

FEATURE SNATCH



She used the mop-handle like a niblick
and teed off my noggin before I had a
chance to duck.

By Robert Leslie Bellem

The idea was new—and was tops! Whoever thought of stealing a million dollar production before it was released? And behind it was the ransom angle, and there was blackmail, too. Sometimes a detective likes to get his teeth into a case like that. It's like matching your wits with a genius.

N OBODY got killed, but it was a major miracle. The two jalopies smacked together with a thunder of a crash; rebounded with their front ends dripping bolts and rivets. Headlight glass showered the road like a rain of razors.

The night was late and there was a lot of fog. I'd been over to a Pasadena movie house catching a sneak preview of the latest Supertone costume opus, a stinker costing copious kopecks, and I was headed back toward Hollywood after the show when this smashup happened. I lamped the whole thing because it took place spang in front of me.

I was driving across Pasadena's famous Suicide Bridge, with a big black Cad sedan just ahead of my bucket. As the Cad reached the far end of the bridge, a roadster without headlights darted out of a foggy side-road, hellity-blip; lurched smack into the sedan's path.

The Cad swerved, tried to miss a collision, failed. I jammed on my own anchors; skidded to a squealing stop just as metal met metal with a crunching noise you could have heard all the way to Glendale. The sedan ploughed broadside into the offending roadster. Then both machines were suddenly motionless.

I said: "What the!" and bounced to the pavement to see if there was anything I could do. At first I figured an ambulance would be needed—maybe even a hearse.

My own headlamps spotlighted the two wrecked machines and I glommed a gander at the roadster's driver. She was a young and very shapely quail with yellow hair and nifty gams. At that very instant she slid from her ruined buggy and started running into the fog.

Then the darkness gulped her like a raw oyster.

At the same instant, the Cad sedan's driver popped out of his car the way a slice of bread erupts from an automatic toaster. He was short, slight, about the size of a jockey, and he was giving vent to fervent cuss-words. He yelled: "- - -! Come back here!"

He began pelting after the blonde chick and I raced along beside him. I've got no sympathy for carelessness at a steering wheel regardless of age, sex or beauty—and the accident had been entirely the yellow-haired wren's fault. I intended to nab her if I could. She deserved to have her shapely form deposited in the nearest jug.

AS I overtook and passed the little Abozo, I whipped out my pencil flashlight; sprayed its beam through the fog. There was no trace of the blonde babe, though. She'd probably taken cover somewhere; might be hiding down in the bushes of the Arroyo Seco by this time. There wasn't much chance of finding her in the thickening fog without a regiment of searchers.

I halted, and the jockey-sized punk panted up to me. He had a skinny puss, a sharp needle of a nose, and his glims gave out sparks. "See her anywhere?"

"Nope."

"Well, come on! Let's smoke her out!"

"Not much use trying it, pal," I said regretfully. "She took a perfect powder, I'm afraid."

"Dammit, what am I going to do, let her get away with this?"

I said: "Not necessarily. You can get

her name from the roadster's registration certificate and sue to the limit. I'll be glad to appear in court for you if you like. My name's Dan Turner. I'm a private eye in Hollywood."

I handed him my card. He took it; traded me a grateful glance. "Thanks a lot. I've heard of you, Mr. Turner. You see, I'm Spence Hanley."

"Nephew and sole heir of Ben Hanley, the high mogul of Supertone Pix?"

He nodded. "Don't hold that against me, though. I may work at the studio like any other relative, but I earn my pay."

We ankled back to the point where he'd rammed his sedan into the blonde twist's heap. I sprinkled some light in the roadster. Then I said: "Nuts!"

Young Hanley stared. "Something?"

I pointed. "You won't get her vital statistics from the registration slip, after all."

"Why not?" his tone grew sharper than his beeper.

"This is a rented iron from one of the Hollywood U-drive agencies," I growled.

He swore; barged over to his Cad and opened its front door as if to climb in. All of a sudden he twitched like a guy who's been jabbed with a red-hot hypodermic. "Oh-h!" he yeepled. Then he started staggering around in circles, his steps as jerky as a mechanical toy.

I grabbed him. "What cooks?"

"The c-cans. The film. G-gone!"

"What film?"

He trembled. "The reels of my uncle's new costume p-production. The latest Supertone million dollar feature—"

"The one that was just previewed in Pasadena?"

He choked: "Y-yes. I was b-bringing the master print back to the studio. Twelve cans of spools. Somebody m-must have s-stolen them out of my car while we chased that girl!"

A hunch nipped me. "Looks to me as if you stepped into a frame, sonny."

"Frame?"

"Yeah. The yellow-haired doll probably doused her headlights and purposely drove in front of you, caused the accident. Then she deliberately lured you into trailing her afoot."

"You mean she had an accomplice waiting here to steal the film as soon as she drew me away?"

"It makes sense," I said.

"No it doesn't," he stuck a gasper in his yap but forgot to light it. "It's preposterous!"

"Why is it?"

"Because in the first place, who'd know I was carrying those reels in my car? And in the second place, the original negative of the feature is in our film vaults out at the Supertone lot in Culver City. Nobody could possibly gain anything by stealing one positive master print. There'll be hundreds more prints made from the negative when the pic is released for distribution."

I said: "So okay. Maybe some dope just craved a souvenir of Hollywood."

About that time another car drew up, a limousine this trip. A Pasadena motorcycle cop also arrived. From the limousine bounced Ben Hanley, the little punk's uncle. He and the cop went into a questions-and-answers act with the harried nephew in the middle of a barrage of words and phrases.

I left them jawing there. If Spence Hanley wanted me for a witness he could contact me later. I drove home.

ABOUT nine o'clock the following morning a phone call jingled me awake. I reached out of bed, uncradled the instrument and said: "Speak right up. You're paying for it."

"Turner?"

“Yeah.”

“You alone?”

“I am, although it’s none of your business.”

“Don’t get your back hair in a kink. This is Duke Kinzer,” the voice said.

I scowled. I knew Duke Kinzer—slightly. And what I knew about him I didn’t like. He was a cheap two-bit grifter and penny ante louse around town, the kind of guy you prefer to see through a telescope. I said: “Sorry. He’s out.”

“Who’s out?”

“Mr. Turner, suh. Dis-yere am de butler. Ah’ll tell him y’all phoned him, yassuh. Goom-bye now.”

Kinzer’s tone hardened. “Cut out the ribbing, Sherlock. I got a proposition for you.”

“Me velly slolly. Me-dumb Chinaboy, no spikkada Ingleese. *Si, Senior*, I geeve your message to boss when he come een. I theenk thees weel be next year some time.”

“Very funny,” Kinzer said. “The dialect kills me. When I get done laughing, remind me to tell you I got a ten-grand melon I can cut with you. Fifty-fifty.”

“Your melons are all sour, pal,” I said. “I’m not interested.”

“Maybe you’d be interested in this one. It’s a cinch. A sure thing. Look. You’ll be called in on a case out at Supertone some time today.” He slid into a fast-talking whisper. “You can solve this case with the information I’m gonna give you. You can tap old Ben Hanley for at least ten G’s reward dough. All I want is five thousand for myself.”

In spite of my dislike for the Kinzer rodent, I decided to give his deal a smell—at least until I found out what it was. After all, I’m in the private snooping racket for all the geetus I can collect. “What’s the case I’m to be called on?” I asked him. “And what information are you going to

slip me?”

“Can’t tell you now, Hawkshaw. But I’ll ring you at your office right after lunch.” He hung up.

I torched a wheezer, had an eye-opener of Vat 69, dunked my chassis in the shower and was piling into a set of threads when the phone rang again. I answered it.

The guy on the other end of the line crackled with excitement. “Turner? This is Ben Hanley of Supertone. I need you right away on an important matter. Can you come right over to Culver City and see me?”

“I’m practically half-way there this instant,” I told him. I hung up, started to turn around—and felt the muzzle of a roscoe poking me in the left kidney.

“You won’t go anywhere for a while,” a she-male voice informed me quietly.

I PIVOTED; nearly swallowed my coffin-nail, fire and all. A young, blonde quail was standing close to me with her .25 automatic cocked and primed. It wasn’t the roscoe that startled me, though. You get used to things like that in my business. What got me down was the jane herself.

She was the party who’d driven her rented roadster in front of young Spence Hanley’s sedan the previous night and then made her getaway in the fog!

I hung the stupefied glimpse on her. “How did you get in my stash, Bright-Eyes?”

“Maybe I picked the lock. Maybe I bribed the janitor for a key. Maybe I came in the fire-escape window. Do you care?”

“I’m delighted. Or I would be if you’d put away that hog-leg. You’re just what a bachelor apartment needs.”

A SCORNFUL grin quirked her crimson lips. “So, a wise guy?”

“Wise enough to know a looker when I

see one.”

“Then you can get a good look while I’m driving you down to Manhattan Beach.”

I said: “So we’re going on a party, hunh?”

“Call it a vacation. There’s a cozy little cabin all prepared for you. A nice weekend spot.”

“I can’t afford vacations, babe. Let’s not go. Let’s just stay here and have fun in Hollywood. They call me ‘Tumbling Turner’, ‘cause I fall for anything wearing skirts.”

“Lay a hand on me and I’ll plug a hole in you, Sherlock,” she warned me.

I doubted that. She didn’t look like the type who’d actually pull the trigger on you for making a pass. She was delightfully streamlined in a tight frock; there was a cute tilt to her nose, a come-hither glint she couldn’t keep out of her optics, and her complexion hadn’t originated in a jar of cosmetics. Her hair was genuinely yellow without benefit of peroxide and her perfume smelled nice.

“You going to spend this vacation with me, hon?” I said.

“I am not.”

I said: “In that case I won’t go.” I made a loose fist, brought it around in a half-circle and swatted her on the wrist. Her rod went clattering across the room and she let out a startled yelp. “Quiet,” I snarled, and doled her a belt on the mush.

She went backward, lost her balance, toppled.

I followed it up by catching both her slender wrists in my left hand. Her blue glims shot sparks. “Stop it . . . let me go!”

“Cork it, sister. Before I give you another taste of my knuckles.” As I pinioned her, I reached for a spare necktie on my dresser, knotted the jessie’s arms behind her.

“Wh-what are you g-going to do?” she panted.

“Leave you here while I make a hurry-up visit to Culver City,” I leered at her. “Then I’ll come back and give your little trip to Manhattan Beach some more thought.”

“You c-can’t make me stay!” She was twisting, trying hard to get her wrists loose.

“I can try.” I leaned down, looped another necktie around her ankles, drew it tight, tossed her onto my divan. Even then, I was afraid she might work her way a loose, so I went to a bureau drawer, got out a bed-sheet, made long a strips of it and wrapped her like an Egyptian mummy. I shoved a gag in her mouth; and then, for good measure, I put a blanket over her and pinned the edges of the blanket to the divan with safety pins.

“So-long, Toots,” I said, and ankled out.

BEN HANLEY was waiting for me in his lavish private sanctum on the Supertone lot. He was a fussy little blister with a bald dome fringed by wisps of grey hair, and his trumpet was even sharper than his nephew’s. The nephew himself, Spence Hanley, was also in the office, jittery as a jockey at the start of the Kentucky Derby. And there was a third guy sitting in the room, a tall, skinny character dressed in black like an undertaker. He sneered at me as I barged in.

I sneered right back at him with compound interest. His name was Mortimer Wolf and he was president of Terrastar Productions—a rival studio. There’d been bad blood between Supertone and Terrastar for a long time, and I wondered what Wolf was doing in the enemy camp. His presence irked me for no especial reason. I just didn’t go for

the guy, was all.

Old Man Hanley said: “Thanks for coming, Turner. I’m in terrible trouble. The film of my latest super picture has been stolen.”

“Yeah, I know. I was on deck when the reels were glommed out of Spence’s sedan. But you’ve still got the negative.”

The nephew started pacing up and down. “That’s just it! Somebody broke into Uncle Ben’s film vaults last night and made away with that negative. It must have happened around the same time the master positive was being taken from my Cadillac!”

“You mean you can’t duplicate the print?”

“No,” the punk’s uncle gibbered. “A million dollar production—gone! We just finished the last takes a few days ago. Most of the sets are partly dismantled already. Some of the cast have been signed by other lots. The rushes were okayed, the necessary retakes made, and the cutters were all through editing and titling. You know that if you saw the preview last night. And now we got nothing to show for it! No negative, no master print—”

I caught my breath. The idea of purloining a million-buck movie was a brand new gag. I’d never heard of such a audacious stunt; but you had to admit the idea was tops. It had the earmarks of genius.

“Any suspicions?” I asked.

Ben Hanley shook his bald noggin. “No. But a man came in to see me this morning. He claimed to represent the ones who stole the film. He demanded a hundred thousand dollars for the return of the reels.”

“A hundred grand?” I let out a low whistle.

“Yes. And I can’t pay it. A hundred thousand would wipe out every dime in our treasury at the moment—and we need

the money to pay Mr. Wolf, here,” he gestured toward the tall, skinny president of the rival Terrastar outfit.

“How-come you owe Wolf that much scratch?”

“We’re in a hole, Turner. We’ve had some flops recently. We hoped this new costume epic would pull us out. Otherwise—well, Mr. Wolf bought up a lot of our notes at the bank, and there’s a payment due tomorrow. A quarter of a million, actually, but he’s willing to accept a hundred thousand on account.”

“A hundred thousand. No less, though,” the Terrastar mogul grunted from somewhere down around his shoelaces. He reminded me of a cheap undertaker waiting for a sick man to kick the bucket. “I want the money or I’ll put this studio in bankruptcy.”

I looked him over. “But if you insist on your payment, Ben Hanley won’t be able to buy back his feature.”

“That’s his lookout.”

“Wait. If he uses what money he has to get his film back, he can probably make enough profit off it to satisfy your debt in full. Why don’t you give him an extension?”

Wolf smiled. It was an unpleasant smile. “No extension. With me, money talks.”

I SAID: “Yeah. It talks. It also stinks. You’ve got Hanley on the hook. No matter which way he wriggles, he’s a gone goose. If he pays you, he can’t buy back his stolen feature—so he goes bankrupt. If he buys it back, he can’t pay you right away—so you put him in bankruptcy. He can’t win.”

“Are you accusing me of engineering the theft of his production, gumshoe?” Mortimer Wolf crossed one bony leg over the other and hung the sardonic focus on me.

"Not exactly. It's a theory, though."

"It's a lousy theory; my friend. I'm not trying to wreck Supertone. I'm just protecting my own financial investments."

"That's nice," I said. "But of course if Supertone should go into receivership, you might buy it and merge it with Terrastar. Two companies for the price of one. It'd be a swell deal—for a mugg like you."

He shrugged. "Okay, so I'm a mugg. So I'm the mugg who suggested calling you in on the case. You're an appreciative louse, I must say."

I wanted to paste him but I restrained the impulse. There was a chance that he might be leveling; I had no way of knowing for sure—as yet. So I ignored him and swung back to Ben Hanley, who was plucking at the tufts of grey fuzz around his bald scone: I said: "You're hiring me to locate the missing reels?"

"If that's possible."

"What about the guy that contacted you this morning? The one who demanded a hundred grand ransom for the film?"

"He said he was representing the parties who have the reels. He gave his own name as Duke Kinzer."

I jumped about seven inches straight up in the air. "Kinzer? Well, I'll be a—!"

Hanley's jockey-size nephew said: "What's the matter, Turner? Why does Kinzer's name startle you?"

"Because he phoned me this morning." Then I snapped my fingers. "I think I savvy the setup now! Kinzer is evidently on the verge of double-crossing his associates and selling out to me for a mere ten thousand plasters. He told me he'd call me again, right after lunch. Maybe I can pull your fat out of the fire after all."

As I said this, I was watching Mortimer Wolf from the tail of my peeper. He scowled, wrinkled his map as if he'd just chewed an unripe persimmon. "You really think so?" he said.

"I do indeed. And by the way, did any of you guys spill that you intended to hire me?"

Hanley quit worrying his tufts of hair. "Why, no. Not as far as I know. Nobody knew it except Mr. Wolf and my nephew and myself. What makes you think—?"

"It leaked out just the same," I snapped. "A blonde cutie came into my igloo a while ago; tried to stop me from coming here."

"A blonde—?" Young Spence goggled at me.

"Yeah, chum. The same one that ran her jalopy in front of yours last night."

"Good Lord!" the punk whispered. "What did she want?"

"I didn't take time to ask her. I was in a hurry. She'll keep, though. I left her tied up. So now I'm going back to beat some information out of her while I'm waiting for Duke Kinzer's phone call." And I ankled out, conscious of three pairs of eyes following me, speculating, wondering . . .

When I got to my parked coupe I took a swivel around; didn't pipe anybody watching me. So I leaned down, let all the ozone out of my left hind tire. As soon as it was flat, I hunted up a parking lot attendant; killed ten minutes helping him change over to my precious spare.

Presently I got rolling in the direction of my wigwam; took my time. Sure enough, when I got there and peered into my apartment, the blonde doll was gone.

SOMEBODY had sliced open the blanket that pinned her down; had cut the strips of sheet that bound her like a bandage. Then she'd powdered.

There was a grin on my kisser, which I lubricated with a shot of Scotch. Everything had worked out exactly as I'd foreseen; and the wren's lam bore out certain suspicions that were taking shape

in my think-tank. So now my next move would be to put the finger on Duke Kinzer. Once I located him, I figured to clear up the mess in short order.

I drove to certain apartments where the rat had lived at one time or another, but I threw snake-eyes every time. Kinzer moved oftener than a Mexican jumping bean with the hotfoot—frequently without paying his overdue rent. And he always carefully avoided leaving any forwarding address. Afraid his former landladies might catch up with him, was the way I doped it.

One wise old dame of an apartment manager disputed this, however. She told me: “Don’t be silly, young man. He wasn’t afraid of landladies. He was afraid of those waitresses he runs around with. One of them’s probably looking for him with a marriage license in one hand and a shotgun in the other.”

I could have kissed the old bag. She handed me the tip I should have remembered for myself—Kinzer’s weakness for hash house she-males. I thanked her and hied myself to a cheap beanery on lower Hollywood Boulevard where a dish by the name of Mae Hainey dealt ‘em off the arm. I’d seen her in Kinzer’s company on several occasions, and maybe she could spot him for me.

Not that I expected her to push out any voluntary information. But I had a scheme to get it out of her.

For once in my life, I got a break when I barged into the eatery. It was just time for the shift of waitresses to change, and the Hainey cupcake was back of the counter taking off her apron, perching a screwy hat on her henna-red tresses. I turned, blipped back to the sidewalk, waited until she came out. Then I fell into step with her.

“Hi, sweet stuff. Your name Hainey? Mae Hainey?”

She gave me the sidewise swivel. “Blow, big boy. Whatever it is you’re sellin’, that’s what it is I ain’t buyin’.”

“That’s too bad, hon. I’m not selling anything except maybe a few drinks. For free.”

She lifted a rouged lip. “Drinks at this time in the morning? You must work on the swing shift somewhere. Go on, cousin, scam.”

“Okay. So I’ll scam. So I’ll give Duke what-for.”

“Duke who?”

“Kinzer. He gave me your name, told me you were a good kid—to look you up. I just got in from Seattle, and—”

“Duke Kinzer told you—?”

“Don’t get him wrong, baby. Don’t get *me* wrong, either. Duke just told me that if I was lonesome, I should drop in at the beanery and say hello.”

“Well, Duke better not talk around about me—”

I said: “Skip it. I made a mistake, is all. I wanted somebody to have some drinks with me and maybe go to a show or something. Can’t a lonesome guy look for company in a strange town? Well, thanks anyhow.” I started to haul hips in the opposite direction.

SHE nailed me by the arm, pulled me back. “Don’t be in such a rush. Maybe I’m lonesome too. Only I don’t like guys to think they can pick me up like I was a tramp. Not strange guys, anyhow. I’m a lady, I’ll have you know. And my old woman was a lady before me.”

“Sure, hon, sure,” I said. “Anybody can see you’ve got breeding.” Actually, standing on the corner with her made me feel as conspicuous as a wop selling balloons at the Ritz.

She said sullenly: “Buy me a drink?”

“That was the general idea when I first started,” I told her. There was a cocktail

dispensary handy and I steered her into its dim depths. The joint smelled of stale beer. We took a rear booth and gave the barkeep our orders. He brought them. Vat 69 for me and a double rye for Mae. She tossed it off neat with a chaser of beer. Then she had another of the same.

After the third prescription, she said confidentially: "Funny thing about me. Whiskey never affects me."

"Really?"

"But beer. I can feel that stuff t, the minute it hits bottom. I feel it now. Makes me warm." She got up from across the table and slid into the booth on my bench. "You feel the stuff handsome?"

"I do now," I slid an arm around her waist, drew her nearer. "It isn't just the drink, either. It's you."

She giggled gravely. "I think you're cute. Wanna kiss?"

I told her yes, which was a complete lie, and pressed my mouth to hers. "Oh, boy!"

"Whatsamatter, honey?" She giggled. "You're cute. I like you. Gotta tell Duke how nice you are."

"Not today you won't," I said. "Not when his leg hurts so bad."

"Whose leg?"

"Duke's. Duke Kinzer's. The left one."

"It didn't hurt him last night," she said.

"The right one either. You kidding me?"

I looked at her. "You mean you haven't heard what happened to him this morning? What happened to his leg, I mean?"

"No. What happened to it?"

"He busted it." I picked up a burned match, snapped it by way of illustration. "Fell down a manhole."

SHE stood up suddenly. "Duke should of called me. Gonna go see him. What hospital is he at?"

"No hospital. Home."

"You got a car?"

"Sure."

"Take me there."

I paid my bill and we went out of the groggery to my bucket at the curb. As I helped her in, I pretended to stumble. "Ouch! I've sprained my ankle and can't drive."

"So gimme your key." Which was just what I was hoping she'd say. Now she would take me to Kinzer and I didn't even have to ask her for his address.

There would be trouble, though, when she found out his stem wasn't really broken. En route, I figured out an answer to this. And when we finally reached the door of his apartment in a shabby stash north of Franklin, I put my scheme to work; made a regretful fist and pasted the red-haired bim on the dimple.

It was a dirty trick but I was forced to it. I caught her as she sagged, toted her to a broom closet farther along the corridor and stowed her with the mops and vacuum cleaners. Then I belted back to Duke's portal; knocked.

Nobody answered. I tried the knob but it was locked. I hauled forth my ring of master keys, found one that operated the latch; let myself in. And then, as I crossed the threshold, an ugly sensation slugged me in the pit of the elly-bay with the force of a battering ram. I whispered: "What the—?"

Duke Kinzer was strewn on the threadbare carpet with a hole in his head; a bullet hole. He was deader than Confederate money.

HE HADN'T been defunct more than ten or fifteen minutes; his wrist was still limber, faintly warm. I'd missed his killer by just that short a time—and I realized Duke had been bumped off by his boss in the Supertone feature-film theft. The shootery had been committed on

account of this unknown boss finding out that Kinzer was planning a double-cross: had figured to sell out to me for a lousy fifty-fifty split of ten grand instead of waiting to collect the whole hundred thousand.

And there were just three guys who knew about Duke's phone call to me. They knew because I'd told them. They were Ben Hanley of Supertone, his nephew Spence, and Mortimer Wolf from the Terrastar outfit.

Frankly, I wasn't sure which one of them was the guilty character. But I was beginning to have a slim idea, along with an even slimmer chance of collaring the bozo in question. It would all depend on a certain loose parcel in my jalopy. I straightened up, made for the door—

It opened in my face and Mae Hainey lurched in. Her peepers were glassy, there was a mouse under her kisser where I'd bopped her, and she had a mop handle in her mitts from the broom closet I'd forgotten to lock when I stuffed her there. She swung the mop handle like a niblick; teed off on my noggin before I had a chance to duck.

She scored par. I went bye-bye.

I WOKE up to the rhythmic tune of somebody slapping me across the chops with his open palm. When I opened my blinkers, I stared into the beefy lineaments of my friend Dave Donaldson, homicide squad lieutenant. The room was infested with his minions, and two guys were lugging Duke Kinzer's remainders out of the joint in a wicker meat-basket.

Donaldson snarled: "Okay, Sherlock. Start belching before I kick the truth out of you."

I sat up groggily, jabbed my thumbs at his eyeballs to drive him off me. "Desist," I grunted. "You know well enough I didn't chill the guy."

"This lady says you did. She put in the bleat to headquarters and told us." He gestured toward the Hainey jane.

I said: "She made a mistake. And she's no lady."

That drew fire from the redhead. "By gosh, I'm more of a lady I than you are, you stinkin' son! I'll—"

A couple of harness bulls grabbed her, held her. I staggered to my pins, fastened the clutch on Donaldson's elbow. "Come with me. Maybe I can clean up this mess for you."

"Oh, yeah? How?"



"You'll see. Come on, get moving." And I dragged him out of the igloo, took him into my coupe. Then I produced the parcel I'd been hankering to examine. It was the little leather purse I'd glommed from the golden-haired cutie in my apartment that morning—the wren who had later lammed with the help of somebody else.

Dave hung the hinge on it. "What goes on?"

"This," I said, and opened the catch. I frisked inside; found a driver's license. It was made out to one Norah Doran and the address was a bungalow court just off Wilshire.

"Well?" Dave asked me grimly.

I said: "Maybe good, maybe bad. We've got to make knots." We piled into my heap and I souped the cylinders. On the way, I explained my theories. Presently I parked a block away from my destination; argued Dave into playing ball with me. He protested but finally caved in; followed me at a discreet distance as I barged toward the bungalow court.

When I was sure he was out of view, I went to the rear cottage, thumbed the bell, dragged my .32 automatic from the armpit holster where I always carry it for emergencies. In a moment the bungalow door opened and I was face to face with the golden-haired dame who'd run her roadster in front of Spence Hanley's sedan last night.

"Norah Doran?"

"Yes. Oh-h-h... it's y-you . . .!"

I put the muzzle of my rod against her frightened puss. "One yep and it gives bullets for lunch, baby," I said. Then I pushed her backward into the wigwam; followed her.

THERE were a lot of Gladstone bags and miscellaneous luggage scattered around the wikiup, some packed, some waiting for cargo. I said: "Getting ready to take it on the lam, eh, hon?"

"What's it to you? You can't b-break in here and—"

"Guess again, sweet stuff. I'm hep to the whole setup. And unless you turn state's evidence, you're going to find your gorgeous form resting on a cold hard bench in the gow."

"I d-don't know what you me-mean!"

I gave her a pleasant leer. "So I'll

explain. You and your boy friend stewed up a slick trick to garner a quick hundred G's. The idea was to swipe a million buck Supertone opus and hold it for ransom. Duke Kinzer was hired to help."

Her breathing got gusty.

"You—you!"

I said: "First your sweetie took the negative reels from the Supertone vaults; an inside job. Then, last night, you drove a rented roadster in front of Spence Hanley's chariot. And when Spence gave chase, Duke Kinzer was on the job to steal the only existing positive-print spools."

"Prove it!"

I ignored this. "Then Kinzer became the contact guy; the go-between. He delivered your demand for a hundred thousand fish as the price of the feature's return. However, he apparently got sore at you for some reason; maybe because you weren't cutting him in for a big enough slice of the take. So he tried to cross you by phoning me, offering to sell out for five thousand."

She was a little more composed, now. "This is all Greek to me, bub."

"Yeah, but I'm translating it for you. When Kinzer phoned me, it was a tip-off. How could he know in advance that I was going to be called in on the case? He must have been close to somebody who told him. And only three guys were aware that I was to be hired: Ben Hanley, his nephew, and Mortimer Wolf."

"Well?"

"So it had to be one of those three who'd glommed the production. I proved this to my own satisfaction by telling all of them that I had you locked in my stash—and then allowing enough time for the guilty party to rescue you. Unfortunately, though, I allowed too much time. Because after your boy friend released you from my dugout, he did something else."

"Something . . . else?"

“Something that’ll buy him a one-way ticket to the smoke house at San Quentin,” I nodded. “He bumped Duke Kinzer.”

All the starch went out of her. She swayed against me, clung like a frightened mustard-plaster. “I . . . I didn’t know there’d be a m-murder! I swear I didn’t! oh-h-h, - please . . . Don’t let me be involved! Take me away! I’ll . . . pay you . . .”

I said: “Maybe we can make a deal if you’ll tell me your sweetie’s name, hon.”

She started to say something but never got it out. That was because a roscow started sneezing from the kitchen doorway. It spewed: *Ka-chow! Chow!* and the blonde quail stiffened, twitched convulsively. Then she went very limp. Who wouldn’t go limp with a pair of slugs in her cranium?

I dropped her; catapulted at the kitchen with my own gat set to spray lead all over the precinct. Then I heard a frightful commotion in the back yard. Dave Donaldson’s voice roared: “Got you, rat!”

WHEN I reached the rear doorway, he was macing Ben Hanley over the bald spot with one hand and putting the nippers on the old blister’s wrists with the other. Hanley was caterwauling like a wildcat with its tail in a crack; and his smoking cannon lay at his feet where Dave had knocked it.

I said: “Nice work, chum. He just browned Norah Doran with that howitzer. And I’ll bet my last dollar it’ll match up with the slug that chilled Duke Kinzer, too.”

“What’s the difference? We can only gas him once.”

I hung the focus on the Hanley bozo. “It had to be you,” I told him. “The theft of the negative from your vaults was an inside job, which eliminated Mortimer

Wolf. So it rested between you and your nephew. But Spence practically cleared himself when the positive print was taken from his Cad sedan. He was shocked, but not too worried. He pointed out that more prints could be made—which indicated he knew nothing about the negative being swiped.”

“Blast you!” the old guy tore hunks of grey tuft from the fringe around his shiny noggin.

I said: “Your studio was about bankrupt. And this million dollar costume opus was a turkey. It stunk. It wouldn’t draw flies at the box office. So you figured to steal it and buy it back for the last hundred grand in your treasury—paying the dough to yourself, actually. That would clean out Supertone’s coffers and Mortimer Wolf would take over; but at least you’d have a hundred thousand dollars saved from the deal. It might have worked, too, if you hadn’t gone murder-haywire.”

He started to curse me. Then all of a sudden his puss turned pasty and he clutched at his shirt-front. Heart disease, the doctors said at the autopsy. All I know is, Hanley was deceased before he hit the ground with his profile.

Later I found the missing cans of film in the late lamented Nora Doran’s bungalow; turned them over to young Spence Hanley, who inherited the Supertone lot. Mortimer Wolf gambled some more financing on the jockey-sized punk, and between them they remade the costume opus—salvaged parts of it and re-shot the rest. It turned out to be a click all over the country.

I drew a fee of five thousand clams and spent part of it on a roaring binge with the red-haired waitress, Mae Hainey. Maybe she wasn’t a lady, but sometimes you get tired of ladies.