

HOMICIDE HUNCH.....

By ROBERT
LESLIE
BELLEM



It was a screwball situation. Here was Dan, sitting at home and minding his own business, when the knock came at his front door. A short time later he was in a lavish apartment a few miles away, where he had been convoyed at the point of a gun, and a beautiful cutie he had never seen before was calling him "Dan, darling" and implying that they were old sweeties!

I WAS slightly plastered that evening or I might not have fallen for the gag. But the Scotch had lulled my suspicious nature; so I answered right away when somebody knocked on the front door of my apartment stash and said: "Telegram for Dan Turner."

The instant I opened the portal I realized I'd made a bad mistake. Instead of a messenger boy, my visitor was a swarthy creep named Pedro Romelo—a tall, lanky Latin who played minor villain roles in Cosmotone horse operas and carried his villainy around with him in private life.

He had a narrow, mulish puss with black sideburns running down past his ears to emphasize the glitter in his slitted glims, and he affected a costume that belonged only on a studio set—velvet pants flaring at the cuffs, high heeled boots, a Spanish jacket over a pink silk shirt open at the throat to show how hairy his chest was. As soon as I tabbed him, I knew I was in for trouble in copious quantities. He and I had crossed swords in the past, and he bore little love for me. In fact, what he bore for me at the moment was a pearl-handled .28 automatic.

He grinned as he thrust the roscoe against my favorite vest. "Want a hole in your tweeds, snoop?"

"No, thanks. The noise might disturb the neighbors." I glued the measuring glimpse on him; I wondered how much chance I had of swatting his rod aside and planting a set of fives on his sneery panorama. I concluded he was too close to me for that kind of risk. I didn't have enough room to swing.

He seemed to guess my thoughts. "Make a move for your shoulder holster and I let you have it," he warned me.

"You needn't bother, bub. What cooks?"

"Wait and see. I got a taxi waiting. Let's go for a ride. If you whistle copper even once, you'll be minus a kidney. Savvy?"

I said: "Yeah. So I won't whistle copper."

He reached under my coat, frisked me for the .32 I always tote in an armpit rig. Then he pocketed both heaters, mine and his own; kept his mitt on the little .28 so its muzzle made a bulge in my direction through the cloth. "Get going."

WE WENT down to his Yellow and it ferried us out to the Tower Arms on Sunset. Presently Romelo prodded me into a lavish layout on the seventh floor; closed the door after us. I set fire to a gasper; took a hinge around the joint.

The blue carpet must have cost a peck of kopecks, its thick pile seething up around your ankles when you walked on it. All the furniture was modernistic: glass-and-chromium tables, blue drapes, metal-and-leather chairs. A screwy floor lamp cast indirect light against the ceiling and the glow bounced back down around a blue leather divan. When I piped this divan, I widened my peepers and choked: "What the—?"

There was a blonde quail stretched out on the glossy cushions, trussed hand and hoof with knotted ropes. Her piquant pan would have been gorgeous even without its heavy-makeup.

It wasn't her she-male beauty that floored me, though. It was the way she greeted me. "Dan, d-darling!" she moaned.

I gave vent to strangled noises, because I wasn't her Dan darling. As a matter of fact I'd never seen her before in my life—and I've got an address book as wide as your wrist. Evidently I'd been overlooking a bet somewhere.

Then, while I was struggling to cope with this screwball situation, the Romelo rodent maced me over the head with his cannon.

WHEN consciousness rejoined me, I was slumped in a chair with my wrists and ankles tied like a Christmas goose. There was a lump on my thatch the size of Grant's Tomb and I had a headache built for an elephant.

The wren on the divan twisted around to hang the gander on me, being careful not to disarrange her golden coiffure. "Poor Dan," she whimpered. "I'm so sorry, honey."

Pedro Romelo sneered down at me. "Ready to spill, gumshoe?"

I said: "Yeah. Ready to spill your clockworks all over the precinct as soon as I get loose from these ropes."

"Don't be that way, pal. The only thing it'll buy you is some more lumps. I want Mort Pollak's key."

I twitched as if I'd been jabbed with a lighted cigar. Until recently, Mort Pollak had been a .22 caliber talent agent in Hollywood—a crooked heel who used his offices on the Sunset Strip to mask any number of illegal shenanigans. Mort had made the serious error of committing first degree killery on one of his lady friends during a blackmailing operation, and I'd pinned it on him. As a result, the State convicted him and rendered him defunct in the gas house at San Quentin.

I had no regrets about this. Pollack was guilty, he took the rap, and that was that. But I didn't know anything about his keys and I said so, emphatically. I'd have used gestures but my dukes were too well tied.

Romelo leaned down, breathed in my kisser. "You lie, Sherlock. You've got it and I want it."

"Maybe you'd better explain what key you mean," I tried to spar him away.

He said: "Look. Pollak stashed ten grand in a safety deposit box somewhere in town just before you sent him over the road. I think you've been waiting all these weeks for the heat to die before you open the box and glom that cabbage. But you waited too long, see! I found out about it and I'm cutting in for the whole wad. Pollak owed me about that much, anyhow. So this is where I collect—when you give me the key."

"Nuts to you," I grunted. "You're as haywire as snowballs in San Diego."

"You think you can dummy up on me, hunh?" He took mincing steps across the room. "So okay. Start belching or I get rough with your sweetie, here." He meant the doll on the couch.

I said: "She's not my sweetie, so go ahead. I don't even know her name."

That drew a sobbing protest from the golden-haired jane, together with a reproachful stare. "Dan, darling, how c-can you say such a thing when we've meant so much to each other?"

"How much have we meant to each other, babe?"

"Oh-h-h, p-please, don't try to keep up the pretense. There's no use lying to Romelo. I've already t-told him you and I are engaged. He . . . f-forced me to. I tried to k-keep it a secret, but he beat me w-with his fists."

I said: "So that's why he nudged me up here."

"Yes." Then she began whimpering as the Latin louse bent over her, and started slapping. First his right hand would smack her cheek; then his left would jolt her the other way. She couldn't stop him on account of the ropes that bound her helplessly.

THE guy was thoroughly business-like, I'll say that much for him. I strained at my own bonds, but all I drew were some chafed places on my wrists and an assortment of blisters on my disposition.

"Dan . . . !" the gazelle wailed faintly. "Don't let him . . . I can't st-stand it. . . !"

"I guess you'll have to, hon. What can I do?"

"Tell him wh-where the k-key is. Please!"

For an instant this didn't make any more sense to me than six aces in a poker deck. Then, suddenly, I caught hep to what she was driving at. "Okay, skunk," I yelled to Romelo. "Lay off her. I'll spill."

He bent his narrow puss in a smile. "That's much better. Now—give!"

"I haven't got it on me. You know that. You probably frisked me while I was unconscious."

"Sure I did. So just tell me where to find it."

I fished a quick lie out of my think-tank. "It's in the lower left desk drawer of my office downtown, in a small envelope. Know where my office is?"

"Yeah. And if this is on the level I'll come back, turn you and your sweetie loose. Otherwise; it's going to be just too bad." He went to the door; powdered.

AS SOON as I couldn't hear his footfalls in the corridor any longer, I copped an irate hinge at the yellow-haired dish on the divan. "A fine kettle of herring," I growled.

"I know. Please d-don't blame m-me. I was at my wits' end or I wouldn't have d-dragged you into the mess, Mr. Turner." At least she had quit calling me darling, I noticed.

I said: "How's for spooning me the lowdown? Who are you, and what's the score?"

"My n-name is June Dawne. I was Mort Pollak's g-girl-friend once upon a time; long before you fastened that m-murder on him."

"Oh. And you held it against me, eh?"

"Not at all," she said swiftly. "He got what was coming to him. That's not the p-point."

"What is the point, then?"

She drew a deep breath. "Pedro Romero kidnapped me because he knew I used to be friendly with Pollak. Pedro figured I'd know about the key to Pollak's strongbox."

"Well?"

"But I didn't know any m-more about it than you do. No matter how hard Pedro b-beat me, I couldn't t-tell him anything. He wouldn't believe me, though. He thought I was holding out."

I said sarcastically: "So you issued me an invitation to your troubles."

"Yes," she blushed through the admission. "I needed help; and I knew of your reputation as a clever detective. I f-fibbed to Romero; told him you were my fiancé. I also told him you had Pollak's k-key."

"Mighty nice of you. What was the idea?"

"Isn't it rather obvious? I figured Romero would b-bring you here, which he did. And I figured you'd help me."

"Which I didn't," I said sourly.

Her glims widened. "Oh, but you *have* helped me! You've chased Romero off on a f-false trail. He'll be gone at least an hour or so."

"And when he comes back without the key, he'll convert me into undertaker bait," I made a bitter mouth.

"He won't even f-find you here. Me either. I've been w-working on these ropes for quite a while. My wrists are just about loose." She tugged, and her mitts slipped out of the knots.

I glued the flabbergasted gaze on her as she sat up and started working on her ankle fetters. Presently they fell away and she drifted toward me. She dredged a penknife out of my pants pocket; hacked me free of the cords that trussed me. When I finally stood upright, I spent a full minute trying to get the circulation back into my arms and legs.

The chick watched me sympathetically. She piped: "Isn't there anything I can do to

make up for pulling you into danger?"

"You can do this, babe," I grunted. Then I slid my arms around her; helped myself to a kiss. She didn't object, apparently. At least she didn't struggle.

I SANK my mitts in her shoulders, held her at arm's length and shook the daylights out of her. "Okay, tramp. Now come clean or I'll take you apart from your beauty!" I snarled.

"Wh-what do you m-mean?"

"I mean you've been feeding me a lot of horse-radish. To start with, Pedro Romero didn't slug you with his fists. Your hair isn't even mussed."

"But—b-but—"

I rasped: "In the second place, it would be impossible for you to loosen any of Romero's knots. I tried it without making so much as a dent in them."

A scared look slithered into her optics. "You—"

"And in the third place, Mort Pollak never had any ten grand stashed in a safety deposit box," I said. "If he'd had that amount of geetus, he'd have hired a mouthpiece to defend him at his murder trial to keep him from going to the gas chamber."

"Wait. Listen—"

"Quiet!" I growled. "This whole thing smells like a plant of some sort. A frame. You and Pedro Romero ran a whizzer on me; and I yearn to know why."

Her pan went three shades paler than adulterated milk. "You've g-got to trust me, Mr. Turner. . . D-Dan. . . ." Then her arms coiled around my neck.

I was a sucker, of course. A guy in his right mind would have laid a haymaker on her dimple and scrambled. But this golden-haired honey was a lovely bowl of cherries, and I never could resist natural blondes, anyhow. I remembered later she seemed to be listening for something. Suddenly she tightened her grip 'round my neck; pulled me close. "Dan darling. . . kiss me . . . my sweet. . ." she

begged loudly.

From the doorway a voice raged: "You dirty bum!"

I bounced three feet straight up in the ozone; landed upright and squinted stupidly at the party who'd just ankled in. He was a bald, middle aged bozo with a puss like a full moon and glims that blazed like bonfires. Oddly enough, I recognized him. He was a Cosmotone director by the name of Maxie Shannon, an expert on cheapie westerns. He directed most of the horse operas in which Pedro Romero played minor villains.

Now he lurched toward me, frothing at the yap. "So you're the dirty louse who's been stealing my wife!"

I said: "Hey, wait. Is this jessie your wife?"

"She's not yours, anyway. Although anybody'd think so. I've got a good notion to—"

Even as he swung on me, a roscoe sneezed: "*Ka-Chow!*" from the kitchenette doorway. Baldy toppled forward on his profile, slugged a dent in the carpet with his trumpet. He was deceased before he stopped bouncing.

Then the concealed heater blasted again, and a hornet stung me over the ear; put another crease in my haircut. The impact short-circuited my fuses. I went bye-bye.

WHEN I snapped out of my trance, Maxie Shannon's remainders lay sprawled in front of me. The only thing new about him was an automatic in his wilted right duke and a scrap of paper in his left—neither of which had been there when he got creamed.

I dragged myself closer to his carcass; took a blurry hinge at the scrap of paper. It was an anonymous note telling him that his ever-loving frau was playing around with another man, and giving the address of this blue-and-chrome tepee. Which explained why the poor slob had busted in, accused me of playing fast and loose with his home life.

But who had shot him from the kitchenette and then tried to push a pill through my skull? Who had planted a gun and a note in Shannon's defunct clutch? I couldn't ask anybody, because there was nobody in the joint to talk to. The blonde doll had taken it on the lam while I was senseless; I was all alone with the bald bozo's remnants.

I staggered to my pins, stuck a gasper in my face, set it on fire. The smoke helped, but not much. There was a cellarette in one corner, though, and I found some first aid in it. Ordinarily I never guzzle gin, but gin was all I could see. I sloshed about a pint of it past my tonsils; waited for it to do its work. Presently I began to feel normal.

With normalcy came another discovery. I lamped a .32 automatic on the floor; recognized it as mine—the one Pedro Romero had lifted out of my armpit rig when he first put the snatch on me at my own apartment stash. It had been fired recently. You could smell the burned cordite in the muzzle.

Then I caught hep to the setup. Romero was the rodent who had drilled his director, Maxie Shannon. And he'd pulled the kill with my personal rod.

But how had he got back into this igloo? I knew he hadn't come in through the front doorway or I'd have spotted him entering, since I hadn't been out of the room at any time. There was no back door, either; I checked on that. Moreover, none of the apartment windows opened on a fire escape, so that theory was nixed.

In brief, the front door was the only possibility; yet the Latin louse hadn't returned that way. To make it worse, this front portal was now locked and bolted *on the inside!*

Which meant Romero and the blonde cupcake hadn't departed by the doorway route after Shannon was chilled. And a seventh floor stash was too high for them to have jumped out the window without serious damage to their complexions. Yet they were gone, leaving my guilty roscoe behind them.

So there I was with a guy who'd been croaked with some of my private bullets—and suddenly I heard a pounding on the door. A voice said: "Open up in there. The law."

I COULD guess what had happened. Some Inosey neighbor had reported the sounds of gunfire; put in a bleat to the bulls. Now I stood a good chance of being jerked to the bastille on a homicide beef—and the frame might stick, too, when you considered how the set had been dressed. I was alone with a corpse in a locked room, my cannon was responsible for the killery, and I had no witnesses to substantiate the screwy truth.

I prodded my mental machinery into high gear while the cop out in the corridor renewed his pounding. There had to be another way out of this wikiup; otherwise Pedro Romero and the golden-haired tomato would still be in my midst. The question was, which way had they powdered?

Then I tumbled. There was a dumb waiter in the kitchenette—one of those pint-size elevators they use in the swankier joints to lower the garbage and bring up the morning milk. So that was how the Romero polecat had returned to blast his director and frame me. It was also how he and Shannon's blonde widow made their subsequent getaway.

I went into action. I scooped up my automatic, holstered it. I also grabbed the other gun—the one in Shannon's defunct fist. I put this in my pocket, and then I dragged the murdered guy into the kitchenette; crammed him into the dumb waiter. I lowered him until I felt the cage touch bottom; slid my own heft down the cable just as the cop smashed his way into the living room.

I wasn't in the clear, though. Not by a long distance. A basement is no place to find yourself with a cadaver on your hands when the law is on the prowl. Luckily enough, I piped an empty galvanized trash can nearby; a big one with a lid on it. I lifted the lid, stuffed Maxie Shannon inside, covered him. Two

minutes later I ankled into the rear alley and ran.

I pelted once around the block and then skulked toward my parked jalopy. No other bulls were in evidence, so I slid under the wheel and drove off as if nothing had happened. It was like shooting fish.

Now I was in the clear; and the sensible thing to do was go home, forget all about the Shannon bump-off. Nobody could possibly finger me, the way things stood. I'd been lucky enough to bust myself out of a nasty spot.

But I wasn't satisfied to dismiss the frame Pedro Romero had tried to drape on me. I craved large slices of vengeance, and there was just one way to collect. That would be to put Pedro's sideburns in the cooler. Maybe the blonde jessie, too.

I STOPPED at a druggery, bought some adhesive tape for my damaged dome and thumbed the phone book; got Maxie Shannon's address. It was on a swanky street just this side of the Beverly Hills line. I rolled there in a hurry.

A cute little French maid opened up to my ring. "I am sorree, *monsieur*. My mistress is not at home. Neither is *Monsieur* Shannon. I do not know when they will return."

I could have told her Shannon never would, except in a mahogany box. But I kept it to myself and said: "Okay, sweets. I'd just as soon talk to you another time. What are you doing next Thursday night?"

She blushed. "*Madame* does not give me any time off. Besides, I do not know you, *monsieur*."

"You will, in time. Meanwhile I'd like some questions answered." I gave her a squint at my special badge.

Her dark peepers popped. "You are a policeman, no?"

"No, I am a policeman, yes. Just a private snoop looking for some inside dope."

"Concerning my employers? *Mais non*,

monsieur. It is not ethical for a servant to repeat gossip.”

I GRABBED her gently but firmly; pulled her close to me. “Now look, Frenchie. I like you, see? Your glims are like stars. Your stems belong behind footlights.”

“I think I comprehend, *monsieur*,” she giggled.

“Good. Now are we going to be pals, or do I have to slap the ears off you?”

“But—but this is fantastic, *monsieur*!”

“It’ll be catastrophic unless you tell me what I want to know. We’ll start with Mrs. Shannon. What was her maiden name?”

“Wh-why, Pollak. June Pollak.”

“Does she love her hubby?”

“I—I do not think so.”

“Has she any boy friends?”

“*Oui*. But I shall not give you his name. Hit me if you wish.” I kissed her instead; then I barged back to my bucket, fed it a ration of ethyl.

AFTER a while I anchored in the alley behind the Tower Arms on Sunset; gumshoed down to the basement. It was no job at all to lift Maxie Shannon’s shell out of the trash can where I’d left him; but when I began probing at his bald spot with the long blade of my pocket knife, it wasn’t so easy. Surgery isn’t in my line.

I kept at it, though, and presently I had the slug that had joined him with the angels. I lugged him out to my coupe and propped him in it. Then, on a hunch, I went back down the steps to hunt for a janitor’s phone.

Sure enough, I located one. In a trice I was connected with the chromium-and-blue apartment on the seventh floor, which by now was apparently infested with homicide dicks called from headquarters by the copper who’d busted in. A familiar voice answered my ring.

I said “Lieutenant Donaldson, please.”

“This is Donaldson.”

“Turner talking,” I said. “How would you

like to put the arm on Maxie Shannon’s murderer?”

Dave yowled: “Shannon? So that’s where all this gore came from! But how did you know about it? How do you know he’s been bumped? How did you figure I’d be here investigating a case without a *corpus delicti*—?”

“Stow the questions, cousin. Listen.” I gave him some hurried suggestions; rang off before he could demand details. Then I went out to my iron; headed for LaBrea. I had to drive with one hand and hold Shannon’s corpse with the other.

PEDRO ROMELO’S wigwam was a cheap cottage in a bungalow court. I toted the late Maxie Shannon onto the front porch, braced him before me as a shield; rang the bell.

Romelo’s voice filtered through the thin woodwork. “Who is it and I don’t want any.”

“Telegram for Mr. Romelo, sir,” I hooked him with the same gag he’d used on me.

He opened up. I thrust Shannon at him like a ventriloquist’s dummy and disguised my tone: “You thought you killed me but you made a mistake, you stinking skunk.”

The lanky Latin let out a yelp you could have heard from Wyoming to Woonsocket. Then he pulled his little .28 and began blasting.

I felt the bald director’s husk jerking in my grasp as the slugs bunted him in the chest. Then I let him topple as Romelo’s roscoe clicked empty. Romelo got his first gander at me, and his peepers bulged like squeezed grapes. “Y-you—!”

“Yeah,” I said, and handcuffed him.

Then a wildcat hit me in the shape of Maxie Shannon’s blonde widow. She tried to claw my optics out of their sockets, but I objected to this. How could I appreciate her gorgeousness without my glims? And she was gorgeous; no doubt about it.

I swatted her with my open duke; put

everything I had behind the poke. It almost tore her profile off. She sat down on the rug, glassy-eyed as a ten day drunk.

Romelo rattled the nippers on his wrists. “Wh-what’s the idea of—?”

I gave him a pleasant smile. “You’re under arrest for croaking Maxie Shannon. You were smitten with his wife, but Maxie probably refused her a divorce. So the two of you decided to fix him up with a nice resting place in some graveyard.”

“You—you can’t—”

I said: “You also decided to make a double-barreled job while you were at it. Oddly enough, Mrs. Shannon happens to be the late unlamented Mort Pollak’s sister; so naturally she harbored a thick grudge against me for sending him to the smoke chamber a few months back. Therefore the scheme was to murder Shannon and pin it on me.”

“Prove it!”

“Okay. You rented that Tower Arms apartment temporarily, as a scene of operations. You lured me there; fed me a silly story about a missing strong box key—which was a lot of nonsense. In a little while, you left; but you sneaked right back in again by the dumb waiter.”

“And?”

“The jane staged a little act with me. Meanwhile, you had sent Shannon a note telling him his wife was at that address with another man. Shannon walked in, spotted her in my arms; whereupon you corpsed him from the kitchenette with my rod.”

“Do tell,” he sneered politely.

I said: “Yeah. Next, you tried to cream me with a second gun. The slug notched me on

the noggin but failed to render me defunct. You didn’t know this, though. You figured I was dead. So you put the second cannon in Maxie’s mitt, tossed mine on the floor; made it look as if we’d burned each other down in a pistol duel. You locked up the wigwam from inside; and finally you took your girl friend down the dumb waiter.”

ROMELO bared his grinders. “A very clever song, Hawkshaw. The only trouble is, you can’t make it stick.”

“Sure I can. Or anyhow enough of it to make you sniff cyanide. You just emptied a whole clip of pills into Maxie, which inserts your nose in a wringer.”

“They can’t execute me for shooting holes in corpses. He was dead when you shoved him at me. The bullet that killed him came out of your automatic.”

“How would you know that?”

“Because I—” All of a sudden he turned gray around the edges. “Oh, my God!” he moaned.

I stepped aside so he could see Dave Donaldson standing on the porch getting an earful. “A nice confession, eh, Dave?”

Dave grunted: “Yeah,” and used his own cuffs to nipper the yellow-haired Shannon widow. “Up on your tootsies, sis. Let’s all go down to the jug.”

So I didn’t have to wait until Thursday night for my date with the French maid, after all. Her employer was deceased and her mistress was pinched for it, so she had her evenings free.