the gendarmes came the long way around the corridor. I grabbed a set of janitor's overalls from a peg, put them on over my clothes, picked up a bucket, a mop and a scrubbing brush. Then I darted out of the closet as fast as I could ramble.

I skidded around a corner-straight toward the oncoming minions of law and order. It was now or never. I turned, pointed back with my mop.

"He went that-a-way!" I yodeled.

They barreled by me and didn't even say thanks, the ingrates. I decided their manners had been neglected in childhood, ignored the impoliteness and dashed for the nearest stairs; thundered down to the main floor lobby shedding bucket, brush, mop and overalls with each kangaroo leap. Presently I zoomed out onto the street, clear of pursuit and free as the breeze.

I didn't dare use my coupe—its license numbers would be on a shortwave radio dragnet within five minutes. I still had my feet, though. They zipped me as far as a taxi stand, and a Yellow toted me through the dusk to my appointed meeting place with Donald Keenan on Franklin Street, across from Maggie Sullivan's apartment igloo.

That was where I blundered into some more coppers. This time they nabbed me.

They had already nabbed Keenan.

CHAPTER V

MURDER'S DRY POOL

IT WAS the Sullivan muffin who put the whammy on me. She had spotted me getting out of my taxi and she wasted no time arranging my arrest. Maggie was fast on the uptake.

She had just emerged from the building with three bulls. The bulls had Keenan in custody, and it was easy to see what must have happened. Maggie, returning to her flat, had caught Donald prowling it. Somehow she had managed to hold him while summoning the law. Now he was pinched; and my turn came next.

"Officers, grab that man across the street!" the red-haired tomato aimed a finger at me. "He's Nick Ransom—the guy responsible for this burglary. He put Keenan up to rummaging my rooms. Quick! Hurry! Before he gets away!"

So Keenan had stooled on me when Maggie caught him. Well, you couldn't blame him too much, for I really had okayed the caper when he suggested it. And now I was ready to share the rap. I made for the opposite sidewalk, surrendered meekly to a flatfoot—gave the Sullivan doll a wry grin.

"Don't worry, toots," I said. "I won't try for a getaway. It's too bad, though."

"What's too bad?"

"That things had to turn out like this. For a while I was hoping you and I could thicken up a nice ripe friendship. You hinted I should phone you for a date."

She tossed her fiery tresses. "Don't flatter yourself. I was only trying to make Griff jealous so he'd break loose from his shyness and admit he loves me." Her peepers narrowed. "And now maybe you'll explain why you sent his nephew to burgle my apartment, you crumb!"

"Hasn't he already told you?"

Keenan answered that one himself. "No, Mr. Ransom, all I said was you'd sent me. I thought I'd keep quiet about the whispers until you were ready to break the whole thing wide open."

"Smart," I approved. "And I'm just about ready. Did you uncover anything upstairs?"

"No, I—I didn't. I tried, but Maggie caught me."

The diminutive redhead blazed: "What whispers are you two goons talking about? What did you expect to uncover in my apartment?"

"Killery clues, kitten," I said. Then I turned to the cops in attendance. "Boys, it's time for a showdown. Unlimber the two-way radiophone in your car and get me Lieutenant Brunvig on the short wave. Ole Brunvig, that is. Homicide Bureau."

One of the harness bulls beetled his brows. "Who do you think you are, butch, giving orders to a officer of the law?"

"Nick Ransom is the handle." I flashed my tin.

He stiffened. "Ransom, the private dick? Used to be a stunter in the studios? Personal friend of Brunvig's? *That* Ransom?"

"Yeah."

"Wottaya know," he said in awed accents. "Why don't somebody tell us these things?" And he scrambled into his heap, made with the wireless. A moment later he gave me the microphone and I told Brunvig what I wanted, where I wanted it and why.

Brunvig's dyspeptic snarl crackled in the loudspeaker. "Okay, Hawkshaw. I don't believe a condemned word of it, but I'll string along just to see you stub your toe. And after you stub it I'm going to jerk your license, heave you in a cell!"

I switched him off. He could pollute the air with threats some other time; right now I craved action.

Action I got. Keenan, Maggie and I wedged into the squad car with the three cops and went away from there in a shower of brine; lit a shuck for Griff Borlund's wigwam. Fast though we traveled, Ole Brunvig traveled faster. His official sedan was right behind our squad car when we dropped anchor near the Borlund hacienda. Moreover, Ole had obeyed

my instructions, stopped and picked up a passenger en route. The passenger was with him now in the shape of Herman Herkimer.

Our two groups met headlong at Borlund's walkway. Herkimer had a worried expression on his furtive mush, as if he realized what he was getting into. Ole merely looked like a tall and undernourished undertaker whose indigestion was bothering him.

"All right, Sherlock," he greeted me. "Give out with the chatter and make it convincing."

I NODDED, cast a glance at Herkimer, Maggie and Keenan. "This hassle has to do with the decease of a typist today, name of Florence Byrne. You've got it listed as accidental. I claim it was a clear case of croakery. Griff Borlund conspired with Herkimer, here, to cover up the real facts. By covering them, he hoped to front for a chick he was in love with. To wit, this little lady on my left—Maggie Sullivan is her monicker. He suspected her of being mixed up in something criminal."

"Of all the idiotic drivel!" the redhaired wren cut in on me. "Me mixed up in something criminal? Why, you low-down worm! That's an outrageous lie and you know it!"

Ignoring this, I said: "Borlund's suspicions were based on a fragment of whispered dialogue he overheard last night at a party here in his shanty. The whispers were about a murder being plotted, and Borlund, even though blind, had good reason to believe Maggie was one of the whisperers."

"That tears it!" the doll flared. "Let's go in and face Griff right now!"

"I was about to suggest it myself," I said, and rang the doorbell. Nothing happened. Next I knocked, and got only bruised knuckles for my efforts. At this point Maggie produced a key from her handbag, unlocked the portal. We all went barging over the threshold.

The joint was gloomy, thick with shadows.

No light came filtering through the thick green roof glass; outdoors, dusk was giving way to nightfall. Borlund wasn't in view. He didn't answer when we called to him.

We found out why when we finally got around to looking for him on the rear patio and around the swimming pool beyond. The Sullivan muffin clicked on a bank of exterior floodlights—and suddenly she screamed.

The pool had been drained of water. Griff Borlund's crushed corpse lay on the hard concrete bottom, at the deepest point, directly under the diving tower. You didn't need a second gander to realize he would dictate no more screenplays this side of the Pearly Gates.

I took a look at his crumpled corpse; felt goose pimples sprouting on my rind the size of golf balls. The blind guy's death was the one thing I hadn't reckoned on, and it left me sandbagged, temporarily speechless.

Keenan was first to say anything coherent. Over Maggie Sullivan's hysterically heartbroken wails he shouted: "G-good grief! He dived into the empty pool—not being able to see that the water was gone!" Then he darted a significant glance at Herkimer and Maggie, as if envisioning how they had left her apartment together in a cab earlier that afternoon. "Whoever drained the pool deliberately killed Griff," he said grimly. "It was cold-blooded murder."

"That's how it was meant to seem, but you're wrong," I rasped. "Your uncle was too careful to make the mistake of leaping into a dry hole. Before diving, he always dropped a stone and listened for the splash. He was so cautious about his safety, he even tested the chairs he sat in, made sure they wouldn't collapse under him."

Herkimer gave me a long, narrow look. "Are you hinting it was suicide? Are you trying to imply he murdered Florence Byrne today, then took this way out?"

"No," I said, "because he couldn't have bumped the Byrne cookie. Remember I was here when she tumbled to her death. She

screamed as she fell and that scream sounded only a second after Griff Borlund had entered the house. Therefore Griff couldn't possibly have had time to race up on the balcony; pitch her over the railing. Somebody else did that job. And that same somebody later cooled Borlund himself. The Byrne quail's murder was a spur-of-the-moment kill; but Borlund's croaking was premeditated from the time he overheard those homicide whispers at the party last night."

The shyster's eyes were furtive. "I don't get you."

"I'll draw you a diagram," I said. "You're executor of Griff's will, aren't you? And administrator of his million-buck estate?"

"Why, yes."

"Moreover, Maggie inherits the lion's share. Right?"

HE GULPED noisily and nodded.

"But under the law, if it could be proved she bumped him, she wouldn't get a dime. Correct?"

"Y-yes."

"And it takes at least two or three hours for a swimming pool this size to be drained dry, wouldn't you agree?"

"I—I guess so."

I turned to Ole Brunvig. "There's your case, pal. Dry as this pool is, its drain-cock must have been opened several hours ago—say around one o'clock, maybe one-thirty. Much later in the afternoon the killer came back, knocked Borlund senseless, lugged him to the top of the diving tower and dropped him, then left. Is that clear?"

"Not by a jugful!" Ole squalled. "Confound you, Hawkshaw, I don't want riddles, I want facts!"

I slipped him a sarcastic sneer. "Use your head. Look at Herkimer. Is he big enough to tote a guy the size of Borlund up a diving tower ladder? No. Could a tiny doll like Maggie do it? No. So hang the handcuffs on the guilty man. Donald Keenan."

The tall, freckled punk let out a violent bellow. "Now wait a minute, you cheap two-bit gumshoe!"

"Wait for what?" I leered at him. "You knew your uncle was in love with Maggie, though his blindness made him too shy to say so. You also knew his will left her most of his money. True, he'd provided a lifetime job for you in the school he endowed for handicapped kids. But you weren't satisfied with your fat salary. You were greedy for the whole estate and you were in a hurry to inherit. So you rigged a scheme to abolish him and frame the Sullivan tomato. If convicted, she would automatically be cut out of his will. You, as his only relative, would get it all."

"Claptrap! Double-talk!"

I said: "Your plot was as devious as one of Griff's own scenarios. You weren't supposed to be at the party last night, but you sneaked in unseen—waited in the butler's pantry until your uncle was within earshot. Then you impersonated Maggie and a confederate discussing a murder. Fooling a blind man was easy. Whispers can't be identified; one guy can sound like two. You were both whisperers! You did all the dialogue yourself!"

"Now you're reaching," he said.

"Reaching for the truth, yeah. The idea was to make Griff suspicious of Maggie—make him worry about her alleged criminal connections. As soon as he confided his suspicions and worries to an outsider—a private snoop like myself, for instance—you'd be all set to knock him off. Then you could count on the private dick pinning the guilt on the girl. Very clever—only you made a slip and tipped your whole hand to me."

He curled a lip and challenged: "Tipped my hand? How?"

"It was when you suggested that I date Maggie while you prowled her apartment," I answered. "You told me I didn't have to stay away from her just because your uncle had asked me to. Now if you weren't present

during his conference with me, how could you know he had requested me to keep away from her?"

"Why, I—I don't understand."

I said: "That was the key to the puzzle. That, plus a pair of binoculars I found on the balcony."

He lost color. "Binoculars?"

"Yeah. As I've since found out, you specialize in one certain kind of teaching; you work with deaf children, train them in reading lips. Today you were at an upstairs window watching Griff with your binoculars. You were lip-reading, making sure he gave me the details on the phony murder whispers involving Maggie. Unfortunately, Florence Byrne was in the stash and caught you."

That got him. He sagged visibly.

I said: "You had to bust her neck, fling her off the balcony. The noise of the scuffle fetched Griff indoors before he finished telling me about the whispers. You escaped—which was when I think you opened the drain-cock to empty the swimming pool. Later, as I was leaving, you pretended to be just coming home. You met me out front, and presently you let me think I was milking you of information. Actually, you were playing me for a sucker, resetting your murder stage to fit new requirements."

"No," he said weakly. "No! No!"

I finished my pitch. "At that point I began to realize you'd bumped the Byrne cutie. But I

needed proof. Like a fool, I failed to guess you were planning to kill your uncle. I left you to burgle Maggie's flat while I went hunting material to prove you'd murdered Florence Byrne. That gave you your chance to come here, cool Borlund and get back to Maggie's joint in time for her to arrive and catch you. You were willing to take a burglary rap because it would give you an alibi for the Borlund bump. But the alibi won't stand up. Your fingerprints will be on the drain-cock control of the swimming pool—showing you emptied the water. They'll also be on the diving tower ladder, showing you carried Griff topside and dropped him." I paused. "Unless you wore gloves."

"I did!" he crowed triumphantly. "There won't be any prints!" All of a sudden it dawned on him that he'd confessed in those seven words. He whirled, panic-stricken, and started to run.

Ole Brunvig's service .38 came out and Ole's sepulchral voice grated: "Stop or get plugged!"

Headless of the warning, Keenan plunged ahead blindly, crazily, not looking where he was going. Maybe it was poetic justice when he went over the side of the pool—at the deep end. It was only a twelve foot drop but he landed on top of his noggin. You couldn't have done a better job on his skull with a sledgehammer.