

HALF-SIZE HOMICIDE

Dan wasn't even working for the movie star when she slapped his face and fired him in the most public way possible! To make matters worse, the whole thing was right under the nose of the gabbiest gossip columnist in Hollywood.



THE JANE was too tall and angular to suit my taste, but she was dressed like a millionaire's dream. She had wavy brown hair, unplucked eyebrows, and a bony map that made up in character what it lacked in beauty. She came striding toward my solitary supper table in Ciro's, moving grimly as if she had a nasty task to do and craved to get it finished in a hurry.

"Mr. Turner?" she asked me in an undertone.

I said: "Yeah," and started to stand up.

Before I could come out of my chair, she raised her voice to a shrill pitch that everybody in the crowded eatery could catch on the first bounce. "You're fired. I wouldn't let you work for me if you were the last detective in Hollywood!"

And slapped me a stinger across the chops.

The open-handed smack caught me unawares; nearly bowled me over. I wasn't working for the tall tomato, didn't even

know her; so how could she discharge me? As I massaged my dislocated complexion I fastened the flabbergasted focus on her. "Hey, listen, sister—"

"Quiet!" she snapped. Then she tossed two crumpled hunks of green paper on my table, spun around and ankled out of the cafe with her chin tilted and her dukes clenched.

The entire joint was buzzing by that time. Anger commenced to rise in me when I realized the spot I was in. Before morning the gossip would be all over town: Dan Turner publicly fired by a client and pasted on puss for good measure! My hard-earned rep as a private hawkshaw would fade like a puff of smoke in a cyclone.

For an instant I considered charging after the angular jessie, dragging her back by the scruff of the neck and compelling her to confess the whole scene was either a rib or a mistake. I actually took three steps in pursuit; and then somebody stopped me.

THE guy who barred my path was Harry Moon, movie columnist for the *Daily Record* and radio tattler on a coast to coast hook up. "Hold it, Philo. I smell a news item."

"You mean you smell, period," I growled. This Moon bozo was a sawed-off little squirt, crammed with arrogance and wearing a supercilious smile under his wispy black mustache. Everybody in the galloping snapshots pretended to be his friend but secretly hated his guts because of the venomous power he packed as a purveyor of publicity. Those who kowtowed to him got rave notices in his column and on his weekly broadcast; those who didn't got smeared.

He dished me a knowing leer. "Don't be a sourball, Sherlock. Slip me the low-down on why Emily McClennan used your map for a xylophone solo."

"Emily McClennan?" I did a double-take as I heard the name. It stood for one of the saddest tragedies that ever happened in the screen colony. "Was she—?"

"Sure. Don't tell me you didn't know."

I looked him full in the glims. "Believe it or not, I never met her before in my life. Now step aside while I go fasten the arm on her and find out what caused the fireworks."

"Fireworks is right," he chortled. "She certainly tied the can on you, didn't she, pal?" Then he lowered his tone confidentially. "Just between the two of us, what kind of case were you working on for her?"

I rasped: "No case, and kindly keep your beak out of my business. I'm not acquainted with the dame."

"Her dough calls you a liar, gumshoe."

I followed the direction of his glance; lamped the two mussed hunks of green paper the tall tessie had tossed on my table. When I picked them up I saw they were century notes; which made the puzzle that much screwier. Why should a strange cupcake pay me two hundred hermans for the privilege of whapping me on the whiskers?

IT didn't add up right, didn't make sense; but I promised myself to unravel the riddle before the night was over. I shoved the geetus in my pocket, favored Harry Moon with a vinegar sneer. "Look, small fry. I don't know the answers; and even if I did, I wouldn't talk for publication at this stage of the game. Now powder while you're all in one piece."

He refused to budge. "That's no way to act, flatfoot. Or do you forget the influence of the press?"

"Stew the press," I snarled. "Maybe you can scare movie stars by threatening to dish the dirt on them, but I'm not a star. I'm just a shamus with a strong back and a

weak mind, and I don't allow insignificant jerks like you to worry me."

"Meaning you don't care what I print?"

I said: "Not at all, bub. In fact, let's see you print this." And I spooned him a helping of knuckle tonic; dumped him floundering. Then I beckoned a waiter, paid my bill, and scrambled.

Maybe I shouldn't have lowered the boom on a bozo of Moon's miniature dimensions; after all, I'm six feet plus and weigh a hundred and ninety on an empty stomach. But I had a reason. Now, if he published the news that a quail had slapped me, he would also have to add that I, in turn, had smacked him. I had a hunch he would prefer to keep quiet about the whole dippy episode for the sake of his own self-esteem.

I barged out to the parking lot, started to wedge myself in my vee-eight jalopy. It was already occupied. Emily McClennan was sitting there waiting for me.

A STARTLED remark bubbled to my kisser but the tall cookie beat me to the draw. "I can explain everything, Mr. Turner. Believe me, I had an excellent motive for doing what I did." Her voice was as poised as the rest of her; cool, unexcited, yet vibrant with suppressed tension.

I covered my astonishment by torching a gasper. "All right," I grunted. "Whistle the patter."

"First, do you know who I am?"

"Yeah, I just found out."

"You've read about my . . . my husband?"

I nodded. "Who hasn't? Bill McClennan was one of the greatest cowboy stars in the flickering tintypes, the idol of every kid in the country. Eight months ago he tangled his convertible with an interurban electric car; got himself

smashed to hellangone. He had to have both gams amputated well above the knees. Now he's a permanent cripple in a wheelchair. The only exercise he gets is swimming in his private pool."

"Anything else?"

I said: "Well, he kept his home life quiet. As his wife, you never shared his publicity; that's why I didn't recognize you a moment ago when you spanked me on the features. Incidentally, I thought you promised to explain that."

"Give me time," she countered. "I want to be sure you understand all the details—such as my husband's present financial status."

I recalled what I'd read in the newspapers. "As far as I've heard, your pocketbook is feeling no pain. After almost eight months of jockeying, the electric line is going to make a whopping settlement both to your hubby for the loss of his career and to Qualitone Pix for the loss of his services. The payoff will be nearly two million. Right?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "Except we may not get it unless I can persuade you to—" She broke off suddenly. "Look!"

She pointed, and I piped Harry Moon lurking in the shadow of a nearby sedan with his ears cocked and his glims fastened on my bucket. There was no way of telling how long the sawed-off columnist had been there or how much he'd overheard.

He apparently didn't realize I'd spotted him, though; which was a break for our side. I told the McClennan wren to take it easy while I taught the little jerk a lesson. "I won't be gone long. Keep under cover so you won't be sprayed by his teeth when I scatter them hither and yon."

She pinched a blister on my arm. "No, you mustn't! Please . . . things are bad enough the way they are. Just d-drive away from him so we can talk without

being spied on.”

“You’re the doctor,” I shrugged, kicked my motor alive and whooshed my chariot off the parking lot in a thundering yank. I was under way before Moon could savvy the score.



HE was fast on the uptake, however. I copped a hinge at him in my mirror as he scrambled into his own elegant equipage and got it moving onto Sunset directly behind me. He started trailing along in my wake.

He did it so openly he couldn’t have known I was wise to him. That was one of his troubles; he always thought he was smarter than the other guy. Maybe this was what made him such a successful news-hound; but for once in his life he was monkeying with the wrong party. I twisted my rudder hard to starboard, took an intersection on two wheels and went barreling downhill in a shower of sparks.

Alongside me, the McClennan chick made whimpering noises in her gullet. “Y-you almost tipped us over—!”

“That’s just a sample, sis,” I said. “Hang onto your upper plate; here we go again.” I blatted into another right turn on Santa Monica Boulevard; headed west for several blocks and then swung left on a cross street with my tires screaming for mercy. By the time I gained Wilshire, there was no trace of Moon’s snazzy

wagon behind us. I’d lost him.

I parked, glued the glance on my shivering she-male passenger. “Let’s resume the dialogue, hon. What makes you think the interurban people won’t pay off for the accident that crippled your hubby?”

“Because it wasn’t an accident,” she said dully.

HER ANSWER almost made me swallow my gasper, ashes and all. The longer I talked to her, the wackier she sounded, and she didn’t clarify matters when she added: “We’re being blackmailed. I want to engage your services if I can. That’s why I slapped you and fired you.”

“Now, wait,” I mumbled groggily. “Derrick the double-talk. I don’t mind being kidded, but—”

“I’m serious,” she responded. “You see, I’m married to a coward. Bill may have been a hero in cowboy roles, but his actual color is yellow.”

“How do you add that up?”

Her lower lip quivered. “He was due for induction in the army. He couldn’t take it. The day of the so-called accident, he drove away in his convertible with the deliberate intention of smashing it and hurting himself.”

“Oh, come, now!” I goggled at her.

“It’s true. Of course he didn’t expect to be permanently injured; he only wanted enough minor hurts to prevent his passing a draft examination. He misjudged the speed of the electric car, though, and wound up by losing both legs.”

I said: “I don’t believe it.”

“You would if you saw the note he left for me that morning. It explained what he planned to do, and why. Later I was notified he was in the hospital.” She squirmed around to face me. “Do you see how this would keep the railroad from

making a settlement if they found it out?"

"Yeah," I said. "They wouldn't be legally liable if the collision was premeditated."

"Exactly," she agreed wearily. "Bill's letter was a confession in advance, and now it's gone. A blackmailer stole it. Now we're receiving anonymous extortion messages, threatening to show the note to the railroad lawyers unless we pay a hundred thousand dollars hush money."

"Boy!" I whispered.

Her kisser drooped forlornly. "We haven't got that much cash. Hospital and surgical charges left us broke. The two hundred I put on your table cleaned us out."

I said: "Well for Pete's sake, take back your dough."

"No, it's your retainer. I w-want you to find the blackmailer; recover Bill's letter. Nobody must know you're working for me, though. That's why I made a scene in the cafe. It will look as if you *had* been investigating something for me but I was dissatisfied with your progress. The blackmailer won't suspect you of any connection with me now. And a private detective such as yourself is my only hope. Obviously I can't go to the police on a thing like this. I'd have to tell them the truth, and then we wouldn't get any insurance money."

IT made sense the way she explained it but I didn't like the setup. "Look," I said. "If I recover this letter, you'll go ahead and accept a settlement from the electric line, right?"

"Yes."

I said: "That's fraud, babe. Why should the railway people pay for something that wasn't their fault? Your hubby deliberately put himself in this jackpot. If I helped him put the bite on the interurban line, I'd be compounding a

felony. The way I see it, this blackmailer is doing you a favor by keeping you honest. All you have to do is ignore his demands and refuse any dough from the railroad; then you're in the clear and nobody in God's world can shake you down."

Tears as big as gumdrops spilled out of her glims. She said in a muffled voice: "It's easy enough for you to talk like that. You're not facing a penniless future with a crippled husband. I am."

"Couldn't you get a job bucking rivets at Lockheed?" I asked her. "You look vigorous. You pack a hefty wallop."

She made a sour mouth. "All right, so maybe we wouldn't exactly starve. But what about the kids you mentioned who worship Bill as a hero? How will they feel if they learn he lost his legs trying to dodge the draft? It will mean disillusionment for the present generation of youngsters. And as long as that letter remains in the wrong hands, there's always a chance the truth will leak out."

"Kitten, you've got something there," I told her. "If I figured you were interested only in preventing the scandal, I might go to bat for you."

She stared at me through a mist of brine. "You mean. . . you'll try to get the letter back?"

I said: "On one consideration. Promise you won't take a payoff from the electric line."

She hesitated, sighed. "I . . . I promise."

"There's another angle," I mused. "Qualitone Pix was supposed to share in that payoff for the loss of Bill's services. Can you persuade them to withdraw their claim? Otherwise I'm afraid you'll have to include me out."

She smiled wanly. "I can try. Let's go see Sid Stullman now. He's the studio president; and he knows about the letter."

HER suggestion sounded valid. I romped on my starter, aimed my jalopy toward Stullman's wigwam in Westwood. Fifteen minutes later we were laying our proposition before the Qualitone mogul. "After all, you stand to gain as much as you'll lose," I put it to him straight.

Stullman was an impressive citizen with a chest as big as a barrel and thick dark hair plastered to his dandruff like a fitted skullcap. One gander at his substantial dimensions and you knew he was plenty important. He wasn't haughty, though. "How do I gain?" he asked me.

"Well, by not taking a settlement from the railroad your own nose will be clean, legally speaking. You also spike the blackmailer's guns," I said. "That gives me a chance to go after the confession letter. When I get it, Bill McClennan's rep is saved. You can then re-issue all his old horse operas and clean up plenty of gravy. The public will flock to see them out of pure sympathy, because they know he'll never fork a cayuse again. You can even pay him a little royalty, maybe, for old times' sake; keep him from the poorhouse."

Stullman said thoughtfully: "I might be willing to relinquish my damage claims if I were sure Bill intended to do the same. I want him to tell me so himself, however."

"Then let's go talk to him," Emily McClennan jumped at the chance. "He'll agree. I know he will!"

So we all went out to my bucket, squeezed in and started for the McClennan igloo just this side of the Beverly line. Bye and bye the three of us ankled into the former cowboy star's stash. Emily led the way; kept calling to her legless husband. When he didn't answer, she decided he must be out in the patio swimming pool and steered us there.

The pool was big and dully lighted by

four or five suspended floodlamps using weak bulbs because of wartime dimout regulations. We barged toward the tiled border; and then, suddenly, I felt sick.

A sawed-off runt was leaning over the edge of the water and hauling something out; something shapeless and floppy that looked gruesomely human in a half-sized sort of way. The object had a head, a body and two arms, but no lower section; no stems. It was Bill McClennan, wearing swim trunks and an expression of utter disinterest in what was happening.

He would never be interested in anything again. Even at that distance I could tell he was deader than custard-pie comedies. I froze, grabbed at his wife—his widow, now—and thrust her at Sid Stullman just as she gave vent to a strangled yelp. Then I launched myself at the sawed-off guy who was dragging the crippled cadaver out of the drink.

He was the *Daily Record* columnist, Harry Moon.

WHEN MOON tabbed me he let go of McClennan's remnants, dropped them on the wet tile rim of the pool. The corpse made a wet squishy sound as it bounced; but the noise that came out of the gossip writer's windpipe was just as ugly. It was something between a gasp and a gurgle. "Y-y-you—Turner—!"

I fastened the grab on him, took a steady hinge at his suddenly colorless puss. "Yeah, me."

He wheezed: "Gosh, I'm glad to see you! I mean—for the love of Mike, quit staring at me that way! Get a doctor or—or an ambulance or—let go of me and do something for Bill McClennan! He's—he's—"

"Defunct," I nodded. Over my shoulder I called to Sid Stullman: "Better phone for a pulmotor, although I don't think it'll do any good. You might call the

homicide squad, too.”

The studio executive turned, dashed for the house. Emily McClennan broke away from him and came tottering toward the pool; went to her knees alongside her late husband’s remainders. Racking sobs tore at her tonsils. Meanwhile Harry Moon squirmed in my grasp. “Did—did you say *homicide*?”

“You heard right, rat.”

“But—but how do you know? I mean—”

“Never mind how I know. Suppose you tell me what you’re doing here.”

His beady peepers looked furtive in the dim light. “I sort of figured there was a news item when I saw Mrs. McClennan fire you at *Ciro’s*. I tried to follow you when you drove her away in your coupe, but I guess you were wise. I—”

“Yeah. I was wise.”

“You ditched me. Then I—I came here, thinking I might run into you and get the low-down. Instead, I found McClennan floating in the pool with his face under water. I dragged him out—but—but how do you get homicide from an accidental drowning? I can’t see—”

“The drowning wasn’t accidental,” I rasped. “Do you remember a legless swimmer named Zimmerman or something like that, back in the earlier nineteen-twenties? He took several stabs at the English Channel; got himself a lot of publicity. His gams were amputated just like McClennan’s.”

Moon gave me the foggy focus. “Sure, I remember. What about it?”

I said: “The reason Zimmerman did so well in the water was because his stems were missing. More than a third of a man’s tonnage is in his legs. Cut them off and his torso becomes as buoyant as a cork. He can’t sink. Get it?”

“You mean—?”

“Yeah,” I said grimly. “Bill

McClennan couldn’t have drowned accidentally. It was a physical impossibility for a guy minus his gams. *Somebody pushed him under and held him there.*”

MOON’S kisser sagged open and his Moptics bulged like oysters being squeezed. “Then that makes it murder! Where’s a phone? I want to call my city desk!”

“You’ll call nobody until the bulls get here,” I tightened my grip on him. “Something tells me you’ve got a copious amount of explaining to do.”

“M-me? Why?”

I said: “Maybe you bumped the poor slob yourself. Or wouldn’t you know about the blackmail angle?”

It was a wild shot in the dark, but it seemed to score a target. I fired my remark on the basis of Moon’s mysterious actions that evening; his undue interest in Emily McClennan’s connection with me. Knowing how he made a career of ferreting out people’s secrets, there was a bare possibility that he was the skunk who had swiped Bill McClennan’s confession letter and tried to use it for shakedown purposes. If so, he might have got scared when he saw Emily contacting me.

He might have come here to put some direct blackmail pressure on her crippled hubby. When the pressure failed to get results, he might have drowned the legless lug for spite—or to keep McClennan from having him pinched as an extortionist.

The theory had its weak spots; but it certainly seemed to jar the columnist’s giblets. Panic crossed his swarthy map and strength flowed suddenly into him. He twisted violently, exploded himself loose from me. Then he backed away, ducked his noggin and came ramming at me like a billygoat. He butted me in the ellybay.

The next few instants reminded me of

a movie reel being unspooled too fast. I staggered, lost my balance; lamped the McClennan jane straightening up to her full, angular height. Simultaneously I piped Sid Stullman emerging from the house after making his phone call to headquarters. I toppled backward, while Emily surged at Harry Moon.

Moon doubled his duke, popped her on the button. She fell in a crumpled heap, and at the same second I went hellity-splash into the swimming pool. As I took this backward somersault I conked my cranium on the projecting edge of the diving board with an impact that blew out my fuses, put me in a coma.

Confidentially, I sank.



WHEN I came back to consciousness, I was stretched out on the pool's tiled border. Bill McClennan's abbreviated carcass was no longer in view; during my sojourn in slumberland a detachment of morgue attendants had loaded him in a wicker meat basket, carted him away. Now the premises were infested with uniformed cops and plainclothes flatfeet, including my old friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad.

Dave was bending over me, working my arms up and down like pump handles.

Every time he squeezed my bellows, water fountained up from my kisser and sprayed him in the profile. He kept remarking he'd always known I was a sponge but he'd never realized how much moisture I could hold. "Wake up and start breathing, you oversized soak!" he mumbled.

I stirred, felt my duds clinging to me with waterlogged clamminess. When I blinked my glimmers open, I caught a bleary gander at Emily McClennan standing nearby, wringing and twisting on the verge of hysteria. The Qualitone mogul, Sid Stullman, was awkwardly trying to soothe her but not getting very far. He was drenched to the rind, his threads dripping gallons of dew and his dark hair still plastered to his noggin like a fitted skullcap. There was no trace of Harry Moon anywhere in the vicinity. Apparently the gossip tattler had lammed after bunting me into the pool and slapping Emily bow-legged.

I spewed a final pint of water out of my interiors; shoved Donaldson away from me and sat up on my haunches, shivering like a pup coughing beef seeds. "What cooks?" I strangled.

Dave bestowed a relieved oath on me. "You lousy son, I was afraid you'd croaked!" he bellowed bitterly. "I ought to punch you in the smeller for scaring me that way." Then he told me I owed my life to Sid Stullman, who'd dived into the drink; rescued me from a watery demise. "But will you kindly explain how you went overboard in the first place?"

I STARTED to slip him the dismal details but a frantic signal from Emily McClennan corked my yapper temporarily. She didn't want me to mention Harry Moon's part in the proceedings and I could understand why. If I blurted the truth about the columnist butting me into the pool, I would also have

to tell his reason for dunking me; how I had accused him of drowning Bill McClennan.

In turn, this would lead to further disclosures; the premeditated accident that had cost McClennan his gams, the confession letter that had been glommed, and the blackmail setup resulting from the mess. Once this stuff came out, the angular Emily's departed hubby would be smeared as a draft-dodging coward and the fat would be in the fire.

On the other hand, was it worth while to protect a dead guy's name when it meant covering his killer's tracks? Under ordinary circumstances I wouldn't even have hesitated over such a question. Regardless of what it might do to McClennan's reputation I would have put the finger on Harry Moon—except for one thing.

I wasn't really sure he was guilty. That made a lot of difference. True, Moon's actions had been plenty suspicious; but not definitely incriminating. Maybe he'd been leveling when he claimed he merely fished McClennan's body out of the pool; perhaps he had no connection with the bumpoff or the blackmailing. If I accused him now and he turned out to be innocent, he could make it hot for me later; sue me for slander, false arrest, and defamation of character—if it's possible to defame a yuck who hasn't any character.

All told, it struck me my best bet was to zipper my kisser until I had a chance to snoop around. Then, if I managed to get the deadwood on the Moon monkey, it would be time enough to sic the law on him.

Dave Donaldson helped me upright. He growled: "I'm waiting to hear how you fell in the pool, Hawkshaw."

"That's easy," I said. "I slipped on the wet tiles and took a header."

"Nobody pushed you?"

I turned to Sid Stullman and Emily McClennan. "Did anybody push me?"

The studio executive shook his noggin. "No, of course not." And the tall dame backed up his lie by adding: "Nobody else was here except the three of us and my husband's c-corpse. " Donaldson seemed to sense that we were holding out on him. A look of baffled fury came into his glims and he started breathing fire and brimstone. "Now, just a minute, Mrs. McClennan. I believe you told me Turner advanced a theory that your husband was murdered."

"Y-yes, that's right."

He swung back to me. "You based your conclusion on the alleged fact that a legless man can't sink unless he's held under the water, eh?"

I said: "Correct."

"Okay. Who held him?"

"I don't know."

"Are you sure it wasn't somebody who tried the same shenanigan on you?" he rasped. "Somebody whose name you aren't mentioning?"

I HAD a hard time keeping my puss expressionless, but I made the grade. For once in his life Dave had pitched a strike across the heart of the plate; had guessed the truth by sheer instinct. I didn't dare admit it, though. I said: "Don't be a dope. Why should I front for a killer?"

"That's what I'd like to know," he yodeled. Then he made his voice quiet. "Okay. Go ahead and clam up on me. I'm just a dumb cop with a homicide on my hands. I don't deserve any co-operation. I'm supposed to solve mysteries with a crystal ball or something. So all right; but Heaven help you if I find out you've lied to me. I'll have your license jerked so fast it'll curl your toenails, understand?"

Whereupon he pivoted on his heel, stalked away from me and fell neck over

tincup into the swimming pool.

IT TOOK me thirty minutes to drive to my bachelor apartment stash, change into dry threads, fortify my clockworks with two snorts of Vat 69, and start forth again on a snooping expedition. Harry Moon's igloo was my first stop. He lived in a mock Mediterranean shanty in Beverly Hills, a joint that must have nicked him for copious kopecks if he paid cash. How a newspaper writer and radio broadcaster could afford that much geetus wasn't too clear—unless he eked out his income by an occasional foray in the blackmail field.

I had a sneaking hunch this suspicion wasn't very far wrong. Moon's position as a gossip specialist put him privy to many a choice morsel of scandal; and he was just the kind of guy who'd sell his silence to the highest bidder. I skulked toward his ornate wikiup, wondering if I'd find him at home.

I hoped not. What I craved was a chance to prowl his premises for evidence—such as that letter Bill McClennan had written before going out to arrange an accident. Luck perched on my wishbone; the house was dark and nobody answered when I thumbed the doorbell.

I dredged out my ring of master keys, found one that worked the lock; stole indoors as soundlessly as a shadow marching on the wall. Presently I risked a ray from my pencil flashlight and got myself oriented; began a systematic search of every room in the layout. Wherever I spotted a cupboard, a closet, or a hunk of furniture that might be a hiding place for documents and papers, I took time out to frisk it. When I got through, I'd hunted the joint from stem to gudgeon.

And I'd thrown snake-eyes.

Then a new hunch nipped me on the

brisket. Maybe Moon kept his personal plunder downtown in his private office at the *Daily Record* building. The more I thought about it, the more logical it seemed. I drifted outside to my jalopy, got it rolling, headed it for the newspaper plant. Twenty minutes later I was a burglar again.

This time it wasn't so easy. The Record was an afternoon sheet, which meant its staff worked daytime and shut up shop at night. But there was a want-ad clerk in the front office and a watchman on duty, making his rounds of the rest of the building. I had to do some fast ducking to get upstairs without being tabbed. I made it, though.

Harry Moon's importance rated him a private cubicle with his name on the door and a special lock. The lock gave me a little trouble but I managed to force it. Then I gumshoed over the threshold; lamped a steel filing cabinet in the glow of my torch. The cabinet was one of those supposedly crackproof affairs, all its drawers being latched by one multiple-locking arrangement whose keyhole was just above the top compartment.

Having no key on my ring that came anywhere near fitting, I probed with the smallest blade of my pocketknife. It would take time to jimmy the gadget but I figured I had plenty. Very likely Moon wouldn't be showing up here tonight; probably wouldn't show himself anywhere until he found out how much heat was on him. For all he knew, maybe I'd already fingered him to the homicide cops; either as a murder suspect or merely because he'd butted me into the McClennan swimming tank. If he had any sense, he would stay under cover until he learned the score.

SO I worked on the filing cabinet's lock, thrusting with my knife until it snagged the first tumbler. This made a tiny

nick in the blade, which I deepened to a notch with my nail file. I probed again, got another nick, notched it. Twice more and I'd manufactured something that almost looked like a key. It actually worked the lock, too.

I opened the drawers; began rummaging.

The columnist's files were arranged alphabetically, the way a newspaper morgue is kept. Two drawers held correspondence and the other pair were crammed with envelopes that contained clippings about movie stars, past and present. In some cases there were sheets of typewritten notes pinned to the clippings: Harry Moon's notes outlining the personal, public, and private lives of people who worked in the celluloid racket. The envelopes dated back to the old one-reel silent days and forward to the present, and they made a comprehensive history of Hollywood as it used to be and as it is now.

I skimmed over them until I came to the M section. The Macs followed the M's, and then came the Mc's. There was a McAllston, a McBayne, two McCormicks—"McClennan!" I whispered as I found the one I wanted.

It was a fat envelope, gravid with information on the screen career of Bill McClennan from the time he broke in as a nameless extra in western quickies up to the day, eight months ago, when emergency surgeons whittled him to half a man. There were copies of his various contracts, including his last starring ticket on the Qualitone lot with its attached life insurance clauses and option paragraphs and sliding salary scales—a document of million buck proportions, far more important in appearance than the handwritten letter which was fastened to it with a Gem clip. But this handwritten letter was what I glued my glimmers on.

The writing was McClennan's, and his signature was scrawled at the bottom. The message itself was addressed to his wife, and it told her briefly that he intended to go out and hunt an accident to keep himself out of the draft. Reading it, I knew I had hit the jackpot. This was the note which had been pilfered from Emily McClennan; the basis for blackmail. And Harry Moon was the blackmailer.

From the office doorway, Moon said: "I guess I should have planted a rat trap in that filing cabinet. Then maybe I wouldn't need this blackjack."

I whirled, piped the sawed-off bozo diving at me. I'd been so interested in my work I hadn't heard him arrive; didn't even know I had company until he announced himself. I tried to yank my .32 automatic from the shoulder holster where I always carry it; missed by a shaved second. The columnist flogged me over the conk with his leather-covered sap; dropped me like an ox in a slaughterhouse.

WHAT SCALDED me was the fact that I'd just unraveled the riddle of Bill McClennan's croaking; but before I could do anything about it I was maced out of action. Moon bopped me again as I toppled; bounced his blackjack off my haircut so hard I heard bells chiming in my veins and arteries.

I hit the floor.

He stooped over me. "Are you awake, snoop? Speak up."

I tried to mumble something but no sound came out of my vocal apparatus. My gullet was paralyzed; and so was the rest of me. I couldn't have moved a muscle if I wanted to—and I didn't want to. It was much more restful just to lie there and let the world go drifting by on a cloud of black soapsuds.

Moon said: "I think you're playing possum, pal. Not that it will do you any

good. Once I make my deal and get my dough you won't be able to prove anything no matter how loud you bleat to the cops. It's a cinch Sid Stullman won't back up your story." Then he kicked me in the head to make sure I was rendered senseless.

Oddly enough, the impact of his brogan merely stopped those bells from ringing in my ears. I've heard of prize fighters who've had the same experience: being on the verge of a kayo and then taking one extra wallop that clicked their brains back into sharp focus.

That's how it was in my case. All of a sudden I was hep to everything that went on; felt myself able to move as well as if nothing had happened to me. I stayed inert, though. I wanted to know what Moon was up to.

He barged over to his desk, lifted his phone, dialed it and waited a moment. Then he said: "Mr. Stullman, please."

There was another pause, followed by: "Sid? This is Harry Moon. I've got something I think you'd like to buy. The price tonight is two hundred thousand dollars. Tomorrow it goes up to two hundred and fifty thousand. Yeah; Bill McClennan's confession letter. Sure I realize he's dead. So what? His name is still alive as long as you've got all his old pix that you can re-issue. And then there's that million buck settlement you're going to get from the electric line. What? You don't intend to take any dough from the railroad company? Oh, I see. You're too honest, eh? Okay. There's still a fortune in reviving his western films. But you won't collect that profit if I publish this letter and prove he was a draft-dodger. I've got you over a barrel, Sid. I think you'd better deal with me. Hunh? You want me to bring it out to your house now? You've got the cash? I'll be right there, palsy-walsy. G'bye now."

Moon rang off. As he moved toward the door, he pulled a stunt I wasn't expecting. He kicked me in the head.

Unconsciousness swallowed me.

A VOICE kept saying: "Get up, dopey. Up on your tootsies. A fine thing, sleeping when there's a job to do. Come on, gumshoe, snap out of your trance and get busy."

I opened my glims and discovered the voice was mine. I was talking to myself; persuasively, too. The argument must have been convincing because I staggered upright, swaying like the tag end of a ten day drunk. There were three lumps on my dome the size of Grant's Tomb and my ears buzzed like a hive of hornets. Pale light glowed in the little office, and when I focused on it I saw it was coming from my pencil flash which lay on the floor where I'd dropped it when Moon massaged me with his blackjack.

The fact that it was still burning told me I hadn't been out of this world too long. Those miniature batteries will last quite a while if used intermittently, but they lose their juice in a hurry under a steady drain. Counting the length of time I'd worked by the light while frisking the files and judging from its present feeble beam, I figured I'd been under ether maybe ten or fifteen minutes; not much longer.

Which meant Moon didn't have too big a start on me.

I lurched to his desk, dug for his phone, dialed police headquarters and got Dave Donaldson on the wire. "Turner talking," I mumbled mushily.

He caught the foggy inflection of my tone. "What's the matter? Plastered again?"

"No. Slugged," I told him. "I feel like the wrath of Wotsisname but I think I'll live to finger Bill McClennan's killer for

you. Flag yourself over here to the *Daily Record* building in a rush. I'll be waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"For us to go places and pinch people," I said. Then I hung up so he couldn't pester me with useless questions. I wasn't in the mood to answer them.

I GROPED my way downstairs to the street, moving carefully to keep from falling on my trumpet. The late night air felt nice against my mush; it had a touch of fog in it, damp and refreshing. I fished a gasper out of my pocket, set fire to it, took a deep drag. The world began to seem normal.

A dark sedan came careening toward the curb; stopped with a squealing of brakes. Donaldson was at the tiller. He opened the front door and said: "All right, genius. Get in and sing me the tune."

I plopped my poundage alongside him. "Know where Sid Stullman lives?"

"You mean the Stullman that's president of Qualitone Studios? Yeh; in Westwood."

I said: "Go there. But fast. There's no time to lose. Harry Moon is on his way there and we may be too late to prevent killery unless we hurry."

Donaldson stoked his boilers and the night began to scream around us as we tore a tunnel through it. Dave didn't use the siren, but he switched on his red emergency spotlight which was almost as good. Its crimson ray scattered traffic out of our roaring path the way a Flit gun sprays flies. I clung to the inside door handle, moaning softly and wishing for a rabbit's foot. My skull felt like a balloon.

Twenty centuries later we slackened speed, turned north off Wilshire and lost more momentum on the slight up-grade. Curving, stately residential streets marked this terraced neighborhood—and Sid Stullman's stash loomed suddenly into

view, elaborately attractive in its emerald setting of barbered lawn and landscaped shrubbery. There was an elegant chariot parked in front of the joint; Harry Moon's bucket.

Donaldson latched his brakes. "Now what?"

I said: "We run like hell and keep our fingers crossed for luck!" Then I surged across the vast expanse of clipped grass with Dave panting down my neck. We gained the house and I skirted it, making for a set of French windows at the side where you could see lights streaking through.

Within the room—an oak-paneled den—voices sounded. One whimpered: "No, you can't, you mustn't!" and the other answered firmly: "I've got to. Having killed once, there's no reason why I shouldn't kill again. This is the best way to complete our little transaction, my friend."

I GATHERED my thews and sinews; took a flying dive at the window. Its panes shattered inward as I catapulted over the low sill; flying shards of glass festooned my tresses and trickled down my neck. I yowled: "*Ixnay, Sid Stullman. You're all finished with your murdering!*"

I was wrong, though. The Qualitone mogul had been aiming a .38 roscoe at Harry Moon, who was cowering in a far corner. And even as I yeepped, Stullman squeezed his trigger. A slug smashed through Moon's think-tank, strewn his grey matter all over the wall behind him.

Then, over my shoulder, Dave Donaldson's service rod sneezed: *Ka-Chow! Chow!* and drilled two neat holes in Stullman's gizzard. Stullman folded over with a bullet bellyache and fell on his dignified features. His loose shock of dark dry hair had a mussed look.

I said: "Too bad, chump. You were

greedy for geetus and it brought you to a premature grave. Harry Moon was the blackmailer; but you're the murderer."

He rolled sidewise, looked up at me with glazing glims but didn't say anything.

"I'll make it fast so you can hear it before you join your ancestors," I told him. "When Bill McClennan lost his legs you were in line for a heavy payoff from the railroad. Unfortunately it developed that the accident had been Bill's own fault. He had even written a confession note, which was subsequently stolen and used for shakedown purposes.

"This scared you. Not knowing who the blackmailer was, you decided it might be dangerous for you to accept damages from the interurban line. But there was another way you could collect on the loss of McClennan's services. It was a very simple way. You drowned him. Can you hear me?"

His optics flickered. He wasn't able to nod.

I said: "I got my tip-off from Harry Moon's files. Moon had a copy of McClennan's contract with Qualitone Pix; *a document that included a million bucks insurance on McClennan's life*. I realized this might be a murder motive. You, being president of Qualitone, were the beneficiary. McClennan, as a cripple, had no value to you; but as a corpse he was worth a cool million potatoes. So you cooled him.

"Anyhow that was my theory. I backed it up with something I remembered. When I first talked to you tonight, you were thoroughly willing to agree you wouldn't press your claim against the electric line.

This was natural—if you'd just come from a job of bumping McClennan.

"There was a clue that seemed to cinch it. Your dark hair had been plastered to your head like a skullcap. It was soaking wet, the same way it looked later when you rescued me from the swimming pool. Whereas its normal condition, when dry as it is now, is sort of fluffy and loose. You still listening?"

His peepers flickered glassily.

"Okay," I said. "That's about all of it. The first time I saw you this evening, you'd just come from killing McClennan. You'd had time to dry yourself but not your hair. It all meshed together. So finally Harry Moon phoned you; offered to sell you the confession letter. I figured you'd lure him out here to your stash and bump him; and I was right."

From some unknown source Stullman dredged strength enough to use his voice. "Are you . . . sorry you didn't get here . . . in time to . . . save . . . Moon's life . . .?"

"No. Blackmailers deserve to croak."

He smiled philosophically. "So do . . . murderers . . . when they get . . . too greedy . . ." The breath leaked out of his bellows and he kicked the bucket.

I turned to Dave Donaldson. "Look, bub. How's for destroying Bill McClennan's confession note so a whole generation of youngsters won't find out their hero was a draft dodger? Then we can say Stullman bumped him for insurance, which is true as gospel. And we can say he creamed Harry Moon because Moon got wise to the first murder."

Dave scratched his chin-stubble. "Okay, boy scout. It's a deal." Dave's a sentimental dope sometimes.