

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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*Brutal this plan, and shrewd—
but who was the real victim?*

DOROTHY F. HORTON

MY FAVORITE corpse

Death does a double-take in this gory murder miniature, which packs a punch unusual in stories so short. Authoress and husband inhabit a trailer near Seattle. "A house would steal time from our writing," she claims.

ARTIE SCHUDDER stepped into the closet behind the living room door and waited. The fingers of his right hand, encased in a light cotton glove, tightened around the butt of a small gun. He listened, tense and alert, to the scraping of the key in the lock. Jenny, his wife, had finally come home.

Any instant now Jenny should be coming into the closet to hang away her coat. His ears strained, listening. She didn't seem to be coming. The close, stale air of the closet made him a little dizzy.

Damn her! He wanted to get this over with. He could hear her pacing back and forth, back and forth, soft thuds on the thick carpet; hard, sharp click-clacks when her heels struck the bare floor. He could hear her muffled sobbing.

Well, she wouldn't cry much longer. So she wouldn't give him his freedom to marry Lill. He'd see about that.

She stopped pacing but she didn't come to the closet. He heard the *whish* of the springs in the overstuffed cushion as she sat down in the chair by the window. He could picture her there, wiping her eyes, pitying herself. The sound of her switching on the reading light snapped across his taut nerves like the crack of a whip. He started to sweat. So she was going to sit at the window awhile? He could wait.

He had his alibi ready. He had gone to sleep in the lobby of the hotel he usually stayed in when in Tacoma. The clerk had seen him. They had talked about his being so tired. He had murmured a goodnight to the clerk and had gone up to his room. He was sure no one had seen him come down the fire-escape later. Leaving his car in the garage, he had sneaked back to Seattle on the bus. In the morning he would be once more in his bed in the hotel room; the clerk would call him and no one would know a thing.

Even the gun couldn't give him away. He had bought one smaller than his own, several months before while on a business trip in the east.

Too, he had been "getting along" with Jenny for a long time; had been calling her "dear" and "honey" before their friends. He wasn't always sure that Jenny was fooled, but the friends were. He shuddered, thinking back over the bridge games he had played, the countless movies he had sat through with Jenny—all the time aching to be with Lil.

His blood warmed, raced, just thinking of Lil. For Lil he was killing his wife; for Lil, whose hair was soft and golden. Because Jenny would not give him up to "that blonde."

Lil was more than "that blonde" to Artie. She was necessity, life, beauty, desirable above all others. When she would half-close those languorous honey-colored eyes of hers and pout that soft, red mouth, he would do anything to possess her. But Jenny recently had been keeping

too close track of him; why, it was more than two weeks since he had actually seen Lil . . .

A sudden creaking of Jenny's chair set his arm to trembling. He steadied himself. This was it. More than fifty minutes had passed since Artie had slipped into his apartment through the ground-floor window by Jenny's chair (so no one he knew would recognize him if they met him in the hall), but it seemed like a month had passed.

Jenny was getting up, coming toward the closet door, opening it a crack, then swinging it wider. His whole body strained backward in the darkness of the clothing. He mustn't move too soon.

A dress slipped off a hanger and slithered to the floor. Jenny stooped to pick it up. He saw her eyes glimpse his shoes, his feet. He heard the swift, harsh rasp of her gasp. He lunged forward, held his hand over her mouth and pressed the gun to her temple.

He pulled her into the smothering closeness of the hanging coats and dresses and pulled the trigger. The sound of the explosion struck his ear with a muffled "plunk," satisfactorily deadened by the encompassing clothing.

He carried the dead cold weight of her back to the chair near the window, set her up in it, with her head sliding off the back, lopping over against the table top. He noted the wet handkerchief and the tear stains on the table. Good! It looked like suicide.

He pressed her fingers around the

gun butt, made the imprint of her forefinger on the trigger and loosened her fingers again, easing the gun to the floor.

He left the reading lamp switched on, of course. She wouldn't have been able to turn it off after shooting herself. He stepped to the window, slipped it up, slid through.

All right, it was over. He could feel his heart hammering against his ribs, feel his stomach bunched into a tight ball inside him. His mind clutched at one thought—wouldn't let go. He wanted—he had to see Lil—wanted to hold her in his arms—kiss her just once.

His legs wouldn't carry him toward the bus station. They took him to Lil's—only a few blocks away, up the dim stairway to her second-story apartment, up to the door, where he stood for a moment, his heart quaking. He fitted his key into the lock.

When he stepped into the hall, he blinked dazedly for a moment. What was the light doing on? It was late. Lil ought to be in bed.

He stepped forward, listened. He

might scare Lil popping in this way. "It's me, Artie," he called out. "Where are you?"

No answer. He stepped into the living room, then took a panicky back step, placing his hand on the door casing for support. Lil lay sprawled on the floor, one arm doubled under her. The blue robe, the soft, clinging blue robe he had given her, covered her still body.

He knew she was dead even before he saw the gun. He picked the gun up, held it in his clenched fist. Tears filled his eyes and spilled over.

He heard the two policemen pounding up the stairs. He heard the woman with them draw her breath in sharply. "There he is right now," she said. "I told you I heard a shot."

He didn't try to get away. What was the use of it, with Lil gone?

He handed the gun over to one of the policemen, his own gun, the one he had left lying around his apartment so they wouldn't trace Jenny's murder to him.

Damn Jenny. Now he knew where she had been so late.