



Mabry swung a haymaker that connected with the cameraman's chin

## THE CORPSE THAT PLAYED DEAD

By A. BOYD CORRELL

*Murder Closes Down on a Hollywood Lot When a Pompous Actor Gives Up the Ghost in the Midst of a Machine-Gun Melodrama!*

**W**HEN Emil Friml, who had jumped from burlesque to become a big-time Hollywood movie producer in the short course of two years, phoned and said somebody was trying to murder Ronald Edwards, I thought he had a touch of the sun. I nestled the receiver closer to my ear and said:

"Listen, Mr. Friml. I'm a detective, supposed to think the worst. But why

should anybody hold anything against Edwards? His fans, yes! His pictures smell to high heaven. But fans don't get into studios—not in wartime, anyhow."

I heard Friml sputtering. "Listen, Jimmy Lee." Everybody calls me Jimmy Lee. "Yesterday he climbed a wall and somebody dropped sandbags at his head. Today we shot a scene of flame-throwers and they threw real flames at him! I tell

you, you've got to come out here and look into it. And remember, no publicity!"

I said I would be out. Panamint Studios, who paid Friml a salary that was so big it was difficult to write it all on one check, had me on their call list to take care of disagreeable things like blackmail, inside petty thefts, and other unpleasantries that by rights should go to the police, but would be bad publicity for Panamint.

The studio was near Santa Monica, off Wilshire Boulevard.

As I cruised the coupe toward the setting sun, I thought about Ronald Edwards.

Edwards had appeared from nowhere into star roles in a new series of war pictures Panamint was producing. Friml was head of the unit shooting them.

However, the films had been so corny and full of hokum that they never made the first-run houses except as added attractions.

Yet Edwards, who wrote his own scripts, continued to be publicized as though he were a million-dollar draw. I wondered what he had done to the brass hats in the front office to get such a gravy train. Probably hypnotized them, or knew where the body was buried.

At the studio gates the cop was expecting me. He hopped on the running board and directed me to a parking space, then said Friml had left word I was to meet him on Sound Stage Four.

I cut across the parking lot to the huge building that housed the sound stages. I expected to find a couple of hundred extras, dressed as Commandos, snaking across scenery made to look like enemy territory. Instead of that, I found a small camera crew setting up in a boarded-off portion of the otherwise deserted stage. Friml was not around.

ART MABRY, the director and right-hand man to Friml, was bouncing around, supervising the lighting effects and the background scenery. He was a huge man with a sharp face and prematurely gray hair that stood up in a short, startled pompadour. He stopped his bouncing long enough to tell me that Friml was in Edwards' dressing room.

I glanced toward that room, a portable affair about fifty feet away in the shadows of the stage. Then I settled down on a stack of scenery flats. Jane Mathis, a script girl whom I had met on a previous job for Panamint, waved. I motioned her over.

"Hi, beautiful!" I said. "What's Mabry shooting?"

Jane sat down beside me. She pushed back her wavy brown hair.

"Just tying in some scenes and sound effects. Mostly retakes."

She peeled a piece of gum and stuck it into her rosebud mouth. I studied her. Her chin had a tilt that suggested she could take care of herself, yet her lips made a man unconsciously lean toward her when she faced him. There was nothing wrong with her figure either, which was draped with a pair of tailored slacks and a tightly-knitted sweater. She flipped the gum wrapper at a passing workman.

"Friml, as usual, is not satisfied," she continued. "This story's edited and in the can, but he took part of it back to the cutting room and demands retakes. Edwards is the hero who plays dead after a burst of machinegun fire and lets the dirty Nazis advance over his beautiful body. Then he ups and blows the blazes out of them from the rear.

"The same old corn he's been doing for the past year. However, Friml wasn't satisfied with the shots of him playing dead while the shooting goes on, so here we are, still doing retakes. Lou says

they've already spent more on raw film than the picture will gross."

I grinned. Lou Mathis was her brother. A handsome kid, whom I had spotted back of the camera when I came in. He had been something of a prodigy in the movie world and had had chances to go East and direct big-time shows on the legitimate stage. However, he liked photography, and had never left his native California. At twenty-one, he was one of Hollywood's top-rank cameramen.

"It's all dough in Lou's pocket," I said. "I could do with his salary."

"Yeah," said Jane. "But he told me if it wasn't for the fact that he's going into the Army next month and will need the money, he'd tell 'em where they could send the Ronald Edwards pictures. He said his name on the credit titles did him more harm than good." She yawned and glanced over her shoulder. "Here comes Romeo now."

I looked toward the dressing room. Ronald Edwards, in a dusty uniform, was talking with Mabry.

Edwards was a good-looking guy in a sleek sort of way. His hair was black and full of tight waves. His uniform looked good on him, what with the padded shoulders Wardrobe had furnished and the snazzy Sam Browne belt around his middle.

Mabry said something to him, and he walked toward a bridge which had been placed by the property men in a set made to look like a blasted waterfront village. The bridge was about seventy-five feet from camera.

Edwards stretched out on the ground, arranged his hair in careful disorder, and got his profile just right. Mabry stood over him.

"Okay, Ronny," I heard Mabry say. "You're dead, see? We're shooting around the mob scene. Thank the gods Friml

okayed that and it's in the can. What you've got to do all over again is get up while the guns are firing—register hate and determination, and start snaking toward camera, see? Friml said you looked scared in the one I wrapped up." He glanced over his shoulder, and added, "Personally, I think Friml's a dope."

I AGREED with Mabry that he was a dope. A dope for continuing to splurge money on pictures featuring Ronald Edwards. What kept him doing it was a mystery. My guess was that he held a forlorn hope that one of these Commando stories would be a smash hit and make up for the others which were losses.

Mabry stepped back of the camera in the shadows.

"Lights!" he shouted.

The overhead floodlights blinked out and the stage came to life. It was a bomb-wrecked hamlet. A low rumbling started, grew in intensity, and broke into staccato blasts. A red glow rose from the background scenery. Thin smoke crept over the scene as a machine-gun chattered. A searchlight stabbed the hazy air. I watched the prone figure of Ronny Edwards.

The tempo of gunfire increased to crescendo, then slackened, sputtered, and faded away. Silence. From out of the darkness and smoke Mabry shouted "Cut!" and I saw him dart before the camera.

"Hey, Ronny," he cried. "You missed your cue. You're supposed to get up during the shooting."

The director had reached the star's side. He bent down—and jerked away. I felt a tightening around the nape of my neck. Edwards had not moved.

I jumped up from the pile of scenery and started for the prop bridge, with Jane and her brother close behind. I leaned over the actor. A dark red worm of blood was

jerking and twisting from his temple, and his throat moved convulsively. He sighed and gurgled. Then the blood stopped jumping, and merely seeped as though no more was left in his body.

Mabry's face turned as gray as his short, clipped hair. He backed further away, pushing at the air with his hands.

Next to me I could see Jane's fingers biting into the arm of her brother. "They've killed him!" she cried shrilly. "Yesterday we thought the sandbag was an accident, and this morning that flame-thrower—"

Lou Mathis slapped her grasping hand hard. I heard him whisper "Hush!"

Emil Friml had suddenly loomed up from nowhere. One moment he wasn't there, and the next he was. In the ghostly light of the background flares, he looked like Scrooge and the devil rolled into one. His withered leg swung like a pendulum between his good one and the mahogany crutch which supported him. His head, a tremendous load for such a scrawny neck, was covered with a fuzz of colorless hair. His ears were pointed, and belonged on a character from a child's fairy story book. I had seen him often, but I was always startled when I faced him.

He balanced himself by holding to the bridge rail, and leaned far over to gaze at the dead actor. At last he looked up.

"Murderers!" he whispered softly. Then his voice rose to a shrill, hysterical screech. "Murderers!"

I felt my face flush in sudden anger. The man was acting insanely. Mathis' arm tightened around his sister's waist. Mabry jerked his gaze from the corpse to the frenzied producer.

"Emil!" he said. "You're talking crazy!"

The producer turned on him. His voice again was low.

"Crazy, am I? We'll see. Three times

someone in this unit tried to kill Ronny. The third time they succeeded." Friml pointed a finger at me. "Jimmy Lee, get over to the main door and don't let anyone leave. I'm calling the police."

He hobbled to a phone attached to a partition near the dressing-room and jiggled the hook viciously.

AS I STARTED for the door, the background lights, casting their eerie glow of red, suddenly blinked out. The stage was in total darkness. I let out a yelp of surprise, and was smacked flat as someone rushed past me. Jane screamed—a long, piercing cry that echoed and reechoed through the building.

I heard a thumping as I pushed to my feet and held my hands out to avoid another collision. There was a swishing, grating noise as though a body were being dragged across the floor, then a bump—and silence.

"Throw the main switch!" That was Mabry, his voice almost hysterical.

The overhead floods blossomed out like a flash of lightning and I squinted my eyes.

One of the workmen stood at the light control panel, his hand still on the switch. His eyes were wide with fright. Jane lay on the floor, her hand pressed hard against her mouth. Mabry stood near me. Mathis was diving for his sister on the floor. I glanced toward the telephone and saw Friml, apparently still trying to get his number. He was jiggling the hook.

"What in thunder's going on—" I started, when I glanced at the spot where the corpse had been. The body was gone.

Under the bridge a head appeared, raised further from the ditch underneath, and a man climbed onto the stage proper. He was a sallow-complexioned fellow of about thirty, with a slightly bulging forehead, a head almost bald, and a body

so thin it looked emaciated. He stared at the faces around him and swept an arm across his sweating face. "Who—who dropped the corpse of Ronny Edwards on me?" he demanded, in a quavering voice.

I recognized him then. He was Lyle Bradford, Mabry's assistant. I darted past him and looked into the ditch below the bridge. Crumpled in a heap was Edwards' body, the mouth gaping, the eyes open and glazed. Around him was the electrical equipment Bradford had been operating. But why had Bradford stayed there when the death was discovered? Friml had certainly shouted "Murderers!" loud enough to bring him out.

I told everyone to keep away from the bridge, then went to the stage entrance. Friml, at last, had the police on the wire. . .

When Detective-Lieutenant Tom Callahan arrived with a couple of plainclothesmen and the medical examiner, he found two groups of silent people. The five stage hands, who had been working on the set, were huddled together near the camera. Jane and her brother, Bradford and Mabry were sitting on the stacked scenery I had vacated when Edwards was shot. Friml stood slightly away from them, swaying on his crutch and staring at the property bridge. After letting Callahan in, I followed him.

The detective was a debonair cop if there ever was one. He fitted his district, which was Hollywood, as perfectly as the scores of celebrities who make up its glamour. His tailored tweed suit must have cost him half a month's salary, and the expensive Homburg hat pulled over his short, smartly-clipped graying hair suggested a well-to-do sportsman rather than a cop.

His eyes, though, were as official as the gold badge pinned to his wallet. They were slate-colored and as cold as a death sentence. He gave me a curt nod of

recognition, and went straight to Friml.

The producer looked at him with smoldering eyes.

"Someone here murdered my star," he said flatly. "I want that person found, and"—he pounded the floor with his crutch—"I don't want any publicity!"

Callahan pushed back his hat. I could see a faint smirk creasing one side of his face.

"Mr. Friml, murder news isn't censored in Hollywood. Not even at the request of a great producer." He ignored an angry glance. "Where is the body?"

"Over here," I said, motioning to the bridge. "He was shot at this spot, but the lights went out and someone dumped him into this ditch."

CALLAHAN leaned over the bridge, gazed at the body a moment, then walked toward the group of stage hands. He spoke to them briefly. I couldn't hear his words. He nodded to one of the cops.

"Take 'em outside somewhere and frisk 'em. I'll talk with them later."

After the workmen had left, Callahan climbed down into the ditch and ran deft hands through Edwards's pockets. He transferred papers and trinkets to a large envelope which he slipped into his own pocket. Back on the stage, he motioned to the medical examiner.

"It's yours," he said. He walked to the group of movie people, pulled up a folding chair which had "Art Mabry" stenciled on it, and sat down.

"All right, let's have it," he said briskly. "Everything that happened before Edwards was shot." He settled back and lit a cigarette.

Mabry started to bounce forward, but Friml pushed him aside.

"It started yesterday. Ronny had to scale a fourteen-foot wall, on the top of which were sandbags. When he reached

the base of the wall, two sandbags toppled down and missed him by inches. If either one of them had landed on Ronny it could easily have broken his neck.”

Callahan flipped ashes from his cigarette. “Who placed the sandbags on the wall?”

Friml shrugged. Bradford ran a nervous hand through his remaining hair.

“I did.”

The detective turned his cold eyes on the assistant director, raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

Bradford squirmed. “At least, I directed the placing of them. I was behind the wall when the scene was shot.”

Callahan leaned forward smiling. He ground out his cigarette with his heel.

“Interesting,” he said. “And you pushed the sandbags on Ronny’s head?”

Bradford’s loose-lipped mouth gaped open.

“No! No! I was busy watching the lighting effects.”

Callahan nodded complacently and settled back in his chair. “Okay. You didn’t push the sandbags. Where were you when Edwards was shot?”

“I was in that ditch,” Bradford said.

“And of course you came out immediately he was found dead?”

The assistant director turned pale.

“No, I—I fainted! Honest, I fainted! Friml shouted ‘Murderers!’ and I just fainted.” He flipped his hands around helplessly. “I’ve got a weak heart, so help me. I’m listed Four-F with my Draft Board on account of it. I woke up to find Ronny’s body on top of me.”

Callahan grinned broadly in Bradford’s face.

“Well, well!” he said. “You fainted!” He rolled a cigarette in his hand. “Let’s go back. What else happened before the murder?”

Friml stumped forward on his crutch.

“This morning we were doing some retakes of a flame-throwing scene. The flames were supposed to shoot behind Ronny, but they shot at him. If his clothes had not been soaking wet from him having supposedly swum a river, he would have been badly burned.”

Callahan turned to Bradford again.

“And were you ‘directing’ the flame-throwers?”

Bradford yanked at his collar. “Well, yes, I was. But, curse it, man, that’s my job!” The assistant suddenly flew into a rage. “As far as that’s concerned,” he yelled, “I was behind the scenes, directing the machine-gun fire and the lighting effects when Edwards was killed, but you can’t pin this killing on me!”

Callahan hooked a fresh cigarette into his mouth.

“And why can’t we pin this on you?”

**B**RADFORD rubbed his temples and stared at the detective.

“Because all the sound effects on this set are canned. There’s not a gun on the stage!”

“What do you mean,” Callahan said, “there’s no gun on the stage?”

“I mean the firing came off the sound track. You can’t buy blanks during war time, and we use prop sound. I was running a projector and amplifier in sync with the action. You’ll find the equipment under the bridge.”

Callahan rubbed his close-shaven jaw.

“Then you turned out the lights?”

Bradford was lighting a cigarette shakily.

“I must have fallen against the switch when I fainted and—”

He was interrupted by a shout. The remaining plainclothesman, who had been probing over the set, came running toward his superior.

“Hey, Chief!” he said, holding out an

object wrapped in a handkerchief. "Here's a thirty-eight I found under the camera."

Callahan reached for the gun. He waved it under his nose, then flipped the chamber open. He cocked an eyebrow at Bradford.

"No gun on the set, eh? Who was behind the camera when Edwards was shot?"

I saw Jane move closer to her brother. He started to push forward, but Mabry was ahead of him.

"I was," said the director. "I was about ten or fifteen feet behind it. But," he added, "there were two stage hands alongside me. They'll tell you I didn't shoot Ronny, and I'm sure they didn't."

Callahan nodded. "I know. I found that out when I questioned them. Who was running the camera?"

Lou Mathis stepped forward, staring hard at the .38. His face was pale and his slight but wiry frame seemed taut.

"I was," he said. "But if you think I bumped that dirty wolf simply because he insulted—"

Jane sprang up from her seat on the scenery. She ran to her brother's side and grabbed his arm.

"Lou! Be quiet! That was all settled." She stood as if to shield him from the detective.

Callahan's cold eyes lighted with interest. He rose from his chair and walked to the cameraman.

"Nothing's settled yet, except that a man has been murdered. I want to know just why you called the corpse a wolf, and just what has been settled." He divided his stare between brother and sister.

Jane's words tumbled on top of each other.

"Edwards merely made a pass at me a few days ago. He's done it to every girl on every set he ever worked on. Lou heard about it and threatened to push his face in.

Edwards apologized. That's all there is to it, isn't it, Lou?" Her eyes sought her brother's for confirmation.

Mathis patted her arm. "Not quite, honey. Just before we set up for this scene, Friml came over and said Edwards had complained about me. Said I had insulted him."

"And did you apologize?"

The cameraman shook his head. "I suggested he tell Ronny to go fry in his ham grease."

Callahan's face almost cracked in a grin. He hid it behind a flaring match which lighted his cigarette.

"Tell me, Mr. Friml," he said, "just why Ronald Edwards was given the front page of all of Panamint's publicity? It might not be as unrelated to the case as you may think. Personally, I've always been of the opinion that his acting belonged with third-rate legit houses instead of Hollywood's billion-dollar industry."

**F**RIML flushed. His beady eyes squinted and his sharp, gnomelike chin thrust out.

"Listen, Mr. Inspector. Rome wasn't built in a day. Art Mabry has discovered more stars for me than you'll find in the flag, and I have confidence in him. We were trying to build up Ronny. I'll admit now that we made a mistake, in putting him in a starring role right away, but he was still good material. Ronny's contract ended next month, and I had just told him that I'd put him in stock at a hundred a week to groom him for future pictures."

"And I suppose he loved that?" said Callahan; sarcastically. "Panamint publicity says Edwards was paid three grand a week."

Friml made a deprecating gesture. "Publicity only. We actually paid him eight hundred."

“Okay,” Callahan said. “Eight hundred. That’s still quite a comedown. What was Edwards’ reaction?”

Friml thumped his crutch and shook his massive head.

“What’s this to do with Ronny’s murder? I only told Ronny about the stock job a few minutes before he went on for the scene. He said he wanted to talk it over with Mabry. Mabry’s been his friend and adviser since he came to Hollywood.”

The medical examiner climbed out of the ditch and came over to Callahan. He held a flat disc in his hand.

“Here’s your bullet, Lieutenant. It was embedded in Edwards’ arm after coming through his head. Apparently he was resting his head on his arm when he was shot. It knocked a hole as big as a saucer through his right temple. It’s soft lead, and I don’t believe there’s any chance of Ballistics finding markings.”

Callahan took the flattened bullet. It was a jagged piece of lead, the size of a fifty-cent piece. He snicked open the .38 and examined the unfired cartridges. I saw him push a fingernail into the lead.

“There’s one bullet fired from this gun,” Callahan said. “The remaining ones are soft lead.” He got up from his chair and spoke to the M. E. “Take the body down to the morgue. We’ll carry on this questioning from Friml’s office.” He flipped a finger at the plainclothesman. “Lock this stage and stand by the door until you hear from me. Nobody is to go in.”

Except for that cop and the M. E., the group of us, including Callahan and a couple of uniformed men with him, headed across the lot to the directors’ building. It had grown dark. After we were settled in the chrome and black-leathered room which complemented Friml as the great producer he supposedly was, I started fidgeting. I was through with the

case. A guy had been killed and the police were investigating. I wasn’t being paid to sit around. More business might be crying at my office.

I walked over to a window that overlooked the street. Dimly I could see the silhouette of huge floodlights that were off for the duration, due to the California coast dimout. Before the war, they used to go on when the first street light flashed up and broke the circuit of a photo-electric cell.

Now the street lights were hooded, and the electric eye was in the discard. A wire dangled in the breeze just outside the window where the “eye” had been. Probably salvaged for the war effort. They were salvaging everything nowadays.

Salvage! An idea struck me. Friml was taking retake after retake, yet the WPB had limited the use of raw film to about seventy-five per cent of previous consumption. And using the precious stuff on a picture that no amount of reshooting could help. I swung around to put in a question, then realized I was out of the case. I shrugged.

“LOOK, Callahan,” I said, “I’m scrambling. You know where you can reach me.”

I smacked on my hat. Emil Friml jumped to his feet. “Jimmy Lee!” he yelled. “I hired you, and you’re going to stay until this business is over! You’ve got ten times more brains than this clothes-horse, and I want you to find out who killed Ronny!”

Callahan’s granite face bordered on a sneer. He had been in the middle of questioning Jane’s brother.

“Okay,” he said. “If the great producer wants you to work along with us. But keep from under foot.”

He gave me a dirty look, then pulled the handkerchief-wrapped .38 from his

pocket. From another pocket he pulled a fingerprint kit. He dusted the gun, then examined it closely. I saw him ball up the handkerchief and throw it into a wastepaper basket. Obviously, the gun carried no prints.

"Mr. Friml," Callahan said, "this clothes-horse would like to know if the studio had insured Ronald Edwards before the picture was started? I understand that's the custom."

Friml, his chin resting his huge head on the crutch, darted his birdlike eyes at the detective.

"Of course. For half a million. That's what the picture budget, plus the profits, was figured at."

"So," Callahan continued, "the studio is in half a million, plus whatever the film grosses?"

The producer jerked his chin from the crutch.

"Plus losing our best star!" he shouted.

"Who had just been banished to stock at a hundred a week."

Lou Mathis laughed. "It'll be the first time a Ronald Edwards picture made money."

Art Mabry got to his feet. His eyes were blazing.

"Ronald Edwards was the greatest potential star Panamint ever contracted!" he yelled.

Mathis swung toward him. "Ronald Edwards was a dirty, woman-chasing ham that had Panamint hypnotized! Friml does anything you say just because you discovered Gale Prentiss. Edwards was your pal. What'd he do—give you a cut of the salary you got for him?"

Mabry's bouncing turned into a tremble. He swung a haymaker that connected with the cameraman's chin. Mathis took the big man's swing but came right back with an upper-cut that lifted the director six inches from the floor. He spun

dizzily, crashed into Callahan, and folded like an accordion in the detective's arms.

Callahan helped Mabry to a chair while the two cops calmed the rest down, then the detective-lieutenant walked up to Mathis.

"Listen," he said. "You were back of the camera when the shot was fired. The gun's wiped clean of prints. The dead guy insulted your sister—" He weighed the gun in front of the cameraman's face. "If I could trace this to you—"

Friml, who had been watching the action, thumped noisily on his crutch.

"That gun," he said, twisting his huge head around to the detective's side, "looks like—"

Mathis leaped to his feet. With one sweep he whipped the gun from the hand of the detective.

"Yes, curse you! It's my gun! Someone took it from my desk!" He backed away slowly, covering us all with the .38. "But you're not taking me down to put me through a third degree!" His hand reached behind him and he opened the door. "I think I know who killed Edwards, and I'm taking out time to confirm it."

Jane screamed, but it was too late. A police positive arced through the air, and its butt thudded on the cameraman's head. Mathis dropped like a Zero fighter with its wings shot off.

THE plainclothes cop who had taken the workmen out of the stage, stepped over the unconscious man, pocketing his gun. He looked at Callahan questioningly.

"I did right in conking him?"

The detective's face wore a sadistic grin. "You conked the murderer of Ronald Edwards. You'll probably get another stripe for doing it."

The cop beamed. He swayed self-consciously.

"To tell you the truth, it was an

accident I came up. I've been holding those workmen downstairs and I wondered if you wanted me to take them to Headquarters?"

Jane had run to her brother's side. She was bending over him, sobbing. Callahan pulled her away and felt Mathis' pulse.

"This killer is just stunned. I'll have a confession out of him half an hour after he's at Headquarters."

The cameraman was coming to. Callahan and the cop hooked arms around him and started through the door.

"This guy's a hothead," the detective said to Friml. "His rep is known in Hollywood. Plenty of scraps in night clubs. I'll bet my badge he murdered Edwards because your ham insulted his sister, and—believe it or not because he was such a rotten actor for a cameraman to have his name tied up with. I've worked Hollywood for years. There's no rhyme or reason to some of these boy geniuses."

I held Jane as the door closed. Friml gazed around blankly, a finger worrying a thick lip. Mabry was massaging his jaw. Bradford, who had remained quietly in a chair in a corner during the rioting, slowly got up. He looked around and sighed.

"Well, I suppose that's that." He put on his hat. "I'm going home to bed."

No one spoke as he went through the doorway. At last Friml hobbled out, telling Jane to lock his office when she left. Mabry followed him, the bounce gone from his big body. Jane had sunk into a chair and was crying. I went over to her.

"Listen," I said. "Callahan's off his beam. He's stuck and wants to make a quick arrest to boost his stock. We'll have Lou out of the jug by morning."

The girl looked up eagerly, then her face clouded.

"But his reputation! He's set on the Army and this might get him thrown out."

I patted her arm. I didn't have a leg to stand on, but I stuck my neck out. "I'll clear him like the Marines cleared the Solomons. Let's take a look at his office. Maybe there's a lead there."

Jane got to her feet and led me through Mabry's office, which adjoined Friml's, and on into a smaller one whose frosted glass door carried Lou's name and title. She flipped on a light and settled in a chair.

I frisked the room and found nothing suspicious. I delved into a clothes closet and found an assortment of sports-coats hanging on hooks. On a shelf was a supply of miscellaneous photographic equipment—light meters, flash-bulbs, bottles of developer and fixative, and stacks of black-wrapped sensitized paper for making prints. On the floor was a large envelope which apparently had fallen from the shelf.

I picked it up and found it unsealed. Inside was a photograph of Carol Jergins. I did a double-take.

Carol Jergins had been a strip tease artist, a show girl, a night club beauty—then a headache for the New York Police Department. Two years ago she had either bumped herself off or been plugged by a boy friend who, so far, had not been identified by the best of the homicide men. A missing link in the chain of circumstantial evidence was a page torn from a New York hotel register which listed the name of a young man admirer. With that page the police would have had the murderer.

**O**N THE back of the photograph was hand-printed:

**JUST TO REMIND YOU THAT THE N.Y. COPS STILL HAVE A COPY OF THIS FILED UNDER UNFINISHED BUSINESS.**

I slipped it back into its envelope and returned it to its place on the floor. I went over to Jane.

“Look,” I said. “Did Lou know Carol Jergins?”

She stared at me, her face puzzled.

“Yes. Over two years ago, when she was on the Coast. He was a kid then, only eighteen, but he had a crush on her. He did some professional pictures of her.”

“Do you now if he kept any copies?”

Jane shook her head. “No, He destroyed those he had after she died. Her death hit him pretty hard. His interest, though, was nothing but infatuation.”

“Did anyone else know about this infatuation?” I asked.

“I suppose so,” Jane said. “He was working for Panamint then, and they were seen together. Why?”

“I dunno,” I said, and scratched my head.

A motive was shaping itself in my mind, but I couldn't tie the strings together. I reviewed the killing. Edwards at the end of the bridge.

“Hey!” I said. “Think hard. Was there any change in the action of the retake when Edwards was shot?”

Jane sniffled, swiped her nose with a hanky.

“No, except that he lay down at the end of the bridge instead of the middle of it. Before, he had been in the center. Frequently slight changes in direction are made in retakes for various reasons. Clearer lighting, better shots.”

Better shots! I closed my eyes and visualized the scene. Edwards lying there, blood pumping from his temple. The hole in his head was aimed directly at the ceiling! The camera was at right angles!

I headed for the door.

“Keep your chin up, kid,” I said.

“Lou couldn't possibly have shot Edwards. Somebody's trying to pin a

double killing on him and I'm going to prove it!”

I slammed out and high-tailed for the sound stage. If I could only reach there before the murderer removed the evidence!

The building housing Sound Stage Four was a blue-black hulk against the darker blue of the dimout. The cop on the door had been dismissed, apparently when Callahan decided Lou Mathis was the killer. I found the place unlocked.

I slipped inside the total darkness of the stage and leaned against the wall. I figured that the body had been moved so that the path of the bullet could not be traced. Also, a bullet of soft lead splatters when it hits and cannot be identified with a gun by ballistics experts. The rifling marks are destroyed.

The .38 under the camera could well have been planted, and the real murder gun fired from some other point. Hence, moving the body. On top of that, Edwards apparently had received a change of direction in his actions for the retake just before his last scene. Friml was the last man with him alone.

I felt along the wall in the direction of Sound Stage Four. I was about to flip on my flash when I heard a slight sound to my left. I froze against a flat of scenery. The noise was not repeated. Probably a rat scurrying about.

I crept forward until I figured I was over the spot where Edwards had been shot. I turned on my flash. A pool of coagulated blood reflected from the light, and I swung the beam upward. Somewhere from above the shot had been fired—and *by remote control!*

Stored scenery, trailing ropes, and cobwebs showed in the light as I raked the rafters. Then there was a grating sound and something as heavy as a tank hit my shoulders. My face was smeared against

the floor and my flash went skittering. An arm encircled my neck and pulled tight. I felt the blood pounding in my head and all I could do was whip back with an elbow. It struck soft flesh and for a moment the weight on my back lifted.

I MANAGED to roll over and lift my feet. I kicked out. There was a gratifying connection with my assailant's stomach and he must have sailed several feet. On hands and knees I felt frantically for my flash.

And then all the stars in the heavens exploded in the Sound Stage building as something cracked against my skull. For the second time my face hit the floor and I was out. . . .

Slowly I came back to consciousness. My whole body felt numb. I tried to raise an arm that didn't seem part of me, and a torturing stab of pain shot through my side. I moved a leg and felt the same pain. I was trussed up like a Christmas turkey.

Above me I saw a skittering of light. It was in the rafters. A hand was untying a gun from a beam. A wire was jerked and a tiny box came loose. The light was off for a moment and a body thumped to the floor. Then the light came on again in my face. It stabbed my aching head like a knife.

"I don't know just what to do with you," a voice back of the light said.

The way I felt I didn't give a hoot if he blasted my head off. However, I remember feeling some satisfaction at knowing my deduction was right. I must have been half crazy from the smack on the head, because I said:

"I know why you murdered Ronald Edwards."

The light jerked as if he were startled.

"You killed him," I went on, "because he blackmailed you into getting him a contract at Panamint. He had the missing

page from the hotel register in New York with your name on it. It would complete the evidence the cops need to pin the murder of Carol Jergins on you.

"His contract was up next month, and he demanded you get a renewal. You knew there was no justification for urging it, no chance of getting it. His pictures smelled to high heaven. So you got up nerve enough to kill him."

"Go on," the voice said, softly, coldly.

I felt icy sweat on my face, and I was sick at my stomach. My head seemed about to explode any moment, and my bound hands and feet were like molten steel. I went on talking, almost babbling. It helped ease the pain.

"You rigged up the photo-electric cell that was used to turn on the studio lot lights. It operates by a beam flashing across the circuit. You hooked the relay to the gun, aimed the gun at the spot you directed Edwards to lie on, and then let the searchlight effect of the war scene do the dirty work. When that beam broke the contact, the relay pulled the trigger. You even put soft lead bullets in the gun so they couldn't be traced to any specific pistol."

The light held in my face had become a shivering red ball of heat.

"And, you dirty killer," I yelled, "you thought you had a perfect suspect in Lou Mathis! You knew he was sore at Edwards for making a pass at his sister. You also knew he was crazy about the Jergins dame a couple of years ago and could have been the unknown admirer. So you placed a picture of the dead girl in his office, stole his gun, and planted it near the camera."

I was getting delirious. I remember snickering at his stupidity. My head was floating toward the ceiling. My arms and legs were no longer a part of me. Words flowed from my mouth like ticker tape.

"You idiot!" I howled. "You made

your colossal mistake in not knowing Mathis' history. At least you should have chosen someone who had been in New York at the time of the murder. Mathis has never been out of California!"

SOMETHING pressed against my temple. It was the nose of a pistol and the cool metal felt good. My head was an inferno. A breeze fanned my face with a gentle swishing. He was wrapping a cloth around his gun to muffle the report.

"You are clever, Jimmy Lee," he said. "Too clever to stay alive."

My mind cleared for a moment. It was the subconscious desire to live making a desperate effort to push through. I jerked my head. A muffled roar blasted my ear and a singe of fire creased my scalp. The man cursed and pistol-whipped me across the face. I faded again. . . .

I came to in the midst of a babble of voices. The lights in the sound stage were on like a pre-war Carthay Circle opening. Callahan stood over me with a wet towel. He had been wiping my face with it. He beamed when I opened my eyes.

"Jimmy Lee!" he shouted. "You filled in the missing clue! The motive! I was planted in the building and heard everything you and the murderer said. My taking Mathis out was an excuse to get back to the sound stage. I figured the answer was here. Boy, have we got an airtight case!"

I flexed my arms and legs which had been freed and now only tingled. I pushed

to my feet. My head felt a hundred per cent better, I squinted a bleary eye at the lieutenant.

"Listen," I said groggily. "Did you sit in a cozy corner watching Art Mabry beat my head into a pulp and try to amputate my legs and arms with baling wire?"

Callahan shrugged, smiling broadly.

"Well, of course, we had to get the evidence. After all, we jumped him before he finished you off, though I'll admit it was close. He'll fry, don't worry." He patted my shoulder.

I glanced to my left where a cop had Mabry handcuffed. His face seemed pushed to one side where something had connected with it.

"What did that to his map?" I asked Callahan.

The lieutenant swelled a bit. "This good old right," he said, hefting his fist.

"Like this?" I asked.

I swung a haymaker for Callahan's jaw and landed. His head whipped back and he rode his heels for ten feet before he hit the floor. I shook my tingling hand.

"That," I said, "was for letting me get the brains beat out of my skull by Mabry. If you get your Beau Brummel self off the floor, I'll give you another one for letting him put my legs and arms on the bum."

Callahan got up, shaking his head. He was grinning as he felt his chin tenderly.

"Jimmy," he said, "we're square. Maybe I deserved it. But not a second one. There's nothing wrong with your arms."