

Death's Autograph

The fat gentleman evidently had a very special reason for wanting that glamorous cinema queen to affix her signature to a page in his little book—and Dan Turner saw it turn out to be a book of doom, with complications that would have tried the tempers of the Devil!



THE GUY had a face like a full moon, a big brown mole on his chin, and a paunch like a vat of lard. He walked the whole length of my pet corn and didn't have the manners to say he was sorry, so I started after him, intent either on getting an apology or thumping him on the trumpet.

It was in the forecourt of the Alexander Theater over in Glendale, where Technivox Pic had just unspooled a preview of Kathryn Dennison's latest starring opus. Being one of her devoted fans, I had dropped in to cop a gander at the production; and now that it was over I had the satisfied feeling that the cost of my loge ticket had been money well spent. The Dennison dame was a tall and regal redhead who looked much younger than her

actual years and knew how to emote without chewing scenery all over the set, thereby enabling her to make a smash click of this new film despite the hammy histrionics of her leading man, a youthful and wooden newcomer entitled Mark Avalon.

Avalon, a mere punk in his early twenties, owned a quite handsome pan; but as an actor he smelled out loud. According to the gossip you heard along the Sunset Strip, he had sleeved this leading role with Kathryn Dennison purely because she'd demanded it for him and refused to take no for an answer. Which, in turn, gave rise to the rumor that she was in love with him. Considering the disparity in their ages, I doubted that.

Regardless of how he had wangled the

part, though, there was one thing you could make book on: after the egg the punk had laid, Technivox would not pick up his option. Casting him opposite Kathryn had been an abysmal mistake, and not even her influence would prevail on the studio to repeat it.

THE USUAL milling herd of autograph fiends had gathered in a thick clot on the theater's forecourt when I ankled out. I paused to ignite a gasper just as the carriage starter on the curb began to bellow for the Dennison quail's limousine. The actress herself, streamlined and gorgeous in a green evening gown and a patina fox cape that complemented her titian coiffure and blue eyes, smiled her queenly way through the crush, escorted by Mark Avalon. They made a striking pair, I had to admit. Though old enough to be his mother, she didn't show it; while there was something possessive about the way he held her arm that almost made him seem like the debonair man of the world he probably wished he was. You could see that he was smirkingly pleased with himself; proud of his brief moment of glory. No doubt he realized every guy on the forecourt envied him his nearness to the lovely Kathryn.

Behind them came Steve Chipman, who had directed the feature. He was grey, balding, dignified and just a trifle gloomy-looking; I had a hunch he was mentally kicking himself for spoiling an otherwise top-notch picture by casting Avalon in it. He brightened, though, when the fans started mobbing Kathryn for her autograph. It proved she was as popular as ever with the paying public; and as long as she stayed popular the production would coin dough at the box office, Avalon or no Avalon.

At which point the paunchy stranger with the mole on his mush planted his brogan on my pet corn and damned near crippled me.

Fatso was dressed like a race-track tout and must have weighed two hundred and sixty on the hoof. My hoof. Charging into the crowd, he crunched every ounce of his porky

bulk on my toes as he went by me. He also dug a heavy elbow into the slate of a pallid little chick who had been waiting for a chance to present a dime-store autograph book to Kathryn Dennison. The pallid chick winced, whimpered and fell back; would have fallen down if the crowd hadn't been so jam-packed.

Meantime the tubby slug, paying no heed to the damage he'd inflicted, barged up ferninst Kathryn; thrust his own book and fountain pen at her. "Sign, sweetheart," he leered, forgetting to add "please."

She stared at him, and it struck me that her delightful complexion lost color under the artful makeup she was wearing. She looked at Fatso's book, then up again into his muddy brown glims; hesitated and finally signed. Her fingers trembled visibly as she grasped the pen and scrawled her name.

BY this time I had managed to worm my way close to the uncouth boor. I tapped him on the shoulder, firmly. "Just a minute, heel," I growled.

He pivoted, hung the fish-eyed focus on me and said through a sneer: "Well, what's eating you?"

"Your manners," I said. "They irk me." And I corked him spang on the dewlaps. His mole made a brown splatter.

He folded like a leaky balloon. I snatched the little red book out of his flabby mitt as he sagged; rammed it into my pocket. As a general rule, autograph hounds are okay; but some of them are nothing but plain damned pests—and Fatso copped first prize for ugly behavior. It would take more than a good swift poke on the wattles to cure him of this, and I was determined to teach him a lesson he would remember. That was why I glommed onto his book. Providing he ran true to type, it was his dearest possession; so maybe he would think twice before using his feet and elbows again.

Stepping over him as he floundered on the forecourt, I tipped my Stetson to the red-

haired Dennison skirt and said: "That fixes that. Compliments of Dan Turner." Then I limped to the parking lot nearby, crawled into my jalopy and drove home to Hollywood.

My injured corn was still throbbing as I prepared to hit the sack, so I used some Vat 69 to kill the pain. There's nothing like Scotch to cure aching feet. Taken internally, of course.

My phone jingled.

I answered it, and a dulcet she-male voice said: "Is . . . is this Mr. Turner?"

"Yeah."

"Dan Turner?"

"Right you are." I said.

"The . . . the private d-detective?"

I said: "Correct, and never mind going on to the next question. I'm the guy who slugged that fat bozo in Glendale, and you're Kathryn Dennison; I'd tab your pear-shaped tones anywhere. You needn't have phoned me to thank me for getting rid of Fatso, though. It was a pleasure."

"I . . . I had something else on my mind," she faltered. "The autograph book you took from him—"

"What about it?" I said.

"Have you st-still got it?"

I felt in my coat pocket. "Yes."

"Have . . . have you looked at it, Mr. Turner?"

"As a matter of fact; no," I said.

"Then please d-don't!"

I did a double take. "Hunh?"

"As a favor to me, please don't even open it. I . . . I'll come to your apartment right away and get it, if you don't mind."

I said: "Hey, wait a minute. What cooks?"

"I c-can't explain now. But it's important to me; terribly important. Promise you won't look at the book. Please."

She sounded worried, which meant she was in some kind of jackpot; and Fatso's autograph book was behind the caper. Naturally I was curious; I'm as human as the next gee. But I've been a private Hollywood pry for a long while, and I've learned there are

times when it pays not to ask questions. This was one of those times. "Okay," I said. "I won't sneak a peek."

"Th-thank you. And may I come over to get it?"

"Sure," I said. "I suppose you know the address; you must've looked me up in the phone directory. Come ahead. I'll be waiting with my teeth in a braid."

She thanked me again, effusively, and rang off. And then, just as I was cradling the phone, I heard a discreet tap on my front door. "Telegram for Mr. Turner," a voice said.

Stupid Daniel. I opened my portal as if I didn't have an enemy in the world. Maybe it was because I was looking forward to having the Dennison jane in my bachelor stash; maybe I was so full of anticipation that I forgot to keep my guard up. Or maybe it was the Scotch prescription I'd just imbibed that lulled me into a bogus sense of security. Anyhow, I opened up—

Whammo! The porky character from Glendale maced me over the steeple with a .38 roscoe, causing my knees to noodle out from under me and the floor to come up and paste me on the profile. An instant later I was sojourning in oblivion; and when I woke up I had a corpse on my neck.

THE CORPSE was genuine; not a nightmare. Consciousness trickled back into my think-tank like damp sand slowly running down an hourglass. I had a lump on my dome the size of third base, and a guy was lying across my back, pressing down on me like eight tons of dead weight. Very dead weight.

I lay just inside my threshold and the door was still slightly ajar. Fatso, who had slugged me senseless, was no longer present; but in his stead I had other visitors. Two of them. A woman and a man.

Without opening my peepers, I knew who they were. You couldn't possibly fail to identify their voices as they stood excitedly

jabbering in the middle of the room. "I tell you, Kathryn; I didn't kill Chip! I just got here." That was Mark Avalon sounding off, the very same Avalon punk who had fouled up the leading man role in Kathryn Dennison's new Technivox pic.

The dame who answered him was Kathryn herself. "I want to believe you." There was a catch in her voice that somewhat impaired the celebrated pear-shaped tones. "God knows I want to. But what can I think when I find you standing here leaning over Chip and Mr. Turner . . . and b-both of them d-dead . . ."

That made her fifty per cent wrong, at least as far as death was concerned. Maybe the guy pressing down on me was defunct, but I wasn't. I was merely groggy; too groggy to cop a squint at my surroundings. I was perfectly content to lie there and eavesdrop on a very interesting conversation. I wasn't even curious concerning the alleged dead bozo on my neck. Apparently he was somebody named Chip, and so what?

That's what a clout on the sconce can do for you.

"Listen to me," Avalon was saying in a harsh undertone. "The whole thing's your fault, in a way."

"My fault—?" Kathryn gasped.

"Yes. I knew there was something important about the autograph book that Turner took from that fat man. I could tell from the way you acted. I asked you about it, remember?"

"I . . . I—"

"I asked you about it and you wouldn't tell me. You slipped me the brush-off."

"Because it was personal, Mark," she said quietly. "Something I didn't want you to know about."

"So you said. But that only made me all the more curious. After all the favors you've done for me, I felt you needed help. I sensed that you were in some sort of trouble, and the trouble was somehow mixed up with the fat man and his little book; the book I knew

Turner now had. So as soon as I left you I came here. I was going to question Turner. And then, just as I came into the apartment house, the fat man rushed out. He almost knocked me down as he went past me."

"Mark . . . are you sure? Are you telling me the t-truth?"

"Of course I'm telling you the truth," the punk said. "Then I came upstairs and found—well, what you see here now."

She drew an audible breath. "Mark, you've got to get away."

"What do you mean?"

"Somebody will have to notify the police. And you mustn't be here when they come."

"Why not?"

"It might wreck your career. I can't let that happen, Mark. I don't want you involved in a murder investigation."

"But I'm innocent," he said. "All I did was discover the two bodies."

"Even so, you mustn't be linked with this in any way. Believe me, darling, I know what I'm talking about. I know more than you do. More than you can even guess. Now go."

"Go where?"

She hesitated. Then: "I've got it!" Go to Polly Wayne's apartment. "She . . . she's in love with you, Mark. She'll give you an alibi if you should need it. I hope you won't, but if you do, she's the one who'll lie for you. She'll be willing to swear you were with her all evening, ever since the preview. I know she will."

"Well . . . all right. If you insist."

"I insist, Mark."

"Okay." His footfalls receded as he scrambled from my igloo.

THERE were other footfalls, lighter, less positive. That was Kathryn Dennison moving toward me. I stirred, rolled the weight off me, blinked my optics open and perceived that the deceased bozo was Steve Chipman, the grey and gloomy director of Kathryn's latest opus. He wasn't gloomy now, though.

He would never again be worried about the success or failure of a Chipman production. Somebody had caved in his skull with a blunt instrument and sent him to his ancestors.

Kathryn stood staring at me, frozen in her tracks. "Mr. Turner . . . you . . . you're alive!"

"That's open to debate," I mumbled mushily. Then I lurched to my bathroom, filled the bowl with cold water, dunked my dandruff in soothing wet coolness. The ache subsided and I returned to the living-room; gulped a quick snifter of highland tonic. "I think you're right," I told the red-haired actress.

"Right?"

"I'm alive," I said. I could feel myself getting well as the alcohol hit bottom and took hold. I downed another fast one, just to make sure. "Very much alive."

She faltered: "Did . . . did you hear . . . were you conscious a moment ago when I . . . that is . . . ?"

I savvied what she was driving at. She craved to find out if I'd listened in on her conversation with the Avalon youngster. I decided to keep her in the dark, temporarily at least; maybe I'd learn more that way. I said: "Look, Beautiful. I don't know from nothing except that I got crowned by the fat slob whose boorishness annoyed me in Glendale. He lured me to my door by pretending he was a telegraph messenger, and when I opened up he gave me a pistol massage."

"But . . . but how . . . ?"

"How did he get to me? Well, you'll remember I knocked him on his duff there at the theater forecourt. While he was floundering, I mentioned my monicker to you; told you compliments of Dan Turner. I imagine he overheard that. And he knew I had taken his autograph book. Presumably, he looked me up in the phone directory the same as you did. Then he came here and got even with me. So when I woke up I had Steve Chipman's remainders on my back, though I'm damned if I can figure how *that* happened.

In fact, I'm as confused as a drunk in a revolving door. I think you'd better tell me all you know before I phone headquarters."

"The . . . the autograph book," she said unevenly. "Have you still got it?"

I felt in my pocket for it. No dice. It had been purloined from my person while I was in slumberland. "Gone!" I caterwauled. Then I added: "What was so important about it?"

She looked as unhappy as if she'd just been informed that the world was coming to an end within the next ten minutes. "Gone? Oh-h-h, no. N-no! You can't mean that. You—"

"Sorry," I said briskly. "And now how's for answering my question?"

"Wh-what question?"

"I want to know what makes the book so important."

"I c-can't tell you."

"Have it your, way," I said, peeved. "Maybe you'd prefer to tell the cops—after they toss your boy friend into the bastille."

"Boy friend?"

"Mark Avalon," I said.

She got white around the fringes. "Then . . . then you heard! You were c-conscious. You . . . you know he was here?"

"Yeah," I said. "I also know you sent him to some filly named Polly Wayne. Object, a fake alibi."

"All right." She wilted forlornly. "I guess I've got to take you into my confidence." She squared her shoulders. "Mark isn't my boy friend. He . . . he's my son."

I FELT my peepers popping like squeezed plums. "Your *son*?" I strangled. "You're the Avalon punk's mother?"

"Yes. He doesn't know it, though. Nobody's supposed to know it. I'd be finished as a screen star if the public learned I . . . I had a grown son. I'm not supposed to be that old."

"On you it doesn't show," I assured her. "Tell me more."

She walked over to my cellarette and helped herself to a pony of liquid courage. "I was only seventeen when Mark was born. He's twenty-one now. But he doesn't suspect that I'm his . . . mother. And he doesn't realize the real reason why I've not been helping him get a start in pictures."

"Nobody else does," I said. "The gossips think it's love—but not mother love."

She nodded. "Mark's father deserted me. I was poor. I couldn't support my baby. I gave him to a family for adoption; they had a boy of their own, around the same age, and I knew they could give Mark all the things I couldn't give him. I . . . well, I lost track of them for years. Then, later, I got into the movies; became a star. That prevented me from acknowledging Mark as my son, even though I'd traced him by that time and knew where he was."

"I get it," I said gently. "The maternal instinct was working on you. You couldn't acknowledge him, but you could do the next best thing by trying to establish him in the galloping snapshots. Which you did."

"Yes."

"And what about Fatso and his autograph book?"

Her kisser was tremulous. "The fat man is . . . Mark's father."

"Your husband? The creep who deserted you?"

She nodded again. "Tonight was the first time I'd seen him in twenty years. But I recognized him. He hadn't changed t-too much; and there was that m-mole on his chin . . ."

"Yeah, the mole," I said, remembering.

"And if I needed anything more to be sure he was my husband . . . well, his autograph book clinched it. It wasn't an autograph page I signed; it was a blank check."

The puzzle began to shape up. "Blackmail, eh?" I said. "A fast shakedown, right out in public. He didn't give you time to consider it; he just shoved the check and pen at you. If

you refused to sign the payoff he'd reveal your age and your relationship to Mark Avalon; make it public that your own son was your leading man. In turn, that might scuttle your career and the kid's, too."

"That's how it was," she said bitterly. "Now you know why the autograph book was so important. I wanted my signed check back. I didn't want you to look at it. I was afraid you'd put two and two together, guess the truth and perhaps tell the newspapers."

I said: "Hm-m-mm-m," and cast a squint at the corpse sprawled on my floor. "And what about the late Steve Chipman, here?"

"He was my friend."

"And—?"

"He was my friend as well as the man who directed my pictures. He was there at the theater forecourt, remember, when . . . when that trouble happened. I think he must have guessed there was something wrong, the same Mark guessed it. And, like Mark, I think he had some idea of helping me out of whatever jam I was in."

THIS made sense, all right. "Your theory is that both Chipman and your son independently got the idea of coming here to my tepee for a squint at the book I'd taken from Fatso. Correct?"

"Y-yes."

"Only Fatso got here first," I said. "He slugged me and glommed the book out of my pocket. Then Chipman arrived, just in time to witness it. So Fatso bludgeoned him the same as he'd maced me. Only Chipman's skull wasn't as durable as mine, so that the blow croaked him. Then Fatso scrambled, just as Mark was arriving. They passed each other. Mark ankled in, saw the carnage and was standing here dazed when you showed up. That would account for all the various time elements."

She agreed with me.

I said: "It also puts the finger on your erstwhile husband as Steve Chipman's

murderer.”

“I’d like that.” Her voice got hard as concrete. “I’d love it. Only . . .”

“Only what?”

“I want to keep Mark out of it.” She opened her handbag, hauled forth a pack of crisp greenery, mostly in hundreds. “Name your price, Mr. Turner.”

My mouth watered at the sight of all that lovely lettuce, but I clung to my ethics. “Ixnay, No bribes, babe. If I can bust the case without dragging your son through it, okay. If it’s necessary to bring him into the mess in order to pin the kill where it belongs, then I’ll bring him in come hell or high tide. This is murder, remember. And murder isn’t a matter to take lightly.”

She gave me an odd look. “If money won’t buy you, what will?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Strange. I’d heard you have a reputation for—”

“For the fair gender? Sure. I love the pretty creatures. And I could develop a yen for you a mile wide. But this is different; this is a kill. It happened in my stash and I’ve got my own hide to consider. Therefore, no punches pulled; no holds barred. I’ll do my damndest to protect your son, but I guarantee nothing. Now let me have your phone number and blow. There’s work to be done.”

“My phone number—?”

“So I can call you if anything develops.”

“I see.” She took a pencil from her bag, wrote on a card, handed the card to me. “I . . . I’ll be waiting to hear from you.”

“You’ll hear, the minute anything breaks.”

She drifted close to me, put her hands on my shoulders, planted a kiss on my mouth. Then she scrambled, leaving me tingling all over like a lightning rod in a thunderstorm. She may have been in her late thirties, but she made me feel as young as a high-school Romeo. I caught myself regretting that I’d let her get away without leaving some of that dough behind her.

. . . . I picked up my phone, dialed police headquarters and asked for my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad. When Dave came on the line I said: “Dan Turner squalling. I’ve got a fresh cadaver in my wigwam for you.”

“What!” he exploded. “Again?” He called volubly on heaven to lend him strength. “Dammit to hell, with you corpses are getting to be a habit!”

“For years,” I agreed sourly. “This time it’s Steve Chipman, the Technivox director. Better flag your diapers over here in a copious yank. And don’t forget to bring a meat basket.”

He said: “I’m on my way. Wait for me.”

“Oh, sure,” I answered; but I had my mental fingers crossed when I said it. Wait for him my adenoids. There was a job to be done and very little time in which to do it. I couldn’t afford to waste any minutes.

I hung up, thumbed through my phone book, found a Polly Wayne listed at the Tower Spires on Franklin. That was just dandy—if she turned out to be the right Polly Wayne. I scribbled a hasty note for Donaldson, left it where he would be sure to find it and took a fast powder out of my flat; dashed down to the garage in the basement and piled into my battered kettle. Instead of heading straight for the Tower Spires, though, I aimed my radiator toward the bungalow of a guy I knew; a Central Casting employee who owed me a favor. This would be his chance to repay it. I had fat character on my mind: a fat character whose mole splattered brown when I dusted it with my knuckles.

MY CENTRAL CASTING pal, name of Tom Flacker, opened up after I’d pounded on his portal a time or two. “Hi, Sherlock,” he greeted me through a capacious yawn. “Haven’t seen you in a hell of a while. Where you been keeping your skull lately?”

“Under a jackhammer, from the feel of it.” I rubbed the swelling that Fatso had festooned

on me with the barrel of his gat. "I need some help in a hurry, chum." Then, talking fast and persuasively, I argued him into going with me to Central Casting, letting me in with his pass-key, and giving me access to the talent files. "I'm looking for a fat man, Tom."

"Any particular fat man? Has he got a name?"

My mush got hot with a sudden blush as I realized I'd neglected to ask Kathryn Dennison what monicker her tubby hubby had sailed under. Well, hell; I'd have to trust to luck. "Just trot forth all the dossiers you've got," I said. "Fat extras, fat bit players, fat character men. The works."

He riffled through a sub-classification of the cross-indexed filing system; started calling out names to me. As fast as he did this, I located the corresponding data in the alphabetized steel drawers. Each individual's card carried the name, address, phone number and a skeletonized professional biography of its subject, along with miniature photographs, both full-faced and in profile. There must have been a hundred or more fat men listed; but I got a nice break. The eleventh card I inspected was the one I'd hoped to find.

I made a note of the information I wanted. Three minutes later I galloped outdoors to my jalopy, kicked it into motion and went steaming toward the Tower Spires on Franklin. Now I was ready for a gabfest with a doll named Polly Wayne, who was supposed to give Kathryn Dennison's son an alibi.

THE WAYNE frill lived on the third floor: Apartment 317. When she answered my knock she proved to be a taffy-haired cutie whose piquant pan betrayed ill-concealed fear the instant she piped the badge I flashed at her. Then the fear was masked behind a veneer of hardness. "Something, copper?"

"Yeah. I want Mark Avalon."

"Sorry. He just left." Then she added: "He was here with me all evening, though, until just a few minutes ago. Ever since he

attended that preview in Glendale." The way she said it made it sound rehearsed, which was what I expected.

I said: "That's too bad, baby. I've got good news for him that ought to relieve his mind. May I use your phone?"

"There's a public booth in the lobby."

"But I'm in a hurry." I shoved past her, spotted a telephone in a wall niche. "I trust you don't mind."

She curled a lip. "Would it do me any good?"

"Not a bit," I said, and dialed the number which Kathryn Dennison had written on a card and handed me in my own igloo a while ago. A servant answered. I said: "Miss Dennison, please. Tell her it's Dan Turner calling."

Presently the red-haired Technivox star's pear-shaped tones caressed the receiver. "Y-yes, Mr. Turner?"

"I've located Fatso," I said crisply. "He calls himself Andrew Colby and lives ever on, Harvard Street." I mentioned the address, which I'd obtained by pawing through those files at Central Casting. "As soon as I can contact a homicide-squad pal of mine we'll hang the cuffs on the guy and your troubles will be ended."

In a quavery voice she thanked me fervently; asked me if I was going to keep the Avalon punk out of it. Good old mother love was cropping up again. I told her that remained to be seen, promised I would do everything I could, and rang off. Then I turned to Polly Wayne, my unwilling hostess. "One more number and I'm finished. Okay by you, Tutz?"

"Make yourself right at home," the blond muffin snapped irritably. She whirled, flounced toward the rear of the apartment and slammed the kitchenette door behind her. Apparently she thoroughly disliked private dicks. Particularly private dicks named Turner.

I shrugged and dialed my own bachelor flat. The rumbling chest-tones that responded

to my ring belonged to Dave Donaldson, whose temper erupted like Vesuvius when he found out who was calling. A thunderous: "You creep!" assailed my eardrums. "Condemn your unmitigated brass, what was the idea of powdering and leaving an unguarded corpse in your living-room when I'd specifically told you to wait until I got here?"

"Unguarded corpse my nostrils," I said amiably, "Nobody was going to steal it. Besides—"

"Besides hell! Do you realize I could pinch you and hold you on technical charges? Suspicion of murder, for instance."

I said: "Hey, lay off. If a dog has pups in the refrigerator, that doesn't make them ice cubes. And just because a guy gets rubbed out in my apartment, that doesn't say I croaked him. Anyhow, I left you a note."

"That's another thing!" he snarled. "Writing me a note, telling me to stick around here and wait for you to phone me. Asking me to sit still when I should be conducting a murder investigation—"

"I conducted it for you, and shut up," I cut across his flow of verbiage. "The point is, you *did* wait. And I'm phoning you. I want you to meet me on Harvard Street as fast as you can wheel." I gave him Andrew Colby's address, Colby being Fatso, of course. "Get going," I added. "This is the payoff. I hope."

He started to fire a barrage of questions at me but I broke the connection; this was no time for a quiz program. Without waiting for Polly Wayne come back from her fit of sulks in the kitchenette so I could thank her for the use of the phone, I dived for the door and lammed hellity-blip off the premises.

IT WAS a ten-minute drive to the Harvard Street house where Fatso Colby lived. I made it in nine-and discovered that Donaldson had arrived a full minute ahead of me. He was parked in his official police sedan across the street, opposite Colby's stash—which,

incidentally, was a crummy-looking two-story walkup. Dave lamped me as I berthed my bucket. He came charging at me like an enraged rhinoceros, his glims shooting sparks and his ears spurting wisps of live steam. "Just what the damnation hell gives?" he demanded. "If this is one of your slippery shenanigans to get out from under a murder rap—"

I told him to go fry a pickle. "It's no shenanigan, it's an arrest," I said. "If my luck holds." Then I asked him: "Have you noticed anybody going into the joint?"

"Only a dame," he said. "Just before you got here. Funny, she looked exactly like that movie star; what's her name? Oh, yes; Kathryn Dennison."

A lump as big as Grant's Tomb formed suddenly in my throat. I yeepled: "Kathryn Dennison? I hadn't counted on that. Let's go!" And I grabbed his arm, hauled him toward the walkup's front entrance. We found the stairs, mounted them three at a clip. But for all our speed, we weren't quite fast enough.

Up above, a gun sneezed: *Ka-Chow!*

This was followed by the thud of a heavy weight falling, hitting the floor. I spurred myself into frantic motion, gained the second-story landing, sniffed burned cordite and followed the acrid stink to an open doorway with Donaldson panting along behind me. We plunged over the threshold into a cheap, sleazy room. Then I froze in my tracks; realized I was too late to prevent another kill. It had already happened.

Fatso Colby lay sprawled face-down on the threadbare rug, his gravy leaking from a hole between his shoulder blades. A slug had gone into his chest, come out through his back, blasted his ticker en route, and rendered him deader than chopped bait. Over in the far corner stood Mark Avalon, his mush as white as a ream of bond paper and his youthful handsomeness distorted by an expression of undiluted fear.

Kathryn Dennison was in the middle of the room with a smoking gat in her fist. She gave

me a dull-eyed gander, dropped the rod, ran twitching fingers through her sunrise-red tresses and mumbled: "All right, Mr. Turner, you can call the police. I'm guilty. I . . . I did the shooting."

"I don't have to call the police," I said. "This guy with me is a cop." I turned to Dave. "Okay; hot shot, make your pinch."

He dragged out his handcuffs. "Let's have your wrists, lady," he growled at the Dennison frail.

"Ix-nay, you dope," I said. "The one you want is that punk in the corner. Mark Avalon."

FOR a single instant, the silence was so thick you could have sliced it like cheese. Then a voluble hell broke loose, principally from Avalon. "You're crazy!" he screeched. "Kathryn did it! I saw her! And you heard her confessing."

"Y-yes," the actress said dully. "I confessed. I'm ready for my punishment."

I rasped: "It's near time you quit fronting for the brat, hon. Skip the self-sacrifice routine. It will get you nowhere." "But . . . but—"

"Look," I made my voice as gentle as possible. "You know damned well Mark drilled Fatso. And though it'll probably break your heart, there are some other things you'd better learn. Such as the fact that he also killed Steve Chipman tonight in my apartment."

"I . . . I won't listen!"

"You'll have to," I told her. "It goes back to that blackmail attempt on the forecourt of the Alexander Theater in Glendale this evening. Fatso forced you to sign a blank check. You signed, thinking he was your long-lost husband. But he was a phony."

"Wh-what?" She stiffened, stared at me.

"Yeah," I said. "It was the mole on his mush that gave him away. When I hit him, the mole splattered. It was nothing but a big blob of brown grease paint. Makeup. I wondered about it at the time, but I didn't guess the answer until later; until you told me that he

was your husband and that you'd recognized him mainly by means of the mole. Okay. The mole was bogus. Therefore he was bogus too. He was a ringer, a guy who had merely pretended to be your errant hubby. And why was he masquerading? That was simple. He wanted to scare you into signing that blank check."

"Y-yes, but—"

I said: "Obviously the shakedown was based on his knowledge of your past; his knowledge that Mark Avalon was your son. But granting that he was an imposter, then how in hell had he acquired this knowledge?"

"I . . . I can't imagine."

"He got it from somebody who did know," I said. "Somebody who was close to you. The Avalon punk himself, for instance."

Avalon yeepped: "It's a damned dirty lie!"

"Button your trap." I swung around to face him. "A fine sort of son you turned out to be," I said through a contemptuous sneer. "Blackmailing your own mother. Hiring a ham character actor to impersonate your missing father. And then going on a killery spree when your scheme sprang a leak."

"Stew you, snoop."

I said: "My theory is this. Somehow you discovered that Kathryn, here, was your mama. That explained why she was helping you to make a career for yourself in pictures. Maybe you resented the fact that she had allowed another family to adopt you when you were a baby. Or maybe, it's just that you're a natural-born heel. Besides which, you realized you had stunk up Kathryn's new starring opus. Your acting in it was so hammy that Technivox was dropping your option. You were washed up in pictures before you even got started. That meant no more big salary. And you wanted dough; lots of it. So you confected a shakedown plot."

"Prove it."

"Give me time," I said. Then I went on: "I suppose you had a snapshot of your old man; the guy who'd deserted Kathryn, twenty years

ago. A guy you'd never seen. So okay. You hunted around for a character actor who resembled him. Fatso was the one you chose. Andrew Colby, to use his proper monicker." I indicated the slain slob on the floor. "The facial resemblance was already there. A touch of makeup, a false mole on his map; and he'd pass muster."

"Nuts to you."

I CONTINUED: "Fatso fooled Kathryn tonight on the theater forecourt; startled her into signing a blank check. Right away, though, the plot started curdling because I stepped into it. I bopped Fatso, glommed his autograph book with the signed check in it. You had to get that check away from me or the whole thing would blow up in your kisser. I think you were with your fat stooge when he lured me to my door, conked me and took the book out of my pocket. I think you engineered that entire scene."

"Go to hell!" Avalon rasped.

"Then Kathryn's friend, Steve Chipman, her director, also got the idea of coming to my stash, hoping to retrieve the autograph book. Maybe he arrived just in time to see Fatso bashing me senseless while you stood by. So Chipman had to be bashed, too. Dead, he wouldn't be able to put the finger on you. Therefore you bumped him. Fatso then lammed; but you stayed behind to make certain that Chipman was defunct. That was when Kathryn ankled in; found you and leaped to the ugly conclusion that you were the murderer. As a matter of fact she was right; but you convinced her that you were an innocent victim of circumstances. So she sent you to Polly Wayne's igloo and told you to rig an alibi."

"You're sure a windy guy," he jeered.

I ignored that. I said: I was suspicious of you because I'd spotted Fatso Colby as a phony. If he was your real father, then why had he waited twenty years to show up? And, conclusively, there was the fake mole.

Obviously, he was a hired stooge; and I had a hunch you were the louse who hired him."

"Hunches don't stand up in court."

"No," I admitted. "But evidence does. I investigated Fatso by looking him up in the files at Central Casting. I learned his real name. I got his address. Then, figuring you'd be in Polly Wayne's apartment at the Tower Spires, I went there. Polly claimed you had left, but I knew she was lying; I'd noticed your car downstairs at the curb. That told me you were hiding somewhere in Polly's joint, and I baited a trap for you."

"Trap?"

I nodded, set fire to a gasper, blew smoke into his glims. "Yeah. I used Polly's phone, figuring you were close enough to eavesdrop. I called Kathryn and said I had the goods on Fatso. I mentioned his name, Andrew Colby, and his address. This address. I knew it would scare the living hell out of you. You realized that if I collared your porky stooge he would probably spill his guts; turn state's evidence, and rap you for the Chipman murder. You had to get to Fatso ahead of me and shut him up—permanently."

"Make it stick," he challenged me.

I said: "You bet I will. Let's see, where was I? Oh yes, I'd just finished phoning Kathryn from Polly Wayne's apartment. You'd overheard the conversation. Polly then went into her kitchenette, supposedly sulking. Actually, I think she let you out of her flat by a rear door. You were leaving as I was phoning Lieutenant Donaldson. You sneaked out ahead of me, the way I planned it. Then you came here to kill Fatso. I was right behind you. Donaldson too. But there was another arrival I hadn't counted on. Kathryn herself. She walked in just as you blew a hole in Fatso's tripes. She took the gat away from you and tried to shoulder the blame. And there's one piece of evidence that will nail down the lid."

"Such as?"

I said: "The blank check in Fatso's

autograph book.” I lunged at the punk, frisked him. Sure enough, the check was in his pocket. It was a slip of paper that would become his ticket to the lethal chamber at San Quentin. . .

A few months later they strapped him into a chair and gassed him. That was plenty tough on Kathryn Dennison; but it was even tougher on Avalon himself. Sniffing cyanide perfume is an unpleasant way to die.