

DEATH on the Set

A vicious and demoralizing practice breaks out in Hollywood

By NORMAN MARAY

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR ADAMS turned from the nude torso of the actress and confronted the frightened prop boy.

"Now, young feller, suppose you tell me how you come to find the body?"

Tony Carter licked his lips nervously. The two publicity men for Branton Studios leaned forward to catch the whole story. A great deal depended upon this boy. It might make or break the last picture that Arlene Doxie had completed.

"Well, I just come from the prop room with the dagger Miss Doxie was goin' to use in her next scene. I knocked at her door but there was no answer. I went away and told the director, Mr. Hartley, that I couldn't get Miss Doxie to open her door. And he said," the boy stopped and looked over at the frowning director who was hunched in a chair near the nude body.

"Go ahead, what did he say," the inspector urged.

"He said for me to get the hell out of here without bothering him and couldn't I see he was busy."

"And was he?" Adams fondled a Havana cigar before lighting it.

"I guess so." The boy spoke uncertainly.

"You *guess* so? Listen, son, we haven't time for guessing. Now, what was Hartley doing?"

"Well, he was talkin' to one of the chorines in the bedroom set. Swell looker she was. He was doin' a lot of talkin' with his hands and the dame didn't seem to worry much. You gotta stand a lot if you expect to get ahead." Carter shot a quick glance at the director who was very red of face.

"Yes, yes, what did you do after Hartley told you to get out?" Adams was puffing furiously at his cigar.

"Well, what could *I* do? I went back to Miss Doxie's dressing room and banged on the door. This time she opened it, that is," he paused uncertainly, "I think *she* opened it."

"Now listen, son, either she opened it or she didn't."

"You see, Inspector, I wasn't sure if it *was* Miss Doxie, it could have been her stand-in."

"They look alike?"

"Can't tell 'em apart."

"I see, what happened then?"

"With one hand, Miss Doxie reached out and took the dagger away from me. I kind of heard someone else in the room with her and I could see that she didn't have nothin' on but this thing-a-majig she's got on now." He waved a hand towards the cold white body. The rest of the audience followed his gesture.

It was a beautiful body, even in death. It seemed to beckon to the passions of the men in the small dressing room. That body had made Arlene Doxie famous. Now, it would move no more with sinuous grace across the silver screen. Those swaying hips would move no more in pantherish strides. Those full-bosomed breasts would no longer be temptingly hidden from the eyes of her fans. Now, between them, where once screen lovers had planted ardent kisses, was a kiss from death—a jeweled dagger.

The dagger shimmered in the yellow light of the electric light about the dressing mirror. A thin crimson stream had twisted to the navel-indented stomach and had congealed there. The well-shaped legs were twined about the silken garment she had clutched in her struggles. On her delicately molded face was a look of sheer terror—as though she had looked at the face of death and not found it pleasant.

BUT, most curious to those clustered about the body were the deep welts, blood-edged, that were curved about her delectable body—as though someone had whipped her before she died.

It was these same welts that Inspector Adams pointed out to the medical examiner after he had dismissed the people he had questioned.

“What do you make of ‘em, Doc?” He puffed at the stub of his black cigar.

“On superficial examination, they appear to have been made with some sharp instrument, probably wire. Yes, wire whipped about the body would make that identical mark.”

“But, Doc, why?”

The medical examiner straightened his back and looked piercingly at the inspector.

“I’ll tell you, why, Inspector. These marks were not self-inflicted. They were inflicted by someone else. And this has not been the first time Doxie was whipped. There are traces of other scars on her body. I think Doxie was a member of some strange cult—a cult of whip-mad fanatics.”

“Hold on, Doc. How could she be mixed up in something like that? She’s been under guard every moment she was off the set. There have been kidnapping threats made, the studio was taking no chances. The rest of the time, she was out here at the studio.”

“Well?” the doctor paused politely.

“Well, darn it, Doc, how in hell could she be mixed up in a mob of ‘whippers’ when she didn’t have the time?”

“She had time during her rests between sets.”

“You mean that the cult is on the studio grounds?” Adams was aghast.

“Exactly. There is an excellent opportunity to hide among the unused sets. If I were you I’d make a survey of all the unused sets. More than that, I’d line up every person in the studio and examine them for body scars.”

“You mean to find the guilty person?”

“Exactly.”



A partly nude girl wielded the lash!

“By golly, Doc, I’ll do it. It sounds crazy but I’ll take the chance.” He charged out of the death room and into the office of the owner of the studio.

The owner agreed readily to anything that might solve this case quickly.

“I’ll call them at once, Inspector. I’ll have them go to the big sound hall. Shall we call the men or the women first?”

“Let’s call the women. This crime looks female to me. There ain’t many men who kill with jeweled daggers.”

“As you say, Inspector. I’ll have every woman on the main studio set in half an hour.”

“Right, and meanwhile, I want to talk to Tony Carter again.” He strolled from the executive offices, down the corridor to the prop room. There,

huddled in a corner, he found the limp body of Tony Carter.

The blood was still flowing from the dagger wound. Across the dead boy's face was a livid welt, the same kind of welt he had noticed on the body of Arlene Doxie.

Tenderly, he unbuttoned the boy's blood-soaked shirt. Then he fell back in surprise. The boy's body was a mass of red welts. Some of them had healed, others were still scabbed!

Evidently, the cult took no chances of a squeal!

"LOCK the doors and don't let anyone in or out until I say so!" Inspector Adams bit the end of his cigar savagely, then turned to the fifty women before him.

The women seemed ill at ease and Adams smiled to himself. He merely stared at them waiting for someone to speak. It would be just a question of time until—

"Say, copper, what's the big idea?" the voice came from a knot of women clustered near the sound box.

"Arlene Doxie is dead as you know. I must make certain examinations. Now, if you will permit me to make the examination we'll be through in half an hour. If I have to send to Headquarters for a woman detective, you'll be here at least two hours, take your choice."

There was a buzz of voices, then again the same hard voice came from the group.

"Okay, copper, but no funny stuff."

"Don't worry. Now, I want you women to line up. Most of you are still in costume so you won't have to undress. Those of you who are wearing dresses will have to remove them so that I may examine the waist. I'll be very quick and I'll try to have you out of here in a half hour."

There was a buzz of annoyance from the women but they started to line up. Adams approached the first chorine. He examined her nude waist carefully, scarcely noting the heaving breasts straining at the meshed confines of the *brassiere*.

"Okay," he sighed at last, "go stand by the door, I'll let you out in batches of ten." He leaned over to examine the waist of the next chorine.

For several minutes he was occupied. His heart beat a bit quicker as the girls obligingly lifted their dresses for the examination of their waists. He frowned several times in displeasure. Could it be that the medical examiner had been wrong? He lifted his eyes from the slim waist of the blonde, he had been examining and stared at the girl who approached him.

She was dressed in a filmy dress that revealed her luscious body, curved thighs that swelled gently

and a heaving bosom that quivered with each intake of breath, the fruit-tipped mounds of passion trembled with desire.

The inspector's eyes took in the vision of loveliness. But it was the face that arrested him. Had he not seen the dead body of Arlene Doxie, he would have sworn that this girl was she.

The girl must have noticed his puzzled expression for she smiled, revealing white even teeth between her bee-stung lips.

"I'm Mae Norton," she breathed softly, "I was Miss Doxie's stand-in."

Adams nodded. This accounted for the resemblance. But, this girl seemed to be quite a talented actress, he could tell by the way she spoke, by the way she handled herself. He shrugged and made his examination. There were seven other women awaiting turns. The others had all been dismissed.

He raised his eyes from the well-shaped waist and smiled at the girl. The girl smiled back. Something happened to Inspector Adams's heart. He felt the rush of blood to his face.

"That's all for you," he stammered. For the first time in his thirty-two years he was flustered, as nervous as an inexperienced schoolboy. He turned to the next girl.

A gasp escaped him as he saw the livid welts on the girl's waist. He looked up.

"You'll—" he never finished his sentence. Like a pack of angry wolves the women were upon him, beating him down. Through a mist of blood, Adams could see Mae Norton trying to get at him, then all was wiped from his mind.

IT WAS the stinging of a lash that brought him to his senses. Vaguely, he felt that he was standing up, that his hands and feet were grasped in something cold and hard. He struggled to open his eyes. The room was a vague blur, another sting from the lash brought the room into focus.

The lash was being wielded by a partly nude girl. He stared dully at her, then recognition seeped into his brain.

The girl with the lash was Mae Norton.

The lash bit home once more and he writhed in pain. A grunt escaped his lips.

"I—I can't hit him again, please," it was a tortured cry from the lips of the girl with the whip.

"If you refuse to whip him, we'll whip you!" The voice was the same as that he had heard in the huge sound stage.

Adams brought his senses to bear on the group before him. Mae Norton was half-clad, her silken garments had been torn from her gleaming white body. It hung in tatters half concealing her legs and

hips. The upper torso was bare and shining dully in the bright white light of the kliegs.

Her breasts trembled as she raised her arm to strike him again. Every movement of her body was a movement of sinuous grace, of bodily passion. Then, the whip dropped from her hand and she crumpled to the floor.

With a curse, a black-haired woman picked up the whip and beat the trembling body of Mae Norton. Again and again the whip cut the flesh. Then, tired at last, the woman flung the whip from her. With a sharp voice, she commanded the other women.

They advanced quickly, seized the pulsating body, and shackled it to the wall next to Adams. With his outstretched fingers, he could almost touch the warm, glowing shoulder of the unconscious girl.

"We'll leave you two love birds here for a while," the hard-faced woman sneered at Adams. "We'll be back—later." She turned and left the scene, accompanied by the other women who had remained silent during the ordeal.

Suddenly, the lights went out. The set was in darkness. There was an unearthly quiet about the place, the only sound was that of his own labored breathing and that of the girl chained at his side.

The minutes slid by slowly, at last the girl moaned and opened her eyes.

"Feeling okay?" Adams whispered softly. The girl turned a pain-wracked face to his.

"I—I think so; my body burns, though. I—I'm sorry I had to whip you—I tried to make it as easy as I could." There was a look of pain in her eyes.

"Shucks, I didn't mind it a bit. Fact is, I rather enjoyed it," he laughed bitterly.

"No! You mustn't say that!" the girl seemed frightened.

"Why?" Adams spoke dryly.

"You mustn't like to be whipped—you'll be like them if you say that—you'll be like Mae Norton—!" The girl stopped short. Adams smiled at her. "Go on, suppose you tell me the rest, Miss Doxie!"

"You know! But how—"

"I SUSPECTED you when I examined you, you were so far superior to those others. And then, that smile of yours, I'd seen it too many times on the screen not to remember it. And just now, you mentioned your stand-in's name."

The girl's chains clanked musically as she tried to cover her nakedness. The cold iron was pressed against the quivering breasts. She leaned closer to him. They could almost kiss in the darkness. Adams strained at his bonds, they did not yield. He lay back against the stone, breathing heavily. The girl affected him strangely—but he must forget that—he

must concentrate on getting out of here—to free Arlene Doxie!

"Where are we, do you know?" he whispered to the girl.

"Yes, I recognized the set. It's an old one, seldom used now. At one time they used it for dungeon scenes. In fact, I used it in one of my previous pictures—"The Slave of Desire."

"I remember that picture," Adams smiled to himself. "But we must stop talking—we must think of a way out. Do you know of any?"

"If we could get free, we could get out through the trapdoor on the other side of the set. It looks like the rest of these stones, but it's just a false tin front. They left it that way to wheel in the cameras."

"It does us little good, now, but if we ever get loose, we'll make a dash for it." He tugged at the chains that held him, then grunted. "No use trying to pull loose from here, it seems to be pretty solid."

"It is, I know. I was chained here once before."

"That was in make believe, this is the real thing now. How did you ever get mixed up in this cult?" He tried a new position with his arms.

"I'm not a member of the cult. Mae Norton was. They had suddenly decided that Mae Norton should get my place in the screen world. Mae told me about it. She was afraid. Against my wishes, she came to my room today and made me get out. I went out to see Hartley, but I couldn't find him. I wanted to tell him about Mae. When I came back, Mae was dead. I realized that unless I took Mae's place, I'd be killed. So, I became Mae Norton."

"I see. Just who is this Hartley? Has he any interest in this studio other than his job?" Adams tingled in the arms from his cramped position.

"He's sort of a part owner. I never did like him—he's a bit effeminate. In the old days he used to be a female impersonator, but after—" she broke off at a shout from Adams.

"That woman—it wasn't a woman—it was Hartley!"

"What do you mean?" Doxie strained closer to him, the sweet musk scent came to his nostrils from her straining body. His senses reeled. This girl affected him strangely.

"The 'woman' who ordered me whipped was Hartley. He thinks I'm getting too close for comfort. If I could only get loose for a minute, what I'd do to him. I can see it all now."

"I still can't—"

"Naturally, you're insured by the company. If you died, they'd get quite a bit of money. More, I believe, if it was accidental death. Your picture was almost finished. Mae Norton could take your place in the final scenes."

"But, what would he gain by that? Why did he get all these women to—"

"He's a pervert, of course. Probably the fact that he was once a female impersonator took hold of his mind. He needed an assistant in this. Tony Carter was the assistant. When he said that Hartley was talking to the chorine 'with his hands,' I should have known he meant with a whip. Hartley realized what the boy had said, so he killed him to keep him quiet. A perfect case. I can get him the hot seat for this. Now, if I could only get out of here—"

"Yes—if you could only get out!" The mocking voice came from the far wall. Adams looked over at the dimly visible figure.

"Hartley!" he gasped.

"Yes, Hartley," again the mocking voice. "You didn't think I'd let you off so easily, copper. I'm back to finish the job I started—and to finish you too, Doxie! Oh, yes," he chuckled as the girl gasped, "I knew you were not Mae Norton. I'd directed you in too many pictures not to know you."

"Listen, Hartley," Adams was stalling for time. "You can't get away with this and you know it!"

"On the contrary, my dear fellow. I can get away with this. When I finish with you and Miss Doxie, I shall leave. Someday, perhaps, your bodies will be

found. Not very soon, of course. We don't use this set very much. My friends shall hold rites over your bodies."

"You won't get away with it," Adams insisted. If only Hartley would come closer, just so he could grasp that throat of his.

"You repeat yourself, copper." Hartley came closer. The wig gleamed dully in the reflected light of the flashlight. "I intend to whip you both to death, let you bleed. Then I shall leave you. No one will stop me, the woman, as I leave the set. When I get to the prop room, I'll make my change and then—!" He snarled as Adams grasped the wig and jerked it from his head.

AND, as though by prearranged signal, the huge Aklieg lights flashed on, throwing the dungeon in startling relief.

The tin door rolled aside. Seven women entered, whips in their hands. Adams had delayed Hartley long; enough. His own cohorts would deal with him.

Slowly, with methodical tread, the seven women advanced. Their upper torsos were bare, gleaming white in the calcium glare of the lights. Their breasts trembled as though in anger. The smooth



Arlene lay in a faint on the floor. The girls punished Hartley

thighs rippled dangerously beneath the soft gleaming skin. A wordless cry escaped Hartley's lips as he tried to get away. Two of the women brought him down with a jerk of their whips. He groveled at their feet, clawing at the gossamer coverings that hid their lower bodies.

Without a word, they approached the chained Doxie and freed her. She crumpled to the floor in a dead faint. Then, paying no attention to Adams, they chained Hartley in the place just occupied by Doxie. He pressed back in terror as the whip was raised.

Plang! The whip shrieked through the air and bit deeply. An inarticulate cry passed Hartley's lips. Another time the whip bit home. Then suddenly, Hartley laughed.

The laugh reverberated in the close confines of the dungeon. Again and again, as the whip fell, the laugh was torn from his lips. Adams moistened his lips. He was seeing a man being whipped to death—and laughing.

A half-hour later the blood-soaked corpse dangled from the chains. The women marched from the dungeon, clanged the door after them, and turned out the kliegs.

Then all was silent, save for the dripping of the blood from the shackled corpse.

There was a stirring from the forgotten Doxie. She crept closer to the chained form of Hartley. Then, she pulled herself up. She loosened the first shackle, the body swung against her, soaking the fair skin with blood. She recoiled.

"Copper, they didn't do this to you—good God, they didn't—" she started to sob.

"Arlene, I'm over here, for God's sake let me loose."

A SOB of thanks rose in the girl's throat as she worked feverishly at the shackles. First one, then the others followed. She crumpled in his arms as the last shackle dropped away.

He held her close, breathing deeply. Her warm young skin was soft under his fingers. The firm breasts pressed hard against his chest. Then, her small seeking mouth pressed against his for a blissful moment. He held her closer.

"Oh, copper," she breathed. "When I thought they had killed you—" his lips stopped further speech.

"Come on," he sighed at last. "We've got to get out of here." He lead her by the hand to the door. They pushed it aside. The cool night air made the girl draw close to the husky figure at her side.

With his arm about her, they walked through the darkened sets. The girl trembled a little under the touch of his caressing fingers. Her breasts heaved as one hand cupped a firm mound.

She raised her lips to his ear.

"Eh?" he stopped in mid-stride.

"I said there was a boudoir set over there," she whispered again.

"Golly," Adams breathed joyfully. "Lead me to it."

"O.K., copper. And say, what is your first name, anyway?"

"That, like the corpse in the dungeon, can wait until present affairs at hand are developed." He grinned broadly as he caught the lithe figure in his powerful arms.

The Dirty "Shark" Racket

AN EVEN two dozen rats in the loan racket were part of the first crop of small-time racketeers who prey on poor stenographers, widows, orphans, authors and artists. The old "borrowing racket" on the "loan shark" basis has got to stop in New York City, at least, according to Prosecutor Dewey; and we welcome the idea of the "peephole" identification so that complainants might not be terrorized.

This magazine, published by Movie Digest, Inc., stands squarely and on-the-level behind the government in its attempt to cripple and convict the racketeers, and our one additional wish is that the same vigorous steps might be taken in Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit and St. Louis. Here's hoping, too, that the big movie companies will develop enough "guts" to fight the loan shark racket vigorously.