

Mystery Book Magazine

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Bennison whirled and leaped through the doorway

MURDER in MIND

JOHN D. MacDONALD

A few grains of gunpowder and a man's mental attitude both help a hick sleuth in solving the strange death of a woman killed by a rifle!

SHE was a plump blonde and she lay dead in the trail on her back. There were streaks of drying mud on the right sleeve of her pale yellow sweater. There was more mud on her freckled right arm. Death had flattened her body to

the ground. Her tweed skirt was pushed up halfway between knee and hip. Her heels rested in the mud and her brown sandals toed in.

The black trees, stripped naked by autumn, stood high around her and the

chill wind off the lake hurried the dry brown leaves across the trail. A leaf had stuck to her hair over the right temple, where the hair was sticky with new blood.

I would have guessed that when she was alive, she was pretty and vivacious. Her lids were half closed, showing a semicircle of glazed bright blue.

Her husband, Ralph Bennison, or more accurately, her widower, had phoned Burt Stanleyson from the nearby village of Hoffwalker. Burt and I had climbed into the white County Police sedan and driven to Hoffwalker where Bennison had been waiting in his car.

He had stopped on the state road opposite that part of Lake Odega where numerous summer camps cluster along the lake shore.

We had followed him down the trail to the lake shore, seeing ahead of us the spot of color against the brown earth—her yellow sweater.

I leaned against a tree and Ralph Bennison sat on a rotting log, his face hidden in his hands. Burt Stanleyson stood beside the body of Mrs. Bennison, staring down at it, while he chewed a kitchen match.

I couldn't help noticing the difference between my friend Burt and Ralph Bennison. They were both big men. Burt wore a wrinkled gray suit, and still managed to look as if he belonged in the woods—perhaps it was the way he moved and the weather wrinkles that lined his brown face.

Bennison wore a red and black wool shirt with matching breeches and high shoes. But his face was white and he moved quickly and nervously. He had the city label on him, all the way from his big shiny fingernails to the bright new leather of his knife sheath.

Suddenly Bennison lifted his blotched face out of his hands and said in a tight voice, "Why are you standing around staring at her? Why aren't you across the lake trying to find out who fired the shot?"

Burt gave him a steady look and then knelt beside the dead woman. He fin-

gered the hair around the wound, dislodging the crisp leaf. I could see the hole in her head, neat and round. Burt reached down and gently pulled the tweed skirt down around her knees. He stood up again and poked with his toe at the mud caked on the sides of her brown shoe. He sighed. The wind swirled a dancing funnel of leaves down the trail.

If it had happened in the summer, there would have been a crowd of summer folks standing around. But in November the camps are empty except for a few hunters, and they were still out in the woods after their deer.

BENNISON stood up and glared at Burt, then scuffed the hard ground with the toe of his spotless high shoes.

"Look here," he said, "Alice and I were walking down the trail with the lake at our right. She was ahead of me. The trail is muddy and uneven and I was watching my feet, like I told you. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her fall on her face. I jumped toward her, thinking that she had tripped. As I jumped, I heard a distant noise like a shot. I rolled her over and held her head in my arms. I saw she was dead, and realized that she had been killed by a stray shot. Then I came after you. Why aren't you after those people across the lake?"

Burt said patiently, "Mr. Bennison, there are two dozen hunters in there. It's four o'clock now. We couldn't round 'em up before dark, and most of them will be cutting back to the other road and driving out of the woods. They'd deny firing high toward the lake. We'd have to take their guns away from them and fire a sample slug from each one. Then we'd have to dig the slug out of your wife's brain and send the slugs down to a comparison microscope. It would be a colossal job. We'll just have to give it a lot of publicity and hope that some man's conscience will punish him."

"The bullet sort of came down on her, didn't it, Burt?" I asked.

"That's right, Joe. Thirty caliber. From better than a half mile, or it would have gone right through her."

He turned to Bennison and asked a blunt question.

"Did you folks come up here to do some hunting?"

Bennison sat down again on the log. He didn't seem angry any more. "Yeah. We rented the Tyler Camp for a week. I was going to do the hunting."

"Where's your gun?"

"Back in the camp."

"Have a gun for her?"

"I told you I was doing the hunting."

"I was just wondering. I notice she's got a little bruise under her right eye as if a gun stock had slapped against her face."

Burt pulled the sweater away from the rounded, white right shoulder. There was a purplish bruise there, too. He covered the shoulder again.

"She did some target practice with my gun," Bennison said. "She bruised easily."

I couldn't figure what Burt was driving at. He's never been one to ask useless questions. He's too lazy. It was obvious to me that the shot had come from a greater distance than a man can aim.

"What's your business?" Burt asked.

"Well . . . nothing at the moment. I used to be in the investment business."

"Married a gal with money, hey?"

"Look here, Stanleyson, I resent this questioning. What's that got to do with finding out which one of the hunters across the lake shot her?"

"Then she did have money?"

"Suppose she did? We both had money."

Burt sighed again and turned away from the body. He walked toward the lake shore and then looked back. A big tree grew close to the rocks along the shore. He squinted up at the tree. Then he ambled down the bank, squatted on a big rock and stared moodily at the water. Bennison shrugged helplessly and looked at me.

Burt came back up the bank and said, "Let's go back to the spot where you did this target practicing. Behind the Tyler Camp, wasn't it?"

Bennison stood up and we all walked

back down the lake shore trail. Once Burt stopped and looked back at the dead woman and said, "Guess there's no need to move her just yet."

They had been firing at tin cans propped against a high bank behind the camp. Burt grunted and squatted and picked up a dozen or so of the gleaming brass cartridge cases. He examined them carelessly and stuffed them into his pocket.

Bennison seemed to have gotten tired of trying to figure out what the big man in the wrinkled gray suit was trying to do. He leaned against the cabin and stared out across the lake.

"You only brought this one gun of yours up here?" Burt asked.

"That's right," Bennison said in a flat tone.

"Mind if I look around the camp?"

"Go ahead."

WE WALKED in and Burt picked up the Remington rifle that stood in a corner of the front room. He glanced at it and put it back. Next he went under the camp to the work shop that old Tyler used to use before he died two years ago. Bennison seemed to be getting more irritable.

Burt glanced at the top of the work bench near the vise. He took the kitchen match out of his mouth, scratched it on the underside of the bench and then ran the flame back and forth, an eighth of an inch above the surface of the bench.

At last he grunted and turned to Bennison who was leaning against the wall, his arms folded.

"Well, Mister," Burt said slowly, "I guess we'd better drag the lake beyond that tree and get the other rifle."

I stood with my mouth open as Bennison whirled and leaped through the doorway. Burt was right behind him. It took me a couple of seconds to wake up. I ran after the two of them. Outside I saw that Bennison was running at full tilt up the trail toward the road. Burt had grabbed the Remington out of the corner. He leveled it, drew a deep breath, then squeezed the trigger.

The flat explosion of the shot echoed

through the clearing. Bennison fell and rolled through the dry leaves. When we reached him, he was clawing with his fingers at his shattered leg, and his face was the face of a madman. He was trying to curse Burt, but only guttural sounds issued from his throat. . . .

After the details had been cleaned up, the dead girl's relatives notified, and Bennison in the hospital, I sat in Burt's office, drinking cider with him and waiting for him to tell me in his own way.

"You see, Joe," he said, "I never would have tumbled to how Bennison did it, if he'd acted right. Maybe you didn't see it, but he was out of character. Any guy who loves his wife shows it in more than one way—even if she has died suddenly and violently. If he was on the level he would have yanked that skirt down himself. No fellow who loves his wife wants a couple of strangers seeing too much of her, even if she's dead. Also, he didn't object when we walked off and left her dead in the mud there. A normal guy would have wanted her moved and covered up."

"But was that enough?"

"No, but that started me noticing things. Things like her shoes being caked with mud and his being clean. Why would he clean his shoes? That started me thinking some more."

"What were you doing down by the water?"

"Looking for a little of that rainbow color that always shows up when you put a little oil in some water. Even one drop will do it—like when you toss a rifle in the lake. I found a little of it washed up to the rocks. Remember the wind was from the lake.

"You see, he went down the trail first, climbed the tree with the rifle, shot down into her head and threw the gun out into the lake. He wiped the mud off his shoes so he wouldn't leave mud on the tree when he climbed it. The trunk was fat enough to hide him from her."

"But why did he throw away the gun?"

[*Turn page*]

"Because it could easily be proved that the slug in her skull had come from it. I figured he'd have to do that so I guessed there were two guns to start with. The oil convinced me that I was on the right track, and when I picked up those cartridge cases and found that on some of them, the firing pin hit flush on the rim, and on others the pin hit just a hair inside, I knew I was getting wārm."

"But Burt, it still doesn't make sense. If he did like you said, that slug would have gone through her head and dug itself six feet down into that mud."

"Joe, use your brains. How would you cut down muzzle velocity of a bullet so you'd lower the penetration?"

I thought it over as I sipped the cider. When it all came to me, I spilled a little cider on my pants.

He grinned as I said, "I get it. Bennison used the vise and took some of the charge out of the bullet shell. You figured it out and guessed that he might have spilled a little powder doing it. The match flame burned little grains of the powder that had dropped on the bench. He wedged the slug back in the case over the reduced charge and then shot her from the tree so it would look as if the slug had traveled in a high arch from across the lake!"

"You keep on getting so smart, Joe," Burt said, "and I'll be able to quit and turn over this thankless job to you. Bennison was sick of her and he wanted her dough. He brought her up here to kill her with the method all worked out. The biggest thing he forgot is that a fellow can't think of his wife who has just been killed as a dead body—unless he was used to thinking of her that way."

We sat for a couple of minutes and thought about Bennison. Then Burt sighed and said, "Just think. Middle of November and I ain't had a chance to knock off my deer yet this season."