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THE CHESS PARTNER

SWEATING WITH APPREHENSION, for he was gun-shy, Martin Chronister cocked the trigger of the Colt .38 and sighted down the barrel for the last time.

The gun, held between the jaws of a vise clamped to the top of a bookcase in his bedroom, was aimed—through a small hole he had cut through the plywood wall—at a chair drawn up to a chess table in the adjacent livingroom.

After examining, without touching, the dark twine that was tied to the trigger and which passed through a staple to the floor, Chronister followed the line through the door and into the livingroom, making sure it lay free along the wainscoting, to where it ended at his own chair at the chess table, opposite the first chair.

For a moment he thought he heard Banning's car, but decided that it was the evening wind beginning to sough among the pines. He added a log to the fire, then turned to look at the painting of his deceased father in the heavy, gilt frame, beneath which the lethal hole in the wall was concealed in shadow.

"I'm using your old Army gun, too." Chronister smiled up at the portrait which he'd lugged down from the attic that afternoon. In the gloomy oils, the medals on the uniform of the disabled old soldier shone dully, like golden poppies through the smoke of battle, and the grim lips seemed to be forming a question.

Why pull a string to do it?

Sure, the Old Man knew what it was to kill an enemy, and might even understand doing it across a chessboard instead of on a battlefield, but he'd always had contempt for his son's fear of guns.

"It isn't just gun-shyness, Martin," he'd said once. "You shrink from every bit of reality and involvement in life!"

No matter, Chronister knew that if he faced Banning with a live gun, he'd botch the job. Doing it his way made the act less personal and more—mechanical.

A crunch of footsteps on the path outside the cabin alerted Chronister to the fact that, having missed the sound of Banning's motor, the zero hour was almost upon him. Flinging open the front door, he greeted his enemy with a false smile of friendship. . . .

IF BANNING WERE ACTUALLY TO DIE that night, it was because he'd made three mistakes, one of which he couldn't help.

First, he'd barged into Chronister's relationship with Mary Robbins. Not that the relationship was much to speak of at the beginning. For two years Chronister had met Mary at the store in town every week when he went to buy his groceries, but the contact had become a cherished event. Always a loner—he had worked for years as a bookkeeper in small-town businesses before he'd retired, unmarried, at forty-nine—Chronister had always been afraid of women. But Mary was different.

She, too, lived in the woods, tending an invalid father, in a house at the foot of Chronister's hill, but he'd always been too shy to pay them a visit. Although she might be, as the storekeeper said, rather long in the tooth, she had a gentle voice and nice hands and eyes, and above all she seemed maternal, which perhaps was her greatest attraction for him.

Then came the Saturday when he'd met Mary in the canned goods section, and they'd struck up a conversation that seemed even livelier than usual, over the quality of different brands of tuna fish. Suddenly Banning happened along, looking remarkably distinguished in his tan raincoat, with his prematurely graying hair.

"I couldn't help overhearing," he'd said in his knowing way. "Fresh *anything* is better than canned, unless you're afraid that building up your red corpuscles will make you wayward."

Mary had looked uncomfortable, and murmuring something about finding it difficult to buy fresh fish in a mountain community, moved away. Chronister was outraged, but he waited until they were outside the store and he had put his groceries in his pickup before he spoke.

"When I'm talking with my friends, I'd appreciate your waiting until you're introduced before you volunteer your opinions."

"I hate to hear phony talk, that's all," Banning said. "She isn't really interested in tuna fish, Martin. What she really wants is a man in bed with her. You'll never make the grade with that kind of talk!"

Chronister felt a sudden rush of blood to his head. "What gives you the right to interfere in my business?" he shouted. "Just because you come out once a week and play chess with me doesn't make you my adviser. And your winning lately doesn't make you my mental superior!"

"You must feel it does, or you wouldn't mention it," Banning said.

Chronister nearly struck out at him then. Until a few months ago, Banning and he had been pretty evenly matched upon the board. Then his chess partner had started winning relentlessly, which seemed to Chronister to give his partner a psychological ascendancy over him. No matter how hard Chronister worked to improve his game, he had continued to lose, and Banning seemed to grow more sure of his domination.

After what had happened in the store, Chronister was beside himself. "Well, Miss Robbins and I are not chessmen," he said, "so keep your damned fingers off us!"

"Sure," Banning said.

He walked away abruptly, crossing the highway to the hotel where he lived alone on a modest disability pension.

"I always wanted to be an intellectual bum," he'd told Chronister once, "and the Army helped me do it."

Banning had lost his left arm in Korea. . . .

For the next two weeks Chronister lived without having a single visitor at his cabin. Twice he saw Mary at the store and the last time she asked him to come to visit her and her father.

Chronister kept putting off the visit, largely out of a lifetime habit of avoiding entanglements, but Mary was often in his thoughts.

Meanwhile he worked hard at his chess books, playing games against the masters. He had a hunch that Banning would be back, and sure enough, one Friday around the end of April his chess partner appeared, full of conciliatory smiles.

"No use holding a grudge, I figure," Banning said. "Besides, I miss our games."

"So do I," Chronister agreed. "I've been boning up on the books, and I think I can take you now."

"Let's find out."

The struggle this time was more even, and up to the end game Chronister felt he had a fair chance of winning. But in the final moves, Banning brought his hopes down crashing, and then checkmated him.

Once again came Banning's smile of superiority, his almost physical levitation—which was Banning's second mistake.

"By the way," he said from his height, "I paid a couple of visits to Mary and the old man. You're quite right in giving her the eye. In a housecoat she's not bad at all. Although her pa is a dreary lump. Every time he looks at my arm, he fights the Battle of the Marne all over again!"

If Chronister had had his gun handy, he might have used it personally then. Instead, he played another game and lost, and invited Banning back the following week.

The very next day he dressed up and went down to visit Mary and her father.

"I wondered why you hadn't been down before," Mary said, standing beside the wheelchair in which sat a withered old man with sly eyes. For some reason, she seemed more amiable here than at the store, and Chronister remembered what Banning had said about the housecoat. Now she was wearing a kind of muu-muu which concealed all but her head and hands.

Aware of his scrutiny, she colored and excused herself, and the old man began talking about the First World War.

"If I hadn't got shrapnel in my spine," he whined, "I'd have taken up the Army as a profession. You been in the service yet, sonny?"

Chronister winced. "No, sir. My father was a colonel in the First World War, and he wanted me to go into the Army, too, but I guess I wasn't cut out for it."

"Good life for a red-blooded man!"

"My father thought so, too."

Mary returned shortly wearing jeans and a tight-fitting sweater, and Chronister saw what Banning had meant.

"My chess partner said he enjoyed a visit with you," Chronister said, following the line of least resistance.

"Oh, Mr. Banning, yes. He's quite delightful."

Chronister felt a stab of jealousy. "I guess he talks a little more easily than I do," he admitted. "Social situations have always been pretty hard going for me."

"It mustn't be that you're antisocial; you just don't like crowds. Well, neither do we. That's why Papa and I live in the woods. I see your light up there sometimes."

"And I see yours."

It went like that for perhaps an hour. Mary served tea and some cookies she'd made, and he departed, not sure what kind of impression he'd created. But he knew that Mary attracted him, and that he felt

the need of her, because when he returned to his cabin that night he was aware for the first time of its emptiness.

Through the rest of the week he continued playing over the master games, but no matter how hard he tried to concentrate, thoughts of Mary interfered. Finally, on a Thursday, in the middle of a game, he threw the chess book aside in disgust, put on his hiking books, and went walking in the sunny woods.

As he sat resting under a yellow pine, he heard voices, a man's and a woman's, which presently he recognized as Banning's—and Mary's.

He wanted to run, but he felt paralyzed, and as he sat they came close enough for him to hear what they were saying.

"... spring is the time for a walk," Banning was saying. "I don't get out half enough."

"Nor do I," Mary replied. "It's so lovely."

The two had stopped a few yards off, and Chronister prayed that the chaparral concealed him sufficiently.

"Look," Mary said, "you can see a roof from here. It must be Mr. Chronister's."

"Does he ever take you for a walk?"

"Mr. Chronister? Oh, never. He's been to see me only once in two years! Besides, I don't get out much."

"You should. Your father can do a little for himself, can't he?"

"Not much, and he's getting worse every day, so I like to be around when he calls."

"If you ever need help, Mary—I mean, with your father . . ."

"Thank you."

A silence followed, and Chronister, straining his ears, thought he heard them kiss. Then there was a sudden movement and quick footsteps sounded down the leafy trail.

"Mary!" Banning called, and then he, too, was gone.

Chronister continued to sit, his fear giving way to anger, then to rage. Finally he rose and pounded through the brush, not caring whether he was seen or heard, and by the time he reached his cabin his mind was made up. Mary was going to be his. He was going to kill Banning—tomorrow night. . . .

THE ZERO HOUR had come.

Banning, sure of himself tonight as ever, sat down in his usual chair, took out his tobacco pouch and loaded his pipe.

"Been doing some changing around, eh?" he asked, looking up to where Chronister had hung his father's portrait to hide the hole in the wall.

"I like a change every once in a while," Chronister said. He sat down opposite Banning, casually leaned over and picked up the twine, laying the loose end across his lap. Banning was staring at the picture.

"Would that be your father? He was an Army man, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"You know, he looked familiar. I see he lost his left arm, too."

"In the Argonne. He led his own battalion."

"Must have been quite a man." Banning's eyes seemed to hold a taunt. "Well, it's your turn, Martin, I think with the white."

Chronister played pawn to king's fourth, and as the opening game developed in a conventional pattern, his hands upon the twine began to sweat.

If fifteen minutes, however, the game took an unexpected turn, and Chronister concentrated on the problems so avidly that he forgot the string, the gun, even his intent to murder. At the back of his mind he knew he was playing superbly well, with a freedom and dash that he had never before achieved. His moves seemed to flow, to dovetail, shaping themselves into a pattern that was a sheer work of art. Time and again he heard exasperated sighs from his chess companion that ignited his ingenuity further until finally, in the end game, he played simple cat and mouse, certain of victory.

"I concede the game," Banning said at last, leaning back in his chair. Chronister, looking up like one coming out of a dream, was surprised to see a new Banning, one divested of pride, humble and human.

In the objectivity of the moment he saw, too, that Banning had never deliberately meant to make him feel inferior. The guy had just been elated by winning a *game*.

"You played better tonight than I ever could," Banning said, smiling warmly. "But I guess it's just your lucky night." He put his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I met Mary in town this morning, and she gave me this to give to you. I won't say I didn't read it, so I happen to know she prefers you to me."

Chronister took the note in a daze, letting the twine fall lightly to the floor.

Dear Mr. Chronister:

Papa had a bad spell last evening, and since we are without a telephone, and you are the closest person to me, I wonder if you'd mind my coming up to see you if I have need of your help?

I'd rather call on you than anyone.

Mary

When Chronister looked up, Banning was staring at the portrait again.

"Now I know who your father looks like," he said. "He looks like *me*—even if his arm weren't missing!"

Chronister's mouth felt dry as he rose. "Let's go into the kitchen and have a beer," he said through stiff lips. He took a step forward then, and felt the tug upon his hiking boot where the twine had caught in a lace hook. Before he knew what happened, the explosion filled the room, making the lamps wink in their sockets.

The echoes seemed a long time dying away, and the blood upon the floor grew into a pool beside the dead man.

There came a timid tapping at the cabin door.

Knowing at last the meaning of utter involvement, Martin Chronister went to answer it.