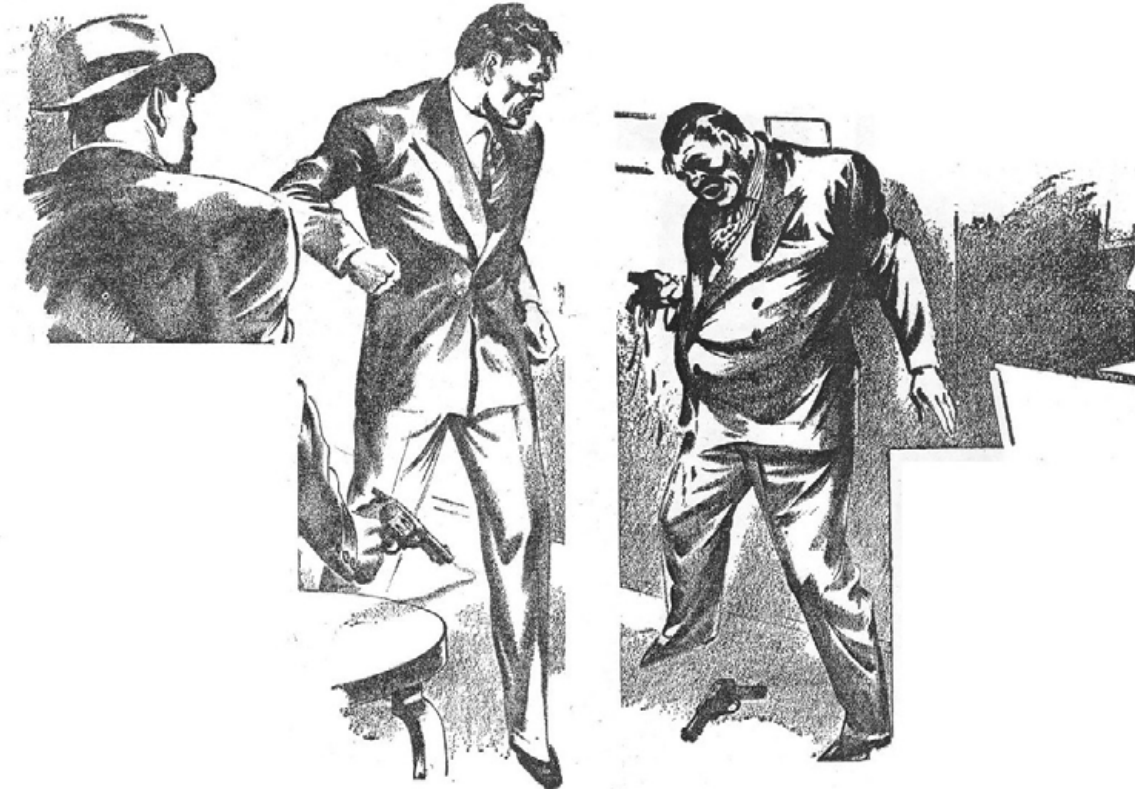


WIDOW BY PROXY

BY ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

In the flash of lightning Dan got a look at his prisoner—a man without a face, a zombie! And listening to his story, Dan suddenly felt that, here in the movie colony, he had at last found a real man!



THE NIGHT was blacker than the inside of a tar barrel and a storm was cooking as I drove Ellen Bancroft from the Metromount lot to her hilltop igloo off Laurel Canyon. She keyed her front portal open and I ankled indoors with her, turned on the lights, prowled through every room of the pretentious joint. When I was satisfied there was nobody on deck except her servants, I drew in a relieved breath, said good-night, and scrambled out to my jalopy.

Before I could reach it, a shadow moved behind me and I felt something sharp nudging me over the right kidney. A harsh voice said: "Don't try anything

funny, Buster. This thing I'm jabbing at you is a dagger, the kind that slides in easy and kills fast."

I froze with my fingers on the door handle of my bucket and an assortment of goose pimples festooning my spine. Up overhead those storm clouds were billowing closer, getting ready to leak. The atmosphere was dank, ominous; but no more sinister than the muffled voice at my back. It had a thick, mushy quality, as if the words were hard to form because of some lip or mouth disfigurement; all of which made the threat that much tougher to listen to.

"Okay," I said. "I'll be good."

"Sure you will. You'll either be good or dead." There was a short pause. "What's your name, Buster?"

"It's not Buster," I said peevishly. "It's Dan Turner."

"What's your racket?"

"Private snooping. Everybody in town knows that."

"I didn't know it," he rasped. "I still don't. All I've got is your word for it. If you're a dick, why were you chauffeuring Ellen home from her studio?"

HIS questions revealed more than he realized. "Listen, mug," I snapped over my shoulder. "If you want me to prove I'm a Sherlock, I'll be happy to oblige with a demonstration, using you as subject matter. First, you're new in Hollywood. Second, you hail from New York; that's where you originally knew Ellen Bancroft. Third—"

"How did you figure that?" he interrupted me.

"Very simple. If you're not aware of my rep, you must be a stranger. For the rest of it, the Bancroft chick came here six months ago from the New York stage to star for Metromount; and you're well enough acquainted with her to call her Ellen. Obviously, since you just arrived on the west coast, you must have known her back east."

He drew a deep breath. "Smart thinking, Buster."

"There's more," I said. "You mentioned I chauffeured Ellen home from her studio. So you must have tailed us."

"Anything else?"

I played my trump card. "Mine is the only chariot in sight, which tells me you followed in a taxi and dismissed it as soon as you get here. Therefore you don't dare puncture me with that shiv or you'll wind up in the smoke house as sure as Golly made green pickles."

"How come I will?" he sounded a trifle shaky.

"Your cabby will tab you as the guy who shadowed my coupe," I said. "He'll describe your funny way of talking—and the muffler or bandage you're wearing on your kisser."

This was a wild shot in the dark because I hadn't yet turned around to look at the lug. My guess seemed to score, a bull's-eye, though. He gave vent to a low groan, took a faltering step backward. That was my cue to pivot and club my knuckles onto his knife-wrist.

The poke caught him flat-footed. He dropped the dagger, tried to wheel and run. I was too sudden for him. I tackled him, brought him down like a chopped tree. Then, straddling him, I whisked out my bracelets; nipped him before he knew what was happening. "Got, you!" I snarled. "Maybe those handcuffs will convince you I'm a gumshoe. Unless you'd prefer a swift bash on the mush?"

He squirmed, a tall, stringy character in a cheap topcoat buttoned to the throat with a dark cotton muffler wrapped around the collar, swathing his map so that nothing but his glimmers showed. This explained why his voice had sounded as if it came filtered through folds of cloth. I began to think I was a pretty good detective.

"Please," he mumbled. "Don't arrest me."

I glowered down into his panicky peepers. "That's very funny indeed. Here the Bancroft cookie's life has been threatened. Her studio boss hires me to bodyguard her every minute she isn't safely at home. I find you skulking outside her stash. You pull a knife on me. And then you have the brass to ask me not to put you in cold storage!"

"Well, but I—"

"Quiet, heel," I growled. "And get up on your shanks. We'll let Miss Bancroft glom a gander at you inside while I'm phoning headquarters." I yanked at his shoulders.

HE cringed, twitched as if I'd rammed a cactus thorn into him. The gathering storm made the night seem heavy, somber. "No! She mustn't see me. I—she—"

"Afraid to face her, hunh?" I said. "What kind of pan are you trying to hide?" I unwrapped the muffler he was wearing; experienced a shuddery sensation as I lamped the bandages underneath. They made a thick white packing from his eyes downward, a packing you wouldn't notice when the muffler was in place. "Extra disguise, eh?"

He uttered a weird, sobbing noise that made the short hairs prickle at the nape of my neck. The sound was almost inhuman, a blend of trapped savagery and despair. Oaths boiled through the mask-like white wrappings on his kisser as he writhed, tried to roll free. His voice verged on hysteria; damned me from hell to Halifax.

I ignored this frantic tirade; picked up the shiv he'd dropped. With one slash I cut the broad gauze bandages, yanked them off his countenance. At the same instant, the storm broke. From the seething black clouds a sudden blaze of lightning exploded; and in the abrupt, blinding flash I piped a sight that sickened me all the way to my ingrown toenails.

My prisoner didn't have a face!

Thunder roared on the lightning's tail and raindrops as big as basketballs began slamming the earth with a drench of blackness; but even in that thick wet dark my optics kept a snapshot of the guy's hideous appearance. His smeller was missing and a puckery hole was where his mouth should have been. Part of his lower

jaw remained, but most of it seemed to have been whittled off with a dull hatchet. Instead of flesh there was scar tissue, white and shiny, drawn taut over shapeless bone . . .

"Cripes!" I caterwauled. "A zombie!"

"If zombies are living dead men, yes," he said against the rain that pelted him. "Now maybe you can understand why I don't want Ellen to see me."

I hauled him upright, gestured for him to wind the muffler around his grotesque puss. "Yeah. You'd give her the screeching meemies. Come on, I'll run you straight down to the gow and let the cops have nightmares." I boosted him into my jalopy, wedged my heft beside him.

The handcuffs clanked dolefully on his dukes. "You still insist on arresting me?"

"Damned right," I kicked my starter, got the motor going. I started driving with one hand; kept the other free to dig forth my shoulder-holstered roscoe in case of need. "I don't like citizens to pull knives on me."

"I can explain why I did that," he said mildly.

I gave him a sour sidewise swivel. "Do your explaining down at the bastille, bub."

"No; I want to tell you. Then maybe you'll change your mind about putting me in jail. You see, Ellen is the reason for what just happened. Will you listen?"

"I can't help myself. I forgot to bring earmuffs."

He mumbled reminiscently: "Ellen and Franklin Bancroft, top dramatic starring team on Broadway until the war came, remember? Husband and wife, genuinely in love; successful in marriage, as well as on the stage. . ."

"So what?"

"So Franklin Bancroft enlisted, two days after Pearl Harbor. He saw action in Africa. He was with the American troops invading and capturing Sicily."

I STEERED my heap down the torrent that was flooding Laurel Canyon. "Okay. Bancroft was killed. Ellen, his widow, went into mourning a while, then gave up her stage work and came to Hollywood to star for her old friend Sime Sultan, a former New York playwright who's now a big-shot producer for Metromount Studios. What is this, a history lesson?"

"Sort of," the faceless bozo said through his muffler. "I'd like you to understand my angle, and the background is important. Ellen's first picture was recently released. It's a click. A new career is opening for her. In time she'll forget the old legitimate stage days . . . and her husband who died in Sicily. She'll be happy again." He choked a little.

I said: "Don't get emotional. Stick to your story."

"It's Ellen's story, really," he answered gently. "The newspapers have headlined it, which is how I happen to know so much about her present troubles. A young Metromount actor named Dunn has fallen in love with her; an insane infatuation. He threatened to kill her when she refused to marry him."

"Which is where I enter the setup," I said. "I was hired to bodyguard her against the crazy jerk. But—"

"I realize that, now. And I apologize for waylaying you. It was a mistake."

I rasped: "A bad mistake, chum. You can do your apologizing from a cell." I turned left into upper Hollywood Boulevard; headed downtown.

"Please," the faceless bozo said. "I was only trying to protect Ellen. I thought perhaps you were the young man who'd been annoying her."

"That's silly. If you read the newspapers, you know the punk has disappeared; dropped completely out of

sight a few days ago. He hasn't been seen since," I snapped.

"He might come back, though. Isn't that why you're still on the bodyguarding job?"

He had me there. "Well, yes," I admitted. "But what business is it of yours? Why the hell should you be so interested in the quail's welfare?"

"She's my wife," he said wistfully. "I'm Franklin Bancroft."



He dropped the dagger, tried to run, but I was too fast for him.

SIME SULTAN was a bald, tubby gee who'd climbed to the peak of the Hollywood pile by virtue of producing a series of profitable pix for Metromount. He had a Spanish igloo on Lookout Mountain Drive, not very far from Ellen Bancroft's stash but a damned sight more pretentious; and when I nudged his doorbell a few minutes later, Sime himself opened up.

His nude scalp gleamed pinkly in the porch light and a look of puzzlement crossed his roly-poly pan. "Sherlock! What's wrong? Has—has anything happened to—?" Then he lamped the guy I had with me. "Who's this? Why is he handcuffed? Why are you holding a gun on him?"

"It was the only way I could force him here," I said. "I unearthed him on Ellen's front lawn. He had a shiv. I thought maybe you could identify him for me."

The mug in the muffler squared his shoulders as if resigning himself to the inevitable. "Hello, Sime. Are you as good at pinochle here as you used to be in New York?"

"Pinochle? I haven't played it since—Good God! That voice, those eyes—*Franklin Bancroft!*"

"I knew you'd recognize me. I was afraid you would."

Sultan rocked on his heels like a punchy boxer. "But you—you're dead! You were killed in action. You can't—you—you're not—"

"There was a mistake, Sime; one of those crazy accidents of battle. My dog-tag got mixed up with another soldier's; a fellow who was really killed. He was buried in my name. The same shell that blasted him blew away most of my face. I was hospitalized under the dead man's identity, and I let it ride. It seemed the easiest way out."

The tubby producer beckoned us inside, took us to a paneled library, closed the doors. His optics bulged like oysters being squeezed as he hung the flabbergasted focus on Bancroft. "A miracle!" he whispered. "When Ellen learns—"

"She mustn't! It was for her sake I allowed myself to be reported dead. Do you think I'd go back to her looking like this?" He took off his muffler.

Sime got pale around the fringes. "God!"

"Exactly." Bancroft's attempted grin was a bad dream, a gargoyle nightmare. But his voice packed resonant power: "It would be too cruel, too selfish, for me to inflict myself on her as I am now. The horror of being saddled with a man who's

got only a half a face would drive her crazy. I won't torture her that way, Sime; I love her too much. I'd sooner let her go on thinking me dead."

"But plastic surgery—"

Bancroft replaced the muffler on his shattered mush. "No, I don't believe the Army surgeons who say that they can rebuild my features. There's nothing left to reconstruct. That's why I slipped away from the hospital last week; I'm as healed as I'll ever be. And I'd seen a news report that Ellen had been threatened by an actor named Dunn who was infatuated with her. I thought maybe I could guard her—not realizing you'd already hired a very efficient strong arm," he indicated me.

I HAULED out my handcuff key, unlatched his nippers. "Looks as if we were both barking up the wrong stump, pal. You mistook me for a wolf and I tabbed you for a prowler. Shake?"

He gripped my flipper; chuckled wryly through the thick muffler. "Okay, Buster. With a man like you looking after Ellen, I won't be worried any more!" Then he turned to Sultan. "Good-bye, Sime." He made for the door.

"Hey, wait," I called. "I'll drive you downtown."

"Thanks, no. I've been in worse storms than this. What's a little rain to a dead man?" And he ankled out into the soaking night like a wraith going back to its graveyard.

I copped a furtive squint at Sime Sultan. There was a hint of brine in the pudgy producer's glimmers; a catch in his voice as he said: "Hawkshaw, there went a man. Just about the bravest man you and I will ever meet—and one of the best friends I'll ever have." He put a cork in his emotions; firmed his tone to a businesslike crispness. "Ellen was okay when you left her?"

“Yeah.”

“No trace of Joe Dunn hanging around?”

I shook my head. “Evidently he scrambled out of Hollywood in a yellow funk when we let the newspapers know about his threats. Five will get you ten he never comes back.”

That was one wager I shouldn’t have made. An hour later the phone in my apartment stash roused me out of a sound snooze. I lifted the receiver and heard Sime Sultan saying: “Turner? Come quick!”

“Come where?” I mumbled drowsily.

“To Ellen’s house. I’m here waiting for you. She called me a few minutes ago—”

I got wide awake in a thundering yank. “What cooks?”

Sime choked: “That screwy Joe Dunn punk is on her front patio. He’s d-dead. Somebody stabbed him.”

An ugly hunch slithered through my nooks and crannies: “I’m on my way,” I yodeled. Then I rang off, thrust my hundred and ninety pounds into a set of threads, gulped two quick snifters of Vat 69 in case of snake-bite, and made sure my .32 automatic was easy in its armpit rig. Within ten minutes of Sultan’s frantic phone bleat I went larruping out of my tepee; made for the staircase leading down to the basement garage.

I never reached it. Just as I passed a window embrasure in the corridor somebody stepped out behind me. There was a swishing noise, and then a blunt instrument connected with the back of my konk. I felt as if I’d been maced by a steel girder. Sudden darkness gulped me.

WAKING UP was one of the toughest tasks I ever tackled. My dome sported a lump the size of a grapefruit and a hell-roaring hangover clogged my think-

tank with fog as thick as navy bean soup. To make matters worse, there was no trace of the citizen who’d bashed me. During my five or ten minutes of unconsciousness the dirty dastard had powdered, having accomplished everything so silently that he hadn’t even aroused any of the neighbors.

I stirred, discovered I was all in one hunk instead of trivial fragments; moaned weakly as I staggered upright. Presently the floor stopped bouncing under my brogans and I groped groggily to the stairs; descended as carefully as a drunken monkey going down an Alp. After what seemed like seven or eight years I managed to get to my jalopy in the underground garage.

There was a spare bottle of Scotch tonic in the glove compartment and I sluiced a gush of it past my gullet. Pretty soon the distilled fire spread through my crevices, made me feel almost normal. In another minute I was driving up the ramp to the street, heading for Ellen Bancroft’s joint under forced draft.

The black sky was still weeping copious gallonage as I whammed into Laurel Canyon, and the clouds kept muttering occasional remote curses; but I paid no attention either to the rain or the thunder. When I finally dragged anchor at my destination, I pelted hellity-blip to the Bancroft cupcake’s unlighted front porch; came a cropper over something soft, squishy. As soon as I got untangled from this yielding object I whipped out my pencil flash, squirted a beam downward.

Sime Sultan had certainly told me the truth when he telephoned. The thing at my feet was a corpse; the remnants of Joe Dunn, the young jerk who’d threatened Ellen’s life because she refused to marry him. In life he’d been a handsome punk, muscular, hefty, profiled like a Greek god. Now he lay sprawled like a sack full of

used bones. Somebody had opened his throat with a blade, let all his ketchup drain away. He was deader than a Confederate dollar.

I knuckled a blister on the Bancroft portal; waited ages before a quavery she-male voice filtered through. "Wh-who is it?"

"Dan Turner. Open up."

The door swung inward and I pinned the glimpse on the chick I'd been bodyguarding the past several days. She was a tall, regal tomato with taffy tresses, the map of an angel, and the sort of curves a bachelor dreams about. Just now, though, she wasn't as attractive as usual. Her hair was tousled, her negligee had a damp look as if she'd been out in the storm recently, and the expression on her pan was a mixture of shock, horror, and hysteria.

"Dan . . . !" she swayed toward me. She had the fantods and she had them bad.

I CAUGHT her, steadied her. "Easy, babe. If you're going to fly apart, better slip me the score first. What happened, when, and how?"

"It . . . it was some while ago. I don't know the exact time. I woke up with my maid telling me there was someone at the d-door. She hadn't answered, of course; all my servants had orders that nobody was to be admitted . . ."

"Okay," I said. "Then what?"

"I w-went to the door and asked who it was. Somebody s-said *You'll be safe now, honeysweet*. And Dan . . . it was my h-husband's voice! He's the only one who ever called me honeysweet. It was a special name he had for me when we . . . when he and I . . . I mean back in the days before he . . ."

"What did you do then, hon?"

Her glims looked haunted. "But it couldn't have been my husband! He's . . .

d-dead. You know that. He was killed in Sicily. He couldn't come back and . . . c-call me honeysweet, could he? I opened the door and he wasn't there. All I saw was. . . Joe Dunn. . . lying on the porch with his th-throat cut . . ." Her voice fluttered toward the high register; broke off. In another instant she'd blow her top. I slapped her a stinger across the puss, hard enough to put fingerprints on her pasty complexion. "Snap out of it, kitten!" I growled.

"Why—why, y-you—"

"That's better. Nothing like anger to keep you on even keel. Get back to your patter. You piped the defunct bozo. And then?"

"I phoned Sime."

"He came right over?"

"Yes."

"Did he notify the cops?"

She shook her head. "No. He called you instead. He said we'd better have your advice before we did anything."

I could savvy his reasons for that. The chubby little producer didn't want his top star involved in a crookery mess if there was any way to sidestep it. After all, the setup could look very bad indeed for Ellen Bancroft. Threats against her had been made by the murdered Dunn jerk; then he'd dropped out of sight. Whereupon his next public appearance was here on Ellen's porch in the role of a cadaver. Some dumb apple on the police force might accuse her of the croak, either premeditated or self-defense; and while she'd probably beat the rap, the bad publicity could easily stink her career to hellangone.

Or there was always a chance she might be convicted!

I TOOK a long, level swivel at her. "You didn't beef the guy, did you, kitten?"

"No! Oh-h-h . . . no! How c-can you

say such a thing?"

"I was just asking."

"But . . . b-but surely you d-don't think I . . ."

"Frankly, no," I said. "I've still got some of my boyish illusions left, and you're one of them. You're no killer." I meant it, too. When you've been a private eye as many years as I have, you develop hunches. Right now mine were working overtime; telling me this Bancroft cutie couldn't possibly be guilty of butchering Joe Dunn's windpipe.

Her wet peepers thanked me for my vote of confidence. "What are we g-going to do, though?"

"Have a talk with Sime Sultan first. Where is he?"

"I don't know." Her shoulders quivered. "As soon as he called you he went outside to look around. He . . . he hasn't come back. Didn't you see him on the grounds?"

A premonition crawled up my slacks. "No. You stay here; and keep your door locked." I barged outside, waited until she shut the portal and bolted it. Then, using my pencil torch, I skirted the Dunn punk's remnants; stepped over the spot where a pool of his gore should have been. I hopped off the porch, began poking around in the downpour.

There was a lot of shrubbery to cover, and I prowled it all. Rain soaked through my tweeds, plastered them to my rind like a clammy shroud. My bruised noggin began to throb again. Then, under a clump of bushes, I found Sultan.

He was stretched out colder than Siberia and he had a goose-egg on his hairless pate where somebody had bopped him.

I yeepled: "What the—!" and hunkered down at his side; shook the bejudas out of him. Bye and bye he blinked his optics.

"Sherlock," he mumbled. "Get . . .

doctor . . ."

"Yeah, Sime. Right away. Can you stand up? You'll have to be moved indoors. A cracked conk is bad enough but pneumonia's even worse. Come on, keed. Up. That's it. I'll steady you. Here we go. Easy now." I steered him toward the house. "Who slugged you?"

He drew a racking sob. "Franklin Bancroft," he said.



"How can you think I'd kill anyone?" she wailed.

BEFORE WE reached the porch, I wangled most of the story out of him. Ellen had telephoned him. He'd rushed over here to her—and discovered Joe Dunn's remainders. He had then phoned me; and while waiting for me to show up, he had decided to do sentry duty outside. "All of a sudden . . . Bancroft appeared before me. . . . I recognized the muffler he was wearing . . ."

"Whereupon he lumped you on the cranium, hunh?"

"Y-yes . . ."

I snarled: "The same thing happened to me as I was leaving my stash."

"Bancroft . . . blackjacked you?"

"It was either a blackjack or a length

of lead pipe,” I answered grimly. “The effects were the same.”

“But . . . why would he . . .?”

I said: “It’s simple enough. After he hacked a hunk out of Dunn’s gullet, he realized the spot he was in. Both you and I’d seen him, knew he was alive instead of dead on a Sicilian battlefield. We knew his motive for beefing the Dunn jerk. We were in a position to put the finger on him. So he decided to rub us both out. Then he could pull a fadeaway; the murders would never be solved and Ellen would never know she had a living hubby, a guy without a face.”

“Are we . . . going to let him get him get away with it?”

“We can’t,” I rasped. “Bancroft is a homicidal maniac. You and I are alive by accident; he didn’t slug us quite hard enough. But his shiv did the business for Joe Dunn, and we can’t let a crazy killer run loose. We’ve got to belch the whole story to the law.”

Sime shivered as we ankled up on the porch, circled Dunn’s husk. “This is going to be tough on Ellen. It means she has to learn she’s not really a widow after all. And yet, instead of getting her husband back, she loses him to the lethal chamber. That’s rotten, Hawkshaw. Damned rotten!”

“So is killery,” I said as I rapped on the door. “Murderers don’t realize how many hearts they break.” Then the Bancroft cookie opened up and I shoved Sultan at her. “Take care of him, kiddo. He’s been bashed.”

“Sime—!” she led him to a living-room divan. “Sime! Who d-did this to you?”

HE didn’t answer her, so I handled it my own way. I grabbed a phone in the far corner, dialed headquarters, asked for my friend Dave Donaldson of the

homicide squad. When Dave came on the line, I said: “Turner squalling. There’s been a knock-off at Ellen Bancroft’s wikiup.” I gave him the address. “The victim was a Metromount ham named Joe Dunn, and kindly flag yourself out here with a meat-wagon as fast as Whozit will let you.”

Donaldson’s explosive voice rattled the receiver. “The hell you yodel! Who cooled the guy?”

“Listen carefully and I’ll describe him,” I said. “He’s a tall, stringy character in a cheap topcoat buttoned to the neck and a dark cotton muffler wrapped around the lower part of his mush. In fact, the lower part of his mush is mainly absent. It was shot away in Sicily where he was reported killed in action with the American troops. He has a habit of calling people Buster, and his name is Franklin Bancroft.”

I rang off, pivoted. On the other side of the room, Sultan and Ellen had reversed positions. Now Sime was rendering first aid while the taffy-haired jane was on the divan. When she had heard me mention her hubby, she’d fainted. Shock does some funny things to she-males.

The funniest thing it did to Ellen Bancroft was when Donaldson and his homicide minions arrived a little later. By that time she’d recovered from her swoon; and the instant Dave barged into the tepee, she surged at him like a frantic angel. “Lieutenant—th-there’s been a mistake!”

“I’ll say,” he cast a gander over his shoulder through the open front doorway where two morgue orderlies were getting Joe Dunn’s shell ready for the hearse. “It’s always a mistake, killing people. Your hubby knifed himself into a jackpot.”

She let her lilting shoulders sag. “That’s the mistake I’m talking about. If Franklin is still alive, he didn’t kill Dunn. You can call off your dragnet.”

"Wh-what?" Dave's beefy puss went purple.

She nodded dully. "I'm telling you the truth, lieutenant. My husband is innocent. I'm the one you want."

"Ellen!" a bewildered roar erupted from Sime Sultan. "Ellen darling! Do you realize what you're—?"

"Yes. I stabbed Joe Dunn," she said quietly.

IT WAS nearly dawn before I got home to my flat. Hell-fire and brimstone had filled the intervening hours. On her own confession the Bancroft doll had been trundled to the bastille over her chubby producer's violent protests. In turn, Sime had contacted eleventeen shysters to defend her. And Dave Donaldson, less foggy than usual, had kept the dragnet out for Franklin Bancroft to be picked up for questioning. Like a typical cop, Dave's theory was that the more people you arrest, the more likely you are to nab the guilty party.

Briefly, Dave figured Ellen was pulling at swift one; dumping herself in the grease so her hubby would go free. Secretly I was inclined to agree with this. To me, the jane's confession had a phony ring. I couldn't do anything about it, though; I had some theories of my own but they weren't worth a tinker's curse without proof. And I didn't dare ask the bulls to help me gather evidence; they'd have laughed me out of Hollywood.

So I retired to my bachelor dugout with an extra edition of the morning *Examiner*, a deck of gaspers, and a jug of Highland prescription; settled down to await developments. I whiled away the time by reading the *Examiner's* flash bulletin on Joe Dunn's decease, Ellen Bancroft's arrest, and her husband's purported return from a Sicilian grave.

Just before sunrise my phone tinkled. I

snatched it out of its cradle. "Turner, this end."

A hoarse, wheezy whisper sandpapered my eardrums; the tone of a guy with a bad cold. "Sime Sultan. Get out here to my house right away. Bancroft is here but he doesn't know I'm phoning you. He saw in the paper about Ellen being jailed for the Dunn kill, and—Oh-oh! He's coming this way. I'll have to hang up." The line died.

Without hesitation I began dialing so rapidly my phone spat sparks. Fifteen seconds later I had police headquarters; another ten brought me Dave Donaldson. I yelled: "Is the Bancroft cupcake still in custody?"

"No. She got sprung a few minutes ago. Some mouthpiece came up with a habeas corpus. Why?"

"That's what I was scared of," I barked. "Climb into your chariot and make knots for Sime Sultan's wigwam on Lookout Mountain Drive. I'll meet you there. Sime has Franklin Bancroft under glass and the bumpoff is solved. Get going!"

Then I sprinted downstairs to my own jalopy, fed it all the ethyl it would drink. The rain had stopped and daylight streaked the eastern foothills with a crimson glow that was reflected on the wet paving like spilled blood. There was a damp smell in the air, a laundered, tangy freshness that perfumed the breeze yowling around my windshield as I gashed a hole in the morning. I wasn't driving fast; just flying low.

Where Sultan's street angled off from Laurel Canyon I swerved to avoid tangling fenders with a black sedan that was moving like a streak of hot grease. It was Dave Donaldson's official heap, and Dave himself was at the tiller. He spotted me, pulled over, flagged me down.

I BRAKED to a shuddering stop that would have given my tire rationing board the jabberwockies; piled out and pelted to Donaldson's bucket. I climbed in alongside him and bleated: "Spur this crate!"

He spurred the custard out of it and we climbed the curving roadway faster than a rabbit romping up a sand dune. Less than a block from our goal I told Dave to park; we would hoof the remaining distance.

We hoofed it; gained Sime's elaborate shanty and approached in the dawn's early silence. Wet grass muffled our footfalls as we skulked toward the front door. I signaled Donaldson to unlimber his service .38 while I produced my ring of master keys. Fewer than ten minutes had elapsed since I'd had that phone message from Sultan, and I craved to enter his stash without using the doorbell. Inasmuch as he had the faceless Bancroft blister with him, and Bancroft's wife was on the loose, I figured strategy was better than a frontal assault. I didn't want any more killings if I could avoid it.

I worked the lock. The portal swung open.

With Donaldson at my heels, I blipped noiselessly over the threshold. From Sime's library came voices, one muffled as if by cloth and mushy as if from a mouth disfigurement; the other hoarse and wheezing, punctuated by coughs that sounded like lobar pneumonia. The muffled tones belonged to Franklin Bancroft, of course. The whispered wheezes were Sime's.

"Yes, she confessed," the producer was saying.

"But why?"

"She was fronting for you, naturally."

There was a muffled sigh. "Then I've got to do what you suggested. I've got to turn myself in. I can't let her take the rap for me."

"I knew you'd see it that way. I'll run you downtown myself. Go on out that door; I'll be right with you."

Outside the library, Dave Donaldson flashed me a questioning gander. We could hear Bancroft coming toward us. Then there was a faint metallic click.

I plunged forward, catapulted into the room just in time to bash headlong against the Bancroft character. The impact sent us both sprawling, locked together like a pair of Siamese pretzels. Over on the far side of the room stood Sime Sultan with an automatic in his mitt. The metallic noise I'd heard was Sime jacking a cartridge into the firing chamber as he drew a bead on the unsuspecting Bancroft's back.

"Nail him, Dave!" I yammered from the floor. "*Nab Sultan—he's the murderer!*"

Donaldson's .38 sneezed: *Ka-Blam!* and a bullet took the cannon out of Sultan's duke, removing a few fingers in the process. Sime squealed like a hog in an abattoir as he lamped the ruined red splinters of his hand. "Aiee God!"

I unwound myself from Bancroft where we were squirming hither and yon on the carpet; stood up, moved across to Sultan, fed him a punch in the kisser. "Shut up, you stinking creep."

He cringed. His flabby gut quivered like jello in a speeding jeep. "You—y-you can't—"

"I've got the deadwood on you," I said. I thrust a gasper in my yap, struck a match on his bald dome, set fire to the pill and blew fumes in his porky puss. "We caught you trying to plug Bancroft through the spine. The rest of the story will come out in court."

"Wh-wha-what story?" he whimpered.

I SAID: "Judging from the way you lcalled Ellen 'darling,' I think you're in love with her; probably have been for

years. She was happily hitched to Bancroft, though, and there was nothing you could do about it.

"Then Bancroft enlisted and later was erroneously reported killed in action. Meanwhile you'd come to Hollywood, made yourself a big rep as a producer. You persuaded Ellen to sign with Metromount. I guess you figured you might stand a chance with her when she got over her grief at being a widow.

"But a complication came up. A punk named Dunn also fell in love with her; threatened to bump her when she refused him. The situation was in that shape when you hired me to bodyguard the wren."

He tried to use his necktie as a tourniquet for his leaking lunch-hook. "I-I'm bleeding to death and all you do is stand there talking—"

"Bleed and be damned," I said. "Let's get back to tonight's murder puzzle. Franklin Bancroft showed up. I brought him to you for identification. Suddenly you realized you could never marry Ellen as long as her husband was still alive. You had to eliminate him—permanently.

"A sudden scheme dawned on you. The Dunn youngster had made threats against Ellen. By coincidence, I think he visited you tonight to say he was sorry, and to persuade you to turn the heat off him. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Dunn was here in your stash at the same time I brought Bancroft to be identified. I remember you closed all the doors so I wouldn't be able to tab any other visitors you might have.

"Anyhow, Bancroft soon scrambled and so did I. Then you beefed Joe Dunn and carried his carcass to Ellen's front porch; she lives pretty close to here. It was at this point that you made two bad mistakes. They gave you away."

Sime coughed liquidly from somewhere down around his knees. "What

... mistakes?"

"First you knocked on the chick's door and said: *You'll be safe now, honeysweet*. That was to tip her off that Bancroft was still alive; that he was the murderer. You wanted her to think it was her own hubby who made the remark. It would pin the guilt on him in a subsequent investigation.

"But you overlooked something. Franklin Bancroft didn't want Ellen to know he was alive. Therefore he wouldn't have spoken any such words. Okay; who else might know he used to call her *honeysweet* back in New York? You, Sime, because you were an old friend of theirs in the east."

"And . . . the second . . . mistake?"

I SAID: "Dunn's remainders should have been in a pool of red gravy on Ellen's porch. A guy with his throat cut leaks to beat hell. Yet there was no blood under him. Therefore he must have been sliced somewhere else and his corpse dragged to Ellen's wigwam after it had drained itself dry.

"Again you filled the bill. Your stash is near hers. You'd be able to dump the body and get back here to your place in time to answer Ellen's phone call. It all adds up to motive and opportunity, and the rest was plain sailing. You went to the jane as soon as she summoned you. Then you called me up.

"You knew it would take me ten or twelve minutes to get my clothes on. During this period you told Ellen you were going to stand sentry duty outdoors. Instead, you hopped into your chariot; drove to my apartment. You maced me unconscious, returned to Ellen's lawn, gave yourself a tap on the skull. Later, when I found you, you claimed Bancroft had done the slugging—thus framing him all the tighter.

"Your psychology was pretty clever.

You figured what Franklin Bancroft would do when he saw the extra editions. He would come to you, ask your advice. Ellen herself played into your mitts by her phony confession; so it was easy for you to argue Bancroft into giving himself up, taking the rap.

“You never intended him to reach headquarters, though. You planned to shoot him in the back. Then you could tell the cops he had tried to escape and you’d been forced to cream him. You could fasten the Dunn kill on him; and he, being defunct, couldn’t deny it. Fortunately, I got here just before you pulled the trigger.”

The pudgy louse coughed again. “That’s . . . what I get for hiring a snoop who’s . . . too damned smart!”

“Thanks,” I crushed out my butt. “I’m even smarter than you think. I had another

reason for wanting to come here to your tepee. I think we’ll find bloodstains somewhere in the room where you butchered Joe Dunn. That’ll be the last nail in your casket.”

Oddly enough, I was right.

We found the gore in a bedroom; quarts of it which Sultan hadn’t had time to clean up. It got him indicted by a grand jury; but he never went to trial. Running around in the rain that night had given him bronchitis. This changed to pneumonia and he passed away in a cell; coughed himself to glory, and saved the state the trouble of executing him.

Afterward, Franklin Bancroft submitted to plastic surgery and his map came out of the operation as good as new. He and Ellen are together again, happy as maggots in a dead cat.