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By
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Treachery Pulls the Trigger



The tiny gat sneezed and
planted a pill neatly in the
guy's right eyeball.

Dan Turner was startled to discover why the monocled publisher-gambler didn't answer the big detective's questions—the guy was dead, although he looked alive! And from there on in the gumshoe trail became rougher and rougher with bruising bumps!

BEFORE I knew it, I was boxed in. The tall, skinny bozo sidled at me from the left and the fat guy was suddenly on my right as I ankled toward my jalopy on the parking lot. "Don't yeeep, flatfoot. Not if you want to live long and stay healthy," the skinny character said out the side of his kisser. "My porky pal's got a gat and he just loves to perforate private eyes like you. By him it's a habit."

"A bad habit," I said sourly. The mouse-trapping trick they'd pulled on me had been very neat indeed. I had just barged out of Grauman's Chinese after catching a sneak preview, and it never entered my mind that these two plug-uglies were laying for me. They had kept themselves concealed until the psychological moment, and now they had me

with my guard down. Maybe their gun threat was a lot of hogwash, but I didn't feel like testing it by making a dig for my own shoulder-holstered .32 automatic. I might be a fraction slow and wind up with holes in my giblets.

"What's the caper?" I demanded, and kept walking.

The two hoods stayed in step with me, as seemingly friendly as lint sticking to a blue-serge coat. There was nothing in the attitude of either one that would arouse the suspicions of stray witnesses; nobody could possibly guess I was being snatched, and consequently nobody would come to my rescue or even seek the services of a cop. In brief, I realized I was on the hook.

Indignant frustration needled through my

nooks and crannies, particularly when I received no answer to my question. I repeated it; switched the phrasing a little. "What *is* this routine?"

"Gabby, ain't he?" the fat one said.

The thin one nodded his noggin, which was perched on a pipestem neck like a taffy apple on a lollipop stick. "All mouth and a yard wide," he agreed.

I resented that. I may be a yard wide, give or take an inch or two, and I also pack a hundred and ninety pounds of heft on my six-foot-plussage. But I'm not all mouth by a damned sight. I said peevishly: "Slip me the score and I'll clam up. I'm entitled to that much."

"You're entitled to climb in your coupe," the skinny citizen stated firm tones. "Be nice about it."

"Look. Are you sure you've got the right victim?"

Fatso said: "You're Dan Turner, ain't you?"

"Yeah," I admitted.

"The snoop?"

"That's one name for my profession," I said.

The thin hombre grinned. "I can think of other names. Get in your car, wise guy. You take the middle, Lard on the other side, and me driving." He prodded me into my bucket and the two gunsels sandwiched me as indicated, whereupon we went away from there in a hell of a yank. It began to look as if I might be in the middle in more ways than one.

Still, I hadn't been hurt yet. That was something. Of course my pride was taking a beating; a man with a tough-dick rep like mine hates to get shoved around by a pair of cheap mugs.

SKINNY whooshed my boiler through the night, down the hill to Santa Monica Boulevard; turned right and followed the Pacific Electric car tracks. We passed the

Neon-lighted mock Colonial facade of the Kings cafe which specializes in sea food that's out of this world; presently wheeled to the north again on Robertson and parked eventually in front of a large rectangular one-story building of modernistic grey stucco that occupied half a city block in overall dimensions. The thin ginzo said: "All out. End of the line."

As my brogans hit the sidewalk I copped a gander at the grey stucco joint; tabbed it as the home of Domino Enterprises, a Hollywood magazine-publishing outfit whose secret angel was rumored to be Nick Hardesty, big-shot gambler. At least the gossip along the Sunset Strip said it was Hardesty's dice dough that was backing the venture, although nobody had actually proved this. Nobody bothered to try. What Hardesty did with his winnings was his own affair; if he craved to go bankrupt issuing a string of lurid murder-story pulps, so what?

I noticed all the building's front windows were dark and wondered what the hell would happen next, now that we were here. Privately I had a pretty good idea, but I kept it to myself for the time being. "Okay boys," I said. "What do we do in Reel Two of this corny opus?"

"Slim and me take you inside," Lard said, and moved toward a massive door carved in imitation of Georgian Gothic.

Thus moving, he had his back to me. His thin companion followed along in my wake, and now was the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party. The setup suited me exactly. I erupted in a blur of motion, bent down low and propelled myself forward with both arms extended like rams. My palms connected with Fatso's shoulders; drove him violently against the door's solid woodwork. His mush struck the paneling with a nauseous *squish* that flattened his features as thoroughly as if he'd been remodeled by a steam roller. He dropped and lay quivering, while piteous moans issued from his mauled yapper.

Meanwhile, bouncing backward, I collided with Slim before he could duck aside. My

tonnage knocked him staggering, and I whirled around while he was still trying to right himself. "Never toy with a buzz saw," I said. "Let this be a lesson to you." I smote him in the midriff.

My knuckles sank damned near to his spinal column and he folded in quick pain, like a broomstick hit by a sledgehammer. A fast uppercut straightened him up again, whereupon I got in close and peered at him critically. "You hurt bad, chum?" My irony was intended.

His mouth was wide open, gasping for air, revealing his teeth in a foolish, idiotic grin that was more agonized than mirthful. They were good teeth, a trifle yellowish but strong and horsey. I loosened the front ones with a stiff jab and stepped back to survey the damage I'd inflicted. I had done a pretty good job, I decided. The knowledge made me feel fine.

I felt even better when I returned my attention to the fallen Fatso, yanked him upright and frisked a snub-nosed .38 belly gun out of his coat pocket. Brandishing the rod, I favored both characters with a ferocious leer. "Who's top dog now?"

"You are," Lard answered abjectly, wiping his mashed smeller on his sleeve and getting the cuff all crimson with ketchup. "Be careful with that heater. It's got a hair trigger."

"Thanks for telling me. You'd better remember it yourself. If I make my meaning plain," I added darkly.

The skinny one said: "You play too rough."

"I'll play a lot rougher if you try anything stupid," I rasped. "That applies to both of you. And now, before we delve any further into this dizzy scenario, suppose you tell me what cooks. Talk it up and talk it straight."

Fatso did the honors. "There wasn't nothing personal about it, Mr. Turner," he whined. "Slim and me was only following orders."

"Whose orders?"

"Nick Hardesty's. We work for him."

"And he told you to hang the snatch on me?"

"Well, yeah, in a way." Fatso wiped more claret off his pudgy profile. "That is, he said he wanted you brought to him."

I DIDN'T get it. I didn't get any part of it. I'd bucked Hardesty in many a Hollywood floating crap game, sometimes winning an odd sawbuck from him and sometimes losing to him. Either way, we'd never had any bad feelings. We'd been on parties together, got sozzled together and were on casually friendly terms, not exactly bosom chums but certainly not enemies. If he had wanted to see me it would have been easy enough for him to call me up and say so. Why, then, had he chosen to make with the muscles and send a couple of moronic goons to fetch me the hard way? It didn't add up to make sense.

I said so. In reply, Skinny lifted a skeletal shoulder. "Maybe Nick wanted to let you know he meant business. Serious business. So's you'd be impressed, sort of."

"In that case there'll be a slight backfire," I said. "The impression will be on him. A knuckle impression." I indicated the door. "Unlock that."

He obeyed, and the three of us entered a small reception room, one side of which was clear glass with a circular porthole. Here, during the daylight hours, a combination receptionist and switchboard operator could sit and survey visitors. Now, of course, the layout was dark and deserted. The only light was a reflection from the transverse corridor beyond. This led into a small private bar and lounge which would have looked incongruous in a New York business house but was entirely typical of a Hollywood setup. The bar itself was done in red Chinese lacquer, the ceiling was a fish net, the walls held lighted glass aquaria full of guppies and gold-fish, and the chairs were of leather-cushioned wickerware that emphasized modernism rather than comfort. On the far side of the room there was

another doorway leading into an office calculated to beat your brains out with its opulent splendor.

The instant I stalked into it I experienced a sensation of active resentment. No lousy pulp publisher deserved such lavish surroundings, least of all a publisher who'd built his bankroll by being professionally lucky with the dice. There was a carpet on the floor that foamed up around your ankles like the thickish, smooth texture of a sponge cake. The wall paneling was bleached mahogany, hand rubbed to a buttery luster. Bookshelves were countersunk into the north end of the room, a blondewood spinet piano was placed a little to the left of the door as you entered, and dramatically under a bank of frosted windows stood a desk so massive you could have set up housekeeping in it without even removing any of the drawers.

NICK HARDESTY sat at the desk, unmoving, impassive as a clothing-store dummy.

He didn't look startled when I herded Fatso and Skinny over the threshold ahead of me and motion them to a halt when a wave of the roscoe I was toting. Hardesty wasn't a guy to register surprise at anything. He was tall and broad-shouldered in a canary-yellow T-shirt and brown slacks, and his coarse abundant hair was the black of anthracite coal. A straggly dab of mustache separated his small button nose from lips that were sensual and a shade too pale, and in his left glimmer he wore a monocle. Maybe it was the long training of keeping the monocle screwed in place that had taught him such complete control of his facial muscles. He was absolutely deadpan. He would probably have stayed deadpan if the Venus de Milo had come prancing into his office doing a highland fling.

"Now then, Nick," I growled.

He didn't answer me. He didn't stir.

"Don't give me that silent routine," I said bleakly. "Ask me what happened to your two bully boys here. Ask me if an accident happened to them. Then I'll tell you it was no accident; I mussed them up on purpose. And you're due for the same dose unless I get an explanation that sounds plausible."

He looked straight at me and ignored me.

I began to feel tight and tense, inside. A hunch crawled down my spine, nibbled at me with ominous premonitions. Hardesty was not only ignoring me, he was ignoring his two gunsels as well. Poise is okay and aplomb is admirable, but there's a time and place for everything and the gambler was being too damned calm. Unnaturally calm. Suddenly I realized he wasn't even breathing.

That was because of the small brown hole in the chest of his yellow T-shirt, a hole that was almost concealed by a fold in the cloth and in the flesh under the cloth. It was a clean hole with only a trace of blood around it, but Hardesty had evidently leaked plenty of gravy internally from the gunshot wound. The bullet had been a small one, a .32 or maybe merely a .25 with a high velocity charge. Whatever it was, it had found his heart and stopped its beating. He was deader than minced clams.

CORPSES always give me the fantods, particularly when I encounter them unexpectedly. It took me almost a full minute to digest the knowledge that Nick Hardesty was defunct, and thirty seconds more to recover from my abrupt attack of the jim-pams. Then I leaped headlong to the desk, rammed a finger against the artery in the gambler's muscular neck. The artery wasn't pulsating and the skin felt cool; too cool. It wasn't cold and clammy, yet. But it would be, soon enough.

When I took the pressure off his throat, he slumped forward onto the desk top and his monocle dropped out, rolled across the unstained blotter, teetered on the edge, and fell

to the floor. Slim and Lard stared as if mesmerized.

I said: "Snap out of it. Don't tell me this is the first time you creeps ever piped a stiff."

"Stiff?" the skinny one gulped noisily, and let his Adam's apple run up and down inside his sinewy gullet. "You mean Nick's—you mean, he's d-dead?"

"Yeah. Bumped." I reached past the corpse, lifted a phone out of its cradle, dialed police headquarters and asked for my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad.

Waiting for Dave to get on the line was a mistake, but not my worst one. Much bigger was the blunder I pulled when I finally made connections with him. The wait gave the two gunsels time to mull things over; and then, as I started talking, I took my glims off my captives. It was only for a brief instant, but in that instant the skinny bozo seized his golden opportunity. He grabbed up a pedestal smoking stand equipped with a demountable ash tray and swung it like a baseball bat, full at my noggin.

Had it connected it would have flailed my brains to cranberry jelly. It didn't connect though. It missed me by a good six inches, like Casey striking out with the bases loaded. Unfortunately the demountable ash tray flew off at the wrong time and accomplished what the pedestal stand failed to do: it tagged me on the jowls, not hard enough to knock me frigid but with sufficient force to rock me back on my heels and dislocate my reflexes. Then, while I was trying to fight off successive waves of dizziness, Skinny made a wild dash around the desk and catapulted himself at the frosted window behind it.

He scored a clean bull's-eye, his head low and his mush covered by his crossed arms, the elbows making a sort of double spearhead. There was a hell of a crash as the glass shattered and sprayed outward, the bony guy going out with the flying shards. A professional stuntman couldn't have done it better.

AS HE vanished, I snapped out of my Apathy and tried to wing him a shot from the snub-nosed .38 belly gun which I'd glommed from Fatso a few minutes before. I would have had a lot better luck with my own personal .32 automatic, but it was clipped in its shoulder holster under my left armpit; whereas the .38 was already in my unsteady fist. When you're in a tight spot you don't stop to think about selecting your hardware; if you've got any choice at all you take whatever's handiest. The trouble was, I forgot that Fatso had warned me his gat had a hair trigger. Without taking aim, I raised it and fired.

The cannon sneezed a premature *Ka-Chow!* before I could get a bead on the rapidly disappearing skinny bozo. My line of fire was all haywire. Instead of hitting Slim I put a slug through the deceased Nick Hardesty's steeple, which made the top of his haircut look very messy indeed but didn't render him any deader than he already was. Then I had the dubious privilege of lamping Skinny dropping outside the window and running like jet propulsion. He was long gone before I could collect my scattered wits and slam another bullet after him. Where he had been an instant before there was now nothing but the fractured window pane.

My jaw was throbbing like a gastric ulcer where the ash tray had caught me, my glims were out of focus, and I felt like the wrath of Whozit. I turned and fastened the bleary glimpse on Fatso. "If you so much as look as if you'd like to lam I'll blast you apart, and scatter your clockworks all over the precinct," I grated in a threatening manner.

"Who, me?" he whined, and turned eleventeen shades of pallid. "Gosh, Mr. Turner, I wouldn't think of doing nothing as foolish as that."

"Your pal did," I snarled.

"Can I help it if he got boogery? I don't have to do everything he does." Then he added virtuously: "Besides, I ain't got no

reason to take a powder.”

“Neither did he.”

Fatso made a thoughtful mouth. “You could be wrong about that, Mr. Turner.”

“Meaning what?” I said. “Are you hinting he had anything to do with this kill?” I indicated Hardesty’s husk.

The fat slob spread his hands elaborately. “I didn’t say that. I didn’t say nothing like that at all.”

“Okay. You indicated Slim had a good reason for scrambling. Do you want to tell me voluntarily what that reason was or must I extract the information by brute strength?”

“Hey, nix. You already showed me how tough you are, out there when you shoved me up against the front door.” He massaged his injured nostrils. “I’ll talk. I’ll tell you anything you wanna know. Just name it.”

I said: “Why did your skinny pal powder?”

“On account of he’s hotter than a depot stove. I mean he done five years of a ten-spot stretch in San Q for a heist job he pulled, and then they turned him loose on parole. He was supposed to be going straight, see, only instead of going straight he hooked up with Nick Hardesty, here, and, well, I mean, that was bad. It was a strongarm job, sort of. You know, like lumping up guys that didn’t pay their gambling debts. Stuff like that. Illegal.”

“Oh, very,” I agreed through a deep sneer.

Fatso went on: “Somehow the word got out that Bergstrom, that’s his monicker, Skinny Bergstrom, I say, somehow the word passed out that Skinny wasn’t keeping his nose clean. So naturally his parole officer got wind of it. Which mean the cops were on his tail. There was a pickup reader out on him. If he should get nabbed, they’d shove him back in San Q to do the other five years of his ten spot. He knowed it. So I guess when he seen Hardesty was croaked and you was about to phone for some law, he figgured he was behind the eight ball. The minute the bulls tabbed him he would of got collared. Well, that’s how I dope it out. I mean it looks like he

couldn’t risk sticking around here, so he done the natural thing and lammed.”

FATSO’S summing-up sounded reasonable. I accepted it with one or two mental reservations and pretended I was completely satisfied. “So much for that,” I said. “Next we take up the matter of Hardesty’s violent demise. If you don’t think Skinny Bergstrom’s the guy that killed him, then who did?”

“Damn if I know. It could have been lots of people. I mean, you know where Hardesty got his dough.”

“Sure. Dice.”

“Yeah. He didn’t run no regular gambling club or nothing like that. Just floating games, here and there. For big chips. He done a lot of business with movie hot shots. Stars and directors and producers and so forth. Sometimes he lose to them, just to keep them happy, but mostly he win. He piled himself up quite a wad of jack these last couple years.”

I nodded. “Enough to finance this publishing venture. And so what?”

“Well, they was some of the suck—I mean the guys he win off of—”

“Call them suckers. It’s all right by me.”

“Yeah, well, lately they was some of them that got to yelping about maybe Hardesty’s dice was too educated. That is, they sorta thought he was switching and using shavers or tops. A lot of them jerks dropped plenty moolah to Nick and he was holding their markers, you know, IOU’s, and it was getting so it was kind of hard to collect.”

I said: “In other words, some of his victims figured they had been jobbed, so they refused to pay off.”

“Right. Which was why Hardesty hired Skinny and me to put on the pressure. I mean we was muscle men. That is, if some yuck didn’t kick in with what he owed, why Bergstrom and me would go call on him and sort of persuade him. After all, a gambling debt is a gambling debt and nobody never

proved Hardesty was using no trick dice.”

“That’s beside the point,” I said. “The thing is, you and Skinny Bergstrom were doing Hardesty’s dirty work; pushing his suckers around.”

“Yeah.”

“And you think it might have been one of the people you pushed around who got even with Nick by cooling him off.”

“It sounds sensible, don’t it?”

“Could be,” I said. “But where do I fit in the script? Why did Hardesty want me kidnaped and brought to him?”

“So’s he could warn you off.”

“Warn me off? I don’t get it. Make it plainer.”

Fatso widened his optics at me. “Ain’t you been retained by a jessie which owed Nick money?”

“No,” I said truthfully. “What jessie?”

“That there movie star, Lorine Duvall. You know.”

I said I knew of Lorine Duvall but had never met her personally. She was a diminutive brunette French cutie who’d been imported to Hollywood by Metrovox Pix, a sultry little spitfire whose first American production had clicked in a large way, thereby skyrocketing her to the top of the heap. I’d heard rumors that she’d acquired the gambling fever in Nice, Cannes and Monte Carlo and that she continued to indulge the habit in this country; but beyond that, I knew absolutely nothing about her. “What’s with the Duvall chick?” I said.

“Why, she was one of the pigeons Nick took to the cleaners for considerable scratch,” the fat gungel said. “But instead of paying off, she balked. Nick sent Skinny and me to toss a scare in her—just a scare,” he added defensively. “We wouldn’t use no strong arm stuff on a dame,” his voice was pious.

“And?”

“She didn’t scare worth a damn. In fact, she said she was going to hire you to get some deadwood on Nick and run him out of

Hollywood. Nick didn’t like that. I ain’t saying he was afraid you would turn up some evidence proving he was crooked, understand. I’m only saying he didn’t like the idea of no private shamus investigating him. So he phoned Skinny and me to pick you up and bring you here for a showdown, sort of. He was going to warn you to lay off and not take the French quail’s case or you might wake up in a wooden kimona.”

“Oho,” I said, sore as a picked blister. “He thought he could order me around, hey? And now he’s the one that’ll wear the mahogany kimona. Serves him right. I’m not a damned bit sorry I shoved that bullet through his skull.”

Behind me, Dave Donaldson lumbered into the office and rasped: “So you admit blasting him, do you, Sherlock! That’s just fine. I heard you confessing, and suppose you stick out your fins for the nippers. You’re under arrest for murder.”

I WHEELED, fixed the flabbergasted swivel on him, and wondered how the hell so much dumbness could be wrapped up in one homicide lieutenant. Here he had ankled onto the scene just in time to overhear me alluding to the slug I’d accidentally put in Nick Hardesty’s defunct conk, and right away he leaped to the conclusion that I was the guilty gee; the killer. It would have been funny except that he was in grim earnest. Friendship or no friendship, he really intended to salt me down in the bastille on a bumpy rap. He figured he had me dead to fights.

Of course when you analyzed the situation you could understand why he was going off half cocked. First I’d phoned him; but before I got a chance to tell him about discovering Nick Hardesty’s cadaver, Skinny Bergstrom had bunted me with an ash tray and knocked me loose from my common sense. I had dropped the telephone, whereupon all Donaldson heard over the wire was the crash of breaking glass and the shot I’d fired at the

escaping guy.

Being a copper, Dave had naturally put a tracer on the open phone connection; located this address. He had then piled into his official wagon and flagged his diapers to the source of my interrupted call, arriving just in time to catch the tail end of my remarks and misinterpret them.

In a way, some of this was my own fault. What with the excitement and, one thing or another, I'd completely forgotten the open phone. I was so interested in questioning Fatso that I'd never completed my bleat to headquarters. And now Donaldson was informing me I was pinched.

"Don't be screwy," I told him. "The whole thing is a mistake. I—"

He beetled his brows at me and strode truculently forward, an irate glitter in his glimmers. "Screwy, am I? A mistake, hunh? Do you mean to tell me that's not a corpse behind that desk?"

"It's a corpse, all right. But—"

"With a hole in the head?"

"Yeah—"

"A bullet hole?"

"Sure, but—"

"And didn't I hear you say you fired the bullet that made the hole?"

"Yes," I yelped desperately. "But dammit—"

"Don't feed me any but-dammit. I'm trundling you down to the gow, savvy? You can try and sell your sheepdip to a jury, but lay off sprinkling it on me. I'm not buying."

"Now wait," I said. "In the first place the pill I put through Hardesty's conk didn't kill him."

He favored me with a supercilious leer. "Didn't kill him, eh? I suppose he's just asleep. If I listen hard enough, I'll hear him snore."

"No," I said. "He's dead enough. I'll admit that. But—"

Dave climbed swiftly to the top of a towering dudgeon. "Damn your brass, quit

weaseling!" his roar cut across my attempted explanation. Crimson suffused his beefy features and he seemed verging on a stroke of apoplexy. Fire and brimstone were in the glare he gave me, and steam came out of his ears. "Hold out your wrists for the handcuffs!" And he whisked the bracelets from his hip pocket, lunged toward me.

WELL, what the hell, I thought. In a spot like that, resignation was the better part of valor. When a guy's temper is burning at both ends and the middle, you can't reason with him. If the guy is a homicide bull like Donaldson it's even worse; all an argument will get you is your elbows tossed in the municipal pokey. I knew I could explain everything to his complete satisfaction as soon as he quit seething; and the fastest way to reduce his boiling point was to let him slap the cuffs on me. I thrust forth my mitts, as meek as a missionary in a cannibal's kettle. "Okay, pal. Have fun now and apologize later," I said.

He started to hang the irons on me, turning his back to Fatso. This was extremely bad judgment. Fatso, who had been totally ignored up to that moment, now took a hand in the game. Or rather, he took a foot. He swung his right brogan like a collegian kicking a field goal; booted Dave full in the rear and lifted him ten inches off the floor.

The thing happened so unexpectedly it petrified me. Dave let out an anguished squawk, as loud as a tomcat with its tail in the meat grinder. He rose in the air, came down, pivoted, and clapped both hands to the seat of his blue serge trousers where the pain was. As he performed this complicated maneuver, Fatso stooped low and charged; rammed his head into Dave's elly-bay. Crying loudly to heaven that his gall bladder was ruptured, Dave fell to the rug and became unconscious.

As he dropped, I snapped out of my horrified trance and leaped at the porky guy. "You damned fool!" I yammered, and got hold of his throat. "What the hell did you do

that for? Now we're both in the grease!"

"Gosh, Mr. Turner, I had to," he blubbered. "That copper was pinching you, wasn't he?"

"Sure, but—"

"And you really did put a slug in Hardesty's brains."

"Hardesty was defunct when I did that," I said. "Your testimony would have backed me up on it and cleared me."

"Not mine. The minute them identification experts found out I was John J. Volmer, alias Lard, alias Fatso, alias a lot of other monickers, why, they wouldn't believe me if I took my oath on a stack of wheatcakes. I got a record as long as an old maid's dream, I have. Not that I'm wanted for nothing right now, but you know how cops are with an ex-con. No sir, my testimony wouldn't of helped you none, Mr. Turner. I seen you was in a jackpot, and I done what was necessary."

I cursed him fervently. "An autopsy on the corpse would prove Hardesty was dead when I drilled him, you idiot. Donaldson wouldn't have kept me in jail more than a few hours. But now—" I choked as I pictured what would happen when Dave revived. He'd claim I was in cahoots with Fatso, that the assault had been my scheme; he would charge both of us with resisting arrest, attacking an officer of the law, mayhem, arson and moperly.

Fatso Volmer said: "Then I guess we better do what I figured we'd do when I butted him to dreamland."

"You mean scam?"

"Yeah. While we still got the chance. Before he wakes up and starts throwing his weight around."

I thought it over, disliked it thoroughly, and decided it was the only sensible thing to do. Otherwise we'd both get jugged until we grew long white whiskers.

Moreover, by lighting a shuck for freedom now, I'd have an opportunity to do some private detecting. I might even be lucky and

find a clue to Hardesty's killer. If I cracked the case and handed it to Donaldson on a silver platter, letting him take full credit, he would probably re-install me in his good graces. "Okay, Fatso," I said. "Let's ramble."

"Now you're talking," his tone held admiring approval as he followed me toward the doorway. "We'll go somewhere and hole up until the heat's off, and—"

"You can hole up," I said. "Me, I'm going to work."

He kept step with me to the building's front door. "You mean snooping?"

"Yes." We barged out onto the sidewalk. "Goodbye, please. If I never see you again it'll be too soon."

"Aw, don't be like that, Mr. Turner," he said woefully. "You hadn't ought to talk to me like that. I *like* you."

I made for my jalopy parked at the curb. "Beat it."

"Nix," he said, his pudgy pan puckering. "I want to string along with you. Look, I ain't got no job no more, now that Nick's been croaked. Couldn't you use me for a assistant, sort of? I'd work cheap."

"Get away from me," I said, and slid in under the wheel; kicked the starter, "Roll your hoop."

He hopped on my running board and clung there like a fat bug. "All I'd ask you for is eating money, Mr. Turner. Not no regular salary. And you'd' be surprised how useful I am. I can run errands and mix drinks and press pants and—why, gosh, I can even cook." He thrust his head in the window. "Aw, please."

Maybe it was the hero worship in his peepers that got me; after all, I'm as human as the next guy when it comes to soaking up flattery. Or maybe it was just his woebegone expression. Anyhow, I said: "Hop in, damn it. You're breaking my heart." And as soon as he settled his tonnage alongside me, I went away from that vicinity in a cloud of waffle batter.

WHEELING at top velocity, I also notched my think-tank into high gear; studied the situation from all angles. Presently a notion hit me. It was only a hunch, but it had possibilities. "So you want to be useful, do you?"

Fatso nodded violently. "Yeah, I sure do."

"Okay, you can start by giving me an address."

"Whose, Mr. Turner?"

"That French wren's."

"What French wren?"

"Lorine Duvall," I said. "The Metrovox star."

He blinked at me. "Her? What for do you want her address?"

"Look," I said. "Didn't you tell me she was one of Nick Hardesty's dice suckers?"

"Yeah."

"She owed him dough and refused to payoff, right?"

"Yeah. Fifteen G's, all told."

I said: "So Hardesty sent you and Skinny Bergstrom to call on her, threaten her."

"That's right, Mr. Turner. Only she didn't scare worth a damn. She just got up on her high horse and said she was going to retain you to get some deadwood on Nick."

"Which she didn't do," I said. "Maybe she changed her mind and decided to take matters in her own hands."

"You mean maybe she drilled him?"

"That's the general theory. It's only a theory, though."

He sounded excited. "Gosh, I see what you're getting at. She barges in on him for a showdown and he's sitting there not expecting, nothing violent, just going over his accounts receivable, and she ups with her little .25 Spanish and puts a plug in his ticker, and walks out again as cool as go-to-hell. Do you think you could make it stick?"

"I'm not even sure it's a reasonably accurate facsimile of how it happened," I said, "But it's worth looking into. Now tell me her address."

He mentioned a swanky apartment on Wilshire and I headed in that direction under forced draft; presently dragged anchor ferninst the edifice in question. With Fatso wheezing along in my wake I boarded an automatic elevator which wafted us up to the sixth floor and spewed us out into a quiet, deeply-carpeted corridor. Here the pudgy bozo took the lead; guided me to the door of Lorine Duvall's sumptuous stash. I knuckled the portal, trying to make it sound like a cop's knock: brisk and peremptory, with a lot of authority behind it.

A sleepy-looking maid answered, after I'd rapped three times more. She was a buxom blonde with a Scandinavian mush and copious curves under her negligee and nightie. "Yes, what is it?" she asked me.

I gave her a brief flash at my special badge. "Police business," I lied. "I want to see Miss Duvall. Pronto."

"Miss Duvall isn't home."

I bulled my way inside, gestured Fatso to follow and told him to shut the door. "Okay, gorgeous," I said to the maid. "If Miss Duvall isn't home, we'll wait for her. If you're lying, trot her out and make it rapid."

"I'm not lying," she bridled. "You can search the apartment if you want to."

I said: "I'll take your word," and broke open a fresh deck of coffin nails; set fire to one. Then I settled my heft on a nearby davenport, made myself comfortable. "In case your hospitality suggests that you offer me a snort, I'll take Scotch. Preferably Vat 69 if you've got some."

"I have not. And I wouldn't give it to you if I had. I'm not in the habit of furnishing liquor to every policeman that forces himself in here."

I blew a smoke ring on my second try. For me, that was par for the course. "You talk as if policemen made a practice of forcing themselves in the wigwam, girlie."

"Tonight they do."

I stiffened. "Meaning I'm not the first?"

"As if you didn't know," she sniffed.

I wondered if Dave Donaldson had awakened from his swoon and somehow stumbled onto the Duvall muffin's connection with Hardesty. Had Dave put two and two together, as I myself had done? And had he then despatched one of his underlings here to interview the French quail?

"So there was another dick ahead of me," I said to the blonde maid. "How long ago?"

"About thirty minutes or so."

This puzzled me more than ever. It ruled Donaldson out of the picture. "This thing is getting wacky," I said.

The maid said "That's what I think. I'd like to know what it all means. Why are you cops so anxious to see Miss Duvall? What's she done?"

"I'll ask the questions," I growled evasively. "Tell me, who was the cop that came here?"

"He said his name was Sergeant Bergstrom."

When I heard that name I damned near swallowed my gasper, ashes and all. "Bergstrom! Describe him."

"Well, he was tall, and thin, and—"

"Did he have big yellow teeth, like a horse?"

"Yes."

"Round head and thin neck, like an apple on a stick?"

"Yes, that's him."

Fatso's glims bulged like squeezed grapes and he looked flabbergasted. "It was Skinny!" he said explosively. "But what was he doing here?"

Quick thinking gave me a possible answer. "Maybe he added up the situation the same as I did," I said. "Maybe he doped it out that the Duvall cookie cooled Hardesty. Or else he figured maybe she would have a line on the guilty party, if she wasn't the killer herself. So as soon as he escaped from me by crashing through Hardesty's office window, he came

here to do some checking."

"But why?" Fatso persisted. "After he made his getaway, what would he want to stick his beak into a murder mess for? That was just asking for trouble."

I said: "Misguided loyalty, perhaps. He was on parole. Jobs don't come easy to ex-cons; you know that. Well, Nick Hardesty had given him a chance to earn a living. It wasn't exactly within the law, but at least it was a job. So when Nick got croaked, maybe Skinny thought he ought to track down the murderer. Motive, vengeance."

The maid was staring at us, wide-eyed, listening to the dialogue and turning as white as a Ku Klux costume. "M-muh-murder?" she gasped. "There's b-buh-been a murder? And you s-suh-suspect Miss Duvall—?" She sank into a chair. "Oh, my g-guh-goodness—and I t-tuh-told that thin man where to find her—!"

"You *what*?" I yodeled.

She bobbed her golden noggin. "I told him Miss Duvall was making some extra scenes on her new picture tonight, over at the Metrovox lot. He said he would g-guh-go there right away."

"Hell's bells and hot popcorn!" I said, and dived for the door. "Come on, Lard, we've got to make knots! Bergstrom's got a thirty-minute start on us and there's no time to lose!"

DRIVING across town to the Metrovox studio was ten minutes of unadulterated nightmare. I souped my cylinders with all the ethyl they'd drink; I cut a roaring gash in the night and damn the motorcycle cops, if any. Luckily, there were none. Before you could recite the Declaration of Independence in pig-Latin I whammed to a shuddering stop at the Metrovox main gates; thrust my badge and credentials at the uniformed guard. "Open up and let me through," I caterwauled. "I've got to see Lorine Duvall."

"Oh, yeah?" he sounded as nasty as fertilizer. "Just hold onto your horses, mister. You want to see Lorine Duvall, but does she

want to see you? That's the question." He moved toward his glassed-in sentry booth. "I'll phone her and ask her."

I hopped from my jalopy, strode forward with my dukes balled. "Never mind phoning. I showed you my shield."

"Private tin," he sneered. "You can buy them things a dime a dozen at Woolworth's." Avarice slid into his optics and he made a secretive rubbing movement of his thumb over the fingertips of his right hand. "Of course, now, if you really wanted to get inside bad enough to make it worth, say, a sawbuck, why, who knows but what it might be arranged."

I said softly: "You sell yourself too cheap, pal. I prefer to bribe you this way." And I popped him on the wattles, dumped him on his cornerstone, and left him lying on the ground, colder than a Siberian's nose. Then I unfastened the big wrought iron entrance gate, swung it open, dashed back to my vee-eight, and drove hellity-larrup onto the lot.

Presently I parked hard by a big barnlike sound stage building, the only one that showed lights. Its heavy door stood open and a green bulb burned alongside the portal, indicating it was okay to mosey in; no scene was being shot at the moment or the door would have been closed and the signal red. Taking Fatso Volmer with me, I blipped over the threshold and picked a path over a scattering of props and heavy electric cables; came to a set dressed to represent the interior of a railroad terminal's main waiting room. Several grips and juicers were standing around doing nothing, a carpenter on an overhead catwalk was making noise with a hammer and nails, and in a far corner a group of costumed extras played gin rummy on an upturned soap box.

Kliegs, baby spots, silken light shields, and aluminum-painted reflectors were arrayed in strategic disorder around the set, but the only illumination came from six or seven raw, unshaded Mazdas that dangled down from the

vaulted ceiling; not until the cameras started to grind would the Mazdas be doused and the Kliegs turned on. I spotted a party sitting in a director's folding canvas armchair, studying a script; hotfooted over to him and tapped him on the shoulder. "Pardon my curly tonsils, brother, but are you in charge here?"

He squinted up at me through thick-lensed, horn-rimmed cheaters. "Yes. Go away. I'm busy."

"So I see. I'm looking for Lorine Duvall."

"Help yourself. Why bother me?"

"I thought maybe you could tell me where to look," I said in a meek tone.

"Try her dressing bungalow. Last one on the left-hand row behind Sound Stage Five. That's where she said she was going when I called a recess five minutes ago."

"She was working here on the set until then?"

He emitted an irritated snort. "Yes. Go away. Shoo. Scat."

I DUCKED out fast; latched onto Fatso at the doorway. "Maybe we're in luck," I told him as I yanked him out into the moonless night. "That half-hour to start Skinny had on us didn't do him much good. The Duvall quail was acting a scene until five minutes ago, so Bergstrom hadn't got to her until then, if at all."

"Hunh?" he looked stupid. "How's that again?"

I tried to clear it up for him as we scurried around back of Sound Stage 5. "Suppose Skinny did get here half an hour ahead of us," I said; "Suppose he bribed the gate guard to let him onto the lot—a reasonable assumption, since we know the guard can be bought for as little as ten bucks. Okay. During that time, the Duvall doll was working a scene; Skinny couldn't get to her as long as the red light was burning. Well, the director called a recess just five minutes ago, and Miss Duvall went to her dressing bungalow. That would be Skinny's first chance to contact her, and now we're

right on his heels.”

“It must be nice to be a smart detective,” the fat guy said. “I guess it takes brains, huh?”

I shushed him quiet. We were practically on top of Lorine Duvall’s dressing bungalow, and I could see lights at the open windows. I could also hear voices, one nasal and raspingly masculine, the other angrily she-male with a trace of French accent.

“You must be out of your mind!” the she-male voice said. That was the Duvall cupcake talking. “You are crazee!”

Skinny Bergstrom was the man talking back to her. “What’s so crazy about offering to settle a debt for ten cents on the dollar? Why hell, lady—”

“Do not use the profanity on me, you cochon! How dare you intrude upon my private quairtaires and frighten me out of the wits and make the demand for moneys I do not owe?”

“You owe it, all right. You know you do. Fifteen thousand dollars that you dropped to Nick Hardesty on the dice. So Nick don’t want no trouble, see? He sent me over to collect ten per cent and call it square. Just slip me fifteen hundred—”

Skulking by the bungalow’s front door, I pinched Fatso’s forearm. “Hear that?” I whispered. “Your pal Skinny is trying to pull a swift one. If he can notch the jane for fifteen centuries, he’ll put it in his own pocket for scrambling purposes.”

“Why, the heel!” Fatso was indignant.

Inside the cottage, the French muffin’s voice lifted in fury. “Not one centime will I pay to you. I have settled the debt. Your *Monsieur* Hardesty is a great fool if he thinks he can make me pay more than I have already paid.

“*Oui*. I settled with him for half the amount. In cold cash. I handed this very afternoon seventy-five hundred dollars to your part— Aie-ee-eek! My throat . . . your fingers—”

BERGSTROM was choking her, threatening to break her neck nine ways from Sunday unless she kicked through with some geetus. This was my cue for action. I slammed myself at the door, crashed it inward and went hurtling over the threshold, knowing I now had the answer to the riddle of Nick Hardesty’s murder. “Avast!” I roared, and plunged at the bony Bergstrom bozo.

He had his mitts wrapped around Lorine Duvall’s windpipe in a savage, throttling strangle-hold that had already begun to turn her piquant Gallic map blue around the fringes. Her midnight hair was loosened in lovely disorder and her dress was torn open from neck to New Hampshire as she struggled in his clutches, just like the climax of a B picture. I leaped in, grasped the thin gee from behind, unpeeled him from his sobbing victim, and swung him around; got ready to kayo him.

He pulled a knife on me, slashed at me with it.

I ducked the glittering shiv barely in time to keep from getting my tonsils amputated from the outside. And then Fatso Volmer stepped into the room, drew a pint-size automatic, aimed it. The tiny gat sneezed: *Ka-Chee!* and planted a pill neatly in Bergstrom’s right eyeball. Bergstrom fell down and was suddenly as dead as the Petrified Forest.

“Thanks, chum,” I said to the porky guy. Whereupon I dug out my own .32 Colt and shot the miniature roscoe out of his hand, taking a couple of fingers with it.

Fatso yeeped and stared at his bleeding duke. “You . . . you—oh, lookit what you’ve went and did! My hand— I’m ruined! Oh—!”

“You won’t be needing your hand when you go to the gas chamber for croaking Nick Hardesty,” I said.

He fixed the glassy focus on me. “Wh-what-what?”

“I began suspecting you when you started sticking so close to me,” I told him. “It didn’t seem plausible, unless you wanted to keep an eye on my movements. And the trick you

pulled on Lieutenant Donaldson of the homicide squad so we could both escape; that benefited you as much as it did me. More, maybe.”

“Hey, now wait—”

I SAID: “Then, when we were discussing Hardesty’s death, your verbal picture m it was pretty damned graphic. You spoke of him sitting at his desk, going over his accounts and not expecting anything violent, when he was shot by a Spanish .25. Of course you talked as if Miss Duvall did the shooting; but how the hell could you have been hep to so many of the small details?”

“Why, I . . . that is—”

“However,” I said, “I needed to find out your murder motive before I could tie you down. So I let you string along with me, and a moment ago I overheard enough of the dialogue between Bergstrom and this Duvall filly to tell me what your motive was. She claimed she had already settled her gambling debt to Nick Hardesty by paying half of it, seventy-five hundred clams. Just before Skinny began choking her, she said: *I paid it to your part*— And then his fingers cut off the word. But what she started to say was: *I paid it to your partner*. Meaning you, Fatso.”

“Listen . . . you can’t—”

I said: “Then I got hep. You had collected the dough from Miss Duvall but hadn’t turned it over to Hardesty. You figured to keep it for yourself. Maybe you’d worked the same shenanigan on various other suckers who owed Nick money. Nick found it out and accused you, so you shot him to his ancestors. Then, as if nothing had happened, you went out and joined Skinny Bergstrom to kidnap me.”

“Hell, I . . . you—”

“It all meshes,” I said. “Miss Duvall couldn’t have got into Hardesty’s office to croak him, because the front door of the publishing building was locked. On the other hand, you had a key. I cinched it just now by letting you shoot Skinny.”

“Look, Mr. Turner. I saved your life.”

“Yeah. By drilling him with a small caliber gat. A Spanish .25 automatic. I’ll lay odds a ballistics test will match your rod with the slug that cooled Hardesty. Want to bet?”

He seemed to deflate, like a balloon with a slow leak. “You . . . you mean you’re going to turn me in? After I kept you from being stabbed?”

“Damned right,” I said grimly. Then I looked at the disheveled Duvall quail “Call the cops, baby.”

She went to her phone on the other side of the bungalow and called the cops.