



Seeing the grisly corpse then, Arlene's dark eyes were stark and wide

FINAL JUDGMENT

By RALPH OPPENHEIM

Being acquitted of a murder charge doesn't satisfy Jeff Corey, who won't rest until he finds the guilty party!

JEFF COREY emerged from the stuffy courthouse into bright afternoon sunlight that made his blue eyes blink. He stood on top of the steps, dazedly breathing in the air of freedom.

People—spectators from the trial, passersby—were pointing out his tall, well-built figure, so easily distinguishable because of his red hair. He gave no heed. He was grimly accustomed to being stared

at, and his face, strong despite its pallor and strain, remained masklike even when he heard a woman's shrill voice exclaiming:

"A disgrace! They should have hanged him! The whole city knows he's guilty!"

Yes, he thought wearily, the whole city. He remembered the frustrated tone the foreman of the jury had used when he had said: "We find the defendant not

guilty, your Honor.”

Being honest, the jurymen had gone against their emotional belief only because of insufficient evidence.

Three men, emerging from the courthouse together, came over to Corey. One was John Hatcher, the city’s leading realtor, a jovial-faced, stocky man, wearing sporting tweeds, and with no hat covering his mass of gray hair. He seized Jeff’s hand and pumped it.

“Congratulations, my boy!” Hatcher said. “I knew you’d be cleared! You can come back to your job as my A One agent any time!”

“That’s swell of you, Mr. Hatcher,” Corey said huskily. “I know how you felt about—about ex-Judge Prentiss, so you must have believed me innocent.”

“How about me?” boomed the other man, Arthur Blanchard.

He was short and broad, with bushy-dark eyebrows. Though he had been ex-Judge Prentiss’ lawyer as well as friend, he had undertaken Jeff Corey’s defense.

“I did my best for you,” he said, “though I admit it was a stroke of fate that turned the final trick.”

When the third man, tall, suave and dark-haired District Attorney Floyd Saxon spoke, his tone was that of a beaten enemy who has not forgotten the battle.

“I also considered myself one of Jonathan Prentiss’ best friends,” he said. “All the more reason I was anxious to convict his murderer.”

He was doubtless bitter because, regardless of what developed now, Jeff Corey could never be tried again for the same crime, for so the law said. But Saxon’s attitude, as well as the open hostility of the townsfolk, strengthened the determination that had been growing in Jeff Corey.

“Mr. Hatcher,” he said, “I’ll come back to my job—as soon as I find ex-

Judge Prentiss’ real murderer! Oh I know”—he waved off protests from Hatcher and Blanchard—“the murder is months old, the trail cold. But I want to stay in this town—for a lot of reasons. To do that I need more than a technical acquittal, and I aim to get it!” His blue eyes were agate-hard. “As soon as I go home and get my bearings, I’m going straight to the scene of the crime.”

Hatcher shook his gray head. The D.A. looked scornful. But Lawyer Blanchard expressed quick alarm.

“Corey, you’re not going to the Prentiss estate, are you? You must realize how upsetting that would be to Miss Arlene Prentiss.”

PAIN clouded Corey’s eyes, but his voice was hard.

“I’ll try not to upset Miss Prentiss. It’s the caretaker, Chris Jenson, I want to see. That’s where I’m starting, and I’m not stopping until I find the killer!”

A few hours later Jeff Corey, having gone to his apartment to shave and change to a clean, pressed suit, sat at the wheel of his convertible coupe, driving toward the Prentiss estate. Grimly he was reviewing the whole nightmare sequence of events that had brought him within the shadow of the gallows.

Hauntingly, the image of a slender, winsome girl kept thrusting itself foremost in his thoughts. Arlene Prentiss. He saw her lovely oval face, her liquid dark eyes, the page-boy cut of her auburn hair.

“I’m sure Dad won’t have any objections, Jeff darling,” she had said only the day before the tragedy, when she had been sitting in this very coupe with Corey.

And more than her words, the soft surrender of her lips had told Corey that a childhood playmate, now grown to lovely womanhood, would soon be his wife. He remembered how, as a little girl, Arlene

had come out of her opulent environment to play with less privileged kids and, still more scandalous, with young Jeff. For her father, then an incumbent Judge, had sent Jeff Corey's stepfather to prison for embezzlement.

Jeff's real father had died in an accident before Corey was born. The man who had married Jeff's mother had been a spineless weakling tempted to stupid crime. He had died in prison of pneumonia, and Jeff's brokenhearted mother had soon followed him to the grave.

Jeff, in his teens, had been thrown on his own, but John Hatcher, the realtor, had given him a good job. The city had not forgotten about his stepfather, though, and regardless of the fact that the embezzler had not been his real father, they had been prone to say "like father, like son."

That was, until Jeff had returned from the war, bedecked with medals. The city had seemed willing to forget the past then, until tragedy had come.

Jeff was remembering more.

"So you want to marry my daughter, eh?" Jonathan Prentiss, seated at his scroll-oak desk in his sumptuous, paneled library, had translated Jeff's fumbling words into crisp, brass-tack facts.

Arlene and Jeff had agreed that he would do the asking, and Arlene, unable to hang around in suspense, had gone out horseback riding shortly before Corey arrived, around two o'clock that afternoon. Chris Jenson, the old caretaker and gardener, had greeted Corey as the young red-haired man had approached the house. Ex-Judge Prentiss, alone in the house, had opened the heavy front door on a chain and, seeing who the caller was, had then admitted Jeff.

Screwing up his courage, Corey had told Prentiss that he and Arlene wanted to live on his, Jeff's income, in a house of

their own. The ex-Judge had seemed pleased. He had been a man with democratic ideas. He himself had been born to wealth, but that had not prevented him from giving his whole life to public work.

When arthritis and age had caused him to retire from the bench and kept him a virtual recluse, he had still participated both financially and physically in many civic activities. Shortly before his death he had become chairman and treasurer of the War Memorial Fund, a big enterprise whereby long-neglected park grounds would become a beautiful monument to commemorate soldiers who, unlike Jeff Corey, had never come back. It had been Jonathan Prentiss' brilliant scheme to have important public and business men campaign personally for funds, each to collect through his own channels.

It had been just short of two-thirty by the heavy, onyx electric clock on Prentiss' desk when a joyful Jeff Corey had taken his departure, with the ex-Judge's full consent to marry his daughter. No mention had been made by either of them of Corey's stepfather, both considering this as belonging to the dead past.

Treading on air, Corey had left the estate—but Chris Jenson, the caretaker, hadn't seen him leave, having been busy with some rose bushes. Jeff had driven off in his car to intercept Arlene on the bridle path he knew she had taken, to break the news to her. But he had been so absent-minded in his joy that he had taken a wrong turn, and had been delayed half an hour before he finally got to her. And when they had returned to the Prentiss estate, the police had been there.

Ex-Judge Prentiss had still been in the library at the scroll-desk where Corey had last seen him. But he had been slumped over that desk, his skull hideously bashed. The police had found the weapon—the

heavy onyx electric clock. A brutal killer had ripped it from its wires to deal the fatal blow. It had stopped at nineteen minutes to three.

Chris Jenson, the old caretaker, had already told the police he had seen Corey go into the house around two o'clock. A little after half-past two he had heard a loud argument coming from the library, as he had been near, trimming some hedges. A man had come out of the house, hiding his face with one arm.

As Jenson had tried to intercept him, the man had knocked the caretaker down and leaped through a hedge. Jenson had caught one clear, sunlit glimpse of the back of the man's head beyond the hedge before it had disappeared, and there had been the sound of a car driving away.

Rushing into the house, Jenson had discovered the body and had called the police. And Jenson had sworn that the back of the head he had seen had been Jeff Corey's—Corey's conspicuous red hair.

By grim irony, it had been Arlene who unwittingly had supplied the motive when she had confessed that Corey had gone to ask her father for her hand, and that she had not broached the subject to the ex-Judge. District Attorney Floyd Saxon had based his case on the theory that Prentiss had refused to let his daughter marry the stepson of a man he had sent to jail, that Corey became enraged and killed him, then wiped his prints off the clock.

The city folk had readily accepted the theory, believing indeed that there had been "bad blood" between Jeff and the ex-Judge. Arlene, at first seeming unquestionably loyal, had insisted that Arthur Blanchard, her father's lawyer, undertake Jeff's defense. But she had not attended the trial, and Corey could not help feeling that she also must have had her doubts, her suspicions.

After all, her own father had been killed. And she could not know what had transpired at that interview between Prentiss and Jeff, and she knew that Jeff had no alibi except "taking the wrong turn" for the time of the murder.

The verdict had been a foregone conclusion—even Blanchard had seemed too resigned to put up much of a defense—until, unexpectedly, Chris Jenson had wavered in his repeated testimony. Where the old caretaker had been so positive, now he was uncertain. No, he decided, he couldn't positively identify the man he had seen running away.

So the case had blown up. But Corey knew that ugly rumor said he had somehow got to Jenson, bought him off. Not only because it might be dangerous to live in a city that still thought him the killer of one of its most beloved citizens, but also because of his love for Arlene, he must once and forever clear his name.

Now, as he drove on in his coupe, the familiar Prentiss estate loomed out of the late afternoon landscape, with its sprawling mansion, its well-tended gardens and graveled private road. Driving through the open gate, Jeff Corey stopped near a small cottage screened by trees from view of the main house. This was where Chris Jenson the caretaker lived. Since Corey didn't see him outside, he hoped the old man had come home.

His face grim and determined, Corey climbed out of the coupe and approached the cottage door. His mind teemed with the questions he would put to Jenson. Why had the caretaker at first been so sure the killer was Jeff, and then changed his mind at the last moment? Had he lied deliberately, then become frightened? Had someone got him to lie, or had it been his own idea?

Corey lifted the decorative knocker hinged to the door, rapped with it. There was no answer. The shades of the cottage windows were drawn. He tried the door, found it unlocked. He let himself into a shadowy living room which had a rustic, raftered ceiling.

He took two steps, then froze in his tracks, icy needles of horror stabbing his spine. In the half-light of the room, he saw the figure of a man hanging on a rope that was fastened to one of the rafters!

Corey recognized the ghastly, death-frozen face as that of the grizzled caretaker. There was an overturned chair nearby, also some coiled, stout clothesline from which enough had been cut to make the improvised noose. Evidently Chris Jenson had come home and hanged himself.

But why? Had the same guilty knowledge which had made him change his testimony led to this final act of expiation? Had he feared that with Corey acquitted, he might somehow be involved in the unsolved crime?

Abruptly, Corey's thoughts broke off as a draft on his back warned him that the door behind him was opening. Even as he whirled, he heard a girl's familiar voice.

"Jeff! I saw your car from the house! Mr. Blanchard phoned to tell me you were acquitted and—"

The voice broke off with a gasped intake of surprise and horror. And Corey, turning to look at the girl, didn't know just what her expression had been when she had first greeted him, for now her dark eyes, seeing the grisly corpse, were stark and wide, and the color had drained from her lovely oval face.

"Jeff—what—" Her voice was a sob. "It's Chris Jenson! He—"

"Yes, Arlene."

Corey spoke grimly. He had forced his own eyes back to the hanging man, was

scrutinizing the dead caretaker. And now he saw the ugly bruise on Chris Jenson's scalp, saw darkening blood drying.

"Jeff, it's suicide, isn't it?" he heard the girl say tensely.

He didn't answer at once. He was moving about the room, his alert eyes searching. Presently his gaze narrowed, agate-hard, grim. Half-hidden under a book-shelf was a length of lead pipe. It seemed to have bloodstains on it.

He turned to the girl.

"No, it's not suicide," he answered her now. "It's murder, Arlene! And unless I'm wrong, it was done by the same killer who murdered your dad months ago!" His eyes were slits. "Evidently the killer feared that Jenson could somehow expose him if I started probing."

He stopped on that thought, grim memory working in his mind. Only three men had known he was coming here to question the old caretaker—D.A. Saxon, Blanchard the lawyer, and the realtor, John Hatcher, his boss. Was it possible that one of them was involved? It seemed fantastic—the man who had tried to convict him, the man who had tried to save him, and his own boss who had offered him back his job. And yet—

He moved to the corpse, felt one of the dangling wrists. It was just growing cold.

"Did you see anybody else on the estate before I came, Arlene?"

He was not surprised to get a negative. The killer would have moved surreptitiously. This cottage could not be seen from the windows of the mansion.

"Clever," he muttered fiercely. "Fiendishly clever!"

"What do you mean, Jeff?" Arlene's dark wide eyes were bewildered.

"I mean, this time the killer tried to frame me for keeps! I was supposed to assume that Jenson committed suicide, that I—or you—would call the police

voluntarily. The police would quickly see that Jenson couldn't have hanged himself, and would find the weapon that had really killed him before he was strung up!"

He was half-grateful now that he had been through such a long ordeal with the police and the law. It had taught him something about crime and clues, enabling him to observe things which, when he had been more naive and uninformed, he would surely have overlooked, just as Arlene had.

"But Jeff, why would the police accuse you?" she asked. "Why should you kill the man whose final testimony saved you?"

"Suppose, as the city believes, I did murder your father, Arlene. Suppose I had somehow got Jenson to change his testimony, but still knew he could put the finger of guilt on me. I couldn't be tried again, but I could be lynched, or driven out of town, once the people had proof of my guilt. With that motive, it would be logical I might kill Jenson, and try, bunglingly, to make it look like suicide." He gave a harsh, bitter laugh. "Convincing, isn't it Arlene? Perhaps it even convinces you!"

"Oh Jeff, how can you think such a thing?"

Her dark eyes filled with tears, the girl suddenly flung herself into his arms. He drew her to him, held her tightly, gratefully, both of them for a moment forgetting the macabre surroundings, the ghastly hanging corpse.

"Jeff!" she sobbed. "I never believed you guilty! I was confused, bewildered, and I couldn't bear to go to the trial, but all the time I was waiting for them to clear you! Darling, you must believe me!"

Some of the long-pent bitterness melted from Jeff Corey. He felt strong now, capable of fighting and beating this thing.

"If you'll help me, Arlene, I can clear

myself."

"Of course. What are we going to do?"

He answered with one word. "Nothing."

"What do you mean, Jeff?"

"We're going to do nothing," he said fiercely. "That's the one thing the killer doesn't expect! We're going to leave this cottage exactly as if we had never been in it! We never discovered Jenson's body, understand? Can we lock the door?"

She took a key hanging on a nail near the door, gave it to him.

"We've got to move fast and carefully," he warned her.

He opened the door, slipped out. Darkness was enveloping the big estate now, and he was grateful for it. He didn't think the killer would be lurking around the premises, but had to chance that. He motioned Arlene to come out, then locked up the shaded cottage with its silent inhabitant.

EVEN as he started toward the mansion with the girl, his tensed ears heard a sound in the falling night. The sound of an approaching car. "Are you expecting someone, Arlene?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"Car seems to be headed here. Come on—hurry!"

He took her arm and guided her swiftly to the mansion. She had left the big front door unlocked. They entered a spacious living room, and she switched on lights. Corey moved to one of the heavy-portiered windows. He lifted the curtain, peered out. Headlamps swung eerily over the estate gate, then cut through it.

"Someone's coming all right," he gritted. "Quick, Arlene! Pour out some wine or something. Light a cigarette. We must act as if we're thoroughly and comfortably at home."

He had peeled off his coat and hat,

heard the girl moving swiftly. He saw the car stop, recognized it as Blanchard's heavy limousine. Two men got out. They walked past Corey's car, and Corey held his breath as they disappeared momentarily in the trees that also hid the cottage. They appeared again, coming toward the house, and Corey dropped the curtain.

"Now listen, Arlene. If anyone asks about the caretaker, he left your employ this afternoon. Understand? He locked up his cottage and left. You don't know where he went."

Before she could even answer, the doorbell pealed. There was no servant staying in the house at night to answer it, so Arlene went herself. Corey went to the coffee table where she had poured wine from a decanter, took a glass of it, and was sitting on a chaise-longue, relaxed, glass in hand, when Arlene ushered in Lawyer Blanchard and the other visitor, who proved to be the gray-haired realtor, John Hatcher.

Both men looked a little grim as they saw Corey getting up from the chaise-longue. Blanchard first spoke.

"We've just had a long talk with the D.A.," he said. "We wanted him to come along with us, but he felt his position would make him seem biased and unfriendly. It seems the town has been taking the verdict pretty hard. For my part, I wish to protect the good name of Miss Prentiss here. Mr. Corey's coming here is naturally going to make more talk, add fuel to the fire."

Arlene answered him. She moved to Jeff, her slim hand taking his. Her eyes were clear and shining.

"You might as well know that I intend to marry Jeff as soon as possible," she said.

The words brought a thrill to Corey, his blue eyes going almost happy for the

first time. John Hatcher turned to him then.

"Look Jeff, I have your interests at heart, also. If you and this girl want to get married, more power to you! But why try to live in all this ugly gossip? Move out of the city—go to another. I promise I'll use my influence to see that you get a good position."

"And I'll administer this estate for you," Blanchard told Arlene. "You won't have to worry about it."

Corey's voice was crisp. "Thanks, gentlemen, but you forget what I told you and Saxon. When I've cleared my name there will be no necessity for our moving out of town!"

Blanchard's bushy brows went up. "You'd have to have pretty obvious proof to convince the suspicious townfolk, Corey. What progress have you made? Did you talk to the caretaker?"

The question was casual enough, but Corey watched Blanchard carefully as he answered it.

"No, I didn't. Unfortunately, I learned that Jenson has left Miss Prentiss' employ."

Arlene nodded. "He didn't give any reason, just closed up the cottage and left," she said smoothly.

"That's tough," Hatcher put in. "It looks as if you'll just be batting your head against a brick wall, Jeff."

But both he and Blanchard still found Corey and Arlene adamant. The two men took their departure, but as Blanchard pulled a hat over his thin dark hair, he said:

"If you should change your mind, Miss Prentiss, please get in touch with me."

From the window, Corey saw the two walk to Blanchard's car. Again he held his breath as they passed the tree-screened caretaker's cottage. Then they climbed in the car and drove off.

Had either of them known that Corey and Arlene had lied about Jenson, that the caretaker was actually in that cottage, a gruesome hanging corpse? Only the murderer knew that. Corey thought of suave, dark Floyd Saxon, the D.A. who had refused to come though he had also been a friend of Judge Prentiss' and had felt involved. One thing was clear—the murderer, whoever he was, must be worried to know that the trap he had prepared had not yet sprung. Nor could the killer do much about it. The body had to be found and reported legitimately.

"Well, Jeff," Arlene's tense voice broke in on his thoughts. "What do we do next?"

Corey turned from the window. "We have to go back to the very beginning now, Arlene."

There was desperation in his voice. He knew he would have to work fast, that he was virtually sitting on dynamite with that unreported murder on the estate.

"Arlene, I'd like to go into the library where your father—" He left the rest unsaid.

The girl's face tightened a little, but she accompanied him through French doors and, as she found the wall-switch, the familiar, paneled room leaped into light. There was the same scroll-desk, with its now vacant leather-back chair. The electric clock was missing, still held as an exhibit by the police. On the carpet under the chair was an ugly dark stain—the once-red blood of the man who had been murdered in this room.

Corey was letting the familiar room revive his memories of that day when he had asked Jonathan Prentiss for Arlene's hand. He resurrected the kindly Judge in his mind, imagined him sitting in that chair. He tried to think of anything Prentiss might have said, any little hint of manner or speech that might have

presaged some knowledge on Prentiss' part of his coming doom. Certainly the ex-Judge had seemed cheerful.

Corey cudged his brain in fierce concentration. And then one little fact did seem to stand out. He remembered how Prentiss had let him into the house, first opening the door on a chain and peering out to see his visitor.

"Was your father always cautious about letting people into the house when he was alone, Arlene?" he asked.

"Well, being a Judge who had sent up many criminals—" she began, and stopped, her face coloring. "Oh Jeff, I didn't mean that!"

"I know, darling," he said assuringly.

So the Judge had been cautious. It indicated that his killer, whom he must have admitted, had been someone he knew, trusted.

"I know the D.A. and the police must have gone over all his papers and records," Corey said. "But I'd like to go over them too, just in case they missed something."

Arlene opened a wall-safe, and also took papers from the desk.

"I'm afraid you'll find precious little, Jeff," she said despairingly. "Dad had developed a habit of destroying records as fast as he made them—which seemed strange, since his memory was not wonderful."

The papers proved to be only bills, canceled checks which had gone to the local stores, and some carbon copies of letters relating to the ex-Judge's latest project, the War Memorial Fund. The letters gave his full plan for the organization of the campaign, and among the names of the public figures who were individually to collect funds and turn them over to Prentiss, were the names of Saxon, Blanchard, and Hatcher.

Corey asked Arlene if any of those three had had any quarrel, no matter how

small, with the Judge. To her knowledge, none had.

Finding nothing else in the library except the grim memory of that tragedy, Corey and the girl went back into the living room. Arlene insisted that they have a snack to eat. It was far past dinner time. She fetched some cold cuts from the kitchen and, though neither had appetite, they forced themselves to take the nourishment.

"I'm still up against a stone wall," Corey told her. "Arlene, you've got to help me! I want you to talk about your dad now—tell me everything you can about him, no matter how small. I never did get to know him well."

Arlene did her best. As she spoke, with the grief of remembered loss in her tone, a clearer picture of Jonathan Prentiss shaped itself to Corey. The Judge had been an astute man, a thorough man who had been a stickler for details, and on whom it would have been hard indeed to pull a fast one. Though rich, he had—before he had acquired that habit of tearing up his records—always accounted for every penny in any financial dealing.

The more the picture grew, the more Corey became convinced that a man like Judge Prentiss should have had some inkling of a murderer's intent, if that murderer was someone he knew.

Arlene began talking about the Judge's hobbies. In his younger days, he had been an outdoor man, loving fishing and other sports. He had also been a home-movie enthusiast, who developed his own 16 mm. films. Confined indoors, he had turned this latter hobby into still another one. He had begun photographing old criminal records and other interesting material, creating for himself a home-made microfilm library.

IT WAS then that Corey abruptly stopped the girl's recital. "Did the police look at his microfilms. Arlene?"

"No, they didn't attach any importance to them."

Corey's brain raced. A man who had lately destroyed records, yet who did not have a good memory—

"It may be another blind alley, but I'd like to look at those films!" he told Arlene.

In the cellar of the mansion was a well-equipped laboratory and dark-room. The microfilm collection was all in neat tin boxes, stacked and dated. As the night deepened, Corey worked feverishly, taking out the most recent film and putting it in the special, magnifying machine where the photographed print or writing could be examined.

Luck, if it could be called that, proved to be with him. For on a reel that was otherwise black, he suddenly found a photographed paper that made his heart leap. It was written in a bold hand, and read:

In event anything happens to me, I want to make this record, trusting that it will be found in time. It has come to my knowledge that a dastardly crime has been perpetrated against the city. Someone has been appropriating funds collected for the War Memorial Fund, and the money runs into a large figure. I am going to check to find the guilty man, and call him to account.

Jonathan Prentiss

When Arlene had tensely identified the writing as her father's, Corey said:

"There's the motive! One of the men collecting funds must have been juggling his books! But who?" He ran a harassed hand through his red hair. "Your father evidently had suspicions, but so had the guilty man—who killed the Judge before the thing could come out!"

For there was no further record. Corey's hunch that the astute Judge would

have had some inkling of tragedy had been borne out, but it still was not enough.

"Only one more road still open to us, Arlene!" Corey gritted. "We've got to go back to Chris Jenson's cottage, see if we can find any thread of a clue there."

He had to ask her to go with him because she would know the cottage better than he did. As they emerged from the mansion the night was deep and the sky full of stars. Again they moved furtively. They reached the tree-screened cottage, and Corey inserted the key. Within he found a lightswitch and, since the shades had looked heavy to him, he dared to snap it on.

Light flooded the raftered room, illuminated the hanging corpse that now was growing stiff with the first signs of rigor mortis. White-faced, Arlene helped Corey rummage around the place.

A large roll-top secretary where Chris Jenson kept most of his accounts was the main object of their search. There was nothing in it but commonplace items—a letter from some relative, bills, receipts. And a book which proved to be an itemized catalogue of all the flowers Chris Jenson had planted and cared for on the estate.

As Corey opened the book, several little placards, each on a small wooden stake, fell out. He looked at them, read the titles printed by hand on them:

Red Roses

Tea Roses

Yellow Tulips

Red Tulips

Arlene saw Corey looking them over.

"Poor Chris," she said. "He always kept such strict records of the flowers he planted. He put those markers in each bed, even insisted on leaving them there when the flowers bloomed. Dad said he made the place seem almost like a botanical garden and . . . What is it Jeff?"

She broke off, for Corey was standing very straight now, his eyes gleaming.

"I think I've got the answer!" Corey said. "I think I know who the killer is now! But don't ask me to explain yet. We've got to work fast!" He took her arm, leading her to the door. "I'm going to make the killer go through a little torture so I can trap him, as he tried to trap me!" he said fiercely. . . .

Close to midnight, Corey and Arlene walked into a brightly lit office where three men greeted them with grim inquiry. The office was that of District Attorney Floyd Saxon, who sat at his desk, his dark eyes suspicious. Also present, having been summoned from their homes, were Arthur Blanchard and John Hatcher. Arlene, phoning from the mansion, had told Blanchard to arrange this night meeting. Then she and Corey had come here in Corey's coupe.

"Well, Miss Prentiss"—Blanchard's bushy dark brows were working—"I hope you have a good reason for your strange request for this meeting."

"I have," said Arlene, as she and Jeff had planned she would say. "You gentlemen, as friends of my father, will be interested to know that I am closing up the estate in the morning, taking a few things from the mansion and the caretaker's cottage, and moving out. In fact, I shall sleep at the home of a friend in the city tonight."

Blanchard started to smile, but it was the D.A. Saxon who spoke.

"That's sensible, Miss Prentiss. You've decided not to face all this publicity and gossip."

"Let me finish," Arlene said. "I'm moving out and marrying Jeff. We're going on a short honeymoon, then we're settling in a house we've picked out in this city."

"That's right," Jeff corroborated, as the

three men stared askance at the couple who had roused them to deliver this news. "Because by tomorrow I shall show you who killed ex-Judge Prentiss, and why! I only want a little more time to check on the evidence I've gathered."

"Evidence?" John Hatcher demanded. "You mean you really found something the police overlooked? Where, Jeff?"

"My evidence," said Jeff Corey with deliberate emphasis, "will come from a dead man."

All three men looked startled and confused. One of them, Corey was certain, knew which "dead man" he was referring to, knew now that he had discovered the body of Chris Jenson. The others, unaware of that murder, could only assume he meant ex-Judge Prentiss, and of course the murderer would have to pretend to assume the same thing.

"You mean," Saxon's voice was skeptical, "you found something in Prentiss' effects which we overlooked?"

"Yes, but I am thinking of something else," Corey said, just to make things clear to the one man in that room with whom he was playing his grim game. "Unfortunately, owing to my own delicate position, I wouldn't be believed if I just told you what I knew. You will have to see the evidence to believe it, and if you all come to the Prentiss estate tomorrow, you will see it."

It was on that dramatic statement that the meeting broke up. All left the office except the District Attorney, who remained behind to close up. Blanchard and Hatcher went out to their respective cars. But Corey and Arlene only went as far as the entrance corridor of the building.

"I must hurry, Arlene, to spring the trap!" Corey whispered. "You understand just what you are to do?"

"Yes, Jeff. You'll be careful, won't you?" As she spoke she was opening her

purse. She thrust a compact revolver into Corey's surprised hand. "It was Dad's," she explained. "I—I thought you might need it."

"Thanks, Arlene—and I won't hesitate to use it if I have to!" Corey promised, pocketing the gun.

Minutes later he was breaking all speed laws, driving his coupe by the shortest route back to the Prentiss estate. When he reached the dark grounds, he parked his car outside the gate, around a turn that screened it where it stood in the shadow of trees.

Like a shadow, he moved onto the grounds. He saw no sign of any other person, but knew he had better move fast. Stealthily he slipped to the little caretaker's cottage. Once more the key went into the lock. He slipped in, this time moving in absolute darkness.

His nerves went cold when his shoulders hit a bulky object. He could faintly see the dead man swaying from the impact. Using his memory of the layout of the room, he crossed the floor, found a closet door. He squeezed in among earth-smelling overalls and coats. Then, experimentally, he reached out until his hand closed on something cold and metallic—a telephone on a little stand. He had remembered its location precisely.

He waited, silent, tense, alone in the dark cottage with only that vaguely visible hanging corpse for company. Minutes passed. A cold fear began to oppress him. Suppose he was wrong? Suppose the murderer didn't fall for the bait?

He stiffened. Was that the sound of a car, somewhere outside? Silence again. The minutes became eons. And then, someone was trying the cottage door!

Instantly Corey lifted the telephone from its cradle, drew it into the closet to muffle the faint buzzing sound. He did that with his left hand. His right went into his

coat pocket, grasped the gun Arlene had loaned him.

The door was opening. Moonlight slanted in. Corey had deliberately left it unlocked. A shadowy figure appeared momentarily, then blended with darkness as the door closed. Corey heard a man breathing. His breath came rapidly, panting, the breath of a badly frightened man, almost a sob. Corey's eyes were slits. The killer was going through torment all right!

A little funnel of light suddenly cut the gloom. The man who had come in was focusing a flashlight on the corpse. His movements were frantic as he searched around confusedly. He seemed to reach decision then. He stood up the overturned chair near the hanging corpse. He climbed on it, and in the dim light, the knife he held in his other hand, the knife with which he apparently was going to cut down the corpse, flickered evilly.

THAT was when Corey walked out of the closet, gun in hand.

"All right, you can keep your hands up right as they are!" he gritted.

The light flashed crazily, picked out the sheen on Corey's gun, then hastily dropped.

"I can see you well enough to shoot!" Corey warned. "And I don't have to see you to know who you are—John Hatcher!"

As he spoke, he moved to the wall-switch, flooded the room with light. John Hatcher, his face blanched under his gray hair, climbed down off the chair. The man was actually shaking.

"Drop that knife." It clattered to the floor. "So you were going to try to take the body away, to cover up your second murder, eh?" Corey snapped. "You couldn't find the evidence, could you?" He was still too wary to say that there was

really no evidence to be found! "Well, you'll soon be swinging from a rope just like poor Chris Jenson, Hatcher."

Hatcher's face was glistening with sweat. "Listen, Jeff," he croaked hoarsely. "You're not forgetting all I did for you!"

"You undid it when you framed me for murdering Judge Prentiss!"

"I didn't frame you! I didn't frame anybody! It just happened that way, and what was I to do when you were blamed? I stood behind you at the trial."

"Yes, and then tried to frame me for killing Chris Jenson."

"I had to, Jeff!" the man shouted insanely. "I had to kill Jenson when I knew you were going to pump him, even though I didn't know for sure that he could pin the crime on me!"

"You killed both men," Corey grated. "And that's not all. You appropriated those funds from the War Memorial Fund, cheating honest people who wanted to build a monument for some of the boys I went with overseas! I ought to shoot you down like the rat you are!"

"No, Jeff," the cringing Hatcher pleaded. "No Jeff! Please Jeff! Listen, Jeff!"

Then, with a truly insane scream, he leaped wildly at Corey. The move was so swift, so desperate, that Corey found the gun knocked up before he could fire it. Screaming, cursing, Hatcher was fighting like a wildcat, until Corey, with his free arm, doubled a fist containing all his own pent-up fury, brought it to Hatcher's jaw with a crunching impact.

Even as Hatcher went down like a log, the cottage door burst open. Blue-clad police filled the raftered deathroom, and with them came District Attorney Floyd Saxon and Arlene!

"Jeff, are you all right?" Arlene threw herself into his arms. "I kept begging them to come in, but—"

“But I wanted to hear as much as I could,” Saxon said. “Which, it seems, was plenty.”

“I did just what you said, Jeff,” Arlene explained. “I went right back to Mr. Saxon and told him there had been another murder, that he had to come with me immediately, bringing police. We raced in his car to a drug store just a little distance from the estate. There I kept calling this cottage every five minutes, until I got a busy signal. Then—”

“We came, with me fit to be tied by all this run-around.” Saxon grinned tightly. “It seems I owe you an apology, Corey, but it also seems you owe us all an explanation.”

“Once I came to the conclusion that the criminal was Hatcher,” Jeff said, even as the police were reviving and handcuffing the realtor, “I knew that I had to set a trap for him, because I had no real proof. So I made up a story about there being some evidence here. He fell for it and, already worried because the body here hadn’t been reported, he rushed out in his panic. I arranged for Arlene to bring you, Mr. Saxon, to a nearby store, because I knew if you got here too soon and found the body and not the real killer, you might arrest me.”

“But Jeff, you still haven’t told how you decided that Hatcher was the murderer,” Arlene said.

“Those flower markers told me that, Arlene.” Corey nodded to the desk where they still were. “When I linked those up with the peculiar way Chris Jenson had changed his testimony at the trial, there

was only one answer. Although too proud to admit it even to his employers, Chris Jenson was color-blind. He couldn’t have told you the color of a tulip, or any other flower that might grow in more than one shade. That was why he left markers to label the colors even after the flowers bloomed.

“Seeing the back of a man’s head, a color-blind man might of course easily confuse red hair for that of some other light color. I had three suspects. You, Saxon, and Blanchard both have dark hair, and the one thing a color-blind man can tell is the difference between dark and light. But Hatcher’s hair is gray, and he has a lot of it, too, just as I have.

“The reason Chris Jenson was sure it was me at first was a psychological one. He had seen me enter the mansion, and hadn’t seen me leave. When a man did come out, he simply assumed it was I, and also assumed the back of the head he saw was red. But as the trial went on, and I kept insisting I had left the mansion unobserved and earlier, he began to think about it, and realized he couldn’t be sure after all. That’s why he changed his testimony.”

The suave, dark-haired D. A. spoke then with grudging admiration.

“Well, Corey, you certainly cleared yourself nobly. And the whole city will bring in the verdict this time. People will be glad you and your future missus are staying in town. We need honest citizens like you!”