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round-robin with rifles



It was a question of Nell's being faithful. Only Death could give the answer.

BY RALPH CHERRY

HUNTING bear in the Ontario bush, Mike Keller was in the lead, while his partner, Jay Maleet, brought up the rear.

It was sudden impulse that made Keller turn and see Maleet taking a bead on him.

"No!" Keller screamed, throwing himself to the ground as Maleet fired. The bullet ripped through Keller's jacket, skinning him slightly.

Keller was lying in a tangle of brush. He could clearly see Maleet, while Maleet could see him only indistinctly.

After a moment, Maleet approached hesitantly. "Mike," he called.

Keller had the safety off his rifle, was thinking, *Just a few more steps, buddy...*

Then Keller fired. Maleet screamed, knocked off balance by the force of the slug that had caught him in the chest. For an instant he danced crazily, finally sank to the ground, having died on his feet.

Lighting a smoke, Keller stared at the dead man. They had grown up together, worked together, built a successful business, which was still doing well. It couldn't have been money that prompted Maleet to attempt murder. Both had more money than they needed, and the future looked

brighter than ever for them. *Then why? Why would Maleet want me dead?*

Keller tried to think and there seemed to be only one answer.

"My wife?" Keller asked himself, exhaling a lungful of smoke.

He thought about Nell and wondered if she and Maleet had been lovers. Playing him for the sucker. Was it possible she had planned this thing with Maleet? He thought back over the past week, remembering the times the three of them had been together, trying to remember what *they* had said, how they had acted, and trying desperately to remember if they had been alone at any time. But there was nothing he could put his finger on—

It was a hard and rotten thing to believe, but Nell wouldn't be the first nor the last woman to play her husband for a patsy. For a man to try to murder his best friend, it had to be for that friend's wife.

How was he to prove this?

Nell was back at camp, had stayed there claiming she had a migraine headache. Before he was finished, she'd have more than that.

Putting on Maleet's red

jacket over his khaki, he started back. In the dull light of dusk, he'd let her think he was Maleet. If she came running, he'd know for sure his guess was right. Instead of Maleet—she'd meet death.

It was almost dark when he arrived at the camp; still she recognized him.

"Mike, what are you doing wearing Maleet's coat?" she asked.

Mike was at a loss for words.

"Has something happened to him?" she demanded.

Finding his voice, Mike muttered, "There's been an accident. We got to bring Maleet help. I left him my jacket because I figured it was warmer."

"What happened?"

She was cool, unperturbed. He admired her for her ability to mask the emotions she must be feeling, not knowing if her lover were dead or alive.

She was a beautiful blonde and had a shape that matched her beauty. This morning he had loved her; now he hated her with as much intensity.

"What happened?" she demanded again.

"Accidentally shot Maleet. We got to bring him help."

"I'll get the bandages, the medicine."

Watching her gather the supplies, he wasn't so certain now that she had put Maleet up to killing him. What he suspected was unimportant. Knowing, being sure, was all important.

Supplies packed, field clothes on, she said, "I'm ready."

They headed off into the brush.

I got to know. I got to know. Keller kept telling himself over and over.

He didn't take her directly to the body, but took a round-about way. He had to have time to think, to plan what he was going to do.

"How much further?" she asked breathlessly.

He pointed, "Right ahead there."

Slowly they approached the motionless figure.

"Is he—is he still alive?" she asked, her voice trembling and afraid.

"I'll look."

Stooping, Keller reached for a pulse he knew was no longer there. He did it to stall, to think, to find a way to prove the unfaithfulness of his wife.

"I got to know," he said half aloud.

"Is he . . . ?" Nell asked.

Keller nodded. How was he to know?

Looking up, he knew. She had her rifle aimed at him. "You bitch," he said. They were his last words, for the bullet plowed into his brains.

