

OVERNIGHT GUEST

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

THE STORY THUS FAR: Adam Bruce, department of justice operator vacationing in the Northeastern hills, where he had formerly lived, ran into his previous boss, Inspector Tope, and Mrs. Tope. He recommended that the Tope's spend the night at Dewain's Mill, operated by Bee Dewain, whom Bruce regarded very highly. Later that night Tope phoned Bruce to come out to the auto camp and have Ned Quill, a state trooper, join them. Despite the fact Bruce was to leave the next morning, he went out to meet Tope, knowing that something serious had happened. He was assured that Bee was not in trouble. He was to meet them at the Faraway cottage.

CHAPTER II

While Tope began to get out the bags, Bee and Mrs. Tope approached the cabin and the girl produced a key. Then, as she tried the knob, she said, in a surprised tone, half to herself: "Why, that's funny! It's unlocked!"

She entered and began to raise shades and let in a flood of light, and when Tope followed, with a bag in each hand, she was explaining to Mrs. Tope:

"You see, I had all the furniture built in. It's cheaper than buying." Tope set down the bags; and he saw beds end to end along one wall, and a chest of drawers beyond. The beds appeared to promise comfort. The carpenter had built frames to support the springs and sheathed these frames down to the floor, so there was no chance for dust and rubbish to accumulate underneath. There were windows in front and rear and toward the brook; and a fireplace at one end, with birch logs ready for the match, and kindling and a crumpled newspaper under them on the clean hearth upon which, clearly, there had never been a fire.

Said Bee Dewain: "I'll open the windows. It seems stuffy. Would you like a blaze?"

"I think so," Mrs. Tope agreed. "It may turn chilly."

Tope crossed to touch a match to the paper under the kindling; but as he stooped down, he noticed something lying on the hearth, and held his hand.

It was a thing of no apparent importance. Another man, even though he saw it, would have discovered in this object no implications at all. It was simply a match which had been lighted and allowed to burn down till only half an inch of uncharred wood remained.

Tope's eye was caught by this match almost completely burned, and he saw two or three more, lying here and there. He had an old habit of noticing unimportant things, of suspecting importance in them; so now before he lighted the fire, he searched in the kindling and in the crumpled paper and on the hearth behind and beneath the logs, till he collected eleven matches which had like the first been lighted and burned almost to the ends before they were thrown away.

Bee Dewain was saying: "And supper will be ready at seven o'clock. Now if there's anything else you want—"

"You say we're the first ones to occupy this camp?" Tope asked mildly.

"The very first," Bee assured him. "I do hope you'll be comfortable." She turned to the door. "When supper's ready we ring a bell! You'll be sure to hear!"

As the girl's steps passed out of hearing, Mrs. Tope said: "Oh, we forgot to give her the message from Adam Bruce!"

"I was thinking of something else," Tope confessed; and he asked: "Need anything more out of the car?"

"Not for just one night!"

"We might stay longer," he suggested, and she smiled.

"Because a brook runs past the door?"

"When I see a place that looks fishy, I always want to try it out," he confessed. Something in his tone made her look at him; but he chuckled disarmingly. She began to unpack the few things they would need.

"It's nice knowing we're the very first ones in here!" she suggested. He said, half to himself: "I wonder why they didn't turn on the lights."

"Why should she? It's still broad daylight!"

"Instead of using matches?" he persisted, in a deep abstraction; and Mrs. Tope looked at him with amusement.

"I discover new virtues in you every day," she remarked, "but you've unsuspected vices, too! It's time you quit detecting at your time of life, my dear. What are you wondering about now?"

He hesitated, said at last: "Why, these!" He pointed to the mantel; she came to look, and he showed her those eleven burned stubs of matches which he had arranged in order there. "I found them in the fireplace," he said, watching her.

"Why not?" she protested, amused. "Probably the carpenters or the plumbers or the electricians threw them there, when they were finishing up the cabin."

"They wouldn't be working, at night," he insisted.

"Whoever lighted these matches used them to see by." She said briskly: "Nonsense! You've too much imagination! Are you trying to—scare me?"

"No, no!" He stood by the mantel, his back to the fire, looking thoughtfully this way and that as though he sought something. Yet in this small place nothing of any size could be concealed. There was no hiding place—unless perhaps the box-like under-structure of the beds.

"What is it you're looking for?" she asked.

"Nothing," he insisted, mendaciously. "Which bed shall I take?"

"The one nearest the fire."

He nodded, and went to the foot of the bed, built against the wall. "I never saw anyone yet who tucked in my covers at the foot the way I like them," he remarked.

"I'll do it!"

"Not even you!"

She laughed softly. "All right," she assented. "You're fussy as an old maid! I'll be down by the brook, if you're bound to be so independent. Come out when you're through!"

Mrs. Tope left the inspector inside, and walked toward the brook and sat down beside the water.



"Now, if there is anything else you want—"

relaxed and at her ease. It may have been ten minutes before she heard his step behind her.

"Well, ready for supper?" she asked.

He was a moment in answering. "Yes, I am." She looked at him intently, and he added: "But you know, I don't like this cabin. I wonder if Miss Dewain would let us change to one of the others, nearer the road?"

"Why? You act as though Faraway were—haunted!"

He said in slow apology: "You'll have to get used to my notions. I go a lot by them."

"We'll ask her when we go to supper," she promised; and after a moment she said, not looking at him, looking at the dark water: "Of course, I know something is bothering you and I know you'll tell me when you're ready. But—if you're uneasy, suppose we move on, to-night?"

He shook his head. "No, not to-night. Tomorrow, maybe; but not tonight."

Her eyes were grave, but she made no comment; and they came down to the Mill together, came into the bright dining-room. Bee Dewain was here alone, and Mrs. Tope said directly:

"Miss Dewain, may we change our minds about Faraway?" And she explained, smiling apologetically: "Mr. Tope lived in an apartment before we were married; and now he isn't happy unless he can hear traffic going by. He wants to be nearer the road."

"Of course," Bee assented. "I'll have Earl shift your bags while we eat supper."

Tope asked: "Have you a pay station here?"

The girl said: "Yes indeed!" She showed him the phone in the closet under the stairs.

When he emerged, he said at once: "You know, Miss Dewain, I think we have a mutual friend. Adam Bruce?"

The girl cried with quick interest: "Do you know Adam?"

"Known him for years," Tope declared. "I've heard him speak of you! In fact, he advised us to stop here. We had lunch with him in Middleford today. He said he'd seen you just yesterday. He sent you his love!"

Bee, her eyes dancing, tossed her head; and Tope said watching her: "He warned us not to mention his name; said if we did, you wouldn't take us in!"

"Adam's an idiot!" said Bee Dewain, her cheeks hot. While Tope was at the phone, the supper bell had been rung violently by some one at the kitchen door; and as Bee

spoke, perhaps summoned by the bell, the gray-haired violinist appeared in time to hear her words.

"Adam?" the newcomer echoed. "Our young friend Bruce?" His tone was sardonic, hostile.

Bee introduced him; and he bowed, smiling. "Balser Vade, otherwise known as the Lone Wolf," he explained. "I have the dignity of a cabin named after me, as Miss Dewain may have told you." And he asked: "What particular idiosyncrasy has our Mr. Bruce committed now?"

No one answered him, but Mrs. Tope saw her husband's glance rest upon the violinist, a lively speculation in the old man's eye. Then others came trooping in. The Murrell twins and their father and mother Mrs. Tope had already seen; but there were others, new arrivals, men. Miss Dewain introduced them. Mr. Whitlock, she said, and Mr. Beal.

The supper was a good one and most of them ate in a silence that was to some degree enforced; for Mrs. Murrell, almost from the first, monopolized the conversation. Once Tope interjected a question.

"You say you've been here two weeks, Mrs. Murrell? I thought most people just stayed overnight." "Most of them do," Mrs. Murrell agreed. "But Mrs. Priddy, the cook here, is my step-sister; and I always did say I'd rather eat her cooking than anybody's. Poor thing, she hates working all day in the kitchen; but she married that good-for-nothing Earl Priddy, and she's had to support him ever since."

Some pot or pan rattled angrily in the kitchen, and Mrs. Tope suspected that Mrs. Priddy had perhaps been meant to overhear. Bee said hurriedly:

"Of course we have a lot of people here in the course of a week—coming and going all the time."

"I suppose the week-ends are your busy times?" Tope suggested.

"Well, yes," Bee agreed. "There were six cabins full last night, and eight Saturday night."

But Mrs. Murrell, not to be silenced, turned her catechism to Whitlock and Beal; and Mrs. Tope saw that Tope watched Whitlock with an unobtrusive eye. After supper, without apology or excuse, these two men went out of doors; and Tope turned to Mrs. Tope, almost briskly.

"Shall we go to our cabin, my dear?" he asked. "I thought you might read aloud to me a while."

Mrs. Tope had never read aloud to him; yet she betrayed no least surprise at this suggestion. "We must finish our book," she agreed, and rose.

Inspector Tope turned with Mrs. Tope toward their new cabin. It was called Cascade. On the stoop, he paused and looked around. Dusk cloaked them from every view. He made sure of this; and he said in a low tone:

"Go inside, my dear. Talk, turn on the light. Draw the blinds. Read aloud. I'll come soon." And without waiting for her assent, he slipped away, his feet silent on the carpet of pine needles.

Mrs. Tope was half impatient with this mystery, and half alarmed. Nevertheless after a moment she obeyed him. She went in, and drew the blinds. Then in sudden haste—the darkness was affrighting—she switched on the lights, and found a magazine in her bag and began obediently to read aloud. Alone in the cabin, her voice went monotonously on and on.

But her eyes did not stay fixed on the page. Her nerves were steady enough; yet the steadiest nerves might have been shaken by this necessity of sitting alone, in a small closed cabin with drawn blinds.

Adam found the door open. He went in, turned on the lights, closed the door. Some embers of a fire still glowed on the hearth, and he added fresh wood, and stood with his back to the fire, intensely alert, listening for any sound outside, wondering where Tope was, and what the old man had to tell, and how soon he would appear. But almost at once he heard soft footsteps on the turf—not on the gravel drive—outside; and then, without knocking, Tope opened the door. He came in. Mrs. Tope behind him.

"Hello, Adam," he said mildly.

"I didn't expect to see you again so soon," Adam confessed, gripping the other's hand. "Hello, Mrs. Tope. Inspector, if this is a wild-goose chase, I'll take it out of your hide. I'm supposed to be back on the job at noon tomorrow."

"You'll have a job here," Tope told him. "Let me give it to you in order, Adam," he explained. "So I'll get it straight in my own mind." And as Adam nodded, he went on slowly, as if weighing each phrase:

"When Miss Dewain put us in this cabin, she said it was new this spring; and that no one had ever spent the night in it. She had a key to unlock the door here; but the door was already unlocked."

"Probably whoever cleaned up after the carpenters got through forgot to lock it."

"Maybe," Tope assented. "But—I don't like that word 'probably'! Here's the next thing. I started to light the fire, and saw a match on the hearth. A burned match. It was burned clear down; but not the way a match is burned when it is used to light a cigarette."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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