

The Fifth Guest

By Norman A. Daniels

PETER HARWOOD was twenty-six, but he felt twice as old. He trudged along the dusty road into the twilight and wondered what kind of a fool he was for obeying the old man's summons. Mort Faylen, his grandfather, had sent for him, even though Peter Harwood had long ago renounced him. Especially that night when Peter had watched his own father dying.

Cars careened past him, sending up thick clouds of choking dust. More than once Peter almost turned back. At least the old man could have sent some kind of a conveyance for him. A light blue coupe shot by, brakes screeched and the dust was thicker than ever. Peter turned around and covered his eyes and nose.



Into that desolate and decaying mansion four men arrived to attend a bizarre birthday party. For, unseen and unbidden, a fifth guest had skulked in—the Grim Reaper.

The car was backing up. It stopped beside Peter and a red-faced man leaned out. His moon face was contorted in a look that bordered between recognition and indifference.

“Peter,” he said finally. “You’re Peter Harwood!”

Peter wiped some of the dirt from his face. “Yes, I’m Peter Harwood. But I don’t seem to remember you.”

“Get in,” the red-faced driver invited. “Doggone if you haven’t grown up into a regular size man at that. You used to be so puny we figured you’d never get tall. So you don’t remember me? Well it has been a long time. I’m Bruce Sandler. We’re related somehow. Let’s see—you’re the old man’s grandson and I’m his nephew. That makes us something but I don’t know what.”

AFTER Peter had settled himself in the seat, Sandler started the car again. Gradually memory returned and Peter recalled this man. He’d always been red of face, but jolly and hardly looking or acting as if he belonged to the Faylen clan. There were memories of being chased all over the estate by him to avoid being tickled. Peter began to chuckle.

Sandler laughed too. “I think you are beginning to remember me, eh, Peter?”

“Yes. I guess you’re the only one I would recall. How have you been, Bruce?”

“Fine! Just fine, Petey. That’s what we used to call you. I’m—sorry about your father.”

“Thanks,” Peter said.

“You must detest the old man.” Bruce kept his eyes on the road. “I wouldn’t blame you much. How come you’re joining his birthday party?”

“Someone named Cheever phoned me and begged me to come. He said Grandfather was very ill and not apt to last very long and he particularly wanted to see

me.”

Bruce nodded. “He’s slipping all right, but what can you expect of a sour old man who has lived to see eighty-seven anyway? Tell me about your father—and yourself. I’ve always been very interested in you. I’m quite successful. Real estate—and if you need any help, I’ll give you a good job, Petey. A darn good job.”

Peter relaxed. It was nice to hear pleasant things. Visits along this road had always been anything but pleasant. He said, “Grandfather never forgave Dad for marrying his daughter. Grandfather had a one-track mind and he couldn’t see how a nobody like Dad could ever amount to very much. But he could have if Mother hadn’t died. Then, last year, Dad got sick. Something he picked up during the war. He wasn’t in the service, but he helped. Anyway, treatment for his ailment required a lot of money for special serums. I asked Grandfather to help and he refused. Point-blank.”

“Um—I know. It was a rotten thing to do. Well, you’ll meet all that’s left of the family. Freddie Blythe who, you may recall, is the old man’s cousin. And Allen Page who is his step-son. I won’t talk about either one. I never talk about people I don’t like. I say too much.”

“Who is this man Cheever?” Peter asked.

“Him? A male nurse. Maybe a bodyguard. I only met him once. He’s big as a barn and about as dumb. I’d say he was a dangerous man to cross. I’m glad you came. Eating a birthday dinner with just Blythe and Page is about the most boring thing on earth. At least I’ll have you to talk with. The old man won’t eat with us. He’s confined to bed.”

Sandler topped a grade and there, in the early evening light, Peter saw the estate he’d known only when he was a small boy. When a bitter old man had

taken him from his father until a judge who didn't believe that wealth alone would bring a child up properly, had given Peter back to his father.

It was a rambling place of two stories with gables and even a glassed-in tower room. The trees around the house were ancient and gnarled. They'd grown aged with their owner. Peter got the impression that the estate looked seedy. The old man was slipping all right. If he was up and about, every blade of grass would be cut just so.

The man who opened the door was Cheever and he did resemble the barn Sandler had used in describing him. Cheever was big all over. Not fat—just big, with bulging muscles, a thick neck and tiny little pig-eyes that were cold and hard.

"Come in," Cheever growled. "Mr. Faylen wants to see you before dinner. Just you alone."

THE last was for Sandler's benefit. They entered the house with its enormous reception hall and living room that looked as if a game of basketball could be played beneath its vaulted ceiling.

Freddie Blythe was there. He looked something like the old man, though he was twenty years younger. His face was scrawny, his eyebrows on a wild rampage all over his forehead and with the same narrow nose made for prying. Blythe, Peter knew, was none too well off. The war had killed his business and it was coming back very slowly.

Blythe shook hands when Sandler brought Peter up to him. He mumbled something and sat down again. Allen Page, the old man's step-son, was in his late forties. He looked like something born and bred at a racetrack. His suit was checked, very tight fitting, and under a

stony chin was a flamboyant necktie. Yet his character didn't fit the clothing at all. He was apt to be sullen, tight-lipped. Now he permitted his thin lips to crack in a vague smile as he shook hands with Peter.

"I thought you were on the old man's blacklist, Peter. I thought—if he lived that long—he wouldn't even accept your children as his descendants."

There wasn't time for any more talk. Dinner was on the table. Peter walked into the dining room and looked at the huge oak table. Only one end of it was set, but the silver candelabras were in place, the dishes were gold-rimmed and expensive, and a tantalizing aroma came from the soup tureen.

Cheever stepped up to Peter. "I told you he wants to see you. Now!"

Peter said, "Okay, I'll go right up and I'll probably come right down again. Sandler, if there is a roast and bread, make me a sandwich that I can grab on the fly. I've a feeling I'll be kicked out."

Cheever glared at him. "I'll see if he's ready for you," he said. "Wait here."

Peter sat down. Sandler grinned at him. "Say—you may be right at that," he conceded. "It's possible he called you here to tell you off. Maybe I'd better see if there's anything to eat. It's a long hike back to town."

He hurried to the kitchen and the swinging door with its leather flap kept moving after him and sounding like someone slapping at flies with a swatter. Sandler came out again, smiling.

"I'll fix you up, Petey, don't worry. Well, Freddie and Allen, seeing we dine without his lordship's company, why not get at it?"

Sandler reached for the soup tureen and began ladling the fragrant broth. Cheever came downstairs again.

"You can go up in a minute," he said. "He wants you to bring him a bowl of

soup and some crackers. That's all he can eat."

Cheever took the tureen away from Sandler and ladled out a bowl of it. He placed this on a large plate, surrounded it with thin crackers and handed the whole affair to Peter.

Peter went up the wide staircase, turned left at the landing and remembered where the old man's room was located. The door was open. He stepped inside. For a moment a pang of pity surged through him. He expected Mort Faylen to look very aged, but he hardly expected the living skeleton that was propped up in bed.

The only familiar things about his grandfather were the bright, birdlike eyes and the still harsh lines around his mouth.

The old man said, "So you've grown up, have you? Look like your father, drat him. But there's my blood in you too. Yes, I can see that now. The same build, identical chin and hair. You're a Faylen all right. Hand me the dratted soup. Then sit down beside the bed and let me talk."

Peter set up a lap tray first and put the soup on it. He backed up a little. "If you're going to start telling me my father wasn't worthy to marry into your family—" he began.

The old man waved his spoon impatiently. "Sit down. Sit down, Peter. I'll start this way. I was wrong about your father. What do you think of that?"

"About time," Peter grunted, "that you woke up."

"Yes. Yes, I've been a fool. But for almost a year now I've lain here with plenty of time to think. A man needs time for that. I made a very bad mistake. I should have helped your father and you too. Peter, I'm an old man. This is my last birthday. I'll be dead in a few months. Go over to the dresser across the room. Open the middle drawer, stick your hand under the stuff in it and bring me a fat envelope."

Automatically Peter obeyed. This ancient character had been disobeyed only once—when his daughter had walked out on him. He gave orders as if he expected them to be carried out quickly and efficiently. Peter found the envelope and placed it on the bed.

THE old man went to work on the soup and crackers. When he finished, he sighed deeply. "A fine way for a man to die—on a diet of soup. I'm a meat and potato man. Damned if I don't think I'll go back to them tomorrow. It'll kill me, but what's the difference? Open that envelope, Peter."

Peter broke the seal and the largest sum of currency he'd ever seen in his life tumbled out. The bills were all of large denomination and there was a good fistful of them.

"Yours," the old man said. "Twenty-five thousand dollars. I want you to have that without most of it taken away by tax collectors. My estate will be divided between all of you, with a good sum for Cheever. He's a dimwitted fool, but he's been loyal. Peter, you are not to tell the others I gave you this money. Is that clear?"

"I don't think I want it," Peter said slowly. "I don't think I want anything of yours."

The old man's cackle was grating. "Yes, you're a Faylen all right. Proud and ornery. Don't be a fool. The money is yours. Can't you see I'll die easier if you take it? I've got a conscience too, no matter what they say about me. Take it."

Peter didn't feel like arguing. He tucked the envelope into his inside pocket. The old man beamed at him, as much as a tight-skinned, thin-lipped face could beam. Peter suddenly felt sorry for him and honestly believed he was trying to right an ancient wrong.

“Go downstairs and eat,” the old man said. “Then come back here and tell me all about you—your father and my daughter. I go to sleep very early so don’t delay. Will you promise to come back?”

“I’ll be back,” Peter said.

He went downstairs slowly. Nobody asked him any questions. He ate the food. It was excellent. Cheever may have looked and acted like a moron, but he could do things with a roast and dessert. Finally Cheever went upstairs and then the questions came.

Allen Page, “Petey—what did he tell you? He’s dying, isn’t he?”

Blythe chimed in. “We know he’s dying. What we want to learn is how he intends to dispose of his fortune. Did he say anything?”

Sandler cut in. “Oh, come now, you sound like a pair of avaricious buzzards, striking at a man before he’s dead.”

Peter lit a cigarette and leaned back. “Yes, he is dying. I feel sorry for him. From what he told me, we all share in the estate. Cheever cuts in also, but with only a nominal sum compared to what we’ll probably get. He isn’t leaving anyone out.”

“We should be humbly grateful,” Sandler said. “We haven’t been exactly doting relatives, you know. And yet, I’ve always been sure that’s how it would be. He only acted tough. Underneath he is as soft-hearted as any of us.”

Peter crushed out the cigarette. “I’ve got to go back to him. I doubt he’ll see any of you tonight. You’ll all stay, as usual, I suppose?”

“I won’t,” Sandler said. “I never do because I live right in town. The rest of you come from far places. But I’ll stick around until you come downstairs again, Petey.”

Cheever was opening a square white box when Peter entered the old man’s

room. Cheever took out a flat paper packet, unfolded it and dumped a fine powder into a glass of milk. He stirred it and handed it to Faylen. Then Cheever left, closing the door behind him.

The old man sipped at the milk. “It’s full of dope,” he grimaced. “I can’t sleep without it and sometimes even that doesn’t work. The doctor says I probably need more, but he doesn’t dare increase the dose. Now I want to hear all about you. Talk me to sleep. Tomorrow we’ll talk some more. It won’t take long, my boy. I’ve a feeling the drug will work tonight.”

PETER sat there for half an hour, telling him all the pleasanter points of his life and leaving out the grimmer details. Gradually he saw the old man’s eyes close and his breathing grow heavy. Peter kept talking for another five minutes and then called in Cheever who tucked the old man under the covers, but left him propped up.

Cheever then walked out, waited until Peter was in the hallway and closed the door. He locked it, removed the key and put it into his pocket. Then he sat down, tilted his chair back against the wall beside the door and seemed to be settling himself for the night.

“Do you always guard him that way?” Peter asked.

“Just tonight. It’s orders. I guess he’s scared of the lot of you. Them downstairs. What are they but a bunch of rats waiting for him to croak? And you—you hate him plenty.”

“No,” Peter said gently. “Not any more I don’t. Which is my room? I’ll hit the hay early because I’ve had a long trip here.”

“Last room down the hall. And listen—I pack a gun and I know how to use it. You might let the others know that. Also I sleep with one eye open and both ears wide. Get me?”

Downstairs, after Peter told what had happened in the old man's room, they chatted for about half an hour. Allen Page yawned and guessed he'd go to bed. Sandler went for his hat and coat. Peter walked onto the porch with him.

Sandler said, "I'm very happy about the way it turned out, Petey. See you tomorrow. And watch Allen Page and Blythe. I don't trust them." Peter wondered what he was supposed to watch for, but Sandler hurried to his car without further explanation. Peter returned to the living room and found it empty. It was only nine-thirty, but there seemed to be nothing to do so he went upstairs.

Cheever was on guard duty at the locked door. With both eyes shut and his mouth wide open emitting snores that had a weird effect in the silent house. There were no lights from any of the other rooms. Peter figured Page and Blythe had retired.

He undressed in the room assigned to him, got into pajamas and slipped between the sheets. He was certain he'd never get to sleep. There was all that money in his coat pocket for one thing and the strange manner in which the old man had reacted for another. These were on his mind. He'd never sleep tonight—but when he opened his eyes again, it was daylight.

Someone was pounding at the door downstairs. Peter slipped into a robe he discovered in the closet, hurried past Cheever who was still snoring but beginning to wake up, and went down the steps. It was Sandler who was at the door.

"What on earth—?" he started to say. "Petey, isn't anyone else awake? Where's Cheever? The old man gets up at the crack of dawn and it's almost nine."

Peter blinked sleepily. "I guess we all overslept. Cheever is still parked outside the bedroom door. Come on, we'll wake him up."

Cheever was already awake and fumbling in his pocket for the door key. He unlocked the door. Page came out of his room, down the hall, fully dressed and bright-eyed. He joined them. Cheever went over to the bed. The old man lay there, eyes closed. Cheever shook him gently. The old man's head seemed to rotate on his neck and then flopped down, chin against his chest. Peter gave a sharp cry and stepped up to the bed. He felt of the old man's wrist. It was stone cold.

"He's dead," he said slowly. "He died hours ago. Someone call a doctor."

Cheever suddenly spread both arms wide and pushed everyone toward the door. "Nothing gets touched," he announced. "And besides a doc, call the cops. I think he was knocked off. I'm staying right here until the cops come."

Peter did the calling. Sandler and Page woke up Blythe and they all waited in the living room. This was rather isolated countryside and a plain-clothes State Police detective lieutenant took charge. His name was Carrington and he looked and acted efficiently. A doctor arrived and then a horde of specialists from the State Police barracks.

IT WAS early afternoon when Lieutenant Carrington addressed them all. He said, "This looks very much like murder. Mr. Faylen's physician is upstairs with the medical examiner. They tell me Faylen took one sedative powder each night. Cheever, you usually administered them. Did you do so last night?"

"Yeah," Cheever said cautiously. "Yeah, I mixed one in his warm milk."

"Only one, Cheever?"

"Yeah. Say, what are you getting at?"

"We found one empty paper in the waste basket and another one tucked beneath the rug. We know Faylen's room was cleaned every day and none of those

papers were allowed to accumulate. The woman who keeps the house up says she took one of those papers out of the room yesterday. So how did there happen to be two?"

Cheever blinked owlshly. "Look—the old man was scared of these people. He told me to lock him in and sit by the door all night. Which I did, with the key in my pocket. I gave him only one powder. Peter Harwood was there and saw me mix it."

"I don't know how many went into that milk," Peter broke in. "You were dumping one when I entered the room. You could have put another in the milk before I arrived."

Cheever's fists doubled and he half arose from his chair, thought better of it and settled back again. The questions came then, furiously. Peter followed them closely and when Lieutenant Carrington gave up temporarily, Peter knew that they were facing a locked-room mystery. If Cheever told the truth, someone must have slipped past him, unlocked the door and somehow fed the old man that second powder. There was no other answer.

They were allowed the freedom of the house and the grounds, but troopers took up posts to see that nobody left. Peter went upstairs. The body had been removed for an autopsy and Carrington was waiting for word about that before taking any further action.

Peter ducked into his room. He still wore pajamas and a robe. He hurried to the clothes closet to see if that envelope of money was intact. It wasn't there. He shuddered. If Carrington found it, he might not believe Peter's story. And the fact that the old man had kept this sum on hand could be proven without a great deal of trouble. Combined with Peter's reputed—and honest—hatred for the old man, this could be construed as a pretty good motive.

Peter dressed in a hurry. Downstairs Carrington was taking his suspects one at a time now. Sandler had already gone through the mill and he looked it. There was perspiration on his forehead and alongside his nose. His face was redder than ever.

He ran fingers through his hair and exhaled sharply. "The old man was murdered all right," he told Peter. "They found enough of the sedative in him to stop his already faltering heart. And they're sure one of us fed him that second powder. Petey, what happened last night?"

"I don't know. I was tired and fell asleep two minutes after I got into bed. Sandler, do you think Page or Blythe could have done this?"

"Somebody did," Sandler said hoarsely. "They're checking my story now. I drove to my office after I left here—and then home. My wife can swear to that. I'm in the clear. But Petey—that lieutenant is getting the full story on you now. How you hated the old man and what he did to your father. You didn't do this awful thing?"

"No, I didn't. Believe me, Sandler, I wanted the old man to live. He was seeing things right for the first time in his life. And where is your motive? According to what I was told last night, all of us were going to share in the estate."

"That's already been determined," Sandler said. "The family lawyer arrived a little while ago. I'm going somewhere into a dark corner and sit down to think. This is terrible."

PETER wandered out to the porch. There were a number of official cars parked haphazardly. Sandler's blue sedan was directly in front of the door. Some sort of tag hung on the right-hand door. Peter idly walked up to the car and saw that it was a parking tag. Sandler apparently

hadn't noticed it. The tag had been issued at five-thirty in the morning and it was signed by an officer named Noonan. Peter decided to say nothing about it. Sandler had enough on his mind now. And that tag formed a pretty good alibi for him.

Cheever came out onto the porch and walked slowly down the steps. He looked around. There were no troopers close by. He stepped up to Peter and pushed his pocket, the outlines of a gun showing, into his ribs.

"Don't say anything, you rat," he warned. "Make out nothing is wrong. Then walk into the house. Stay right beside me or I'll blast you in half. Don't think I won't."

"But—" Peter started to say. A savage prod of the gun told him Cheever wanted no questions. Peter walked into the house. Cheever brought him to the cellar door, opened it and pushed him through. After the door was closed behind them, Cheever pulled the gun into the open.

"Down them steps," he whispered grimly. "And keep your hands away from your pockets. Boy, there's nothing I'd rather do than smear you!"

At the far end of the spacious cellar and beneath a bright overhead light, Peter was backed to the wall and searched. Then Cheever stepped back and leveled the gun.

"You knocked him off. You did it. For the dough he kept in his room. Twenty-five grand. I found it in your coat pocket. I ain't so dumb. Faylen paid me to guard him. I muffed it, but I'm going to see that the guy who bumped him pays for it. Well—go ahead and talk."

Peter said, "He gave me the money last night. It was kept there for me. Something extra he wanted me to have. Cheever, you're going at this the wrong way. In the first place you were in the best spot to kill him. Two powders were as easy to put into the milk as one. You guarded the door and

fell asleep doing it, but you said yourself you slept lightly and nobody could get by you. If you still want to make accusations, find a mirror, face it, and accuse yourself."

"Smart guy," Cheever growled. "Very smart, only I don't fall for it. I know all about you. The old man was scared skinny of you. I guess he had a right to be. Well—I'm going to put a slug through your head, stick the gun in your fist and say you bumped yourself off. They'll believe it. You had a good reason for killing him and you were afraid of the consequences."

Peter felt the first pangs of fear. This stupid man was fully capable of killing for revenge. He'd hardly get away with it, but as he saw things he'd been paid to protect the old man and when he failed it was up to him to exact vengeance. The money in Peter's pocket was all the proof Cheever required. There was deadly hatred in his eyes right now.

Peter said, "Why don't you tell me the truth? You're going to kill me and try to make the police believe I took my own life so suspicion will be off you. It won't work. It will make them that much more suspicious."

"I didn't do it. They can't fry an innocent man. I got nothing to worry about, but you have. The old man was good to me. The only guy in my whole life who ever was. You bumped him off and I'm making sure you pay for it. I'm taking no chances with a jury maybe letting you go. You're going to get yours—right now."

He moved closer. Peter swallowed hard; he felt his muscles tense. The gun moved to within inches of his forehead and he could tell Cheever was trying to estimate the proper angle and distance to make the wound look self-inflicted. Cheever scowled darkly and steadied the gun.

IN ANOTHER half minute it would be all over. Peter knew he'd be dead. Dead and finished. Dead because a stupid ape of a man had convinced himself as to the identity of the murderer.

There was something peculiar about his eyes too. They seemed to be half-lidded, as if he was using effort to keep them open. An idea shot into his brain, but it didn't look as if he'd have the opportunity to act upon it. Cheever was getting set for the kill.

Someone walked heavily across the floor upstairs and the cellar door opened. Lieutenant Carrington's voice was sharp. "Harwood—and you, Cheever. Come up here."

Peter whispered. "Go ahead and shoot, Cheever. See how far you'll get with that suicide angle." He raised his voice, "Coming right up, lieutenant. Cheever was just showing me the wine cellar."

Cheever growled, put the gun away and whispered, "Okay—so it's your inning, but you won't get away with it. I'm going to tell the coppers about that dough. Let's see you find a break lucky enough to take you out of that rap."

Cheever hurried up the stairs and cornered Lieutenant Carrington. Peter saw the lieutenant lead Cheever into the study. Peter walked out to the porch. There didn't seem to be as many troopers about and some of the official cars were gone. No one guarded the front of the place so far as he could see.

Peter walked casually toward Sandler's car, opened the door and slid behind the wheel. He stepped on the starter, shifted and let the car roll slowly down the drive.

There was a trooper at the gates. He was stepping out to flag him down. Peter stepped on it hard and blared a warning with the horn. He shot through the gates, careened along the turn onto the highway

and set about putting as much distance between himself and the estate as possible.

He wasn't stopped on the way to town, but he had an idea local police would be alerted so he pulled into the first garage he came to. As he got out of the car he yanked off the parking tag. An attendant came forward and Peter told him to change the oil. He had no idea whether or not that was needed, but it would keep the car off the streets.

He promised to return for it soon, boarded a bus and rode to the center of town. From a drug store booth he phoned the police and asked the desk sergeant at headquarters where he could locate an officer named Noonan. He was given an address and Peter took a cab there.

Patrolman Noonan was working in his backyard. Peter showed him the tag. Noonan made a wry face.

"Now look here," he said, "that tag was issued because there was an ordinance violation and I'm not taking it back. Besides, I already filed the stub, so you got to do business with headquarters now. It's out of my hands."

"I'm not trying to get out of paying for the violation, officer. But do you know whose car it was? Bruce Sandler happens to be a rather important man—"

"Not in police circles, he ain't." Noonan was getting sore. "I knew it was his car. It was parked right in front of his office for three hours and he was working inside. There were lights on and when I first went by, I saw him in there. But he wouldn't answer when I knocked to tell him to get the car off the street. So I tagged it."

"He was there all night long then?" Peter asked.

"Far as I know. The car never moved because I chalked the tire. Look, why don't you tell him to pay the two bucks and forget it."

"Thanks," Peter said, "I'll do that."

He already had learned Sandler's address from the phone book and ordered his cab driver to take him there. He identified himself to Mrs. Sandler, a buxom, hard-eyed woman.

"You know about the trouble, of course," Peter said. "Bruce wanted me to talk to you before the police came. What time did Bruce get home last night?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I didn't expect him home at all. He usually stays at the old man's after those birthday parties each year. I was surprised to find him in his room this morning."

"Just tell the police exactly that when they come," Peter advised. "Bruce gave them the same story."

He returned to the garage and found Sandler's car now ready. He drove it back toward the estate at a moderate clip. Within a mile of the place he became aware of a car pulling abreast of him and he was suddenly looking into the wrong end of a gun. Behind it was a State Trooper. Peter hastily applied the brakes, stepped out of the car and raised his arms high.

LIEUTENANT CARRINGTON was talking to Sandler, Allen and Page when Peter was led into the room. Carrington advanced on him. He said: "You're under arrest, Harwood. The motive is your hatred of the old man and the fact that you netted twenty-five thousand dollars by killing him. Besides your share of the estate. Running away didn't help either."

Peter said, "I merely took a drive into town. I was on my way back when your troopers stopped me. I'll tell you why I slipped away too. I found out who killed my grandfather."

Cheever gave a sarcastic laugh. "This ought to be good, coming from the one

who really knocked the old man off."

"Keep quiet," Carrington snapped. "Go ahead, Harwood."

Peter said, "We know my grandfather died of an overdose of his sedative powder. Two of the powder envelopes were found in his room. Only two of us were with him when he took the sedative—Cheever and myself. The presence of the two powder envelopes seems to be proof that he was given their contents at one time. As for suspects—I guess all of us in the house had our reasons. Cheever was getting an inheritance. Page and Blythe have been waiting for him to die for years. Sandler is well off, but certainly not averse to getting a little more."

Sandler smiled. "That's true enough, but I didn't even see the old man last night. I left early, went to my office and did a lot of work until very late."

"And there is full proof that you're telling the truth." Peter brought out the parking tag. "Your car was decorated while it was parked in front of your office during the night and the patrolman saw you inside the office. So you certainly did not come back to the estate. Your wife says you were asleep in bed this morning."

Sandler frowned. "What reason did you have for investigating those things, Petey? Was it because you were trying to help me prove my innocence?"

"No—your guilt," Peter replied slowly. He glanced at Cheever who sat bolt upright. Peter said, "Cheever, keep your eyes open and don't be falling asleep."

Cheever blinked. "But I'm okay. I—"

"Your eyes keep closing," Peter broke in. "You may find it wise to stay wide awake. Now, Sandler, getting back to the murder. I really don't know your motive, but there must be one. Last night you handled the tureen of soup. In fact, you

served us. From that same tureen Cheever took out a portion for my grandfather and I brought it up to him. Not long afterwards he was given his regular dose of sedative in warm milk by Cheever. You left early, Sandler, and returned to town. Page and Blythe and I retired early too. I thought I'd never be able to sleep and yet I slept like a log. Cheever slept all night sitting uncomfortably in a chair. How about you, Blythe? And you Page?"

Blythe said, "I was asleep in two minutes and never woke up once."

"That goes for me too," Page said. "I—Hey, I'm getting this. There was something in that soup."

SANDLER, who had been sitting with his hat in his lap, suddenly dumped the hat aside and showed the gun it had concealed. He arose quickly. "Stay as you are, all of you. I thought Peter knew. Lieutenant, draw your gun with two fingers and drop it on the floor. Then kick it into the corner. The rest of you—don't move an inch,"

Peter said, "You drugged the whole tureen of soup and we were all knocked out from it, including yourself. That's why you had to get away early. When the drugs took effect, you didn't want anybody to see you pass out. The patrolman who tagged your car said you wouldn't answer his knocking on the office door. That was because you were in a drugged sleep. Cheever was hit worse than any of us. I'm betting he finished all the soup left in the tureen.

"You came back here this morning and everyone was asleep. You entered my grandfather's room the moment we went in and while we were shocked at finding him dead and unobserving as to what you did, you dropped another sedative envelope—empty—on the floor so it would seem that somebody slipped the old

man a double shot. I think you hoped that Cheever would be blamed."

"What difference does it make?" Sandler said in a monotone. "The old man had it coming. He intended to leave me his whole estate. Then he became ill and started thinking and changed his mind and his will. After all the attention I'd given him. He was going to have the four of us share, but what did you other three ever do for him? The money was mine. All of it—and I was being cheated."

"Besides," Peter said slowly, "my grandfather knew you resented the change in his will and knew all the attention you had given him was only for the purpose of inheriting everything. I imagine he intended cutting you off altogether."

Sandler side-stepped toward Lieutenant Carrington. "You're taking me out of here, lieutenant. Right past your men. If you want to live, don't show them anything is wrong. And the rest of you—call a warning and the lieutenant will die. I'll take the twenty-five thousand dollars too. I knew the old man was giving it to Peter. He told me so last week and that's when I got sore. Back up, lieutenant, toward the door. I'm not afraid of any of you. I'm the only man here who is armed—"

Cheever's gun made a terrific roar when it went off. Sandler screamed once and then doubled up. Carrington hurled him into a chair and ripped the gun from his grasp. Peter looked over at Cheever.

"I thought you'd never pull that gun," he exhaled slowly. "I was afraid you were still so doped up that you wouldn't get wise when I warned you to keep your eyes open. They were half shut and the pupils affected when you were going to shoot me down cellar. That's what gave me the idea all of us had been doped and that was how Grandfather got the additional dose of drug."

Lieutenant Carrington made a phone call for an ambulance. Then he cuffed the groaning Sandler to the chair before he faced the others. Carrington said, “Harwood, your theory was correct, of course, but man alive, any of you could have put the dope in that soup. Sandler was an idiot to admit it.”

“I thought he might,” Peter said with deep satisfaction. “I built up a case against him—one that would tumble if examined closely, but I banked on the fact that Sandler wouldn’t question it. He was the

murderer and he knew that, of course, so all he saw was his whole clever plot being broken up. He didn’t stop to analyze things. Once the idea of defeat crept into his mind, all he wanted to do was to get clear and that meant using a gun.

“He was too anxious to get away from this estate last night in order to fashion an alibi. That made me wonder about him, and when I found out he couldn’t hear the policeman’s knock on his office door, I guessed he was asleep. Drugged—just as all of us were drugged.”