

Brunton ran his hand
caressingly over the
shiny stock of the rifle



MURDER CAN COUNT

by MORRIS COOPER

Sheriff Brunton proves it's a good idea for a killer to understand his weapons!

SHERIFF BRUNTON lifted the Garand from the ground and pulled the bolt open with his forefinger to make certain the gun was unloaded. His eyes glinted appreciatively as they ran over the weapon.

"Mighty nice," he said, squinting down the barrel, "mighty nice. First time I ever seen one, but my son wrote me a lot about it when he was in the army."

The tall man at his side scuffed his feet against a fence post, and cleared his throat.

"This is no time to be admiring that thing." There was a sharp edge in his voice, and brown eyes flicked away from the small group of men who were gathered

around a huddled form.

"Pshaw, Mr. Lucius, there ain't nothin' to be nervous about." The sheriff jerked a thumb at the corpse that was stretched across the meadow grass. "Old John Mill can't hurt you."

Mr. Lucius glared at the sheriff. "It's not that at all. I can't understand how you can gloat over a gun that just killed a man."

Sheriff Brunton looked at the rifle in his arms, and ran his palm over the shiny stock. "The way I figure it, Mr. Lucius, this gun ain't to blame. No more'n anything else man uses to kill."

Albert Lucius grunted and turned his

back to the sheriff. He heard the coroner call "all finished," and watched him walk over.

The sheriff squinted and waited patiently. Doc Nard polished the lenses of his glasses carefully, peered through them, and said:

"Right through the heart. Could have been an accident."

Mr. Lucius glowered. "Could have been? Are you trying to say I'm a liar?"

Doc Nard put his spectacles on. "Old man Mill could have stumbled." He spoke to the sheriff, ignored Mr. Lucius. "And if he was carrying that gun just so, and if it went off just so—" He stopped and spread his hands. "Mighty big ifs. All I know for sure is that he's dead as they come."

Sheriff Brunton nodded his head. "Thanks a lot, Doc." He turned to Mr. Lucius. "How about comin' over to the house with me?"

Albert Lucius looked at the body, and the sheriff said: "We can't do him any good. The boys will take care of him."

THEY started toward the small farmhouse that lay at the foot of a knoll, about a quarter mile away. Sheriff Brunton cleared his throat.

"I didn't get the whole story over the phone." He grinned confidentially. "Might be my hearing ain't as good as it used to be."

"Well," began Mr. Lucius, "we were walking and—"

The sheriff interrupted. "How come you were here? Vacation?"

"Business. I am—was Mr. Mill's partner. Came down early this morning to discuss some important matters,"

The sheriff shifted the rifle slightly. "Didn't know Mill had any business. Thought he was retired."

"He wasn't very active, but he still had a finger in the pie."

The sheriff glanced at Mr. Lucius. "You don't sound like you was too grieved."

Mr. Lucius snapped. "I'm not. The old fool kept meddling and wouldn't leave me alone." He stopped talking and started to walk faster.

"Whoa!" The sheriff grabbed his elbow. "Take it easy," he laughed. "I'm not as young as I used to be."

They walked in silence for a moment, and then the sheriff said: "John Mill only came to live here about a year ago, and I don't know too much about him. Any relatives?"

Mr. Lucius shook his head. "None."

"Then who gets his share of the business?"

"I do."

The sheriff whistled. Mr. Lucius glared at him and said. "I might as well tell you we carried partnership insurance. You'll find out anyway."

"That's a nice motive, Mr. Lucius. How much insurance?"

"A hundred thousand."

The sheriff whistled again. "A mighty good motive."

Mr. Lucius said nothing, and Brunton asked: "What time did you get here?"

"About eight this morning. I drove down."

"Did Mill know you were coming?"

"I phoned him last night. When I got here, he sent his man into town for some things."

The sheriff stopped in front of a shade tree, and sat down. He waved a hand at Mr. Lucius.

"Sit down and rest."

Mr. Lucius shook his head. "I'll stand."

The sheriff stretched his feet out and leaned his back against the tree trunk. He sighed contentedly and patted the rifle.

"How come the two of you were out

with this gun?"

"Well, Mill couldn't sit in one place longer than a minute. He was like a flea." Mr. Lucius looked at the comfortable figure of the sheriff. "He couldn't rest like some people."

The sheriff grinned. "Guess I am a bit on the tired side."

Mr. Lucius fumbled for a cigarette, offered one to the sheriff. Brunton shook his head.

"Anyway, Mill wanted to show off that new gun of his. Bragged he was one of the few to have one, and for me not to tell anyone." Mr. Lucius flicked the match away, and Sheriff Brunton watched it arc toward the ground.

"Interested in guns?"

"Not a bit," snapped Mr. Lucius. "But I had to humor him or he would never have started talking business. We went out into the meadow and he blasted away at a target."

The sheriff nodded.

"I saw it."

"He insisted I try a couple of shots." Mr. Lucius dropped his cigarette and ground it out viciously with his heel. "Almost broke my shoulder."

"They'll do that if you don't hold them right." There was sympathy in the sheriff's voice. "Ever fire a rifle before?"

"A couple of times. Why?"

"Just askin'," said the sheriff. "Just askin'."

MR. LUCIUS looked at him, and then continued. "Well, we finished with the gun and started back. Mill took the bullet holder from the gun—"

"Clip," said the sheriff.

"What?"

"Clip. That's what holds the cartridges."

"Oh. Anyway, he put it in his pocket, and we started back."

"Did he close the bolt?"

"Certainly. And he must have forgotten that there was a bullet left in the barrel."

"You're certain he closed the bolt?"

"Of course I am." Mr. Lucius looked down at the sheriff. "I admit I know very little about guns. But I do know that when this one is fired, another bullet automatically falls in place. Mill must have forgotten."

The sheriff nodded his head.

Mr. Lucius continued. "I had a lot on my mind and I must have walked ahead of Mill. Suddenly, I heard a shot, and when I turned, he was falling and the rifle was on the ground. I made certain he was dead, came back to the farmhouse, and phoned you."

Sheriff Brunton stood up. "It won't do."

"What won't do?" Mr. Lucius stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"About murder."

"Murder?"

"That's what I said."

Mr. Lucius' eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to tell me I murdered John Mill?"

"You catch on fast."

"But I told you what happened. And the coroner said it could have been an accident."

"Could have," the sheriff admitted, "but it wasn't."

Mr. Lucius laughed.

"Your head must be as feeble as your legs. Go ahead and arrest me and see what it gets you."

"You're already under arrest, Mr. Lucius. Just didn't get around to telling you."

"You're making a fool of yourself, Sheriff, and my lawyer will make a bigger fool of you when he gets you on the stand."

"Maybe," said Sheriff Brunton.

“Maybe not. But I got a witness.”

“Witness?” Mr. Lucius looked startled. “I didn’t see anyone.”

The sheriff patted the rifle. “This is my witness.”

“Oh.” Mr. Lucius sounded relieved. “If you mean the nitrate test, I admitted I fired the gun.”

“That’s not it at all.” The sheriff inserted a cartridge into the M1 and closed the bolt. “Watch.” He pointed the rifle into the air and fired. Then he held the gun close to Mr. Lucius.

“See anything?”

Mr. Lucius shook his head. “Not a thing.”

“The bolt,” said the sheriff, “is open.”

“So what?” asked Mr. Lucius.

“You shot John Mill, took out the remaining cartridges, closed the bolt, and then called me. When I found this rifle, the bolt was closed.”

Mr. Lucius stared at the sheriff.

“You admitted you knew little about rifles, nothing about the M-One. What you did notice was that the bolt automatically shot back and closed whenever the gun was fired.

“What you should have noticed was that the bolt stays open when the last shell is fired.”

The sheriff chuckled. “My boy wrote me about that. Said it was a wonderful improvement over the Springfield for a feller who wasn’t counting how many shots he fired.”