

BULLET FROM NOWHERE

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

The cameras are set, the scene has already been rehearsed; "Shoot!" the director says. . . . What happens is stark tragedy—not of the movie, play-acting variety, but like a chapter out of the deeper drama of life itself.



I smacked him on the button. He was like a raving maniac

THE SCENE wouldn't have got by the Hays office. Audiences in the U.S.A. aren't supposed to know what a woman's undraped body looks like.

But this happened to be a Spanish version for the South American film houses. It was the final take in a production dealing with the career of Mata Hari, the famous woman spy. The scene was to depict her death before a firing-squad; and my friend Billy Blackwood, the

director, had invited me over to the studio to see it made.

"You'll get a boot out of it, Turner," he had grinned at me. "Lola Martinez, who plays Mata Hari, displays her epidermis in no uncertain terms. And Lola's epidermis is worth looking at."

So there I was on Sound Stage "A" on the Altamount lot. The set represented a shell-scarred courtyard somewhere in France. There was a crumbling, bullet-

pocked wall in the foreground. Billy Blackwood sat on a folding chair in front of me. Two big, hooded, sound-proof cameras flanked him on his left. Lee Riley, the red-haired cameraman, fiddled with his lenses as he stood at his station between the cameras. An assistant adjusted twin microphones overhead.

Blackwood said: "Okay. Final rehearsal. Let's go!"

THE lights dimmed down. It was supposed to be a night scene. Out into camera-range marched a squad of six extras uniformed as French poilus. Then, accompanied by a uniformed officer and a priest, Lola Martinez stumbled forward.

Despite the all-engulfing folds of a somber black cloak I could see that she was damned attractive. Her dark hair streamed backward over her shoulders and her puss was pale, agonized in the dim light. She stepped before that bullet-pocked wall. The priest mumbled a few words, retired to the side-lines. The officer raised his sword—



Lola Martinez, with a dramatic gesture, threw off her black cloak. I gasped. Her ivory thighs and rounded hips seemed sculptured out of living marble. The officer dropped his sword. The poilus of the firing-squad pulled the triggers of

their rifles. Hammers clicked down on empty-firing chambers. Lola Martinez swayed. Her hand went to her breast, crushed a thin glass capsule of red stain over her heart. Slowly she sagged to the ground, with crimson streaming down over her bosom.

"Swell!" Blackwood said. "We'll shoot it just like that."

Lola arose, covered her charms with the black cloak. She strolled over to the side of the sound-stage, where a brunette maid washed away that crimson stain. I watched the operation; wondered if I might get a job as Lola's maid. If there were many chances to work on her the way the maid was doing, I'd like it better than being a Hollywood private dick!

The extras of the firing-squad were handed blank cartridges. They loaded their rifles. The Martinez wren was given a new glass capsule full of red stain.

Billy Blackwood said: "All ready! Okay. *Quiet, everybody—this is a picture!*"

The cameras started whirring. I watched the whole scene reenacted before my eyes. Lola stood before the bullet-scarred wall. She threw off her black cloak. Once more I drew a sharp breath of admiration at her perfect beauty. The officer dropped his sword. A sharp volley rang out from the rifles of the firing-squad.

Lola's hand went to her breast. She staggered. Crimson welled over her heart. She slumped down in a crumpled heap.

I noticed something. That red glass capsule was still in Lola's hand—unbroken! I leaped to my feet. I said: "What the hell—!"

Billy Blackwood turned and stared at me. I plunged past him. I went to my knees beside Lola Martinez' lovely, unclad form. I stared. Crimson trickled over white, rounded contours. But it wasn't red stain. *It was blood!*

Lola had been shot through the heart, right before my very glims!

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Somebody yanked me backward off balance. It was Billy Blackwood. He was raging. He said: "Damn you to hell, Turner—you've ruined the scene!"

I said: "Ruined hell! This girl's been browned."

Blackwood took a backward step, as though I'd slugged him on the trumpet. Then he launched himself at Lola's corpse. He stared at the round red hole: "God in heaven—!"

I whirled, faced Lee Riley, the cameraman. "Beat it to the nearest telephone and call police headquarters. Ask for Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad—tell him to flag his diapers out here!" Then I whipped out the '38 automatic I always carry in a shoulder-holster. I faced the white-featured group of six extras who had comprised the firing-squad. I said: "One of you birds shot Miss Martinez. The first one among you who tries to get away gets a lead pill in his tripes!"

A trembling property-man came toward me. "Mister, I swear I gave them all blank cartridges—"

I said: "I know you did. I saw you. But one of these eggs substituted a real bullet." Then I turned. I was just in time to see one of the extras leap forward and kneel by Lola's slumped form. Tears streamed down his swarthy face, openly, unashamed. He said: "Lola—I loved you so much—!" Then he lapsed into soft, whispering Spanish. . . .

I grabbed him, jerked him to his feet: "What the hell's the idea? Get back over there with the others!"

THEN he did something that almost caught me flat-footed. He stared at the five remaining poilus for a single, glaring

instant. "Which of you killed her?" he rasped almost hysterically. Then he made a dive for my automatic, tried to wrench it out of my hand. "*Por Dios*, I'll kill all five of them!" he screamed. "Then I'll know I got the right one—!"

I slugged him on the button with my right duke. I had to. He was dangerous—a raving madman for the moment. My knuckles smashed into his puss. He went down, stayed down. I swept the five other extras with the muzzle of my gat. They were scared plenty.

I noticed Billy Blackwood. His map was greenish-gray, and he looked about ready to heave his cookies. He gulped to arrest the retching movement of his belly.

I felt sorry for him. I set fire to a gasper; waited.

It seemed hours before Dave Donaldson arrived. It was probably not more than fifteen minutes. Dave bounced out upon the sound-stage with a couple of flatfeet at his heels. He saw the brunette doll's body, and his jaw jutted. Then he noticed the uniformed poilu stretched at my feet. "For cripes' sake! Two of them! I thought only one had been bumped off!"

I said: "There was only one, Dave. I had to smack this guy silly to keep him from running amuck." Then I said: "One of these six extras shot Lola Martinez. Better take all of 'em downtown for questioning."

"Thanks, Turner. You're a damned handy guy to have around." He leaned forward and dragged the swarthy-faced poilu to his feet. The man opened his eyes groggily. Donaldson cuffed him forward, herded the other extras off the stage. He left a bluecoat behind to guard the defunct jane's remainders until the stiff-wagon came for it.

I turned to Blackwood. "Sorry this had to happen, Billy."

He stared at me dully. "This wrecks my picture!" he whispered harshly.

I handed him my flask, gave him a snort of Vat 69. Then I left. I drove to my office and took care of some correspondence.

LATE in the afternoon I had a phone call. It was Dave Donaldson.

Dave said: "Hello, Turner. We've solved the Martinez killing.

"I said, "The hell you have!"

"Yeah. Remember that dark-faced extra—the one you slugged on the sound stage?"

"Yes. Was he the one?"

"He denies it, but we've got the goods on him. He's a Mexican, same as Lola Martinez was. Also, it develops that he used to be Lola's sweetie back in Chihuahua, where they both came from. His name's Felipe Gonzalez. A few hours more of third-degreeing him, and he'll break. He's bound to."

I said "Fine!" and hung up. There wasn't anything else doing around my office, so I closed up and went home to my apartment.

Just as I was sticking the key in my door I felt a hand on my arm. Somebody had crept up behind me in the hallway without my hearing the approaching footsteps. I whirled on my heel, and my hand dived for my .32 automatic. I don't like people to sneak up behind me. It gripes me.

I stared into the pale features of a girl. She was looking at me with wide eyes. I recognized her. She was Lola Martinez' maid—the one who'd wiped crimson stain from Lola's bosom back on the set that morning. The one whose job I'd envied.

"Pleas-a-se, Mr. Tur-ner—" She spoke with a sibilant softness, a trace of accent. She had dark hair and liquid brown eyes and an ivory complexion; a typically

Spanish figure, diminutive yet voluptuous and full-blown. She was Mexican.

I said: "What can I do for you?"

"I—I desire to talk to you, Mr. Turner," she answered. There was a pressing urgency in her husky voice, as though she had a lot on her mind.

"All right. Come on in." I let her into my apartment. "Sit down," I told her.

She sat down and leaned forward. The dress she was wearing was cut low at the neck. I caught a glimpse of firm, flawless mounds, ripe and rounded and seductive. I liked the looks of them. I said: "What's on your mind?"

"I—I am Raquel Gonzales. I am—I was—Lola Martinez' maid."

"I know that."

"But I am also Felipe Gonzales' sister!" she burst out.

I stared at her. "Felipe Gonzalez? The extra man who drilled Lola?"

SHE clutched at my arm, pressed herself against me. I could feel the firm resilience of her flesh through the thin cloth of her dress. Her heart was throbbing wildly. My own ticker skipped a beat at the soft, fragrant, femininity against me. "Felipe did not shoot Lola!" she cried out. "We were all friends together in Mexico! When Lola became a star, she brought me here as her maid; she managed to get Felipe extra work so that we could all three be together! Felipe had no cause to kill Lola. She was good to him—and to me—"

"Wasn't he her sweetheart in the old days, back in Chihuahua?"

"No—no—no!" the girl whispered harshly. "They were just friends! And now the newspapers say Felipe has been arrested for the crime!" Tears welled into her liquid peepers. "You must do something to save him, Mr. Turner—!"

“There’s nothing I can do, my dear. He needs a shyster, not a snoop.”

“But—but only the great Dan Turner can discover who actually killed Lola!”

I was flattered. Also, Raquel Gonzalez’ nearness began to do things to my veins and arteries. I patted her, and she quivered against me in a way that gave me ideas. . . .

I said: “How can you afford my fee?”

She looked at me. Then she pushed herself out of my arms, “I—I haven’t much money. But—” And then her hands flew to the neck of her dress. She yanked. I heard a ripping, tearing sound—and she tore the frock open from neck to New Jersey.

I put the startled focus on her. She was wearing nothing under the frock except a thin pair of step-ins and a wisp of brassiere, and her body was a symphony in feminine curves. Her breastworks were firm and full and erect; her body possessed a voluptuous maturity that left me gasping like a gaffed shark.

I stared into her hot Latin glims. They were challenging and inviting and full of promise. Ordinarily, I don’t work on a case unless I know there’s a stack of cabbage in it for me. But on the other hand, Raquel Gonzalez was one of the most exquisite cupcakes I’d ever gandered—and after all, I’m as human as the next guy!

I swept her into my arms. She fused herself against me, opened her red lips for my kiss. I felt hot flashes charging my batteries. . . .

AFTER a while I said: “Okay, Raquel. I’ll do what I can for your brother. But I’m not promising much. I think the cards are stacked against him.”

She looked up at me. “You will save him, *mi corazon!*” she whispered. “I know you will!”

I said: “I’ll do my best.” But after she had left my apartment stash I wondered what in hell had made me promise to do anything at all. If ever there was an open-and-shut case against a guy, it was this one against Felipe Gonzalez.

But I’d promised his pashy sister I’d do something, and it was up to me to keep my word. I poured myself a stiff jorum of Vat 69 and sat down to think things over. Frankly, I didn’t know where to start. I was up against a blank wall.

I smoked about ten gaspers, killed nearly a whole fifth of Scotch before I finally got a hunch. It wasn’t much of an idea, but at least it might prove to be a starting-point. I went downstairs, got into my jalopy. I drove out toward Beverly Hills and stopped before the house where Millie Wagner lived.



Millie Wagner conducted a movie-gossip column for a string of newspapers. What she didn’t know about Hollywood wasn’t worth knowing. I rang her bell.

Millie opened the door herself. She was tall and willowy and blonde, and her curves were in exactly the right places. When she saw me she opened her big blue eyes and said: “Well—hello, Sherlock! I haven’t seen you in a coon’s age! Come in.”

I went in. Millie was dressed in a negligee of some thin, flowing material that didn't hide very much of her. She took me into her library, poured a couple of drinks.

I studied her. She wasn't hard to take. And I knew what would be required of me before I could get any information out of her. I pulled her down alongside me on the divan, slipped an arm around her waist.

She sighed. "Still the same old Dan!"

"Yeah, only more so." Then I kissed her.

It lasted a long while, that kiss. It hit me like a shot of Benedictine. I traced patterns on her bare shoulders with my fingers. She grabbed me and said: "Damn you, you're driving me nuts!"

"That's what I intended to do." Then I did some more. . . .

AFTER a while she blinked at me lazily and said, "All right. Tell me what you really came here for."

"You've heard about Lola Martinez being rubbed out, I suppose?"

"Certainly. Why?"

"Know anything about her private life?"

"Plenty. Mostly bad."

"Who were her boy-friends?"

Millie said: "You'd need an adding-machine to count 'em." Then she named a dozen Hollywood guys. I listened. She wound up by saying: "Billy Blackwood was her latest conquest."

I jumped to my feet. "What?"

"Sure. Billy was completely gone on her. And she liked him pretty well, too. Gave up all her other boy-friends for him. Of course, it may be that she kept a few other part-time playmates to fill in the evenings when Billy was otherwise engaged."

I grabbed my hat. "Thanks a lot, Millie. You've given me an inspiration."

"You forgot to kiss me goodnight. Is that the thanks I get?"

"Some other time!" I laughed back at her. Then I dashed outside and piled into my bucket. I drove to the nearest pay-station telephone, dropped a nickel in the slot, dialed Billy Blackwood's number.

Blackwood answered the phone. I said: "Hello, Billy. This is Dan Turner. I wondered if you'd do me a favor."

His voice sounded hollow and toneless. "If I can."

"I want you to go to the Altamount studio with me. I want to have a look at the rushes of that scene in which Lola Martinez was shot."

Blackwood choked. "I—I'm sorry, Dan. But—well, I don't want to have to watch that scene again! "Good God—I can't drive it away from my mind as it is!"

"I know how you must feel. But it's quite important."

"Why is it important? The police have caught the man who killed her."

"I'm not so sure of that," I answered. "That's why I want to see those rushes."

He hesitated. Then: "All right. Stop by my house and we'll go to the studio together."

IHUNG up. I felt sorry for Blackwood. If he'd really been in love with Lola Martinez, it was going to be tough for him to sit and watch the re-enactment of the scene in which she had met her tragic death. But I wanted to see that scene. I wanted to see exactly what the camera had caught the moment Lola died.

I drove past Billy's tepee, picked him up. Thirty minutes later we were inside the Altamount studio. He left me while he went after the rush prints I wanted. Pretty soon he came back. "Lee Riley was downstairs. I got him to get these for us."

We went into a little private projection-room. Blackwood threaded a

reel into the projector, doused the lights and turned on the machinery.

I watched as Lola Martinez' death-scene flashed on the screen before me. In spite of myself, I shivered as I watched her facing the firing-squad. I saw her throw off the cloak and disclose the beauty of her unclad she-male charms. I saw the officer's sword drop. The rifles of the firing-squad barked out.

As the poilus fired, I noticed something. On that darkened scene there was it sudden faint flash of light, as if the film had been marred by halation. The light seemed to have blurred the film on its right side.

I tensed, turned to Blackwood. "What caused that halation?"

He frowned. He seemed nervous. "I—I don't know."

"Could it have been caused by a shot fired from somewhere near the cameras?"

He stared at me. "What do you mean?"

"Could it?"

He shook his head. "There wasn't any shot fired from somewhere near the cameras."

I shrugged. "Okay. It was just an idea of mine. Have you got the same scene as it was taken by the other camera? There were two working, weren't there?"

Blackwood nodded, produced a second short reel of film. He slipped it into the projector, started it unwinding. Again I watched Lola Martinez facing her impending death. Again the firing-squad's rifles barked. And again there was that faint light-blur on the edge of the film—this time on the left edge.

I jumped to my feet. "Thanks, pal. I've got to go now. Let me have those two reels of film, please."

He hesitated. "What—?"

"Maybe it's important and maybe not. I can't stop to explain just now. I want to have a look at Lola Martinez' body." I

snatched the two cans of film, dashed out of the tiny projection-room.

I leaped outside and hurled myself into my coupe. I drove hell-for-leather to the nearest night owl beanery. I plunged into a phone booth, dialed Dave Donaldson. "Dave, this is Dan Turner. I've just uncovered something damned important!"

"Important? Regarding what?"

"About the Lola Martinez killing. Has Felipe Gonzalez confessed yet?"

Dave cursed. "The skunk escaped from his cell a half-hour ago!"

I felt as though somebody had kicked me in the kidneys. I said "Good God!" Then I said: "Listen, Dave—did your medical examiner probe for the bullet that killed Lola?"

"Yes, but what was the use?" Donaldson answered grimly. "She's dead—and we know that the slug must have come from Gonzalez' rifle. But there wasn't any point in examining it for markings from the rifling of Gonzalez' gun, because we don't know which of the six rifles he carried. There were six men on the firing-squad, and all the rifles were mixed up when we took those extras down to jail."

I said: "You damned fool—maybe the bullet didn't come from any of those six rifles! Maybe it was fired from somewhere else!"

"What—?"

"Listen. Where is Lola's carcass?"

He told me. It had been removed to an undertaking establishment on LaBrea near Wilshire. I said: "Meet me there right away. Bring a medical examiner with you."

I hung up and dashed back to my heap. I got in, kicked the starter. Then I jammed the throttle all the way down to the floorboards.

TEN minutes later I drew up before the undertaking parlor where the brunette star's remnants had been sent. Donaldson wasn't there yet. A night clerk let me in. I flashed my special tin and said: "Where is Lola Martinez' body? I want to see it."

The man led me to a door. He opened it. The room ahead of me was as dark as the second cellar of hell; and from it emanated a faint, sinister odor—an odor of death. . . .

The night-clerk reached for a light—

Something moved in the pitch-dark room before me. I felt my scalp tighten. And then I saw a flash of yellow flame in the blackness, heard a deafening report. Something stung into the fleshy part of my thigh, kicked my gam out from under me. I went down.

A form leaped forward out of that dark room. Something glittered in an arc. The funeral-parlor's night-clerk sagged backward with a moan as the butt of an automatic maced against his conk.

I tried to get to my feet, tried to get my .38 from its shoulder-holster. I felt a thudding blow on the side of my thigh. A masked man leaned over me as I collapsed. Then everything went black.

I WAKENED to find Dave Donaldson shaking hell out of me. The medical examiner he had brought with him was binding up my thigh. My trouser-leg was drenched with blood. The medico said: "You're all right, Turner. Just a flesh-wound; no bones broken. Here's the slug." He held forth a nasty-looking lead pellet.

I took it. Then I swayed to my feet. Donaldson said: "What the hell happened, Philo?"

"Never mind that now. Quick—let's get into that room there!" I leaped into the darkened room from which the shot had come. I found the light-switch, snapped it.

The room blazed with illumination. I stared. In the center of the floor there was an operating-table; and on the table lay Lola Martinez' naked, lovely corpse. Only it wasn't lovely any more. Some sharp apple had slashed into the flesh of her breast with a dull knife—a knife that had left a nauseating, gaping wound. . . .

I said: "Well, he tried to get it."

Donaldson stared at me. "Tried to get what?"

"The bullet from her breast," I snarled. "I must have surprised him at his work—that's when he shot me!" I felt in my pockets.

"By God—he got those two cans of film, too!"

Meanwhile the medico had been working over the form of the unconscious undertaker's clerk. Now the man opened his eyes and staggered dizzily to his feet. He looked at me drunkenly; then his bleary gaze went to the body on the operating-table. He saw the hideous wound in her bosom. "What—who—who did that?" he gasped, almost tossing his pancakes.

I said: "Somebody who wanted the bullet that croaked her."

The clerk said: "But—but there wasn't any bullet in her body! The police had removed it before we prepared her for burial!"

Dave Donaldson nodded. "Sure. Here it is." He took a lead slug from his pocket.

I snatched at the thing. Then I held up alongside the pill which the medico had taken from my thigh. I said: "Same caliber, by God! And I'll bet they were fired from the same gun!"

Donaldson's eyes narrowed. "What the hell are you talking about, Hawkshaw?"

I said: "Look, these slugs are from an automatic. Lola wasn't killed by Felipe Gonzalez. She wasn't killed by a rifle-bullet. She was killed by a pistol from

somewhere close to the cameras. Somebody shot her just as the firing-squad cut loose with their volley of blanks!”

“How do you make that out?”

“I had the proof—but now it’s gone! I had the films that were made of the scene in which Lola was murdered. Both films showed faint, definite light-halations at the edges. The scene was made on a darkened stage. The light-halations at the edges of the films proved that the death-shot came from near the camera-lenses—so near that the flash of the shot fogged the picture!” I grabbed at Dave’s arm. “Come on—let’s go! I’ve got an idea we may still catch the guy that did this!”

I DRAGGED him out to my bucket, let him drive. My thigh was giving me fits. I said “Step on it—out to Billy Blackwood’s house!”

Donaldson opened up the motor of my vee-eight faster than it had ever been opened up before. As he drove, he talked. “You’re sure it wasn’t Gonzalez?” he asked me frenziedly. “Remember—he’s escaped from jail. He could have come to that undertaking joint and shot you—”

“No. It wasn’t Gonzalez. And for God’s sake stoke this can!”

We roared ahead through the night, shrieked around a corner on two wheels and a prayer. Donaldson slapped on the brakes—and destroyed about seven dollar’s worth of my perfectly good rubber. We slewed in toward the curb.

I scrambled out. Donaldson followed me. Billy Blackwood’s bungalow was dark, deserted-looking. I held up a silencing finger. Dave and I stepped up to the porch.

I whispered: “How good are you at housebreaking?”

He grinned grimly through the gloom. He went to a window and fiddled with it. Abruptly it gave way. He pushed it open.

Together we stepped into that dark house, closed the window behind us. I said: “For God’s sake be quiet. Just keep still and listen!”

We stood there in utter darkness for maybe five minutes. Then I heard a sound from somewhere in the rear.

Somebody had entered from the kitchen. I heard footsteps coming forward through the hall. I peered out, saw the gleam of a muffled flashlight. A dark figure stopped before a door, opened it.

I crept forward with Donaldson trailing me. I reached the door of the room into which that dark figure had vanished. I looked in. A man was standing by a bureau. The room was a bedroom. The man was masked. He was opening a drawer. He was putting two film-cans into the drawer—two film-cans and an automatic—

I snicked on the lights and said: “Okay. Hoist ‘em high, *Mr. Lee Riley!*”

The red-haired cameraman whirled. His face went grey.

I grinned at him, fished out a gasper, set it afire. “You’re under arrest for the murder of Lola Martinez and for shooting me in the leg.” I blew out a lungful of smoke.

“You damned, lousy, snooping—You can’t prove a damned thing!”

I SAID: “Yes I can. In the first place, Lola Martinez had been your sweetie—Millie Wagner told me so, named you among a dozen others. But Lola gave you the gate when she took up with Billy Blackwood. So you figured to kill Lola and plant the crime on Blackwood, thus getting revenge on both of them at the same time. That’s why you’re here now. You did exactly as I figured you’d do. As soon as you shot me there in that undertaking parlor, you came here to plant your gun and those films you stole from

me. You knew they'd be evidence enough to fry Blackwood."

Dave Donaldson looked at me. "How did you guess—?"

I said: "As soon as Millie Wagner named Lee Riley as one of Lola Martinez' discarded lovers, I got an idea. I went down to the Altamount studio and had those rushes run off—the scene showing Lola's death. As I told you, the films showed light-halations at the edges. But here's the point: one film was fogged on the right edge, while the other was fogged on the left. Which meant that the shot was fired from *between* the two cameras. There was just one man who had been standing between the cameras when Lola was shot. That man was Lee Riley!"

"Well, I'll be damned! Then the Mexican, Felipe Gonzalez, was innocent?"

I nodded. "It was just tough luck, his being there on that set. Tonight when I had Blackwood run off those films for me, Lee Riley was in the studio. He must have overheard me when I suggested to Blackwood that the shot might have been fired from alongside the cameras. Riley got scared. He went at once to the undertaker's, tried to recover the bullet from Lola's breast. It was the one bit of evidence that would convict him. He didn't find the bullet—and then I surprised him. He shot me—and then came here to plant his false evidence against Blackwood."