

The Lovable Rogue

THE ROGUE MAKES A COMEBACK

BY
TUX TOLEDO



The thrill of having been outwitted so cleverly by Irene Atom was temporary and I soon fell into a despondency that not even my Rolls Royce could cure. Do you have any idea of how despondent that is? No, you probably don't. Well, let me tell you it's very despondent. To top it off I had no place to stay and was forced to check back into the Kensington Park Hotel.

The doorman said "good morning" with a New York accent as he opened the brass-rimmed doors. It was a clear, winter San Francisco morning and a sharp, ocean-tinged breeze slapped my face. What a way to start the day.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

I pulled my dark green, almost brown, Canali overcoat tight and walked into the wind. There's nothing like a good overcoat to keep the chill from ones bones. My overcoat had been meticulously crafted from the finest Merino wool by the hands of the finest Italian tailors. Speaking of Merino wool, did you know that each Merino sheep produces up to ten kilograms of wool? Perhaps you didn't. If not, then you probably also do not know that Merino sheep were originally from the Mediterranean basin and were taken to Australia and New Zealand in the 18th Century. If you did, then consider yourself one of an impressively knowledgeable minority.

As I walked on I was soon faced with the difficult choice of a either good cigar from Dunhill or the *San Francisco Chronicle* from a corner newsstand. I chose the *Chronicle*. Dunhill will always exist; the continued existence of small corner newsstands in the modern world is remote. Perhaps you have noticed my tendency to support the underdog.

I passed the Ritz Deli and noticed Sarah Everton having an intimate cup of coffee with a man I think I may have met before. She saw me through the tall windows and motioned for me to join her.

"Good morning, Sarah," I said.

"Good morning, Winston." She grabbed my hands and kissed me a bit too dramatically. "It's so nice to see you. It's been such a long time." Her smile restored the youth to the outer reaches of her face. It had been a while since I had seen her and I must say that if she wasn't careful she was going to



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

end up as portly as her husband. Have you noticed how wealth has a way of ravaging the body? Perhaps you have.

The man rose.

"Do you know Tom Sledgeton?" Sarah asked, presenting her breakfast partner. He was a tall man, also well on his way to becoming portly. He wore an expensive suit that he had bought off the rack without alteration. It's a crime to pay that much money and not get bespoke or at least made-to-measure. Style, you either have it or you don't and if you have it, well, enough said about that. Mr. Sledgeton did not have it.

"We may have met before," I said to him. "I'm Winston Churchill."

"How do you do?" he said. He looked me over the way an investor looks over stock quotations.

"Tom's a good friend of Rodney's," Sarah explained.

"And how is Rodney?" I asked.

"Fine. He's out of town on business. He'll be back this afternoon. We're having a dinner party Friday night. My horoscope said it would be a good night for a party. Why don't you join us?"

"I'd love to."

"Good," she said. "Parties are always better when you're around. Something exciting always seems to happen."

"I'm sure she means that in a positive way," Sledgeton said.

"Of course I do!" Sarah laughed.

"Thank you," I said.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Well, it's been nice meeting you," Tom Sledgeton said, suddenly grabbing my hand.

I took the hint.

"Yes, goodbye," I said. I kissed Sarah on the cheek and left the deli. I continued toward the newsstand with renewed vigor. The prospect of the Everton's party brightened my spirits.

The Everton's were young money on a buying binge they hoped would secure their place in established society. They lived in a small palace, imaginatively called "Everton House", on Broadway, west of Van Ness. Pretty ritzy territory. My Rolls Royce always looked at home in their driveway.

I had known Sarah's husband, Rodney, for quite some time. He was an impetuous man, relentless in his pursuit of success. His conglomeration of businesses were prosperous, his shotgun collection impressive, his parties predatory and expensive. Friday evening promised to be eventful if nothing else.

* * *

James easily conquered the Friday night traffic and we arrived promptly at Everton House. Since it had been raining on-and-off I wore a genuine Burburrry's trench coat over a heavy wool, brown bespoke suit from Henry Poole. Sarah's butler answered the door. It slipped from his grasp as he opened it and it banged against the wall. Very shabby. Not something a proper butler would have done. Then again, he didn't look like a proper butler.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

He was in his mid-twenties with a sculpted physique that should have been adorning a piazza in Rome. Definitely Sarah's type.

"Winston Churchill," I announced to him.

"Who?"

"Winston Churchill."

I handed him my trench coat. He reluctantly took it. I'm sure my sartorial flair was wasted on him. He didn't look like the kind of man who could tell the difference between a real Burberry's trench coat and a cheap imitation. In case you don't know, the secret to a real Burberry is the cotton. It is chemically treated while still in the yarn, woven tightly into cloth, and proofed again before being made into a garment. Class will always tell.

The butler looked at James.

"Where shall we put your driver?"

"He's not my driver, he's my **chauffeur**."

"Oh, then he'd better come inside."

The butler led us into a large living room decorated in shades of dark blue and maroon. The furniture was magazine chic and appeared to be permanently fastened to the floor. A stone mantle imported from France sat above the fireplace and a fire crackled in the hearth. The random mixing of interior design styles and eras did not appeal to my decorating tastes.

Rodney, shotgun in hand, stood in the center of the living room. Two other men, one of them Tom Sledgeton, stood in jealous trances in front of him. Rodney saw me enter and smiled.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Winston!" he called. "It's good to see you again. Sarah told me she had invited you. I'm glad you could come."

I joined the trio and shook a massive hand attached to a log-shaped arm that protruded from Rodney's canyon-width shoulder. Everything about Rodney was big.

"I'd never miss one of your parties," I said to him. "You're looking good. And I say, so is that shotgun."

Rodney beamed.

"Yes, I just bought it at an auction. I outbid these two for it."

Sledgeton and the other man snarled.

"Oh, by the way, do you know these gentlemen?" Rodney asked, exaggerating his pronunciation of "gentlemen".

"Tom Sledgeton," Sledgeton said to me as if we had never met.

"I'm Edgar Littleton," the other said as he shook my hand. He was a small man with Ivy League glasses and a bald head.

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

"All three of us went to Wharton Business School together," Rodney said. "We've been friends ever since. We have the same hobbies, the same interests, the same everything. Why, we could be triplets!" he laughed. "They're a bit sore at me now, though, because I outbid them for this shotgun. She's a beauty, isn't she?"

Rodney raised the double barrel shotgun for all to see. It had a gold pheasant intricately engraved above the trigger and the stock glowed like finely



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

polished furniture. It was the most beautiful shotgun I had ever seen - even more beautiful than the ones Ted Nance collected.

"It's a vintage A. J. Roberts," Rodney said. "Cost me \$125,000."

I whistled.

"But she's worth every penny," Rodney continued. "Look at that detail work. And the barrel has not been re-blued. That shine is original."

"You've got yourself a masterpiece," I said.

"I know. And they don't." Rodney poked his nose at his two friends and grinned. "Edgar went out of the bidding surprisingly early. But Tom fought me all the way."

"Until you drastically overpaid for it," Tom said. "Still, I should have continued bidding. That A. J. Roberts would have been the crown jewel of my collection. I wanted it badly, but Rodney always seems to know what my limit is."

Rodney laughed and patted Sledgeton on the shoulder.

"Go get a drink and drown your sorrow," he said.

Sledgeton nodded and slithered off.

"I've got a new company, too, Winston."

Edgar frowned and adjusted his frames.

"Edgar tried to outbid me for it," Rodney chuckled. "But he lost his nerve. He always does."

"That isn't so," Edgar growled.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Oh, Edgar, why don't you go and have a drink with Tom. You can both drink away your losses."

"Honestly, Rodney," Edgar said. "One of these days you're going to pay for your arrogance."

"Ha! You guys couldn't afford to make me pay," Rodney laughed.

Edgar shook his head and stormed off. Rodney ran out of laughs and turned to me.

"Winston, the best thing in life is winning," he said. "Like winning that shotgun from Tom and winning that company from Edgar. Winning is truly everything. It's the food we eat and the air we breathe. Yes, winning is what it's all about. Winning makes life worth living."

"What about how you play the game?" I asked.

"If you play the game right, you win."

"Whatever makes you happy."

"Winning makes me happy, Winston. And my shotguns."

"Are you still talking about that shotgun?" a woman asked.

"Of course," Rodney smiled.

The woman joined us and was swallowed into Rodney's friendly embrace. She looked a bit frail but her face was lively. Her eyes were like marbles and they rolled underneath a pair of artificially enhanced eyelids.

"Winston, this is Edgar's wife, Agnes."

"Hello," I said to her. "I'm Winston Churchill."

"My, Rodney, you have such important friends," she giggled.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"I do my best," Rodney laughed.

"Have you met my husband?" Agnes asked me.

"Yes," I said. "And Tom Sledgeton."

"My, the whole crew," she shook her head and chuckled.

"Excuse me," Rodney said to me. "I'm going to put this gun away. Agnes will keep you company."

Agnes smiled and nodded.

"He's been showing everyone that shotgun," she said. "I'm tired of hearing about it. He's just rubbing it in, though, trying to make the other two feel bad. They've been competing against each other like that ever since college. I've never seen anything like it. Once one of them wants something the others also have to have it. It drives me crazy. But they seem to enjoy it. I guess it's just one of those things women don't understand."

"Your husband didn't seem to enjoy losing that company," I said.

"Oh, he'll get over it. He always does. I really don't know how they've managed to stay friends all these years."

"Rodney, put that gun away," Sarah yelled from across the room.

"All right, all right," Rodney said. "Hey, Winston, come over here."

I smiled at Agnes.

"Sorry, but I'm wanted," I said.

"That's all right. One should never keep Rodney waiting."

I joined Rodney in front of a large gun case in the far corner of the room.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Look at this one," he said, taking another shotgun from the case. "It's a Parker."

"Very nice." It looked like one of Ted Nance's guns.

"I think you've seen the rest of them."

I scanned the case.

"Yes, I think so," I said.

He closed the case and locked it.

"Here, hang on to this for me, will you?" he said. He handed me a small, tan envelope. "Keep it with the others."

"Sure."

* * *

Have you ever noticed how elegant dinner parties tend to raise one's spirits? If you inhabit my milieu then you have, if you don't then you probably haven't. But it's true. Trust me. The Everton's party had worked its magic and cured my malaise. The Rolls had regained its charm and I felt good enough to order a new suit. I will not disclose the name of my tailor but I will tell you that the suit will be double-breasted and cut from a dark gray birds-eye fabric that you may have seen on Bogart. And, of course, I had to acquire accessories to match: tie, pocket square and belt. When one owns a Rolls Royce one's wardrobe must measure up. We'll talk about shoes later.

I was in the best of spirits when Monday dawned. The *Monday Chronicle* was delivered with my breakfast and I sat back in a comfortable chair next to my room's window and took a sprinkling of news with my orange juice. All very



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

civilized. All very civilized until the bottom half of the front page. A two-column story shattered my morning: Rodney Everton was missing.

According to an exclusive *Chronicle* story, Rodney had not returned from a Saturday hunting trip. Sarah Everton had expected him home that afternoon but he never returned. She was a bit miffed at the police for telling her that Rodney had not been missing long enough to warrant a full investigation. As the British would say, it was all a bit rum.

Under the circumstances the civilized thing to do was to visit Sarah and offer my services. I called for the Rolls and James immediately took me to Everton House. Sarah answered the door herself.

"The butler had to take a short leave of absence," she apologized. He had probably banged the door once too often. Even Sarah has her limits.

"What about Rodney?" I asked.

"Oh, it's terrible, Winston." She clung to a damp handkerchief and led me into the study.

"Tell me what happened."

"Friday night after the party Rodney told me that he was going hunting in the morning. He got up around 5 a.m. I made him coffee and then he took his new shotgun and left. He said he would be home late in the afternoon but that was the last time I saw him."

I walked over to the gun case. The A. J. Roberts was missing. Curious.

"I'm sure there's been a dreadful accident," she continued. "It's the only explanation."



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Don't jump to conclusions," I said. "He hasn't been gone that long. He may have decided to stay longer. Perhaps the hunting was good."

"Oh, Winston, you sound just like the police! Rodney would have called me if he was going to stay longer. He always does. It's not like him to just stay away."

"Who did he go with?" I asked.

"I don't know. He didn't say. He often goes with Tom or Edgar. Tom did not go. I don't know about Edgar."

"Have you talked to Edgar?"

"No. Maybe the police may have. I don't know. Oh, Winston, I'm so worried." Her eyes went dark for a second.

"I'll do what I can to help if you'd like," I said.

"Oh, Winston, I appreciate that, but Tom is taking care of things."

Tom Sledgeton entered the room on cue. He was surprised to see me.

"I came over when I read the news," I said to him.

He nodded. Sarah went to him.

"Tom's been so good during all of this," she said. "I don't know what I would have done without him."

"She exaggerates my value," Sledgeton said. "But it's important to help friends in need."

"Yes, very important," I agreed.

"Thanks for your concern," Sledgeton said, leading me to the door. "But I think everything is under control for the moment."



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Yes, I'll be all right," Sarah said. "I'm eternally grateful for your visit."

I nodded and left Everton House.

"Any news, sir?" James asked.

"Rodney went hunting and never returned." I paused for dramatic effect.

"And the A. J. Roberts is missing. According to Sarah he took it hunting."

"Then there has been foul play, sir."

"Indeed there has, James, indeed there has."

* * *

The next morning I was stirred from a restful slumber by a raging telephone. Agnes Littleton was on the line.

"Winston, I'm sorry to bother you, not knowing you all that well and what not, but I don't know who to turn to. You've heard about Rodney Everton's disappearance?"

"Yes."

"Well, the police have just been talking to Edgar. You don't think they think he may have something to do with it, do you?"

"Probably just routine," I said.

"I hope you're right but they seem to believe that he went hunting with Rodney on Saturday morning. But he didn't. I don't like this, Winston. The police are asking terrible questions. What should I do?"

"Don't worry. If Edgar is innocent he has nothing to worry about."

"Of course he's innocent!" She yelped like a yelping terrier.

"Then just sit tight. I'll take care of things."



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Thank you so much, Winston. May I call you Winston?"

"Certainly."

"Then thank you again, Winston."

I hung up and the phone immediately rang again. It was Sarah.

"Winston, they found Rodney's truck in the Sierras! But there's no sign of Rodney. Oh, Winston, I'm afraid he's dead!"

"Calm down, Sarah. Why would you think that?"

"I'm sorry, Winston. I'm just so worried."

"I understand. Have they found anything to indicate Rodney has been injured?"

"I don't know. They didn't tell me much. No, I don't think they did."

"Well, don't give up hope, Sarah."

"I won't."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No. Tom's still taking care of me. I just thought you'd want to know about the truck."

"Yes, I'm glad you told me about it. Please call me if anything else comes up."

"I will."

I hung up the phone and went back to bed. My head had just hit the pillow when the pounding on my door started.

"Strike three, I'm up," I growled.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

The pounding wouldn't stop so I opened the door. A man in dirty clothes and a muddy face barged in and tracked mud across the floor.

"Winston," he said.

I was surprised to hear my name and a little alarmed at his presence in my room. He reminded me of some creature from a third-rate horror movie.

"Winston, it's me."

I looked at him more closely. It took some imagination but I eventually recognized the face before me. It was Rodney Everton!

"Rodney!" I said. "You're missing."

"I am?"

"Yes. What happened to you?"

"I don't know," he shook his head.

"Sit down. Can I get you something to drink?"

He sat down and scratched his head. Little flakes of mud and leaves fell on his shoulder.

"I'll take whiskey if have it."

I found a small bottle of Beefeaters in the mini bar.

"Rocks?" I asked.

"Straight."

I poured the whiskey into a glass and handed it to him.

"Now tell me what happened," I asked.

"I don't really know. I can't seem to remember very much."

"What do you remember?"



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"I remember the party. And I remember waking up in the wilderness. But I can't recall anything in between. I must have been drugged and dumped somewhere. Winston, what's going on?"

"You've been reported missing," I said. "There was a nice piece about you in the *Chronicle*."

"There was?"

"Yes."

He thought about it for a while and seemed pleased with the thought.

"So how long have I been gone?"

"A couple of days."

His eyes blinked a few times.

"That's why I'm so hungry. Say, what day is it anyway?"

"Monday."

"Monday!" His eyelids jumped and a few more flakes of mud fell like snowflakes.

"Yes. By the way, how did you get here?"

"I wandered through the woods for a long time, then early this morning I found my way into some small town. I jumped in the back of a truck bound for San Francisco. I suspected foul play so I came straight to you."

"Then you haven't been home?"

"No. I thought it might be easier to get to the bottom of this if no one knew I was back."

"Good thinking," I said. Rodney hadn't gotten rich by being dumb.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"How's Sarah?" he asked.

"Concerned. But Tom Sledgeton has been providing comfort."

"Has he?" He rubbed his jaw with the dirty thumb and index finger of his left hand.

"Yes," I said.

He finished the Beefeaters and attempted to sort things out.

"So what's the story?" he said. "How did I disappear?"

"According to Sarah, Friday night you told her you were going hunting in the morning. You left early the next morning and that was it. They found your truck in the Sierras, but they didn't find you. Sarah thinks you may have had a hunting accident."

"This was no accident. I don't know what happened, I'm still a bit groggy, but this was no accident. Winston, we have to find out who did this to me."

"Edgar Littleton, perhaps?" I said.

"Edgar? Why Edgar? Why would he do something like this?"

"He is a hunting partner of yours, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you did outbid him for that company, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did." Rodney paused and then smiled. "And don't forget, I also beat Tom out of that shotgun."

"Yes, and it's missing."

"What? My A. J. Roberts is missing?"



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Yes, you allegedly took it hunting with you. Curious, isn't it?"

"It's more than curious, it's dastardly. Who could have done such a thing?"

"Let's find out."

"How?" Rodney asked.

"We'll set a few traps and see what we catch."

Rodney smiled. A true sportsman always enjoys a good hunt.

* * *

James had again used Connally hide food on the Rolls' leather upholstery and the seats smelled wonderful. The rich aroma cuddled me as I sat down.

"Good job, James."

"Thank you, sir." He tilted his head and waited for instructions.

"To Everton House."

"Yes, sir."

Everton House was quiet. Tom Sledgeton's Mercedes was in the drive. It's nice to have a car like that to park next to because it makes the Rolls look all that much better.

Sarah again answered the door herself.

"The butler's still away?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so." Embarrassment crossed her face as if she had turned it on with a switch. She led me into the study. Sledgeton was stuffed into a



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

gothic chair with the *Wall Street Journal*. He did not rise when we entered the room. Poor manners.

"Any more news?" I asked.

"No," Sarah shook her head. "All they've found so far is his truck. There's been no trace of Rodney at all."

"Have they found his shotgun?"

"No."

"What are the police doing now?" I asked.

"Waiting," Sledgeton said. He didn't take his eyes off the paper.

"Waiting?" I grumbled. "Is that all?"

"Yes, Winston," Sarah said. She looked me in the eyes and gave me her best Mary Astor look. "I really don't think they're doing enough."

"What more can they do?" Sledgeton said. "The Sierra's a big place. I'm sure they don't have enough men to search everywhere."

"I suppose you're right," Sarah said. "But I wish they could do more. I wish there was something I could do to help."

"Perhaps there is," I said.

"What do mean?" Sarah asked. The surprise in her eyes was genuine.

"Have you thought about consulting a psychic?" I asked.

"What?"

"They have been known to help the police solve mysteries and find missing people."



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"You can't be serious," Sledgeton said. He lowered his paper and glared at me.

"I am serious," I said. "It's worth considering."

Sledgeton shook his head and turned his attention back to the Journal. Sarah turned pensive. She was very good at that.

"But a psychic?" she said. "How unusual."

"Rodney's disappearance is unusual. Sometimes you've got to be creative in these matters and try untraditional approaches."

She thought for a moment.

"Maybe you're right," she said. "You are experienced in these matters."

"Sarah!" Sledgeton tossed the *Journal* and went to her. "Don't be silly."

"I'm not being silly. Winston may be on to something. I've read about these psychics. They have helped the police find people and solve mysteries. Besides, I've got to do something, Tom. I can't rely solely on the police. They aren't getting anywhere. Do you have any better ideas?"

"No, I don't have any ideas at all," Sledgeton said. "But I think Winston's idea is ridiculous. You read too many horoscopes."

"Don't belong to the Flat Earth Society, do you?" I asked him.

"What?" My sarcasm was wasted on him. Not surprising given his poor taste in clothes.

"Then it's settled," Sarah said. "Where can I find a psychic?"

"I think I know someone who may be able to help," I said.

"Yes, I thought you might," Sledgeton howled.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"How do we go about this?" Sarah asked.

"Really, Sarah, I can't believe you're serious about this." Sledgeton stormed out of the room.

"Leave it to me," I said. "I'll bring the psychic here. I think Tom, Edgar and Agnes should all be present."

"Will there be a séance?" she asked.

"Yes, but not one like you've ever seen before," I said.

* * *

"I think this is perfectly outrageous," Sledgeton whispered to me.

"You don't believe in the supernatural?"

"No. I don't think you do, either. I think you're taking advantage of Sarah."

"Why would I do that?"

The question stumped him. He was about to continue his attack but froze when Madame Faux, the Seer of All Things, entered the room. She looked half gypsy and half renaissance minstrel.

"I am ready to begin," she announced.

"Shall we all sit around a table and hold hands?" Sarah asked.

Madame Faux threw her a disgusted look.

"We don't do things that way anymore," she said. "This isn't TV."

"Oh," Sarah blushed.

"We will need a room where we can all sit closely," Madam Faux said.

"The study," I suggested.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Yes," Sarah said. "The study will be fine."

Madame Faux and I arranged several chairs and a sofa into a semicircle that faced the door. I placed a small table in front of the chairs. Madame Faux balanced a candle on the table.

"We shall begin," she said. "Everyone please sit down."

I lit the candle and turned out the lights. The room was very dark and the candle cast jumpy shadows on the walls and on the large bookcase behind the circle of chairs. It was a perfect setup. Madame Faux sat behind the table and faced us.

"My, it's dark in here," Agnes said.

"It is supposed to be," Madame Faux said. "We are dealing with psychic forces."

Sledgeton giggled.

"Good, a disbeliever," Madame Faux said. "It is always better to have one." She slowly closed her eyes. "All I require is your silence."

"You shall have it," Sledgeton yawned. He leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes. However, he awoke quickly when Madame Faux began chanting in some foreign language that sounded like Latin played backwards. She certainly knew how to captivate an audience. Then she stopped chanting and went into a trance.

"Edgar Littleton," she said from her trance. Her voice had become deeper and it sounded as if it was echoing off the walls of the Grand Canyon. I wondered how she did that.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

Edgar let out a little yelp at the mention of his name. The poor lad seemed a bit shaky.

"Tom Sledgeton," Madame Faux's voice boomed deeper off the canyon walls.

"Yeah?"

"I sense a connection between you and Rodney. A strong connection. An undying friendship."

"Everyone knows that," Sledgeton snarled.

"Shhh," Sarah whispered.

Sledgeton shrugged.

"But the tie that binds you is now broken," Madame Faux continued.

"The friendship of many years has been severed."

"What is she talking about?" Edgar whispered.

"I sense hostility," Madame Faux said. "Hostility and a great sadness. I sense the spirit of Rodney Everton."

Agnes gasped.

"The spirit is approaching," Madame Faux continued. "It is a tortured soul, one betrayed by friendship. So sad, so sad."

"She's giving me the creeps," Sarah said.

Sledgeton rose. "I'm going to put a stop to this right now," he said.

He was halted by a haunting voice that appeared to be coming from every corner of the study.

"Where's my shotgun?" the voice asked.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

Sledgeton froze.

"Rodney," Sarah whispered, looking as if she had seen a ghost. "It's Rodney!"

"That damn shotgun," Agnes said. "That's all he ever thought about."

"Which one of you has my shotgun?" the voice continued.

"It can't be Rodney," Sarah said. "It can't be."

"Why not?" I asked. She didn't answer.

"This is some kind of hoax," Sledgeton said.

"Do you have my shotgun, Tom?"

Sledgeton stiffened.

"Still think it's a hoax?" Agnes asked him.

"Sarah, do you have my shotgun?"

Sarah recoiled. Suddenly Agnes screamed. A shadowy shape flickered near the doorway.

"It's Rodney's ghost!" Agnes cried.

Sledgeton squinted. "That's no ghost," he said. "It's casting a shadow." He started toward the doorway.

"Where's my shotgun?" Rodney yelled, much louder than before.

"Where's my shotgun?"

"Shut up, Rodney," Sarah screamed.

"Where's my shotgun?" Rodney continued.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

Someone blew out the candle and there was movement in the darkness. I heard noises from behind the bookcase and when the lights came on Sarah had the A. J. Roberts pointed at Rodney.

"Go back to hell, Rodney," Sarah screamed.

She pulled the trigger but the gun did not fire. She pulled the trigger again. Then again.

"It won't shoot without this," I said, tossing the tan envelope Rodney had given me at the dinner party onto the table.

"What's that?" Sledgeton asked.

"The firing pin," Rodney said. "I remove the firing pin from all of my guns and give them to Winston for safe keeping. It makes the guns safer to keep in the house and also makes them useless if they're stolen."

James appeared and took the A. J. Roberts from Sarah.

"Then you're not dead," Sledgeton said to Rodney.

Rodney stepped forward.

"Does this feel like a dead man?" he asked. He reared back and landed an uppercut to Sledgeton's stomach.

Sledgeton fell backwards, stumbled over a chair and fell to the floor. Sarah went to his aid. She looked up at me.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked.

"I didn't," I said. "I thought it was Tom."

Sledgeton tried to pick himself off the floor.

"Me?" he wheezed.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Yes. I knew Rodney's disappearance had something to do with that shotgun. A true collector would never hunt with a valuable gun like that A. J. Roberts. The risk of damaging it is too great. Then there was the matter of the firing pin. I knew how badly you wanted that shotgun so I penciled you in as the prime suspect. Of course, when I learned of your affair with Sarah I became fairly certain that she was an accomplice."

Sledgeton turned to Sarah.

"Then you took the gun," he said to her.

"Yes. But I did it for you. I knew how much you wanted it so I decided to get it for you. I paid the butler to kill Rodney. I drugged Rodney's coffee Saturday morning then the butler took him away. He was supposed to make it look like a hunting accident. Apparently the useless oaf screwed it up.

"Anyway, I was sick of Rodney. I wanted to be with you, Tom. I wanted to be free of Rodney once and for all. I wanted him to be a loser for a change, and I wanted to make you a winner. I wanted to make you happy. I knew that gun would make you happy. You see, I did it all for you."

Sledgeton was moved. He kissed Sarah and held her close. Rodney glared at them. Fortunately, the shotgun was still inoperable.

"Why did you go along with this stupid séance?" Sledgeton asked her.

"I had to appear to be doing something to find Rodney. If I hadn't done something Winston would have become suspicious and he would have uncovered the whole thing. A séance seemed harmless enough."

"But he uncovered it anyway," Agnes said.



"Style, you either have it or you don't, and if you have it you have it all the time."

"Yes, he did," Rodney said. "He uncovered a few other things as well."
He glared at Sledgeton.

"You leave him alone," Sarah said.

"I'll do with him as I please."

"Oh, yeah?" Sledgeton said. "That's tough talk from someone who's
supposed to be a ghost."

"I'll turn you into a real ghost," Rodney yelled.

I took Madame Faux by the arm.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go. This conversation is getting much too
spirited. Home, James."