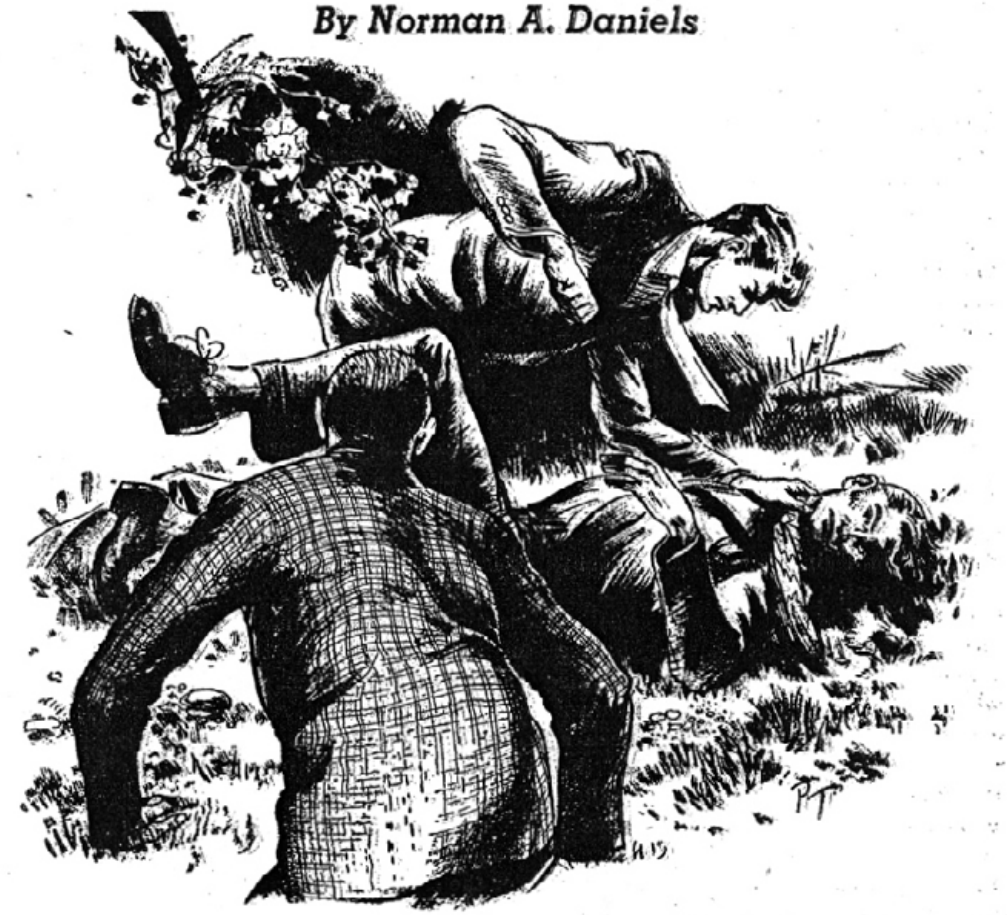
Ten Detective Aces, April, 1947

Many Unhappy Returns

By Norman A. Daniels



Matt Stanford's wealthy grandmother made her heirs go through hell every time she had a birthday. But when someone added a gift of murder to the old gal's party, Matt won that door prize as the target for tonight.

MATT STANFORD turned into the narrow lane that formed the approach to his grandmother's sprawling house which was as eccentric in style as its owner was in habit. On the seat beside Matt Stanford lay a package. Grandma's birthday present. This year it was a heavy wool sweater which ought to be useful during the bleak cold days when the wind from the sea swept in over the cliff beside the house. Grandma was the daughter of a fishing boat captain, the widow of a fishing fleet commodore. She would stick to these rugged Maine coastline hills until she died.

This was one day of every year that Matt dreaded. If she lived much longer, he'd refuse to take it any more and stop coming. It was like begging anyway.

His headlights bobbed up and down. It was almost impossible to see far enough ahead to predict what to do in the event of an emergency. That was why Matt's car crashed into the pile of debris heaped in the middle of the lane.

It was mostly brush and a few old branches dragged out of the woods that bordered the lane, but there was enough of it

to make the way impassable. Matt sighed. If this was a sign of what the evening would be like, he'd take some boring tea party instead. He got out of the car and began dragging the brush off the road.

The man who hit him never made a sound, threw no shadow, and kept out of range of the car headlights. He struck when Matt was bending over to get an armful of brush.

There really wasn't anything to it as far as Matt was concerned. One moment he was a blistering mad young man, muttering to himself. The next moment there was a shock, a sharp pain, ringing noises, and a black gulf into which he mentally dived, head first.

ABOUT five minutes passed before Matt untangled himself from the pile of brush, sat up, and tried to remember what happened. It couldn't have been a car because his own coupe occupied the entire lane. No branch could have fallen to clout him like that because there were no trees directly above. Therefore someone had crept up behind him and let go with a sap of some kind.

Matt was sure of it when he gently applied a hand to the back of his head and found it bloody. He got to his feet, reeled over to the car, and took a jack iron from under the seat. Armed with this, he spent a few moments looking around.

He hadn't been robbed. The wallet was intact. He'd simply been hit on the head—not with murderous intent because if murder was the attacker's objective, it would have been accomplished neatly and swiftly as Matt lay there unconscious.

He realized the pile of brush had been meant solely to force him to stop and expose himself to this attack. But why? What had the attacker been after? Matt couldn't figure it out, so he got back into the car and drove over what was left of the brush. In a short time, he saw the monstrosity of a house where his grandmother lived and insisted she'd die.

She'd been engaged in the beautiful, to her, task of dying for the past ten years. At eighty-eight she looked as if she'd last another forty or fifty years at the least. She was too stubborn to die and she enjoyed these grisly birthday parties more each year.

The others had arrived. Matt was certain he was the last one. Jonathan Holman's shaky old Ford of ten years' vintage was parked beside Dr. Fred Busley's shiny limousine. Carrie Latham's fireman-red sedan was in line, too. She was a whack to own a car that color. Or maybe it was her mealy-mouthed son who wanted it that hue to make an impression he couldn't make. He was colorless, drab and resentful.

Richard Fenwick's businesslike coupe was there, too. Fenwick had been a close friend of Grandma's husband and was now adding his annual prayers to those of the others present, that he'd soon cash in on this friendship.

What made Matt really snicker was a bicycle leaning against one of the tall maples. Old McQuillan owned it. He'd been the servant until Grandma pensioned him off because he was getting into more trouble than he was worth. He was there for the same purpose as all the others. To collect if he could. Or find out how the land lay.

Matt scowled, because he included himself among the leeches. Rightfully, too. Nobody would come here to see the old lady unless compelled to do so by her edict. The invited guest who didn't show up would be automatically stricken from her will as of even date. She made a fresh will each year, changing the amounts for each heir as the whim took her.

Matt walked into the house. Jonathan Holman greeted him with a quick handshake, a cool smile, and then a gasp as he notice the blood on Matt's head.

"It's nothing," Matt said. "I don't know

exactly what happened. I think I was lambasted by somebody who intended to rob me, but got scared off. I want to clean up before the others see me."

Jonathan's voice was like him—stringy. He was a beanpole with a halo of gray hair around a shiny bald pate. He said, "Matt, you can't. She'll be coming down any minute. If you aren't here to pay court . . ."

Matt placed his package on a table. "Jonathan," he said slowly, "this is my last year. I'm through. If she wants to make a spectacle of cutting me out of her will tonight, that's okay too. I'm fed up. I don't give a damn. I intend to clean up."

MATT walked along the reception hall. It was bigger than a museum foyer and about as homey. Matt thought he'd never seen a colder place. But it was like Grandma. Cold, austere, and unfriendly. Matt passed the living-room door and glanced in. They were all there.

The living room was patterned after what the cabin of a fishing smack looked like, on a scale a hundred times bigger. Matt grinned. When he'd been a kid, he used to get behind the pilot's wheel, set just behind the big window overlooking the cliff and the sea. He'd steered that whole house on voyages that took him all over the face of the earth. Even the Sahara desert.

Now he saw Ron Latham idly turning the wheel and staring out into the darkness. Ron was twenty-nine. Two years older than Matt, but he looked younger. He'd never done a stroke of work in his life and maintained a vast ambition to keep up the record.

His mother, Carrie Latham, had married Grandma's oldest son. She was still a handsome-looking woman and knew it. A ruthless woman, too, for she'd operated her dead husband's factory for eight years now and made even more money.

Dr. Busley, fat and fifty, smoked one of his expensive cigars with his characteristic energy. Matt always thought he never smoked those eighty-centers. He ate them.

Old McQuillan, looking more like a dried-up mummy than ever, had taken a seat far to the rear of the room as befitted a former servant. But his pale blue eyes were busy watching everyone and everything. Vultures, Matt thought. Every last one of them. Intent upon one thing. Money!

Matt walked up the graceful staircase to the second floor and along the corridor toward the guest rooms at the far end.

"Matt!"

The voice came from behind a closed door. It was imperious and commanding. It brought Matt skidding to a stop. He shrugged, wheeled, and walked to the door. He opened it and stepped into his grandmother's suite.

She didn't seem to have changed one bit. She sat in her wheel chair—though she could walk as briskly as the best of them—the shawl from India was around her shoulders. She wore high button shoes, a black dress to her ankles, and the inevitable frilly stuff around her throat to mask the wrinkles that were deeply etched there. Grandma Latham at eighty-eight was still vain.

"I knew it was you, Matt," she said. "I remembered the way you walked. Springy and full of youth and strength. How do I look, son?"

Matt cocked his head to one side. If he told the truth, she'd throw him out. He really didn't care, but after all she had been a beautiful woman and lived mainly in the past. So he lied gallantly.

"About ten years younger than last year, Grandmother."

SHE laughed and stretched out one incredibly thin hand. "I like the way you lie, Matt. You remind me of your father. He was good at it, too. Frankly, I'm very glad you came this year. I thought—you might not."

Matt sat down beside the old lady. He took out a pack of cigarettes, lit two, and handed her one. He alone knew her secret vice. She inhaled deeply.

"Nice," she commented. "Why did you come, Matt? You're the only one of the lot who doesn't give a tinker's damn for my money."

Matt grinned. "I don't know, Grandma. Perhaps it's because I like you in spite of all your faults. And then, you are my grandmother. It's true, I don't care whether or not you leave me a cent.

"If I hadn't wanted to see you, I'd never have come."

She laughed at him. The old lady was smart and shrewd. "Good boy. Tell me, do I look any closer to death this year? Will those buzzards downstairs gloat because they'll sense I cannot live another year?"

Matt said, "If I was waiting for you to die I'd be highly disgusted. You look fine and I mean that."

Her withered hand patted Matt's arm, "It's the only fun I have, Matt. Bear with a foolish old lady's contention of sport. I plan for this day all year long. It helps to keep me going. If I don't like their birthday presents to me, I change the will. If they don't kowtow just so, I cut ten thousand off their share and add it to someone else's. It's amusing. Great fun."

Matt didn't smile. He looked steadily at the glowing end of his cigarette. "For you, Grandmother. But last year—well, it wasn't so funny. Remember?"

"You didn't tell anyone?" she asked anxiously.

"You asked me not to and I didn't. Sometime you may carry this too far again. However, I agree that those who can't stand your peculiar kind of torture don't deserve to inherit a dime of your money. Are you going to demand that they tell you what they'll do with your money after you die? Just like every year."

"I love to hear them lie," she chuckled.

"I'll lie, too, as usual," Matt said. "I'll tell of all the great benefits I'll perform. When you know darn well I'll simply have the biggest bust of my life with it."

She didn't comment on that beyond a curt laugh. Her eyes were on Matt's head. "What happened to you? That's blood I see."

Matt arose, crushed out his cigarette, and went to the door. "Somebody tapped me a little. I'm sure it was not an attempt to murder me, but I can't seem to fashion any reason for the attack. You didn't tell a soul about the tragedy?"

"I did not. You know me better than to ask such a silly question."

Matt nodded. "It was just an idea. We could have been wrong about Gilbert, you know. He might have been murdered."

The old lady shuddered. "I've wondered, too, but when I remain calm, I know it wasn't murder. Run along and clean up. I'll delay my arrival downstairs until you get there. See me after the others have gone to bed. You're the only one I can't fool. The only one who isn't afraid of me. I enjoy your company."

Matt grinned at her. Times like these he had to admit he loved the old rogue. He hurried to the room always assigned to him. He peeled off his coat and vest, laid them on the bed, and stepped into the bathroom. He applied water, soap and plenty of towel to his head. The cut wasn't deep or serious. He didn't even bother to fasten on any adhesive.

He put his coat and vest back on, walked briskly downstairs, and greeted the others. There wasn't much time. Mrs. Parker, who was the combination cook-maid-housekeeper-butler and nurse, came out of the kitchen as if she's been shot from a gun. The old lady had punched the bell summoning her.

A MOMENT later, the elevator whirred. It was an open cage affair built many

years ago. Mrs. Latham, the old lady's daughter-in-law, took a deep breath. "Behold," she said, "the queen descendeth."

Mrs. Parker opened the cage door and wheeled the old lady out. She sat in the chair, studying each one of her heirs intently. Then she sniffed in audible contempt.

She raised one hand. "Bring on the presents," she said grimly. "They'd better be good."

There was a scramble. The presents were heaped on the old lady's lap. Her courtiers withdrew to watch with breaths held while she opened each one.

The first was from her retired servant, McQuillan. It turned out to be an oil painting of the schooner the old lady's husband had sailed. A beautiful portrait. She studied it and then looked at McQuillan,

"You fool," she rapped out. "I know what a thing like this costs. Half of what I paid you the past year in a pension. Do you think you can buy me? I shall cut your legacy from ten thousand dollars to five."

And so it went. She found fault with everything, including the sweater Matt had brought. It was all an act. He knew it, but no one else did.

Matt walked over to the immense window, fingered the ancient wheel set there and tried to figure out why he'd been hit on the head. He reached for cigarettes. Something in his vest pocket over his heart crackled. He took out a small folded piece of paper. On it was a typed note. He read it with considerable awe and a horrible inkling of what it meant.

The note read:

Now, perhaps, you will understand I am not a coward and not afraid to kill again. I don't even care if the police see this note. I'm not afraid of them, either. Matt's death will serve to prove I'll carry out my promise unless you do as I say.

"My death!" Matt gasped. "My death!"

He gulped and hastily thrust the note back into the pocket where he'd found it. He wondered how long it had been there. Perhaps since he'd been knocked cold. That could be the reason for the attack. He walked over to a chair and sat down heavily.

SOMEONE was going to be intimidated by his death. Matt didn't like the idea at all. He tried to reason it out. He'd be killed. The note would be found. Two people would recognize its meaning. The murderer who wrote it, and the man—or woman—who was supposed to be frightened into some sort of submission through it.

The note said the writer was "not afraid to kill again." Matt wetted his lips. He knew what that referred to. Gilbert Miller, who went over the cliff on last year's birthday.

A sudden tirade brought Matt's attention to the group facing the elevator. It was Richard Fenwick, who'd been one of the friends of Grandma's family. He was noted for his temper anyway. Matt had expected an outburst of this kind for the last four or five birthdays. Apparently Grandma had criticized the present he'd brought.

Fenwick was yelling at her, his face red with the passion of anger.

"I've had enough!" he thundered. "Too much! I won't take it any more. You're a damnable old woman who should have been dead years ago except that you are too stubborn to die. You'll probably outlive all of us. Each year we have to put up with these crazy shenanigans to stay in your good graces. Otherwise we're cut off. We don't get a dime of the money you've dangled before us for twenty years. Well, you can keep it! I'm finished! Done!"

He walked over to the door, picked up his hat and jammed it on. He closed the door with a slam that rattled every window. For a moment nothing was said, then Grandma chuckled out loud.

"Well," she laughed. "Well, well, and well. That did it for him. The rest of you will profit by sharing in what I intended leaving to him. About eight thousand apiece. You ought to give a loud and lusty cheer. Give it!"

They cheered, like a group of inane idiots. Matt rubbed his nose. Fenwick had stood this nonsense for two decades and now he had thrown over the whole thing. It wasn't natural. He needed money, had coveted his share of the estate this long and now he gave it all up. Matt began to get certain ideas.

GRANDMA was talking again. Addressing Jonathan Holman, who smiled sheepishly at her compliments.

"Jonathan, last year you were unable to attend. This year you were kind enough to bring me two presents. Practical ones. I like them and I appreciate your thoughtfulness. I shall, see that you are rewarded when I am dead."

Jonathan stammered something in the way of thanks, walked toward Matt and mopped his face with a huge handkerchief. He sat down beside the younger man.

"One more of these celebrations find I'll go stark, staring mad. She gets worse each year."

"She's an old hellion," Matt agreed complacently, because he didn't believe what he said at all. "But then she can't possibly live much longer. Or have we been saying that for the past ten years?"

"Twenty," Holman amended. "What keeps her alive anyway? Isn't that a devil of a way for a son-in-law to talk?"

"Uncle Jonathan," Matt said, "you're better off than the rest of us. Were you really sick last year, when you didn't show up?"

"I damned near died. Even then I tried to convince my doctor to let me come. Man alive, Matt, there are thousands of dollars at stake. I nearly had a relapse worrying."

"She was worse last year," Matt commented. "When Gilbert Miller pitched over the cliff, it did something to her. Well, you're in the clear anyhow. What did you think of the way Fenwick acted?"

"I don't blame him," Jonathan declared, "I felt like doing it myself. Maybe I will. Maybe I'll have to."

"What did you mean by that crack?" Matt asked quickly. "You'd have to do what?"

Jonathan's thin lips compressed themselves into a tight line. He got up and walked away. Matt studied his retreating back. Then he jumped up and raced out of the house. He was in time to jump on the running board of Fenwick's car and stop him.

Fenwick said, "Get off my car. Why have you come? To gloat?"

Matt opened the door and dropped into the seat beside Fenwick. "You're going to answer some questions," he said grimly. "You just insulted Grandma and threw away thousands. Why? Because you couldn't stand her any longer, as you stated? I don't think so, Fenwick."

"Who cares what you think." He shifted gears noisily. "Get out or I'll carry you off. I'm not staying here."

"Because you're afraid. That's it. Somebody told you if you didn't sacrifice your right to Grandma's inheritance, you'd be killed. Like Gilbert Miller was killed last year."

"You're crazy." Fenwick didn't put too much enthusiasm into his denial. "Get out."

He started the car. Matt opened the door, thrust a foot to the running board, and spoke quickly, "You're a yellow rat, Fenwick. You don't deserve to inherit. You're letting someone scare you off."

Fenwick stepped on the gas pedal. "I don't want to die like Gilbert did. I know what you're up to. You told me to do this or be killed. You know too much."

MATT jumped. He didn't want a four-mile hike back to the house. He walked slowly up the drive. He patted his vest pocket to assure himself there was a note and this wasn't a dream. He was going to be killed, as an example. Not for Fenwick's benefit. The man had succumbed to intimidation anyway.

Someone else was being threatened. Someone, among the heirs, had concocted a scheme whereby he—or she—intended to profit handsomely. As each heir withdrew, or was killed, the inheritance for each survivor became that much greater. Matt would be killed and one other heir would recognize the meaning of the note found on his body. He'd quit, too. Who was the note meant to frighten? Mr. Busley, McQuillan, Jonathan Holman, Carrie Latham, or her son, Ron?

One of that group was meant to be forced to give up the inheritance due. Of the others, one was an intended murderer. Matt broke out in a cold sweat. He'd strike soon. After breakfast the next morning, they'd break up the party and all go home. It had to happen before then. Tonight! There would be no tomorrow for Matt Stanford. He shuddered and hated the darkness.

Jonathan was sitting on the porch steps when Matt approached. Matt sat down beside him. Jonathan smoked a pipe. Even in the gloom Matt noticed his worried expression.

"Matt," he said, "why did you chase after Fenwick that way?"

"Why?"

"Because I have to know. Man alive, talk. It means a great deal. Perhaps my life."

Matt said softly, "Who told you to walk out and give up your inheritance, Jonathan?"

He turned and grasped Matt's shoulders so hard Matt winced in pain. "How did you know? How?"

Matt shook himself free, "Wait a minute. I know what you're thinking. That it was I. Well, you're wrong. Fenwick just quit because he was too scared to go on. He said he didn't want to be killed like Gilbert Miller was killed last year. Someone is trying the same line with you. Who is it?"

Jonathan shuddered. "Matt, I don't know. There was a telephone call last week. I couldn't recognize the voice. I don't even know if it was a man's or a woman's. I was told unless I insulted your grandmother and told her to keep her damned money, I'd be killed. Yesterday, just before I started up here, the same voice called. It told me I wouldn't have another chance. Unless I pulled out before tomorrow morning, I'd never get back to town."

"Just a voice," Matt groaned. "It means nothing."

"There was a note, too." Jonathan reached into his pocket. "I found it on the pillow in my room when I arrived. Matt, you're not behind this?"

Matt smiled wryly as he took the note, "I'm slated to be the object lesson for you, Jonathan. I'm to be killed so you'll scare properly. In that way our murderer is getting rid of two heirs. You and I. Let's go onto the porch where there is enough light to see by."

THEY walked to the living room window and stood to one side of it. Matt read Jonathan's brief note. It merely told him he'd see exactly why he should obey orders very soon. Matt compared the block printing, the ink, and the quality of the paper with the note he'd found in his pocket. They were all the same, as nearly as he could make out from this rough examination.

Jonathan read Matt's note over his shoulder. "Gosh! That's awful. Matt, I'll get out. If I go now, you won't be killed. Whoever is behind this can kill you. Look what happened to Gil Miller last year."

Matt nodded. “He went out for a walk. We found him much later. He’d fallen off the cliff to the rocks on the shore. I don’t fancy that kind of an end, Jonathan, but I’ll be double damned if anybody can scare me this way. You stay. We’ll see it through.”

“But your life? Matt, it’s too dangerous.”

“Forget it,” Matt said. “I was hit on the head about seven o’clock tonight. You were here then. Who was missing at that time? It would take a good half hour to reach the spot where I was struck and get back here.”

“I don’t know,” Jonathan groaned. “We don’t especially enjoy one another’s company, so it isn’t like a family gathering. I went to my room. Dr. Busley went for a walk. He always does whenever he comes up here. Along the cliff. I can’t help you there, Matt.”

Matt walked toward the door. “Keep this quiet. I’ll go in first. You wait a few minutes before entering, so nobody will have any idea we’ve been together.”

Jonathan shrugged. “I’ll do anything you say, but it’s too late. Ron Latham was peeking out of the window at us a moment ago. He knows we’ve been together.”

Matt swore and walked into the house. Grandma had gone back to her room. She always did before dinner, so her heirs might wrangle a bit. It added to what she considered the liveliness of the party. Matt went upstairs.

Grandma was in her room. She looked keenly at Matt, then dismissed Mrs. Parker with a wave of her hand. When the door closed behind the servant, Matt dropped into a chair.

“It’s caught up with you. Grandma,” he said. “I’ve half expected something of this sort to happen. You’ve pitted those people against one another until they think of nothing but the money they’ll get when you die. Now one of them seems to have conjured up a smart trick to increase his share.”

“What are you talking about, Matt?”

“Fenwick just told you off. Naturally, you cut him out of your will. Or you intend to do so. He said he was fed up, but that was a lie. He was scared into sacrificing his share of your estate.”

“Scared? How? What do you mean?” The old lady’s faded eyes were bright in interest.

Matt took his note out of his pocket. “This was planted on me when I was assaulted. It’s an anonymous note to an anonymous person. I’m to be murdered. The person it means to intimidate will realize the murderer means business, tell you where to get off and withdraw as your heir. I’ll be dead. That means my share and the intimidated person’s share will be divided among those remaining. Add to that Fenwick’s share. Later, if this works, it will be repeated. Someone else will die, someone else will be intimidated until there are only two or three heirs left.”

The old lady’s almost transparent hands curled into tight fists. “I never believed it would come to this, Matt. I can stop it. I’ll announce—”

“You’ll do nothing,” Matt said curtly. “Postponing this won’t help. We’ve got to catch our would-be killer. Jonathan is the person intimidated. He got this note. Read it.”

“It’s fantastic!” the old lady cried.

“Fantastic nothing. It’s a very practical way of getting money. You’ve been having a lot of fun, Grandma. It’s led to murder.”

“Not yet,” the old lady cried. “Not yet, Matt. Nobody has been killed so far. Gilbert wasn’t murdered. We know why he went over the cliff.”

“Yes,” Matt nodded. “We know. So do most of the others and it gives me one lead. I’m going for a walk. I fully expect the murderer will try to carry out his plans. So help me, if you take any action to prevent him, I’ll expose you as a sentimental old

fraud. You don't really mean all this. It's just your way of having fun. Wish me luck, Grandma. I'm going out to nab me one potential murderer—or be murdered."

HE GOT away before she could protest.

Matt walked noisily downstairs. Jonathan was by the door. The others were in the living room. Matt spoke in a voice loud enough to be heard by all.

"I'm taking a stroll. Anybody want to come along?"

No one from the living room answered. Jonathan seized his arm.

"You can't do it. This is the chance the killer has been waiting for."

"I'll be ready." Matt said grimly.

"I'm going along, Matt."

"Over my dead body, you are. Keep an eye on them, Jonathan."

Matt walked out. He hurried around to the back of the house and crouched down behind a bush. With Jonathan guarding the front door, anyone who intended to slip away would leave by the side door. Ten minutes went by. Then someone was briefly profiled in the lighted doorway. It was Dr. Busley. He walked nervously into the gloom.

Matt stood erect, eyes narrowed a trifle. He began walking toward the cliff. With each step his determination grew weaker. He felt like running for his car and getting away. He guessed there must be some of the old lady's spunk in him though. He didn't deviate from what he intended to do.

He reached the cliff's edge.

Matt came to a dead stop. He thought he heard brush crackle but everything seemed to be perfectly quiet. It was an intensely dark night. The surf wasn't even as noisy as usual.

THE first rock hit Matt a glancing blow on the shoulder, but it sent him careening crazily toward the edge of the cliff. Another rock whizzed past his head. He drew back from the cliff and threw himself flat. A small boulder hit the ground two feet from his head. He squirmed into a crouching position. He heard the next stone on its way and lunged to one side. Then he was up and running for the brush.

Someone else was running too, with a good start, but Matt kept going. He stopped abruptly, heard the crashing, and proceeded in that direction. He was getting closer. Then someone screamed. A high-pitched yell of terror. Matt's legs traveled even faster.

He reached the pair quickly. Jonathan was on the ground, arms shielding his face. Ron Latham, Carrie's son, stood over the older man and had his foot drawn back for a lusty kick. He saw Matt. Possibly he didn't recognize him, but Ron was game. He met Matt's savage attack with a punch that hurt. Then they were both on the ground. Matt pinned Ron down. Ron's fingers sought Matt's face, questing his eyes and finding them. Matt smashed home a solid punch before the inquiring fingers could do their grim work.

"It was him." Jonathan was on his feet too, wiping blood from his face. "The little rat was following you. So was 1, to see no harm came to you. When I jumped him, he fought like a wild cat."

"Grab his feet," Matt ordered. "We'll carry him back. It will be easier than fighting all the way, as he'll do if he snaps out of it."

THERE was a different kind of group assembled before Grandma's wheel chair this time. Ron, his swollen face being nursed by his mother, glowered at everyone. Jonathan seemed rather proud of himself. Dr. Busley made no attempt to exercise his medical skill on the battered victims. He just chewed a cigar and looked worried.

Ron pushed his mother's ministering hand away. "I saw Matt leave. I saw Jonathan go. Then Dr. Busley went out.

I wondered what they were up to so I

also took a walk, Next thing I know, Jonathan was trying to strangle me."

Dr. Busley raised his eyebrows. "I was merely taking a little stroll."

Matt said, "You were out there for a specific reason, Doctor. You were also being intimidated. Why am I so sure? Because the note in my pocket wasn't meant for Jonathan; but for you. As a doctor, you would have been the first to examine my body.

"Last year, Doctor, Gilbert Miller was found dead at the bottom of the cliff. I'm going to ask each of you one question. Jonathan, you'll be first."

"Go ahead," Jonathan said. "I'm ready to help in any way I can."

"Do you know how Gilbert Miller met his death? And why?"

Jonathan shrugged. "It's quite obvious. He was murdered. The killer said so in that note."

MATT turned to the old lady. "Grandma, your secret was well kept. Tell Jonathan what happened last year."

The old lady said in a crisp, clear voice, "Gilbert came to me and asked for his share to be given him then. He'd gambled his firm's money and was in danger of being caught. I refused to help him out of the mess. Gilbert committed suicide."

Jonathan blinked. Matt faced him. "Everyone in this room knew that except you. Grandma warned that if anybody told the truth about his death, that person would be disinherited. So the secret was kept. You thought, like people were supposed to think, that Gilbert accidentally fell off the cliff. You figured you could say it was murder and get away with it. You are the only person here who didn't know it was suicide. The only person who'd be fool enough, in complete ignorance, to try and make out his death as murder. You are the avaricious scoundrel who is trying to whittle down the number of heirs to make your share greater—"

Jonathan did try. He tried desperately to reach the door, but he only got a foot or so beyond the old lady's chair. Her cane flicked out. Jonathan tripped, sprawled on the floor, and Matt landed on top of him.

"Call the police, Carrie," the old lady ordered. "I told you I changed my will each year, according to my fancy. I did not. The will was made fifteen years ago and has never been changed. It will be now. Jonathan gets nothing. Fenwick gets less than I intended because he's a coward. After the police take Jonathan away, I'll tell all of you exactly what you'll get when I die. How am I doing, Matt?"

"It's about time," Matt grunted, "that you woke up to the fact that you've turned us into a bunch of worried, panicky people. You almost turned Jonathan into a killer and me into a corpse."