

**THE STRANGE
DEATH**
of Manny Square

A. B. CUNNINGHAM

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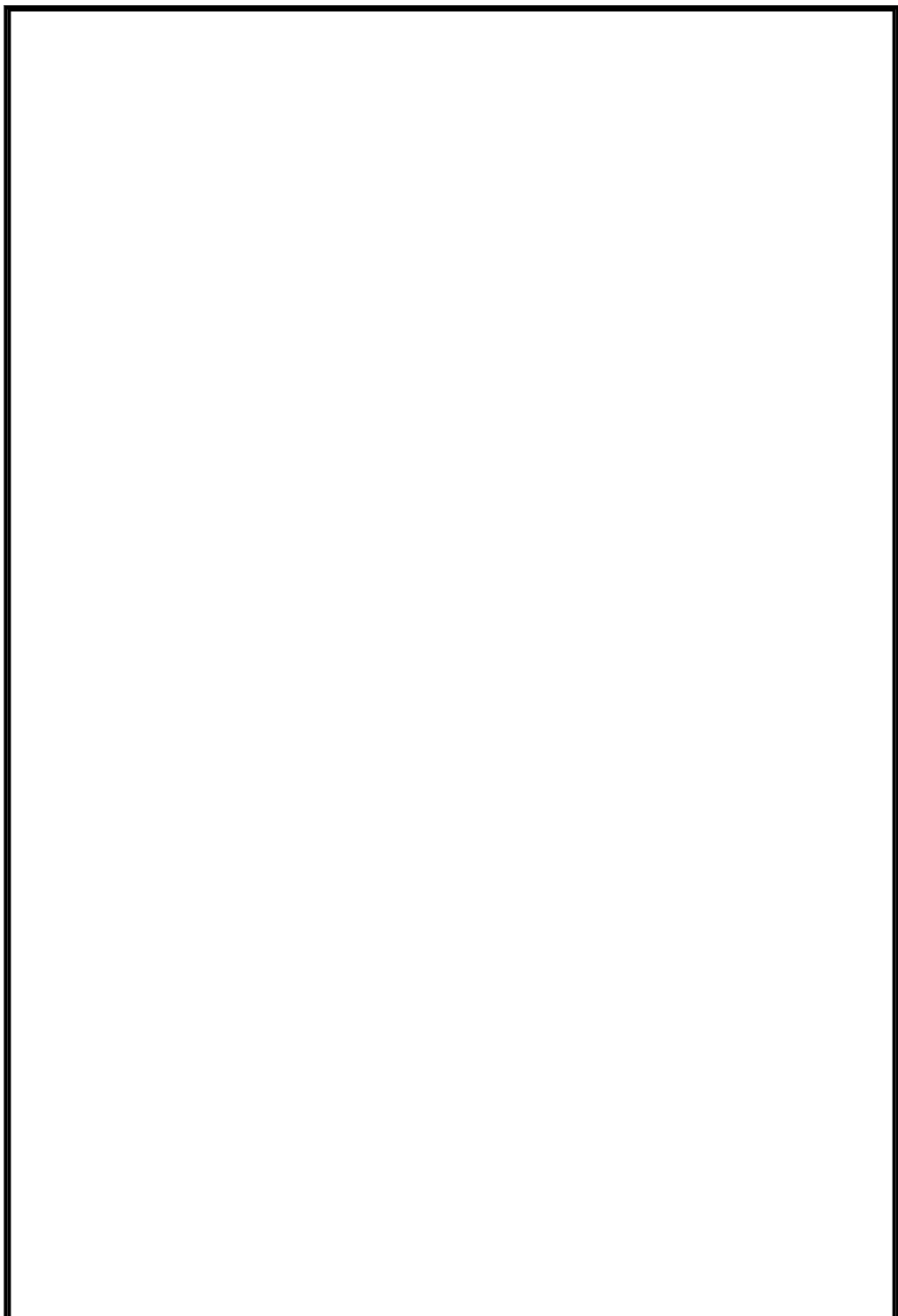
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A. B. CUNNINGHAM



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BY A. B. CUNNINGHAM

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THE STRANGE DEATH OF MANNY SQUARE

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CHAPTER 1

Only once in a blue moon had anything stirred Deer Lick like the strange death of Manny Square. Once long ago there had been an eclipse of the sun, and twilight had fallen when there should have been light. The legislature was in session, and drew up a solemn resolution that now was prophecy being fulfilled—the sun was refusing to give her light and the moon would be turned to blood. The citizens of the commonwealth were exhorted to prepare for the end of the world. Almost simultaneously Latobe, the blind prophet, tapped his way with his blacksnake cane to the crag below his mountain cabin, and muttering strange ritual through toothless gums, leapt into the air to fly to his home in the skies, but met a violent death in the treetops below. The epidemic struck Deer Lick, where Preacher Busk first sucked the ends of his handlebar mustache and then screamed the need of repentance, his voice shrill and cracked; while small boys ran wild in the tumult and sinners stormed the altar and received the gift of tongues. The excitement eventually subsided, but the event lived long in the minds of the old. Many a crone spoke of it with glittering eyes; and to the jeers of the young who said that the world *hadn't* come to an end, she would hint spitefully of irreverence and rock back and forth in her chimney-corner seat as if nursing a secret wisdom withheld from the young and unbelieving. 10

Again and much later excitement in Deer Lick had approached the proportions of a Great Fear. William McKinley had been assassinated, and Gus Luker had galloped down the bottom on a

fleet sorrel dry under the saddle blanket, and had spread the news that his grandmother had foretold the event, having read it in the webs of spiders. She had seen the letters WM woven in a great web like a shawl. The spiders themselves were of a new kind—blood red in the torso and dragging fat bags the size of the end of the thumb; portentous spiders, weaving the prophecy with seriousness and unnatural wisdom. Gus Luker's message flew like a swallow, and soon others recalled having seen the strange spider symbols. The spiders grew in size with the multiplication of the stories until eventually they hung big as bats in their cabalistic webs, themselves unnatural creatures introduced to earth as bearers of the terrible portent.

The peculiar death of Manny Square almost instantly took its place as one of the great happenings in the county. Only here was none of the super-natural which defies explanation and precludes the possibility of satisfying the curiosity. For Manny Square had been flesh and blood, and the imprint of the muleshoe on his face was something that could be seen and touched. Here was a thing that had been *done*, with the doer lurking in the background doubtless watching the progress of the manhunt; and Deer Lick, not being able to see him but knowing he was there, watched the comings and goings of Sheriff Jess Roden with an absorption amounting almost to hysteria.

For the Squares were important people. The fertile rolling fields of the Manny Square farm on the ridge overlooking Green River were one of the showplaces of the county. The rail fences were of chestnut wood, so neatly split that they might have been sawn; and they were fences which were never broken, but wormed high and tight and secure, up hill and down. Nor were the rows allowed to grow up in weeds or briars, but were kept

clean as a lawn. The great house stood just at the apex of the point—a white house with rambling ells of different floor levels, commanding a view of the watershed as far away as the bend of the river below Niggertown. The paint of the weatherboarding was faded to the dull color of dogwood bloom, and gave the house an air, not of newness and hospital efficiency, but of mellowness and contentment.

Over the point to the south, and out of the sweep of the winter winds which tore down from the north, was the Square barn, enormous and fat with abundance. It was red, with a rolling roof above the huge mow bursting with timothy and clover hay. Toward the hill were the cow stalls where sleek Guernseys lay bedded in wheat straw and lazily chewed their cuds. To the south and toward the greater light were the horse stalls in which dun draft horses stamped their heavy feet; and three box stalls where the purebreds which Manny Square entered in the Pine Ridge races pranced and turned, whinnying, their heads high.

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It was a farm of abundance and great local prestige, to which the cabins of the hillmen might have been as slave quarters to a plantation. Nor would the hillmen have heard the comparison with resentment, for the Squares were recognized as different and commanding.

Mrs. Lou Square, mother of Manny—called Ma'm to her face and Old Lou behind her back—was the recognized driving force of the household and the pre-eminent social arbiter of the community. At sixty-two her hair was still carrot-colored and vital. She had lost the suppleness of her youth but had gained a certain commanding power. Day after day she made her rounds

through the rooms seeing that they were correct; she worked occasionally among her flowers, wearing gauntlet gloves, snipping, reprimanding the hired man. She subscribed for magazines and read a great deal. Once she had journeyed all the way to Bennington to lecture to a federated club on the landscaping of a flower garden.

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Directly under her in authority, and indeed sometimes at war with her imperious will, was Manny Square, the elder of her two sons. He was a small man, slight as a woman, but he made up in strength of character whatever he might have lacked in bodily power. He accepted his position of leadership in the community without arrogance, thinking not so much of his standing as of the things he wished to do—developing a better breed of hogs, writing to the state experiment station for leaflets on soil building, pacing his purebred saddlers over an improvised track down in the river bottom.

No one ever thought of speaking of Manny's wife in the same terms as of Manny and his mother, yet she constituted the third member of the household. For she had been the family hired girl back in the days before the death of old Emanuel Square; and Manny had married her in defiance of the wishes of his mother, who had chosen for her son the haughty and impeccable Gwen Dixon, daughter of a proud family of Riverside. The girl had been Lizzie Bogle; and although after her marriage with Manny the last name had been discarded and the first changed to Beth, she was unable to make the transition to aristocracy. Only in her middle twenties and beautiful in her own way, she preferred to go on practically in an unchanged status. She worked diligently in the kitchen, in spite of the fact that there was a new hired girl to do the work; she donned her

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husband's old coat and hat and went out to do the chores at the chicken houses and at the barn; and she responded to Old Lou's occasional catechism with a smiling humility.

There always had been just enough going on up at the Square place to keep it in the public eye. Before the death of old Emanuel, his vast appetite for biscuits and honey served periodically as the starting point for a new legend—how the huge egg-shaped body would settle on a breakfast chair, the voluminous abdomen folded over the rim of the table, and how the small soft hands would butter biscuit after biscuit, building up a stack of them on his plate, the yellow butter dripping from the neatly broken folds. And then, with a comb of white-clover honey from one of his own ranking hives, Emanuel Square would breakfast; methodically, on and on, his rosy lips glistening with the butter and honey combined.

A maid would bring the story off the hill, or a hired man who had watched through a window; and small boys, seeing old Emanuel swinging his belly as if it were a feather tick wrapped around his middle, or eyeing it spread out over the saddle of a horse, looked at him in wonder; and their elders would wink at each other and declare that some day the old man would eat one too many, which he did.

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And then at his passing came the intriguing affair of the will. All told, the estate consisted of three sections of land—the lower, on which the big house stood; the upper, with a rambling old house falling into decay but with a good stand of valuable timber; and the back section, which lay to the east. Old Emanuel Square had considered the sections as of approximately equal value, and in a sense they were; although to arrive at such an

appraisal, it was necessary to take into consideration a certain number of if's and when's. If one were seeking a homestead, the lower section would be the most attractive. If immediate profit, the heavy stand of timber on the upper tract waited only the woodsman's axe to turn it into ready cash. But if one were not immediately pressed, and had in addition a place to live, the land to the east constituted the most promising investment. It had never been cleared: under the protecting underbrush the soil lay rich and deep. The little creek that cut the hollow made available a perpetual water supply. And as soon as some enterprising lumberman decided that the tract was accessible to his oxen and trucks, the valuable timber would provide capital for developing the acres and stocking them with purebred cattle.

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Such thoughts as these were in the mind of old Emanuel Square when he made his will. And because Lou his wife would not be immediately pressed, and because she seemed content to live part of the year with one son and part with the other, he gave her the section to the east.

But the circumstance which set Deer Lick to gabbing was that he gave Wayne the choice of the other two sections. Wayne was the younger by two years, and even his cronies could not say much for him. He was large and fat and soft, with the small hands of his father, but with a fondness for drink which the old man had never had. Yet he had been Emanuel's favorite, for reasons no one had ever divined. Perhaps it was because the son had the courage to live the dissolute life which the father had always secretly coveted for himself. Or perhaps it was because of a vein of humor in Wayne: he occasionally told jokes at breakfast, droll and risqué, at which his father roared, shaking like a mountain of jelly in his chair, biscuit crumbs from his red

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mouth spraying the table. Or it may have been that Wayne was favored because the old man shrewdly understood that he needed help more than Manny ever would.

For Manny was a hustler, an organizer, a demon for work and system. He was his mother's son; put him in a shack on a barren hillside eroded to ruts and grown up with broomsedge, and he would skimp and save and plan. Slowly the ruts would be filled with stone and the stone overlaid with a fertile drift. Gradually legumes would be planted and the ground allowed to lie fallow, until in the end the barren soil would lose its gray sandy texture and turn black with its own richness. And little Manny Square, crushing a handful of it and allowing it to fall through his caressing fingers, would smile his small triumphant smile before flying to bend his back to new labors. The stone itself, curse of the shallow ground, would be hauled and chipped and mortared into walls and the walls would become a house and deep barns replacing the shacks.

Perhaps old Emanuel Square knew all this. At any rate, after his death it was Wayne's privilege to wander for a few days over the two sections, making up his mind; sighting down a slope, stepping off distances. There were two factors, he finally decided, which inclined him to choose the upper section. One was the stone quarry of Grady Heard which disfigured the home place, and the other was the timber. On the high ridge was an excellent stand—whiteoak and chestnut, principally—and it was directly accessible to the river. In it Wayne saw a chance of quick profit out of the question for the one living down on the point.

So he had settled in the rambling big house below the ridge; and

Deer Lick had witnessed a two-year circus while Wayne ran through with his patrimony. Those were gay times up in the house under the three pines, with an almost constant party on, and red wheels rolling in with the bigbugs from Leatherwood, and Wayne always half stewed playing the boisterous host, and young girls from Riverside and Pine Ridge walking in pink dresses and saucer parasols down the laurel-bordered paths, and fiddlers up from Niggertown to strum through the night.

It was all enough to keep Deer Lick a-chatter without the unexpected marriage of Manny Square to Lizzie Bogle the hired girl. Manny was then forty-one, and seemed destined to a permanent bachelorhood. Old Lou, not displeased at being the undisputed mistress of the big house during the time of her stay with Manny—it had been decided that she should live six months with one son and then go for a like period with the other—had nevertheless felt that eventually Manny would marry; and to provide against the inevitable, she had chosen Gwen Dixon as the woman for him. Gwen was not much younger than Manny, and was in every way fitted for him. She was proud, cool, perfectly poised. And save for the fact that her cheeks were too full and gave to her face a certain ground-squirrel puffiness, she was pretty.

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But one day, saying nothing to his mother but with Lizzie Bogle riding behind him on a big rangy sorrel, Manny had set out for Pine Ridge; and when he returned at nightfall they were man and wife. Old Lou had taken her defeat heroically, the only sign being a thinning of the lips and a squaring of jaw. She had even set about to make a lady of Lizzie. It was she who changed the Lizzie to Beth, using the new name so constantly that it gradually became the accepted address. She also strove to induct Beth

into the uses of leisure, teaching her to crochet and make needlepoint.

But Beth did not respond with any readiness. Although but twenty-six, she seemed already set in the ways of her people. She listened meekly and a little eagerly; she pretended interest. But as soon as the dominating presence of Old Lou was removed, she drifted quite happily to the kitchen and scraped the new potatoes preparatory to creaming them the way Manny liked them. And when, as occasionally happened, Old Lou invited Gwen Dixon down for an afternoon, Beth was cordial enough; but after a half hour or so of groping for conversation, she would escape to the kitchen and later serve the women tea, tendering an oatmeal cookie for which she was famous.

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All of which Deer Lick knew. Manny had always commanded respect. But he came near being a hero when he defied his mother in the marriage, both because he had stood up to the old lady and because he married Lizzie. Lizzie was one of them; her home was two miles down the river in a sycamore bottom. And when she stepped into the Square mansion as Manny's wife, it just showed that she was as good as the Squares. Why, *anybody*, given the Square money, could put on airs. They needn't think they were so high and mighty!

And just because the Squares were important people whose lives supplied a needed interest and glamor, the death of Manny fell upon the community like a thunderbolt. He had been killed by a smashing kick from Lige, the great white mule; and many a man, after the first moment of mute astonishment, had recovered to say that he knew all along Lige would bide his time. A mule

was treacherous; it would wait twenty years for a crack at a man.

There was enough hubbub as it was. But when Sheriff Jess Roden said that Manny had not been killed by Lige but had been murdered, he might as well have touched off dynamite under the county. There was not only amazement, but a certain eerie apprehension, as though some incorporeal Death were stalking the countryside and might strike at anyone anywhere.

CHAPTER 2

Ed Lefferton, carpenter and undertaker, was the first outside the immediate family to learn of Manny Square's death. Fred Sutton, one of Manny's hired men, had dropped down from the point to tell Lefferton there was work for him to do up on the hill.

Lefferton was properly astonished, although he did manage to say something about the treachery of mules in general and of old Lige in particular.

"And a white mule is worse 'n any other kind," he said, his big square face grim with sure knowledge. "I've hearn they'd wait twenty years for a crack at a man."

Fred said, "Right." He had the air of not being able to tarry. "Old Lou wanted you to come up as quick as you could. I'll have to be scootin' back to work."

"You're not workin' today, are you—I mean with Manny dead?"

Fred grinned. He was a handsome fellow, well-built and blond, a white scar on his upper lip giving him a certain distinction.

"You know Old Lou," he said. "She don't like to see anyone idle."

Lefferton pondered this. Then he said, "I can't go this minute. But tell her I'll be up soon's I can git away."

For Lefferton had thought that he would like to have Jess Roden go with him. It was a three-mile walk, and the sheriff was

always good company. Besides, Roden's interest in any unusual death amounted almost to an obsession. So after Sutton had gone, Lefferton explained to Mayme Everett his housekeeper that he would maybe be gone all morning, and struck down the bottom to the sheriff's house.

It was not eight o'clock, but Jess Roden had been up for more than two hours. He had cooked an enormous stack of flapjacks, spread his own with new cane molasses, given the dogs theirs straight, and then taken them outside for a bit of training. They were four—Big-Boy, the vast flat-headed mastiff tall as a calf; Dace, the shaggy squirrel-dog, black and white in color and truculent in disposition; Carlo, the red bird dog, soft-eyed and loping, his red plume waving; Lead, the bony-tailed coonhound, mournful, indefatigable on the trail.

Roden was teaching Big-Boy to obey signals without words, for the two often worked together where words might be dangerous. A slight backward jerk of the head meant that the dog was to approach; a shake, that he was making a mistake. A thrust of the hand palm outward was the sign to go farther; a quick waggle, that he was to give up the attempt. The dog was so eager that he panted, saliva dripping from his red lips. His ears did his talking for him: pointed for attention, flat for comprehension and joy, quivering as a response to praise.

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"I guess you can tell, eh, old feller?" Roden said fondly, calling the dog to him and patting the great flat head. At which Dace, jealous, growled under his breath, and Carlo waved his plume. Only Lead went toward the corn crib for his morning siesta in the early sun.

Ed Lefferton rounded the house. “Bad news, Jess,” he said.

Roden looked at him, quick to catch the portent of the brief words. “Out with it!”

“Old Lige got Manny Square last night.”

“You mean kicked him?”

“Killed him.”

While Roden was training the dog, his expression had been watchful and critical; at Lefferton’s sudden appearance, it had changed to curiosity. But at the mention of a death his whole face grew sensitive and fluid. It might have been a part of his mind, participating in his thought.

“Who told you?”

“Fred Sutton. They sent for me.”

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“When did it happen?”

“Some time last night. They found him about six o’clock.”

Roden said slowly, “It’s hard to believe, Ed. I don’t mean that Lige couldn’t *kick* him. But to kick him jest right to kill him—that’s what’s hard to believe.”

“He got him right in the face,” Fred paused, his square face serious. Then he said, “Do you think mules is as smart as they say, Jess? I mean havin’ it in for a feller, and waitin’ till everything’s jest so, and then—”

Roden interrupted him. “You on your way?”

“Yes.”

Roden called the dogs. Dace came bounding, Carlo waved his plume and snuffed eagerly through loose lips, Lead rose as though stiff and came slowly, Big-Boy grinned, wagging his stub tail.

“You stay here—see?” Roden said to them. They dropped their ears, dispirited. But they brightened when he waved vaguely and said, “Watch the place.”

The way led up the river. The early morning presaged the glory which would come later in the day. It was Tuesday, the third of September. The world was just recovering from the dog-day heat of August, when the ragweeds drooped dusty by the roadside and the pennyroyal gave off its permeating sharp odor. The willows on the river bank were displaying their first yellow; the air was crisp with a certain cool invigoration.

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The men were going at a sharp pace, each thinking his own thoughts. Finally Roden asked, “Did you tell me all you know about it?”

“Pret-near. You know about old Lige. Since the time he fell in the quarry someone’s always gone out and stabled him at night. Guess the job fell to Manny last night. Lige was in his stall, haltered and everything. Manny was back agin the wall, his face caved in.”

“Hit him straight, eh?”

“Couldn’t a measured it better. That’s why I asked was a mule like they say—knowin’ when everything was jest right.”

They passed the bend in the river, struck up the steep hill.

“A mule is smart,” Jess Roden finally said. “But not *that* smart. It wouldn’t happen once in a thousand years.”

They reached the lower limits of Grady Heard’s stone quarry. The place might have been the excavation for a vast stadium. Where the hill had once curved gradually downward, a great gash, semicircular and ragged, had been blasted out, the base and fringes a litter of small stones, the center boring straight into the mountain and leaving a sheer face of rock a hundred and fifty feet high at the back. Already, somewhere in the great basin, was the pounding of men at work.

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“This is one thing Manny won’t have to worry about any more,” Lefferton said with a crooked grin.

For answer, Roden looked quickly up at the extreme summit of the quarry where a single wire, precariously strung on unsteady posts, ran along the lower edge of Manny Square’s pasture. Lefferton followed the sheriff’s glance and chuckled dourly.

“It was jest like Manny to string that one wire up there,” he said. “He could’ve saved the stock he lost if he’d’ve built a good strong fence along the edge.”

“Manny wouldn’t do that! He felt it was Heard’s fault the quarry was there, and that it was Heard’s business to take the precautions.”

“Yeah. But Heard wouldn’t build a fence. He said he didn’t need it.”

Roden grinned thinly. “So there you are. Heard wouldn’t because he didn’t need it, and Manny wouldn’t because it wasn’t his place to. And they had to fight it out.”

“They never actually fit,” Lefferton put in quickly. “Manny was too little to take Heard on.”

“But he got even.”

Lefferton chuckled. “I’ve hearn that along toward the last, every time Manny lost a hog or a calf or something down the quarry, he saw to it that an equal thing of Heard’s come by an accident some way.”

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“That’s right. Once he lost a heifer over the quarry, and the next day one of Heard’s was down there, dead.”

Grady Heard loomed to the left of them, swinging a sledge. He was unaware of their approach, but stood on a great wedge-shaped piece of rock which had evidently been blasted out the day before, and struck it powerfully in a straight line, up and down, so as to break it in two. He saw them when they were within a few feet of him. He straightened and stood waiting, as though to demand a reason for their coming.

For no one took liberties with Grady Heard. He stood well over six feet and was powerfully built, with broad square shoulders and strong legs. Something in his eyes kept men at a distance. They were black, and glowed as with a suppressed fury.

“Well?” he said. He crooked the index finger of his left hand and scooped the sweat from his forehead.

Roden said, “Manny Square was killed last night, Grady.”

“How’s that?” The words exploded from his great chest.

“Old Lige kicked him in the face. Fred found him this mornin’.”

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Grady Heard seemed to comprehend slowly. His eyes widened. He slid a hand down the sledge handle and lifted the iron as though he would examine it, obviously unaware of what he was doing. One end of the hammer showed hard steel; the other end was covered with a thick pad which might once have been part of the top of a felt boot. He used the padded end to strike a stone which he wished merely to jar apart. Now he stood for a moment absently picking at the wire which held the pad. He expelled his breath slowly.

“You on your way up?” he asked of the men.

“Yes. Ed’s to do the work.”

Grady Heard seemed to come to a decision. “If anyone says anything, tell them I’ll come up if I’m needed.” There was a mingling of defiance and resolution in his voice. He stepped from the stone and turned to face it, beginning a measured and continuous tapping down the surface with the padded end of the hammer.

Roden stood a moment to watch: Grady Heard was famed for the accuracy with which he could break a stone. The thick pad

now kept the sledge from shattering; there were only the muffled jars, following the cleavage made in the side of the rock. And in a little while there was a rift when the stone flashed apart, the two straight edges dividing.

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“Neat work,” Roden said.

Heard whirled; he might have forgotten the men.

They went on. When they had reached the edge of the quarry and were scaling the steep slope, Lefferton said, “I’d hate to have Grady sore at me.”

“No reason why he should be.” Roden was in unexpected good humor: what had promised to be a listless day had turned to interest. He almost twinkled as he said, “Chances are, when *you* have any dealings with him he’ll be harmless!”

They were at the top of the quarry. Manny Square’s pasture ran smooth and green down to the very edge of the precipice, only the single wire guarding against the sheer hundred-and-fifty-foot drop. The two men paused, each realizing that the single straggling wire represented one of the bitterest feuds ever to prevail in the county. For Grady Heard had followed the excellent stone to the precise line of his property, and then had kept on blasting in and down. Manny Square had first protested, saying the cut was spoiling the view of his place from the river. And on the occasion when he had lost his first heifer down the precipice, Manny had descended to the floor of the quarry to await Heard’s coming, the dead calf not far away. It must have been quite a meeting, though there were no witnesses —Manny Square quiet but obdurate, his face bleak with anger

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and outrage, and big Grady Heard insulting in his prodigious strength and self-assurance. For Heard had come, and he had seen. He was properly sympathetic. But he said, swinging his sledge,

“Know what I would do if I was in your place?”

Manny Square spoke with restraint, watching Heard. “What?”

“I’d build me a good fence up there.” He brought the sledge down on a stone; for him the interview was over.

Manny Square turned very slowly. He brushed an imaginary bit of dust from the knee of his trousers. Any sort of fight between them was out of the question, for Manny was slight as a woman and Heard was a giant. But Manny went to Pine Ridge to inquire into the law. There he was told by a suave attorney named Grimback that Heard was within his rights. He was on his own property; he did not need to build a fence, since nothing could scale the face of the quarry. Manny would have to protect himself.

Square would gladly have gone half way; he was not a man to court trouble. But Heard had talked down at the depot. He had said that Square was only jealous of Heard’s graveled driveways, of his big stone barn. He had also predicted that Manny would build the fence. And almost before either was aware, they had so committed themselves that there was no turning back without loss of face. Heard went ahead, blasting deeper; Manny was more reluctant, troubled by this thing which had risen to harry his days. Perhaps also he realized more clearly where it would lead; for in the end the bitterness

between the two men had become cankerous and implacable. Of late it had entered a new phase where, as Ed Lefferton said, for every head of stock lost by Square down the quarry, a similar head of Heard's managed to be found dead in approximately the same way. No one could connect Manny directly with the coincidence, but Deer Lick wagged its head and waited.

Jess Roden twanged the single wire and turned up the hill. "More devilment can come from a line-fence squabble than from anything else but money and a woman," he said.

"All the same, Grady will feel cheap now." Lefferton displayed flashes of discernment.

"Maybe. Maybe he'll be glad of it."

Ahead of them up the rolling slope was the great Square barn. The lot ran out behind it, strongly fenced. Two or three men hung about the door leading to the horse stalls. On the far side of the lot Fred Sutton broke stone for a neat graveled runway for the cattle. And at the fence just above the upper corner of the barn, now securely tied where he could do no harm, was Lige, the big white mule.

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Wayne Square came a few steps to meet Lefferton and the sheriff. The usual fat smile was gone from his face. He shook hands with both men, soberly, returned with them to the lower corner of the barn. "They found him right in there," he said, nodding toward the open door.

Lefferton clucked sympathetically, peering in. Roden, not facile at any expression of sympathy, merely looked skyward and rubbed his hands. Wayne gave them time to look, then drooped

against the building.

“The hard thing is,” he said helplessly, “that it almost didn’t happen. Manny went to Pine Ridge yesterday and expected to stay all night. If he hadn’t come back, he would be alive today.”

Roden said absently, his eye on old Lige, “He had planned to be away for the night, eh?”

“That’s right. He had made all arrangements.”

“What caused him to come back?”

“No one knows. No one knew he *was* back till Fred found him.”

“Too bad,” Cary Davis said. He had been a close friend of the dead man’s. “And he went before he made his will, after all. He told me a few weeks ago that he was going to fix it up this winter.”

34

Ben Neal spoke up. He was a big black from Niggertown, heavy-shouldered and surly-faced. He had once worked for Manny. “And when he come back and see ol’ Lige in de field, he fotched him to de bahn.”

“I had told him a hundred times to get shet of that mule,” Wayne said. “But he wouldn’t. He paid it more mind than any horse he had.”

“He did so!” Ben Neal corroborated. “Befo’ he canned me—when I was workin’ for him, he told me to see dat Lige was always well tended.”

Roden studied the big Negro curiously. Manny Square had discharged him less than a year before for his rough handling of a purebred boar. Neal had left sullenly, knowing that a discharge from Square would make it difficult for him to get work anywhere else. He had gone through a pretty tough winter. Yet here he was at Manny's death, the heavy shoulders properly drooped and the surly face ludicrous with sympathy. He pulled a cap from his round skull.

"Sho am sorry, Mistah Wayne. Comes anything us kin do, you say de word." He replaced the cap, settling it snugly on his ball-like head, climbed the fence, and started down the hill.

35

"How did he know Manny was dead?" Roden wanted to know.

"Why—I guess he was just passing," Wayne Square said. "The word hasn't got around much yet."

There was the sound of footfalls in the cow stalls. Roden glanced toward the upper door as Beth Square stepped into the barnyard. She hesitated for a moment, her eyes on Fred Sutton pounding stone a few yards away, then turned toward the group of men. She had pulled on her husband's old hat and coat as she often did when running out of the house to do some chore, and the result was a startling reminder of the little man who so recently himself had been busy about the place. She smiled at the men, although there was something apologetic and woebegone in her face.

"Mother Square saw you come up the hill, Mr. Lefferton," she said. "She wants you to come up to the house."

“Right. I was on my way. Comin’, Sheriff?”

Beth halted briefly outside the cow stalls, leaving the men to go on ahead. She looked about her in a way that was both benumbed and distracted—at Lige the mule, at the cattle lane beyond the fence, at Fred Sutton. Then she uttered a small sound which might have been a sob or a plea, and ran through the barn after the men. 36

She was panting when she overtook them, and they were three abreast as they reached the kitchen door. Old Lou was standing just outside the screen, dressed in black, one hand holding her pince-nez glasses and the other on the small black button which worked a spring. Beth ran up to her, still distracted but pitifully eager, as though to announce the fact that she had fulfilled the old lady’s command. But Old Lou ignored her; by a squaring of the shoulders and an upward swing of the pince-nez, she even succeeded in eliminating the younger woman altogether.

“Ah, Mr. Lefferton. I was afraid you had forgotten.”

But Lefferton was unawed by the Square hauteur. “Where is Manny?” he demanded briskly.

“Mr. Roden,” she said formally, then turned toward Lefferton who was already through the door. “Do you wish Mr. Roden to come with you?”

“He helps,” Lefferton said briefly; and Roden also stepped through the door.

Manny Square was laid out on a bed in a small guest room which opened off the spacious living quarters. Roden stopped

just inside, cupping the back of one hand in the palm of the other, his eyes eager but respectful. Lefferton strode to the bed and drew back the sheet with professional directness.

37

Manny Square lay small and neat and straight, his hands folded on his chest. Two pennies lay on his eyelids to keep them closed. The face had evidently been a ghastly sight at first, but it had been bathed and shaped till the deep imprint of the mule shoe showed only as an elongated half-circle over the putty-white features. The mouth even held a suggestion of the clipped smile which had been characteristic of the man during his lifetime.

Lefferton whipped from his pocket a cloth measuring tape and with deftness and speed set about taking the few measurements he would need in determining the size of the coffin; for he kept no coffins in stock, but made each one as it was needed.

Through his preoccupation he heard the voice of old Mrs. Square, low but imperious.

“... black walnut,” he heard. “The very best you can do. And I want a box for the coffin to rest in. I would suggest beechwood, or maple. Very hard and mitered....”

Roden had been standing perfectly still, only the slow rubbing of his hands betraying his interest. He stepped a bit closer to the head of the bed, making the movement as inconspicuous as possible. His eyes strained toward the dead man’s face. There was something peculiar about the cut, something not quite right. He had pictured the face even before he saw it—the somewhat long and dished face of Manny Square, and over it the elongated semicircle of old Lige’s shoe. The gash would be deep at the bottom, down about the mouth or chin, as the mule’s

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foot would come from the ground and strike, not flat, but at an incline, the toe first. It was this that had been in Roden's mind when he protested that such a kick would hardly kill a man, as the principal force of the blow would strike not at the vulnerable forehead but toward the mouth and chin; enough to shatter a jaw or knock a man unconscious, but not enough to kill him.

But here he saw something entirely different. Not the toe but the heel of the shoe had struck first. The murderous work had been done on the forehead. The imprint just below the nose was negligible, hardly more than enough to break the skin of the upper lip.

"... both the inside and outside of the coffin with black velvet," Old Lou's voice swept on. "If you cannot procure it here, send for it. To Bennington, if necessary. A telegram would start it on the afternoon train."

Roden glanced at her, half impatient that she should be going on and on in the face of the tragedy which had overtaken her son. But at once he was filled with a grudging admiration. She was steadying herself against the wall; her skirts were shaking from the trembling of her knees. But she was carrying on, going through with it. The old lady had something, all right—pride, will. She wasn't going to give way, break down. She was going to see the thing through, carrying it off like a Square.

Half ashamed of his intrusion Roden slipped through the door. Manny's wife was standing just outside. It was as though she felt herself an outsider: her eyes strained toward the figure on the bed, and there was again the woebegone apology on her face.

But she checked herself at the threshold, awaiting the pleasure of her betters.

But once more out in the sunshine, the sheriff forgot the human side of the tragedy and returned to the impossible gash on Manny Square's face. A mule kicks from below, its toe inclined outward. Consequently the toe strikes first, makes the deepest mark. To cut as it had on Manny's face, the shoe would have to be reversed on the foot, and then it would be upside down.

He was walking slowly toward the barn. And there before him was old Lige, securely tied to the fence. Roden glanced back over his shoulder to make sure no one was behind him, and trotted toward the corner of the barn. Lige was in his way an institution. He was old, all of fifteen years, and the only white mule for miles around. He was irascible and truculent as a moose—tall and bony, with great lop ears and an evil eye. He seemed always to be viewing the world with derision, his loose lips flapping back from long yellow teeth in a sardonic and evil grin.

40

He was too old and captious to be of any service about the farm, but Manny Square had turned a deaf ear to all suggestions to get rid of him. Between mule and man was a strange bond, the man eccentric and determined, the mule derisive and fractious. The complaint was general that Manny paid more attention to Lige than to his favorite purebred. It was true that when Lige slipped down the quarry, his master spent an entire morning rescuing him; tying a great laprobe under the mule's shoulders and hauling him up the precipice with an improvised windlass. Lige had showed his gratitude on reaching firm ground again by baring his yellow teeth and trying to take a nip at Manny's

shoulder. But the man only grinned his tight-lipped grin, clouted the animal over the rump, and went through the remainder of the day as if much relieved at Lige's rescue. Thenceforward he always saw to it that the mule was safely stabled every night. It had evidently been his concern to put the mule up on an unexpected return from Pine Ridge that had led to the little man's death.

41

And yet—had it? Roden's doubts increased. To receive such a blow on the face Manny would have had to be practically on his hands and knees back of the mule. Only then could the tips of the shoes have smashed first. Roden's glance back over his shoulder had followed the thought that he might make a test on Lige himself.

He was careful to keep the mule between him and Fred Sutton who continued to break stone in the cow yard. The other men had drifted away. For a moment the sheriff stood looking the big animal over. It returned his stare, its eyes red and glowing with a sort of suppressed malevolence. All at once it uttered a garbled and vicious sound. It pranced, drew to the end of the halter; finally jumped at the fence and began to bite slivers from the topmost rail. Its hindquarters were toward the barn, the solid wall not three feet away.

Roden picked up a long cornstalk. He darted a quick glance over Lige's back to make sure Fred Sutton was still occupied, then jabbed the sharp stalk into the mule's flank. The response was as instantaneous as it was savage. The mule threw its weight on its shoulders and with both hind feet let fly at the barn.

The crash brought Fred Sutton's eyes up. Roden had dropped the stalk and was standing at a safe distance. He grinned toward Sutton. "He's playful in a way I don't like," he said.

Sutton grinned back. "He always is."

And then, as the mule swung on the halter, Roden sidled toward the wall and examined the marks. They were as he had known they would be—the toes deep in the wood, the tips hardly discernible at all.

Manny Square hadn't been killed by the mule.

CHAPTER 3

The conviction came over Roden with a little prickle of wonder and awe. For it was a certainty, although he had no proof. Nonchalantly, as though merely killing time while he waited for Lefferton, he crossed the barnyard and entered the door leading to the horse stalls. Lige's was the third from the door: the moist bedding on the floor bore innumerable marks of the long narrow feet in spite of the footprints that had been superimposed upon them. Back there against the south wall Manny had been found. Roden studied the place, his lips grim, his eyes fluid and luminous. Then he stepped to the door and called Sutton.

"Mind to show me where you found him, Fred?"

Sutton rubbed the sweat out of his eyes with a large red handkerchief. He stepped to a certain spot and took his bearings carefully. "Right here," he said.

"On his face?"

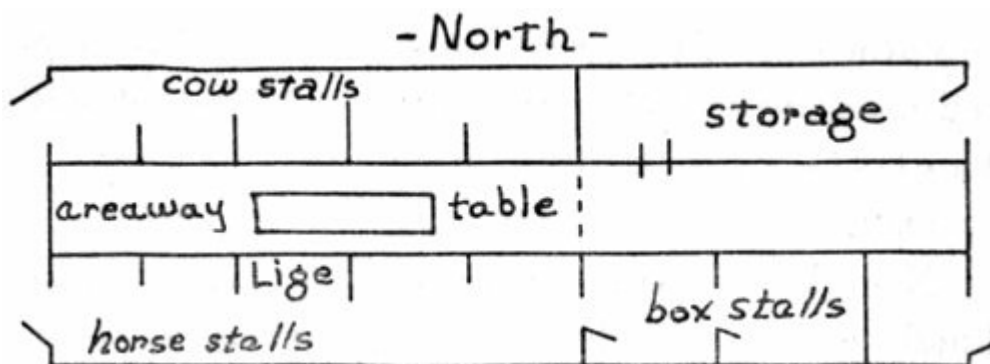
"No-o. He was kinda settin' up. Like he had been lifted clean off his feet and jest slid down when he hit the wall."

"Lige couldn't reach him for another crack at him, eh?"

"No. Lige was haltered short."

Roden said that it never paid to trust a mule. Sutton agreed. Then at a noise in the barnyard he bethought

himself and hurried back to his sledge. Roden grinned thinly, knowing that with Old Lou in charge the hired hands would step lively. Then he turned his attention once more to the barn.



The Square barn

The horses were quartered on the south, the cows on the north. Back of the deep stalls on either side was a runway about four feet wide. In the center of the barn and between the two rows of stalls, was a wide areaway, with baled hay and sacks of corn and wheat and oats and bran stacked conveniently here and there. In the direct center of this areaway was a long table made of heavy timbers and serving as a sort of work bench or mixing place, where feed was prepared or bundles broken before being thrown to the waiting stock. To the north of the table was a ladder with rungs nailed to beams and leading to the mow overhead.

45

Roden was standing back of Lige's stall, on the spot where Manny Square had been found dead. He put a hand up against the wall, and started at a slight tinkling sound. On a peg which had been driven into an auger hole were half a dozen mule shoes, hung there by the thrifty Manny as they had been cast by

the mule. Roden lifted one down, interested in studying its shape. But on the instant he was wholly absorbed. The shoe was old and rusty, but it had clearly been recently used. There was no dust upon it, nor any caked mud in the nail holes. And extending from each hole out over the side of the shoe were vague lines, blue on the metal, such as might have been made by iron upon iron.

Sheriff Roden caught his breath with a small whistling sound. The canniness deepened in his face. For in one of the nail holes, and filling a shallow groove which ran from the one hole to another, was a bit of flesh. He lifted it out with a finger nail, examined it minutely. It seemed a particle of skin such as might have been left imbedded on the shoe had it been driven

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into a human face.

A shadow darkened the door and caused Roden to look up. He blinked slightly when he saw Fred Sutton. The man's handsome face was no longer pleasant and humorous, but was sharp and colorless in a strange way.

"Found somethin', Sheriff?"

"A shoe."

"Oh, them!" Sutton nodded at the others on the peg. "Manny always hung 'em there. Didn't like to waste anything."

"Ever use 'em?"

"No. Never seen him take one down."

"This one—"

“Jess! You in there?” It was Lefferton calling from without. He nodded to Sutton, stepped before the door. “I’ve got to hop to it.”

Sutton started to say something, but thought better of it and returned to the stone pile. Roden waited till he was out of earshot, then said to Lefferton, “I’ve got to see Manny again.”

“What’s up?”

“I’ve got to see that place on his face. You can say you forgot something and give us an excuse to go back in.”

“But the old lady’s on my tail.”

47

But Roden was already steering him through the barn toward the house. “You think up an excuse.”

Mrs. Square let them in reluctantly, stopping in the doorway of the little guest room and holding her pince-nez to her nose as they approached the body. Lefferton once again drew down the sheet and made pretense of laying the tape across the slight shoulders.

“Let me help you,” Roden said. He took one end of the tape and held it firmly on the far shoulder. The action brought his face close to the dead man’s. And although he remained but an instant, his photographic eye told him what he wanted to know. The flesh had been pushed back in place to give the features a semblance of naturalness; but on the left cheek a small strip of skin was dished out. It was hardly noticeable—a mere indentation perhaps half an inch long, but it laid bare the tiny blood vessels beneath it.

Roden said, “Got it right this time?” He straightened, turned apologetically to Mrs. Square. “Ed used the wrong end of the tape the first time,” he said. “Got Manny’s shoulders wide as a giant.”

On the way back to the barn he said, “You stall around out there in the lot and keep anyone out. I want to look the place over.”

“But I got to hurry, Jess. This is a big thing.”

“I know. I won’t be a minute.”

48

Once in the barn, he slipped the narrow mule shoe in his hip pocket, stepped to the manger where Lige had been haltered, and vaulted nimbly to the areaway beyond. The table was before him. Here Manny Square had been wont to stand, cutting the bundles of feed before throwing them to the mangers, mixing the grain. The hole to the hay mow was directly overhead.

Roden already had a theory of how Manny Square had been murdered. It had come to him as inescapable once he was convinced Lige was not the agent. Square had been killed by someone who wanted to make it appear the work of Lige; and so the mule shoe had been wired to something—a heavy timber, a sledge—and driven home in exact simulation of the kick of a mule.

And the blow had not come from below but from above. Only then would the shoe strike as it had on the dead man’s face—the heel tips first, the toe hardly at all. But with the killer above his victim, say up there in the mow, and with Manny here at the table breaking bundles for old Lige, the timber bearing the fatal shoe could drop like a forced pendulum, gathering momentum by

its own weight, driving inexorably toward the mark and striking heel first....

Roden climbed the ladder. Hay pressed the rolling roof on all sides, with only a brief cleared space around the square hole. He stepped to the south side and squatted, looking down to the floor below. The distance was approximately eight feet. Allowing about five feet eight for Manny's height, something like two feet would remain to be accounted for. The timber on which the shoe had been wired would need to be about two feet long—perhaps less, when provision was made for the swing of the arm. And it would have to be something with considerable weight to it, something whose own momentum would be sufficient to drive the shoe home. It could not, like a hammer blow, be given its drive by the arm wielding it, since the distance was too great. Something like a sledge hammer which, when merely held by the tip of the handle and let fall, would cut through the air with a ponderous iron force sufficient to shatter the skull.

49

A sledge hammer. Roden was on his feet, combing the vast mow with his eyes. He circled the cleared space around the hole, thrusting his hands under the hay. He clawed his way to the roof, the hay giving and letting him slip back, the enclosure filling with a heavy and stifling dust. Under the roof just south of where he had squatted he found the sledge—an old one with a partly broken hickory handle, whose huge iron was dead from long disuse, the edges blistered as from ancient contact with an iron wedge. It had been thrust down along the roof until even the handle was an arm's length under the hay.

50

Roden pulled it out, slid down to the light. A brier caught him as

he slithered along, raked over his thigh. It caught in his suspenders and followed him down, jabbing his hand when he tried to push himself erect.

“Damn it to hell!” he muttered, and reached to tear the brier away.

But he stopped with it in his hand. It was a big dewberry, shriveled and dry. On one of the barbs was what he at first thought was a feather or a bit of down. Then he saw that it resembled wool.

“Out of my pants, I guess,” he said thinly.

But it was not. It was fluffy and gray, a wisp that had evidently caught on the barb when—when somebody else slid down the hay. It took on sudden meaning. Roden pulled it free, dropped it under the inside band of his hat. Then he turned his attention to the sledge.

The wire was gone, but the marks of it were unmistakable. They ran through the eye of the sledge where the handle fitted loosely; they showed in a circular indentation around the base of the handle. There was even a vague polish on the face of the iron where the mule shoe must have rubbed it.

“Listen, Sheriff!” Lefferton’s impatient voice came from below. “I gotta beat it.”

Roden had intended to swing the sledge through the hole, testing its length, its possible striking power. But Lefferton was coming in. He was already at the manger, lifting to vault into the areaway. And Roden was not yet ready to reveal his findings.

The Squares were important people; a hint that Manny had been murdered would be cataclysmic as an earthquake. It would suggest some strange skeleton in the Square closet, expose the household to the vulgar and the curious. It would be a signal to the newshounds of Pine Ridge, of Bennington. The step was too serious to be taken without due consideration.

Roden clawed his way back up to the roof, thrust the sledge back where he had found it, slid down again. "I'm comin', Ed," he called, and put his foot on the ladder.

"What you doin' up there?"

"Looking around. Quite a place."

"One man was mighty interested in what you was up to."

Roden stepped to the floor. "What's that you say?"

"I walked out to the quarry. Guess Fred Sutton thought I was gone. When I come back jest now he was flattened agin' the barn out there, listenin' to you."

"Fred was?"

52

Lefferton nodded. "When he saw me he jumped like he was shot. Then he pretended he was doin' somethin' agin the wall."

They reached the door. Fred Sutton was pounding stone.

"Let's git goin'," Lefferton said shortly.

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CHAPTER 4

A shattering blast from the stone quarry rocked the earth beneath their feet. A cloud of white dust spurted in the air like a geyser. Then came the rumble of the loosened stone as it lifted from its ancient resting-place and crashed to the floor of the quarry.

Lefferton said, “There! You can’t blame Manny.”

They avoided a direct approach, keeping well to the east until they were on a level with the base of the quarry. In near the hill Grady Heard was at work. Big Nig, the giant river boatman and man of all work, was helping him. They were drilling a new hole for a second charge of dynamite. Heard, squatting on his heels, was holding the drill, while Big Nig, stripped to the waist and glittering, wielded the sledge. Grady looked big as a horse, imperturbably holding the steel, turning it after each stroke, never looking up. But even so, Big Nig was the larger. Together they assumed the proportions of satyrs, magnificently enormous in keeping with their surroundings.

“Let’s wait and watch ’em set it off,” Roden suggested.

But Lefferton was not to be delayed. “I can’t!” There was aggravation in his tone, as though the sheriff did not appreciate the work that lay ahead. “You stay if you want to; I’m gittin’ on.” He did not even pause, but dropped down the hill in a gathering trot.

Roden entered the quarry, began hopping from stone to stone

toward the two men. But Heard stood up and threw down the drill. Big Nig dropped the sledge. They climbed down to the mass of rock thrown out by the blast. One huge slab lay flat upon the others. Grady Heard studied it, his head to one side. Then he nodded toward the negro, and both went toward the cumbersome homemade trip hammer which stood dust-covered a few yards away.

It was Grady Heard's special invention, particularly useful in breaking large stones. It stood on four legs two feet high. Extending from the base and running out horizontally, was a four-foot hickory handle on the end of which was a sledge. The hammer was operated by a crank: when the machine was set before the stone which was to be broken, the big sledge hung poised above it like a lance. At a turn of a crank, a heavy rope lifted the hammer, forcing it up against the resistance of the hickory handle. But at a certain precise point the rope was tripped, allowing the sledge to crash down on the face of the stone, driven both by its own weight and by the spring of the flawless hickory.

The two men lifted the device, worried it to the big slab. Heard made some adjustments, calculating. Then he nodded, and Big Nig grasped the crank. Muscles sprang out over his broad back. But the sledge lifted, tripped, fell powerfully; lifted again, fell, crashing to the face of the slab. A fissure ran up the stone, and Heard lifted his hand in signal to the negro to stop turning. Only then did they have time for Roden.

Big Nig nodded his head, grinning from ear to ear. But Heard only straightened impatiently and said, "Well?"

“I thought you’d want to know. Nothin’ was said. I guess they’ve got enough people up there to tend to everything.”

“Have they shot Lige yet?”

“No. He’s tied outside.”

Heard’s eyes glowed. “But they know he did it, don’t they?”

“Sure. Lige got him, all right—square in the face. That trip hammer is clever, Grady.”

Heard appeared suddenly almost jovial. “Especially with Big Nig to operate it,” he said drolly.

“Goin’ to touch off the other blast?”

“Not now.” He turned to the big slab, seemed recalled to his work. “That’ll be all for today, Nig,” he said.

“Yazuh, boss.” The negro went at once for a faded blue shirt which lay draped on a rock, pulled it over his head. Then he loitered till Roden was ready to go, when the two men started down the hill together.

56

“Thought you always blasted at night, Nig, so the stone’d settle by mornin’.”

“We does. On’y last night Mistah Heahd said we wouldn’.”

“Why?”

“Said he was storin’ de dynamite in de quarry, ’n foh me to keep

out or I'd be liable to tromp on it."

Roden stopped abruptly. "He said he was storin' the dynamite in the quarry?"

"Dat's what he told me boss."

"He shouldn't do that! It's too dangerous. I'll go back and tell him."

Heard saw him coming this time. He was just picking up the padded sledge. "Well?" he demanded.

Roden nodded pleasantly. "Nothin' to go home for. Us bachelors don't need to work much. Thought maybe you'd set off that other blast and I'd git to see it."

"It won't be set off till evening."

"Got the dynamite all ready?"

"It's over yonder." Heard nodded toward what seemed to be a heap of gunny sacks at the edge of the quarry.

"Dangerous stuff to have around, eh?"

57

"Maybe. But not when I'm here to watch it."

"Don't leave it here at night, eh?"

"Never. I've got a dugout for it at home."

Roden nodded approvingly. "It's bad business."

Heard seemed to see him, really, for the first time. “What do you mean?”

“Jest that—it’s bad business. Same time, I’d like to see you touch off a blast.”

“Then you’ll have to come back some other time,” Heard said shortly. He swung the padded sledge to his shoulder.

Roden accepted the dismissal and went serenely out of the quarry. He half expected the big negro to be waiting for him somewhere along the way. But he was not. The river road lay cool and deserted under the overhanging trees. The river itself was beginning to dance now that it was liberated from the dog-day heat.

The dog pack greeted Roden with delirious joy when he reached the house, jumping against him, licking his hands, trying to seduce him to the woods. They kicked up the earth as they leapt, they whined and barked, and finally fell into a free-for-all when they snapped at each other and growled and yelped. Roden parted them, deriding them, and let them into the house where they sniffed and pawed at the oven door before settling down to watch him as he dropped into a chair.

He began to count off on his fingers the points of which he felt certain. One: Manny Square had been killed by a mule shoe wired to a sledge. Two: and by someone intimate enough with the Squares to know the nature of Lige the mule, and to use the knowledge to plan a crime which would readily pass as the treacherous work of the unruly animal. So far, so good—the crime had been committed by someone who knew the Squares

and the mule. To that extent it was an inside job. But—he tapped his middle finger, groping for point three. It was not definitely an inside job, for the killer had not known that Manny expected to be away for the night.

So. Someone close but not too close; someone who knew all about Lige, but not an intimate of the Square household, since the crime had been planned without the knowledge that Manny expected to be away for the night. Roden leaned back, laced his fingers behind his head. His eyes strayed over the room but registered no objects. He was already obsessed with the manhunt, fired by the challenge which this killer had put before him.

Jess Roden had traveled a long way since a set of rather humorous circumstances had made him sheriff of Deer Lick County. At the outset he had thought of little beyond a rather vague political sinecure. But contact with crime and the criminal's efforts to cover his tracks had affected Roden as a personal challenge. He reasoned, "A man commits a crime knowing perfectly well that there are officers whose express function it is to bring criminals to justice. The inference is inescapable—the criminal thinks he is cleverer than the officers, that he can lay his plans beyond their power to detect." When the thought first began to stir in his brain he was stung by every small violation; it was as if the law-breaker had leveled a jeering finger at him and said, "I am not afraid of you, Jess Roden. See—in proof I have gone right ahead in spite of you, knowing you are not smart enough to catch me!"

That was the explanation of the unholy and deadly smile that played over his thin lips when he was apprised of some

depredation. A new smart Alec had arisen who thought he could break the law and get away with it. And so Roden sprang to the manhunt with an intensity sometimes out of all proportion to the gravity of the offense. He would show the scoundrel—he would show everyone—that there was no crime which one human mind could devise that another human mind, if shrewd enough, could not uncover.

By nature his brain was keen as a hound's nose. It needed only the proper stimulation to arouse it, and that the office of sheriff had provided. He proceeded almost at once to the study of his craft, training himself in minute observation, storing his mind with all conceivable information. But the conviction had grown in him that the secret of crime is the criminal, that the more he knew about human nature and the nearer he approached to the dark cauldron where the human passions brewed, the better equipped he would be when he stood in the presence of murder, the greatest crime of all.

And so he began the study of the people about him, finding them microcosms in which the whole human comedy was represented. He became in his field what Burbank was in another—an independent originator, a discoverer on his own account. He made his own discovery of the James-Lange theory of the emotions, which holds that by imitating the bodily attitude of an emotion the feeling itself may be induced, and it gave him material for endless experiment. Time and again, by fixing his own features—his mouth, his eyes, his muscles—in the likeness of someone he had under observation, he had been enabled to interpret the secret processes which prevailed in the man's mind.

In time his head was filled not only with the vast lore of the hill country, but with an amazing number of facts pertaining to the general human animal. He knew that boys are proud of the fact that they smoke; that young men boast of a heavy beard and delight in a hairy chest; that middle-aged men consider it a mellow compliment if dogs like them. He knew that women throw out various lures to ingratiate themselves with men—some using their legs, others installing themselves by saying they get along better with men than with women, and still others by trying to make themselves appear untouchable. He knew that the part of a woman's body least affected by age is the foot, that the place where age strikes her most ruthlessly is in the parchment-like skin on the back of her hand. He knew that hair begins to grow on a man's ears at forty, that the upper eyelids droop in the early thirties, that vertical wrinkles pucker the upper lip at fifty. He knew there are three kinds of blushes, each with its own point of origin—the blush of anger starting in the cheeks, that of shame rising in the forehead, and that of love originating in the neck. He knew that an empty period of time seems longer than one packed with action; that an object seen through a keyhole is mistaken as larger than it really is.

And it was his method when he found himself on a manhunt to let this vast accumulation of detail hang fluid in his mind, so that any small items pertaining to the case in hand might fly to their relevant places like small iron filings to a magnet. Not much was ever relevant, not much was ever needed. But there was always some small thing—the swelling of the lip in triumph, a nervous tic in the neck, a whitening of the eyeballs in fear—which provided access to the very thing which the culprit wished to conceal.

As he tarried now to let the fact of the murder of Manny Square take shape in his mind, he was aware of the audacity of the undertaking before him. He was sticking his neck out. He was not compelled to reveal what he suspected. Deer Lick would accept the death as the work of the mule. No question would ever arise. But if the fact were known that it was murder, the hounds of justice would begin to bay and Jess Roden would be out on a limb, forced to name the murderer or face the disgrace of failure.

It was the old pride which finally decided him. Here was this killer, going ahead in spite of the law, thinking he could plan a crime too subtle for detection, so sure of it that he went ahead to the final act. And even now he was off somewhere congratulating himself on his success, his lip curling with contempt at the officers of the law.

“All right,” Roden said aloud. “You asked for it, and I’ll take you on.”

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He got to his feet but checked himself at a sudden thought. No one knew anything as yet. The killer himself was smugly unaware that his crime had been discovered; the countryside knew only that Manny Square had been killed by the kick of a mule. Interested in the drama of death, but not suspicious. Perhaps it would be well to leave it so for the present, to put no one on guard, arouse no clamor.

There would be an advantage in such a course, and yet a disadvantage as well. Roden could not proceed directly. He could not go back to the Square farm without giving some kind of explanation for his presence; he could not ask questions. But

there were things he could do. He could go to Pine Ridge and try to find out what had caused Manny Square to change his set plans and return home instead of staying away for the night. It might have been the little man's own doing, or perhaps something had happened. At any rate it represented a break in continuity, a hitch in arrangements. As such it deserved looking into.

Roden displayed no haste or undue curiosity when he arrived at Pine Ridge a little after three. He usually went to the county seat a few times each year, and this might have been one of his customary trips. He looked the town over with a countryman's undisguised interest. He avoided the wooden sidewalks because they magnified the sound of his footfalls and made him conspicuous. He first strolled entirely through the town, then retraced his steps, cut left, and knocked on Hank Sule's door. Hank was large and paunchy, with a bulbous nose and mottled skin. He shook hands with Jess, pawed slightly on a rug which lay just inside the door, and then with a perfectly straight face conducted his visitor through the house and up the slight slope of the backyard to an outhouse which both men entered with some formality. Sule produced a gray jug from beneath a pile of straw. He pulled a corncob covered with cloth from the neck and poured a good stiff drink into a tumbler. Roden downed it and put out his hand for more.

It was purely a business transaction, though the relationship between the two men was quietly cordial. They loitered on the way back to the house, exchanged commonplaces with every sign of interest and regard. The sheriff finally dropped a fifty-cent piece in Sule's palm and departed for the courthouse, feeling refreshed.

On the way in to town he had decided to take a look at old Emanuel Square's will. He was aware of its general provisions, for it had been the subject of prolonged discussion around Deer Lick. But now one of its beneficiaries was dead, and another was out on a limb for want of money. And wills were tricky things, with their reversions and provisions. 65

He began reading with only a mild interest, not expecting to find anything new. The section lying to the east, bounded by certain markers, was to go to Louisa Square. The other two were bequeathed to Manny and Wayne, with Wayne having choice between them. The one to whom the upper section should fall was to receive from the general funds of the estate sufficient monies to restore the house on the property to a livable condition, said monies to be over and above an otherwise equal division of the estate.

All well and good. Roden looked up to catch the eye of Miss Luden fixed upon him in a friendly way. She was a nice girl, Roden thought: if he knew how to manage it, he would like to take her somewhere, show her around. She interpreted his friendliness, crossed to him.

"Mr. Wayne Square was in to look at the will not long ago."

"He was—oh!" Roden caught his breath. He forgot the pretty eyes of the girl and sat fingering the document. He said finally, "Mr. Wayne stands to git a nice thing now."

"Does he? Did this—this Manny have a wife?"

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"Yes. A youngish one. She'll draw a third."

“I don’t like that!” Miss Luden said sharply. “I think a man and his wife ought to be equal. I think she ought to get *all* when he dies.”

“Yeah. Maybe so. But she’ll be pretty well fixed.”

“Mr. Wayne will just run through what he gets.”

“I guess—how do you know?”

“Because he wasted what he got the first time. The day he came in here to look at the will, he tried to borrow money at the bank. My uncle is cashier there.”

“How much did he want?”

“All he could get. He said he *had* to have it. But Uncle Bim—that’s not his real name—wouldn’t give him anything. He said his place is mortgaged for more than it is worth now.”

Her face was beautifully flushed with her anger at the law and at Wayne Square. Some fellers would know jest how to go about askin’ her for—for a date, wasn’t it? She was clean as a pin. A vague perfume emanated from her, filled the air about her. But Roden looked down at his dusty shoes and uncreased trousers, and courage went out of him. Oh, well....

“Thank you for showin’ me this,” he said. “It’s been a help.”

“Do you think—you don’t think it had anything to do with Mr. Manny’s death?”

“Mr. Manny was killed by a mule.”

“That’s right. I forgot. I guess it was because when you—when anyone’s killed and you take it up—”

“I’m after somebody, eh?”

“We think there isn’t anything you can’t do.”

She smiled. Her teeth were white, her lips crimson. Funny about those lips. They were not smooth like the skin on the palm of the hand, but had tiny creases running across them, so that the soft flesh seemed naturally puckered. Roden experienced a slight intoxication. Some fellers would know how to start everything off. There was an eagerness in her face, a kind of helpfulness and sympathy. He cleared his throat, turned his hat round and round in both hands. But he did not know what to say.

He went out reluctantly and yet with a measure of relief, dropped on a green-painted metal bench on the courthouse lawn. He had known that Wayne Square was hard up, but not that he had reached the end of his rope. A man who had to have money like Wayne did, and Manny’s rich acres right under his nose.... Still, they were brothers. But get Wayne half pickled and desperate besides, and he might forget who Manny was. He wouldn’t heir all Manny had, but he’d get quite a cut of it —enough to put him on easy street.

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Roden looked up at the sun, jocund and sparkling beyond the green leaves. Directly across the street a sign on a second-story window caught his eye. Emmet Derek, Attorney at Law. Derek was a good scout; he could tell Jess what he wanted to know. Roden got to his feet, looked once more at his dusty shoes and uncreased trousers, and crossed the street.

Emmet Derek was a little man, long-necked, skinny. He had arranged his small office like a lure. Row on row of calf-bound books lined one wall. Leaning against a filing case on his rolltop desk was a large important-looking envelope addressed to him but bearing in the upper lefthand corner the words: The Governor's Mansion, Bennington. The impression it gave was that Emmet Derek was in intimate touch with the governor of the state. On the desk itself was a brief marked URGENT. Derek started at the turning of the knob of his door. He lowered his feet to the floor and hastily dropped a chew of tobacco from his mouth to a coffee can in a top drawer, and closed the drawer quickly. When Roden entered, the attorney was pondering the brief, his brows drawn together in deep concentration. But when he looked up and saw the sheriff, he lost something of his gravity.

“Oh! Hello, Jess.”

“Howdy, Emmet.”

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“Did you come to jaw? Or what?”

“I need to know something.”

“Hah! Business.”

“It's like this, Emmet. A man dies, leaving a wife, a mother, and a brother. How will the estate be divided?”

“Did he leave a will?”

“No—he wasn't expectin' to die.”

“His wife gets a third. That’s the law.”

“So I thought.”

“The mother and brother get a third each.”

“The mother comes in, does she? I wasn’t sure of that.”

“Yes. Are you thinking of a special case?”

“Not exactly. I was figurin’.”

Derek looked disappointed. He pulled out the drawer, bit off a new chew. “How’s things over at Deer Lick?”

“So-so.”

Derek had not heard of Manny Square’s death, and Roden did not enlighten him. He wanted to get away. But he had found out what he wanted to know: Wayne Square would get a third. That wasn’t everything, but it was plenty. Roden stepped lively once he was down the stairs, for the afternoon was slipping away, and he still had to try to find out why Manny Square had changed his mind and gone back home.

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He went down to Boxton’s livery. Everyone stabled at Boxton’s when coming to the county seat, partly because of Sam Boxton himself, a round and jovial German with a real love of horseflesh, who welcomed each customer personally and each horse with an understanding pat between the ears. It was inevitable that Roden should go to Boxton.

The liveryman greeted him with a bantering roar. “Still ridin’

Shank's mare, eh, Sheriff?" he cried. "I'd think you'd be gittin' tired of it by this time!"

Roden grinned. "If everybody was like me, where'd you be?"

"They're not," Boxton said complacently. "Business is good."

"Sam, did Manny Square come here yesterday?"

Boxton sobered instantly. "That was an awful thing to happen to a man. I just heard about it."

"Yes. But there was a queer thing: he intended to stay here last night, but changed his mind and went home."

"True enough. He told me the horse would be here for the night—that big sorrel, Ace. It was the letter that upset him. Soon as he read it, he turned shaky all over."

Roden said, carefully, "What letter, Sam?"

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"I found it there in the office." Boxton stepped from the front entrance of the big stable to the small office, a tiny room littered with harness and cobs. He pointed to a desk whose top had once been covered with leather but was now almost whittled away.

"It was right there."

"Who brought it?"

"I don't know. I just saw it there and thought someone had left it for him, knowing I'd get it to him."

"And you did?"

“I sent it by Rusty, the kid that helps around. He found Manny in at Weston’s buying a suit. He said that when Manny read it he turned white and was so shaky he could hardly get the pants off he was trying on.”

“You don’t know what was in it?”

“No. He came storming in here a few minutes later demanding his horse. Last I saw of him he was cutting the corner up there, laying on the whip.”

“What time was that?”

“Around six. I’d just got back from supper.”

“Tell me this, Sam—did you see anybody around here last night that might have brought the note, anyone you didn’t know?”

Boxton considered, toying with his ragged mustache, running a hand over his partly bald head. “No-o, can’t say that I did. Look here, Sheriff! What’s up?”

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“You’re sure, eh?”

“Well-l-l, I did see a big nigger up the street. Thought at the time he didn’t belong here.”

“What did he look like?”

“Thick and heavy. Black as the ace of spades.”

“Do you know Big Nig?”

“Sure. It wasn’t him.”

“Did he have a surly face?”

“Come to think of it, yes. But his chest—it was thick as a barrel.”

“I think I know who it was.”

“I asked you once, Sheriff—is anything the matter?”

Roden said slowly, “I am not sure, and I’d rather not say anything till I am.”

“Okay, Sheriff. Who was the nigger?”

“Feller named Ben Neal, from over our way.”

“Think he wrote the note?”

“Somebody did. He *could* have.”

After he left Boxtton’s, Roden had a bite to eat at the Bon Ton Cafe before starting back to Deer Lick. There was a waitress there who always favored him, a stocky girl with freckles and a friendly smile. But she seemed downright homely after Miss Luden. Miss Luden was a girl for you! No dampness of kitchen smells hung about her. Clean as a pin. Roden ate morosely, and was glad to leave the Bon Ton behind him.

And yet, he thought as he headed east in the early twilight, the comfortable feel of the earth under him, he had made progress. Manny Square had intended to spend the night in Pine Ridge but

had been summoned home by a note. Ben Neal could have been the bearer of the message. Roden recalled his surprise earlier in the day that Neal happened to know of Manny's death. And Wayne Square, desperate for money, had been to town to see what he could do. Doubtless he had found out that at Manny's death a snug share of the rich acres would come to him.

CHAPTER 5

Darkness soon crept like an odorless smoke over the hills. And with it came a silence so vast that Roden's dull footfalls on the loose earth of the road were like the thud of a maul, eerie and hollow; or like the wing-beat of some old pheasant drumming in the rotten earth by a distant crumbling log. Yet to the indefatigable sheriff the way home appeared in the nature of a stroll, a respite during which he could stretch himself and clear his mind.

For a time he pondered the knowledge gained at the county seat. And then he viewed the case as a whole, forming a sort of picture in his mind with little Manny Square in the center and lines running out from him toward those who might conceivably have wanted to put him out of the way. It was a figure made familiar to him by the zodiac graph in his almanac, where a partly disemboweled man stood in the center and lines pointed from various parts of his body toward the twelve great signs. But the continual mulling over the problem soon brought confusion to Roden's thinking, and he decided to rest himself with other thoughts.

The road over which he traveled was rich in lore; and for a time he put Manny Square out of his mind and let his thoughts play over this and that story stemming from the various places he was passing. Just a little way ahead of him the road dropped down a wooded slope to a deep hollow. The choice timber had been cut off; the hillside was now a tangle of twisted limbs and a fresh growth of young saplings. But the story ran

that one black night a man had been ascending the hill when he heard the rattle of chains above him. It was such a sound as would have been made by throwing a log chain and allowing the links to clink down upon each other in the fall. The traveler stopped, waited. The beating of his heart was the only sound in the sudden stillness. Then there was a noise on the ground, the rhythmic beat of a steady tramping. The brush at the side of the road parted without sound and a pale horse stepped forth. The rider was also pale, but he had no head. The stump of a neck lifted an inch, two inches, and stopped. But the hand on the rein was steady. It guided the horse across the road. The brush below parted, again without sound, and horse and rider continued steadily down the hill.

“What I could never understand,” Jess Roden told himself with a dry chuckle, “was how the feller ever saw the ghost. It was a black night!” For Roden was a strict realist; for him, everything had to be on a definitely physical basis.

But he passed a place where the grim and pathetic story had actually happened. Ab Primer lived down under the crest of the ridge. Ab was a big, credulous, slow-moving man; his wife Millie was red and stringy and inclined to epileptic fits. Years ago their small son, Cater, had died. Corpses were not embalmed in the region, but were simply laid out, dressed, and buried.

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It entered the mind of Ab Primer that Cater might not really be dead; he might be only in a deep stupor. Ab bared his mind to Millie. “It’d be awful,” he told her, “if the little feller’d come to down in his grave.”

Millie caught her breath, began to bite her fingernails. “Let’s stop the buryin’!” she cried.

“But we couldn’t keep him, Millie. He might *be* dead.”

“You fix it, Ab. You fix it some way!” Millie was beginning to draw her chin into her neck in a way that presaged a fit.

Ab fixed it, his slow mind grappling with each detail. The burial was made on his own plot of ground, not far below the house. As soon as the little crowd had dwindled away, Ab sprang into action. He threw the dirt out of the grave and removed the lid of the coffin. He bored an inch auger hole in the lid near the head and inserted a long elder which he had carefully hollowed out. Later, it would serve as a hollow tube running from the boy’s mouth to the outside air. He bored another hole, much farther down. To the dead hand he tied a string and ran it through this second hole. He replaced the lid and put the earth back in the grave, careful not to unseat the elder, and allowing the string to run free. His last act was to arrange his cocked shotgun on two forked sticks beside the grave. To the trigger he tied the end of the string, drawing it taut so the slightest pull upon it would discharge the gun. Then he went home and waited. Millie waited. But the explosion did not come.

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“Ab left the gun there for near a month,” Roden told himself sympathetically. “But it never went off.”

His eye was caught by a light not far ahead of him and to the left. He paused, looked more closely. The light became two small spots of fire, glowing steadily and unblinkingly. It might

be a cat, Roden thought. But he did not hold with the theory that a cat's eyes glow in the dark.

"They only shine when there's light to reflect," he told himself.

He groped about for a stick or a stone. A clod came up in his hand. He threw it. It broke in midair and sprayed the underbrush with a hail of small particles. The two bright spots continued to glow. He strode angrily toward them, found himself in a tangle of weeds and brush and dank moss. And then his feet kicked up the fox fire that glowed phosphorescently on the rotten end of a chunk.

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"That's your ghost for you!" he said impatiently, and fought his way back to the road.

A hoot owl began to follow him. And while he knew what it was, its hoarse and unnatural screaming set his scalp to crawling. It was now behind, now ahead of him. There was no sound of its wings in passing, but only the barking cough: a sound too deep for the human voice to make, descending in a cascade of explosions and ending in a series of small hoarse croaks that made the flesh creep. Furious at himself for a fear that he could not control, Roden fell into his swinging dog trot toward Green River.

It was around ten o'clock when he reached the end of the long ridge and faced the sleeping watershed below. The bright sickle of the new moon had already dropped to the horizon behind him. Overhead the stars glowed like white torches; far below, the swirling fog cut a path over the water. The air was brisk yet somnolent; alive with the energy of early autumn, yet sleepy

with the mystery of night. Roden felt the quickening energy creep into his blood, was possessed of a keen desire to know what was going on over on the distant point.

Besides, there was the matter of the dynamite. Grady Heard had told Big Nig to beware of it, to keep away from the quarry. But only on a particular night, the night on which Manny Square had been killed. Yet he had assured Roden the dynamite was always stored in a dugout at home. Someone was lying. It was not the negro; such a tale would never have occurred to him. Grady Heard was the evasive one. Either the dynamite had been in the quarry or he had wanted to keep all prowlers away. If it had been there—was it possible that Heard's fury had reached the point where he was willing not only to let the stock fall down the quarry, but to blow it to smithereens in the fall? Or if he had wanted to keep prowlers away, was it so that he himself should not be seen in his prowlings?

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Roden entered the quarry cautiously, his small flat pocket flash ready in his hand. The tiny white flame cut the darkness immediately around him, lighting up the broken stones, throwing brief shifting shadows, now gray, now black. He did not proceed continuously, but stopped every little while, snapping off the light and listening intently. But eventually he covered the entire surface of the quarry. He even climbed to the bank where the pile of gunny sacks had lain in the morning. But they were gone.

There was no dynamite in the quarry. He snapped off the flash, sat down on the bank. Either Grady Heard had decided that with Manny dead there was no need to blow

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anything up, or he had lied to keep Big Nig away. And if the latter, why? Certain facts began to fit in place—the padded sledge which was Heard’s daily tool, the trip hammer crashing on the face of the stone. No one in the county would find the method of Manny Square’s death so much a part of his daily thinking as would Grady Heard. It was a natural—from the breaking of a stone with a pad wired to a sledge to the killing of a man with a mule shoe wired to a sledge. While as for motive—Roden knew that the feud between the two men had reached the quintessence of bitterness. It was an ugly thing which had started gradually but grown till it cankered and festered and drove each man partly mad. And yet it was a stalemate, with neither one able to strike a decisive blow. It was inevitable that they must have been goaded by their very helplessness to pile fury on fury.

And so the dynamite—Roden thought of a sudden that he had the answer to the dynamite. Always of late, after a head of Manny’s stock had been lost down the quarry, a similar head of Heard’s had been lost in somewhat the same manner. It had never been possible to pin the quick vengeance on Manny, although actually there was little doubt. And so the dynamite had been

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Heard’s response—a colossal and magnificent explosion which would trap Manny where he had no business to be, forever proving that he had been killing Heard’s stock and planting it in the quarry, settling the responsibility once and for all. And yet Heard might readily escape any charge of guilt, since he had a right to store the dynamite on his own property.

Roden jerked his head quickly to one side, startled by a quick and raucous scream which came from the direction of the river. But it was only a shitepoke disturbed in its slumbers. He

became conscious of the noises of the night. A mole bored in the ground near his hand. Moles are said to be blind, Roden thought, but he knew better: he had seen their tiny eyes. He had also heard that they bored in the ground to keep out of the way of enemies. But he had another theory: he believed they bored for small bugs and worms. A shuddering sound lifted from the tops of the trees below the quarry, yet there was no wind where Roden sat. Above him, in the direction of the strong pens, came the squeal of a pig, to be followed instantly by the explosive and enormous coarse gruntings of one of Manny's gigantic boars. The commotion dwindled to an irritated murmur, died away. Directly overhead was a snap and then a hysterical flapping, as a stray bull bat reversed its course and hurried another way. Roden sat up, entranced by it all. For here was the life of the night—unseen, diverse. The darkness was alive with it, crawling. It was like the fleas on a dog, unseen, hopping, scurrying along, vividly active. And then from the direction of the great Square barn came the sardonic bray of old Lige. There was first a catching of the breath, as if in preparation for the effort. This was followed by the first great blast of air from the iron throat. It was a vast yaw-w-w; and then it began to titillate up and down, sucked in and forced out, filling the air over the dark acres of little Manny Square. It was not triumphant. It was sardonic, freighted with frustration and malice.

Then, above the noises of the night and the bray of the mule, Roden heard another sound. It riveted his attention because it did not belong. It was far above his head—the unmistakable twang of the single strand of wire. There was a further sound, like an exploring foot feeling for the edge of the precipice. Small particles of earth were dislodged and came hopping down the cliff to plop against the stones at the base. Roden

humped low to make himself invisible. He saw the shadow then—a vague and shapeless mass skylighted above the abruptly terminated point. There was no head, no definite shape, but only an amorphous bulk darkly outlined against the distant stars.

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It was too big for a hog, unless it was one of Manny's purebred boars. But he had been very careful of them, keeping them in a field to the north which gave no access to the precipice. It was for teasing one of them that Manny had discharged Ben Neal. The shadow was hardly large enough for a cow. It might be a calf, or a heifer.

Roden remained humped low, his eyes and ears straining. Then there was a crash at the base of the quarry, a sharp and decisive report. But there had been no accompanying slide of earth or gravel, such as would have been the case in the frantic sliding of an animal down the precipice. There was only a crash at the base, with no intervening clatter. Besides, the shadow still lingered at the top. Simultaneously with the crash it lifted to the height of a man. It stood poised for a moment and then disappeared. But there was this time no clang of the single wire, no exploring feet. The vague shape might have evaporated into thin air.

Roden sat only till he was sure no further move would be made from above, when he slid cautiously to the floor of the quarry and made a precarious way toward the base. The going was treacherous; once a stone slid under his feet and threw him forward. But he managed to stay his fall with his hands. Only when he was near the base of the pit did he flash his light. He saw nothing at once, save the confusion of the gray

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stones. It was only after he had twice made the circuit of the area that the bright pencil of light singled out the sledge hammer. It lay with the heavy iron wedged between two ragged pieces of rock, the gray handle partly concealed in a crack.

There could be no doubt of its identity. It was the sledge he had thrust down under the hay of the mow. There was the same splintered face on one side, the same marks of wire on the handle near the eye, the same break in the weathered hickory handle. It was the break that clinched the identification. And as he studied it, Roden's eye was caught by something, which had not been there twelve hours before. It looked at first like a feather, or a bit of down. But he knew at once that it was a fluff of gray wool. He examined it carefully before he drew it out. It was wedged firmly in the break, the two ends pointing toward the haft of the handle. Exactly so it would have been had it been pulled out of a yarn mitten as the hand was drawn firmly toward the tip of the handle; or as it would have been had the sledge been swung out over the quarry and allowed to slip through a mittened hand.

Roden drew it out of the break and dropped it under the inside band of his hat. Later it would lie on the fireboard at the house, under the tumbler beside its mate. And as he put the hat back on his head he reflected that there was always something—a bit of wool, a mule shoe hanging on a peg, a thin sliver of human skin—to nullify the perfect crime.

Then he bethought himself: the killer had stood at the top of the quarry not five minutes ago, could not even now be far away. Roden smiled grimly. If he had known five minutes ago what he knew now, the murderer would be in his hands.

“But I didn’t!” he said shortly.

He restored the sledge to the exact spot in which he had found it, and scrambled out of the quarry, using the flash only when absolutely necessary. When he reached the top he dropped to hands and knees and crawled toward the highest point, careful to make no sound. There he lay for all of three minutes, listening. But only the distant sounds from the house and an occasional stamping of the stock in the barn came to him. When he was convinced that no one tarried on the spot, he straightened and held the torch on the ground.

There were footprints, but they were many and confused, his own among them. For he and Ed Lefferton had stopped here, as had doubtless many others in the course of the day. He thought he detected the spot in the projecting dry earth from which the gravel had recently been dislodged, but he could not be sure. Even if he had been sure, the shallow indentation would have told him nothing.

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He snapped off the light and started for the barn. If what he suspected was true, the mule shoes would no longer hang on the peg behind Lige’s stall. For the killer was out to destroy evidence. He had not done it the night before. Maybe he had felt so secure that he thought he could bide his time; or he might have been interrupted, or overcome with sudden fear. But he was at it now, throwing the sledge away, covering his tracks.

Roden opened the door to the horse stalls and stood poised and listening. The killer might have gone first for the sledge and later for the mule shoes. He might be in here now, not ten feet away. Roden dropped his hand to his hip pocket but brought it

away empty; he had not cared to tote a gun on the Pine Ridge trip. A killer surprised in his cover-up work would be ferocious as a lynx, all the more so as being caught when he was trying to conceal. But only the noises of the stable came to Roden's ears—the deep sigh of a cow, the stamp of a horse's hoof, the running of an exploring nose over the dry stripped stalks of the fodder.

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Roden edged along the south wall, running his hand before him. There were pegs back of each stall. Bridles, bits of rope, a pair of hames. And then the peg back of Lige's stall. No mule shoes hung upon it. The killer had removed them all, doubtless without realizing that one was already gone.

Now that the sledge and the mule shoes had been removed, the killer would feel more secure. And yet the question remained as to why the work had not been done on the previous night. If not then, why now? There was no reason to suspect that the killer had grown apprehensive during the day. The removal of the sledge and the shoes might have been a part of an original plan which was interrupted last night; there was as yet no telling what strange things had happened here only twenty-four hours ago.

And then for the first time the thought of the lantern obtruded itself. It hung from a wire to the north of the big table in the areaway. If Manny had lit it to see his way around, somebody else had put it out. But he might have used a flashlight, particular as he would be about striking matches in the barn.

The door behind Roden bumped softly. He jerked his head around, flattened against the wall. Old Lige began to

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weave on his halter, no doubt furious at this shadow behind him, perhaps even remembering his tormentor of the morning. If he was not haltered close, his sharp narrow feet might reach the wall. Roden squirmed about, turned toward the door. He made his way to the casing, pushed cautiously on the big panel. It opened easily enough, and he stepped to the barnyard. There was no one around.

He crossed the lot to the upper corner of the barn. Lights were mellow in the house. A few buggies stood in dark silhouette above the barn. Friends from a distance were already beginning to come in. By tomorrow afternoon the place would be overrun with them—from Riverside, Pine Ridge, from Bennington. But while the house was evidently well filled with people, there was none of the hubbub of the usual wake. Manny's friends would be quiet, decorous; perhaps sitting about reading, or talking in a restrained way.

Roden decided to go up where he could watch the house. He wished desperately that he might go in, see who was there. But he was not intimate enough with the Squares to enter as a friend, and as yet it was not known that there had been a murder.

He circled the barn and cut back to the fence which ran up the slope west of the house. Concealed by its strong rails, he made his way up to the point. The yard was vaguely illuminated by the yellow light from the windows. The doors were closed against the sharp air of the early autumn night. A little knot of men stood before the front entrance, talking in subdued voices. Roden could not distinguish them; only the voice of Wayne Square was intermittently recognizable from where he crouched.

He waited till the men went in. By the light which fell upon them in the doorway he recognized Wayne Square, Cary Davis. The others he did not know. But Grady Heard was not among them. Not that Roden had expected him to be; but if he had been, he could not have been the prowler who threw the sledge down the quarry.

Roden wished suddenly for Big-Boy. In such a situation he often made use of the sharp senses of the dog to detect what was hidden from him. With his hand on the flat head, the man could interpret every move of the dog's body—a sniffing, that a new scent was in the air; a twitch of the ears, that a sound had risen too minute for Roden to pick up; a low growl, that danger was not far away. For Roden believed that the killer was still somewhere around. He might, of course, have hurried away once his tasks were accomplished. But the sheriff was certain he was not far away, held, if for no other reason, by pure fascination.

There was a change in the illumination of the kitchen. The yellow glow from the window was no longer so bright. Then the light went out altogether, leaving the room in darkness. Evidently the wick of the lamp had first been turned down, and then extinguished by a quick puff. A shadow emerged from the back door, stood on the stoop. Then it disengaged and rolled swiftly down the path toward the barn.

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Roden lifted, muffling even the noise of his clothing. Running his hands along the rails and still only half erect, he slipped after the rolling shadow. It was to the left and a hundred feet ahead of him, and moved with great swiftness but with practically no sound—clearly someone bent on getting to a

secret destination as quickly as possible. Before reaching the barn the shape veered toward the fence and drew up at the head of the lane. The change in direction had cut into the distance between the prowler and the sheriff. They were less than twenty feet apart. Roden stopped abruptly, clamping his legs together to stop the rubbing sound made by his trousers. He opened his mouth to breathe noiselessly. The shadow hesitated also, the body pivoting from side to side as if looking quickly about. Then the voice came, low, cautious, but wildly anxious.

“Fred!” When there was no answer, the single word was repeated, even more desperately. “Fred!”

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Roden knew the voice; it was Beth Square’s.

Before he had time to wonder there was a movement beyond the fence. A head lifted above the rails. A cautious ‘psssst!’ drew Beth’s attention. She expelled her breath in a quick cough which was near a sob and ran forward. She put her hands on the rail and raised a foot. Fred Sutton rose from his concealment and lifted her across.

Roden crawled closer. He was within a yard of them, feeling the earth with his hands before putting a knee down, finally stopping at a corner of the fence and blending into it. For all of a minute there was no movement beyond the strong rails. Then Beth sobbed, the sound torn from her.

“I can’t *stand* it!” she said, her voice shrill on the word.

“S-s-s-sh!”

Her sobbing ceased as though a hand had been placed over her

mouth.

“Take it easy, darling.” Fred Sutton’s voice was low, soothing.

“I *had* to see you, Fred!”

“I know, dear.”

“You still love me?” It was not so much a question as a cry, agonized by uncertainty.

His answer was triumphant, exulting. “As if I could ever quit!”

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“But tell me—*tell* me!”

“You’re upset, Lizzie. You must pull yourself together.”

“I know, I know. Half the day I’ve been crazy.”

“Has Old Lou been at you today?”

She must have nodded, for his voice dropped dangerously. “You are free of her now, Lizzie. You could slap her in the face!”

“But it’s all so awful, with Manny in there and her—”

“What has she done?”

“Nothing. She just ignores me. To see her you’d think I wasn’t there.”

“I don’t see why you ever married him. Old enough to be your pap. Only thing he had was money.” It must have been an ancient

plaint; for once the words had started they flowed readily, inexorably. “A rich man’s money, an *old* rich man—”

Here his words ceased, as though by a hand over his mouth. Beth said faintly, “I didn’t know *you* then, darling.” But she quickly reverted to her initial hysteria. “What will we *do*, Fred! Oh, I can’t go back in there any more!”

“Get hold of yourself. You know this is what we’ve wanted. Too bad it had to come this way. But you’re free now, Lizzie—free!”

93

“But suppose somebody finds out!”

The silence was too prolonged. When Sutton finally spoke it was guardedly, but as if he could see no way out of it. “We’ve got to consider that. We’ve got to consider everything. I’m telling you this to put you on your guard, so that if anyone *does* find out—”

“What *is* it!”

“I think Jess Roden suspects something.”

“Jess Ro—oh!”

“He was up in the mow this morning.”

“But no one saw me, Fred—I’d swear it!”

“Did you do just like I told you?”

“Everything!”

“Well, no one saw me either. But Roden might have seen where I’d been up there.”

“But other people go to the mow.”

“Not the way I did!”

“That’s why I had to talk to you, Fred. I got to thinking, ‘I don’t know what he did after I left him. I don’t know if anyone saw him. I don’t know how he got out.’ Tell me, dearest.”

“You don’t need to worry. No one saw me. But you know Jess Roden. If he begins to snoop around—I’m only telling you so you’ll be prepared—”

“I don’t know whether I *can* hide it!”

94

His voice was rough, peremptory. “You’ve got to!” Then there was the sound of their bodies meeting, and when he spoke again it was in a different tone. “We’re out of the mess now, sweetheart. You’re not an old man’s darling—you’re mine!”

“Fred....” The word held a faint interrogation.

“Yes?”

“Manny was awful good to me.”

“Sure he was, but you didn’t love him.”

“There’s something pitiful about him up there—he’s so little and thin.”

“Sure, I—say, what are you driving at?”

“Maybe I did love him—in a different way.”

There was again the rustle of their bodies. “Say, what’s this? Now that he’s out of the way you—”

“Don’t! I just wanted you to see—maybe I’ll *tell* it!” Her voice had again risen to a wail.

“You’re out of your wits! You’re crazy to—”

“I *know* it!”

The voice of old Lige rose from the barn, a vast he-haw, sardonic and malevolent, beginning on a powerful blast and descending to a series of throaty gutturals which, although muffled by the four walls, set the night in ragged vibration.

Beth said, “I must go!”

“All right. But get over that spell. We can be married soon.”

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“Are you sure?”

He laughed shortly. There was a moment’s complete silence, and then Beth was lifted to the top of the fence. She dropped to the ground, went streaking up toward the kitchen door. Roden hugged the fence, immovable, hardly daring to breathe. But Fred Sutton’s guarded footfalls went down the lane.

Roden relaxed slowly. He stood up, put his hands on the top

rail, and pondered for a considerable while. Then he climbed into the lane and turned on his flash, shielding the light with his free hand. The earth was not too dry to yield the footprints. Near the lower rail Fred Sutton's pressed deep, especially over the toes; the heels made little imprint at all: it had been here that he squatted, awaiting the coming of Beth. Farther back the whole track showed—a big flat heel little worn, a broad sole not rounding toward the tip but almost as blunt as a spade. From the depth of the imprint, he must have stood here when lifting Beth off the fence. In an uneven half circle the tracks spread to a diameter of three feet or more, Sutton's always blunt and sure, Beth's also flat-heeled and blunt, but quite small. Roden dropped to his knees to study hers. They were entirely flat to the ground, like the imprint of a smooth board, and the impression held to the very edge of the sole.

“She had on new shoes,” the sheriff said under his breath. Then he told himself as he swung the torch guardedly, “Take a good look and see that you remember.”

The footprints meant as much to him as footsmells to his hound Lead. For Roden was a tracker. The triangle of a rabbit's leap, the splay-toed track of an opossum, the indented heel of the skunk, the open-toed leap of the squirrel—all spoke to him definitely and in kind. And these human footprints, although he might not need to know them, would tell him where Fred Sutton had been, and where Beth Square, unless she changed her shoes. He stood up, knowing the two as definitely by their tracks as by their voices or faces.

Beth had been lifted over the fence on coming; she had slid off when she left. He let the flash play on the topmost rail. It was

slick with much use, for here was the general crossing to the lane for anyone not wishing to go round by the bars. But caught in a deep splinter of the rail was a bit of gray wool no larger than a fluff of down. Roden drew in his breath with a small whistling sound when he saw it. He climbed the fence, throwing the torch recklessly. But he bethought himself almost at once and grew cautious again.

The bit of wool was slightly under the top and on the side of the rail toward the house. It had been pulled out on the ascent and not on the descent of the fence, since the free ends pointed definitely upward. Roden pulled at the strand, but found it wedged so tightly that the end broke off in his fingers. He had to insert his knife blade and pry the wood slightly up before he could extract the middle part from the sliver.

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“So,” he said thinly, dropping the thread under the inside band of his hat. He swung to face the lane, propelled himself with his hands on the rail, and left in the direction taken by Fred Sutton.

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CHAPTER 6

Jess Roden was at the stone quarry before seven the next morning. It had been impossible in the darkness of the previous night to make a satisfactory examination of the ground where the killer had stood when he threw the sledge down the precipice. For one thing, the small flash had picked out only tiny spots, leaving the surrounding terrain dark: a complete picture of the total area was impossible. And there had also been the danger of swinging the light too freely. The killer could not be far away, and he would be quick to interpret Roden's presence on the cliff. A swift leap out of the darkness, a shove, and the sheriff would join the procession of calves and hogs which had perished down the quarry. Or the light might be seen from the barn or the house and bring someone down to investigate before Roden was ready to reveal the grim knowledge which he possessed.

But he had a further purpose now in wishing to examine the spot. He knew the marks which would have been left by Fred Sutton and Beth Square. The place was cut up with tracks, yes; but the sledge carrier's would be the last. They would top the others, however vaguely. And there would be now no mistaking the totally flat imprint of Beth Square's new shoes, or the heavy blunt toes of Fred Sutton's.

He took the last few steps which brought him to the single wire and stood for a moment before emerging in full view of the barn and house. The multiplied sounds of early morning rose in a rural cacophony—the singing of busy hens, the squealing of

pigs. Cattle lowed from the head of the lane. A purebred horse whinnied from its box stall. But no one was yet astir about the place. Even Fred Sutton, who usually came first from his home up the bottom to feed the stock of a morning, was not yet in evidence.

“Maybe he was up late!” Roden said grimly, and stepped boldly to the top.

The ground lay dark under the heavy dew. The grass did not run to the edge but stopped a few feet back, leaving the earth bare directly above the ragged rim. The soil was thin, sand and gravel predominating. But the footprints, held like casts by the dew, were clear and definite. One overlaid another, the older being partly obliterated; but the total effect as seen in the early light was distinct enough. There was the break in the rim made by the foot thrust forward to explore the edge. And a couple of feet back of it, as if planted firmly in order to hold the body safely while the free foot got the distance, was the heavy imprint pointing toward the rim of the quarry. So would a man have stood, pivoting on one foot while he got the distance with the other, before flinging the sledge away.

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It was not a woman's track, nor was it Fred Sutton's. The heel was broad enough for Sutton's, and flat. But it was worn at the back and to the right. There were also chips out of the curved portion back of the instep such as would have shown in a rubber heel broken by contact with stones. Roden explored the earth up to the edge of the grass, saw his own footprints made the night before. Once he thought he saw a woman's track, and dropped excitedly above it. But it might have been a man's cut in two by another in such a way as to make it seem narrow and small. And

save for an additional imprint of the broad heel, this time pointing up the slope, he saw nothing more of significance. But before he started off the hill he picked up a handful of the loose soil and stood studying it a moment, fixing it in his mind. The owner of the big heel, whoever he was, might have carried some of it away on his instep.

“At least it’s something!” he said.

A sound like the slamming of a screen came from the house. He looked quickly up, then circled the cut and dropped off the hill. His temper was short, for his discoveries had been disappointing and there was nothing more he could do till nightfall. For a copper cent he would go back up there and tell Old Lou that her son had been murdered. There were a lot of things he wanted to know. He wanted to know if Ben Neal had taken the note to Manny Square, and why; he wanted to know why Grady Heard had lied about the dynamite, and where he had been on the night of Manny’s death. He wanted to find the mule shoes and the wire which had bound the shoe to the sledge. He wanted—

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And then he heard the deep voice of Big Nig, singing. The giant black had a voice like the whistle of a tugboat, and it was his wont while resting on his paddle as his long canoe knifed the water, to break forth into song. *Nellie Wildwood, Old Black Joe, I Want to be in Heaven Settin’ Down, Water Boy*—they rumbled from his cavernous chest with impartial and fond catholicity; now with the sprightliness of a lumbering elephant, now with a resonance so deep that the flanking hills reverberated with a sort of elemental trembling. Big Nig made his music over the waters.

*O Mary, O Martha,
I want to be in heaven settin' down!*

Roden heard the song and stopped dead. Big Nig and Ed Lefferton were bringing up the coffin. His eyes glowed delightedly: he could go back with them, find an excuse for prowling over the place while Ed Lefferton worked. He left the road, cut through the tangle of young ash and ironweeds and parted the willows at the river bank. Soon the canoe came in sight—the coffin balanced precariously across it; Ed Lefferton in the bow, his steadying hand on the black top; Big Nig in the rear leaning on the paddle. Roden waved them toward the bank.

“Goin’ up?”

“All set. But Old Lou will find fault somewhere.”

“I’ll go along. You let on I had to help you.”

Lefferton looked at the sheriff point-blank. Jess Roden was the last man to expose himself to bereavement. He was awkward at sympathy. “What you want to go for?”

“I’m interested. You tell ’em I had to help.” Then he said to Big Nig, “You plannin’ to git through with this before time to work at the quarry?”

He did not ask the question for information, but merely to make talk while he climbed precariously into the canoe. But Big Nig grinned doubtfully.

“I’s been fired.”

“Fired?”

“The can done tied to my tail.”

“What for?”

“Mistah Heahd wanted to take Ben on.”

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“Ben Neal?”

“Yazuh, boss. Ben gits de job.”

“Why?”

Big Nig lifted his elbows in an expressive gesture, dug the paddle deep, and sent the heavy canoe boring up the river. He avoided the sheriff’s eyes.

“Watch out!” Lefferton cautioned, steadyng the coffin.

And so they made their way up the hill and to the big house, the giant black carrying the coffin on his back, the two men tailing behind, helping over the fences, calling directions. Old Lou was on the kitchen stoop, motioning them to go to the front door. There were people about the place, but they kept pretty well out of sight. The coffin was deposited in the small guest room. Big Nig backed out quickly. Ed Lefferton set about his work with practiced skill. Roden made a feint at helping, but only so long as Old Lou’s attention was on him. When she stepped out for some purpose, he said hurriedly to Lefferton,

“Don’t be surprised at anything. I’ll explain later.”

Lefferton looked up quickly, eyed the sheriff. But his mind was on his own work. Roden slipped through the door, almost colliding with Beth Square, who stood as she had the day before, slightly to the right of the doorway, apologetic and pitiful. If anything, she looked younger than she really was. Her body was comfortably plump and appealing, the flesh firm. There was a look of distraction on her face, but in spite of it her features were girlish and full of life—pervaded by a kind of eagerness and lush fullness.

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“Oh!” Roden exclaimed. “Excuse me, Lizzie.”

“I am sorry.”

She drew back, bowing slightly. In her eyes was an effacing meekness, but also a sudden fear. Roden caught the almost imperceptible shift in her breathing. Deception did not sit well upon her. She doubtless knew it and was afraid of herself. She was fashioned for the commonplace, for the daily chores and serenity of mind and undeviating loyalty. By what chance her devotion to Manny Square had been interrupted by the handsome and smiling Fred Sutton, Roden had no way of knowing. It might have been the call of the flesh of one equally young; it might have been a reaction against the entrapment in which she increasingly found herself, with her mother-in-law epitomizing the iron form in which she was being crushed as the wife of Manny Square. But now she was caught in another kind of trap, her loyalties pulling one way and her love for Sutton another, herself a pathetic battleground of warring forces.

As she took a step backward out of Roden’s way, he experienced an instant of compassion. The drop of her

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eyelids was so patently an effort at self-control, the momentary quivering of the corners of her mouth an equal evidence of her lack of success. But he forced the sympathy back and regarded her coolly. Last night, though tearfully, she had been in Fred Sutton's arms. With men Roden felt confident. But women were bafflers. A woman's love, say for her own child, often made her ruthless; her ambition for her husband could render her scheming. She was a bundle of contradictions, tender and predatory, tearful and designing. Beth Square might be all of these and more, her loyalty to Manny existing side by side with a stubborn determination to salvage the mistake she had made in marrying him, and to follow her heart to Fred Sutton.

"Want to go inside?" Roden asked her.

"I—no."

"It's not in my line either. Mind if I walk about a bit till Ed's through?"

She shook her head. Roden took in the big living room. But he was thinking that Fred Sutton leaned on a broken reed in expecting a safe and tight-lipped silence from Beth.

Concealment was not in her; she was volatile, weak. A clever lawyer could tear her to shreds; Roden himself, cornering her, pressing her, tripping her up with what he already knew, could badger her into hysterical admissions and disclaimers. So far as she and Fred Sutton were concerned, when the sheriff was ready to put the screws on, she provided an open door to the truth. Unless, he corrected himself, his thin lips tightening—unless the other side of her came out and she shut up like an oyster to protect the man she loved.

The downstairs seemed deserted. Perhaps the friends were not up yet, or they might have gone up to spend the night at Wayne Square's, or they might have sat up all night and just recently gone to bed. Roden left the living room: its decorous correctness would reveal nothing. The big fumed-oak dining table had been cleared of all breakfast dishes, extended to its full length, and set again, as if in readiness for the platters of cold lunch which would later be spread upon it for any chance company at the noon meal. Roden measured it with his eyes, took in the quiet importance of the heavy silver. A great potbellied bowl of chrysanthemums crowned the center.

Trust Old Lou to see that everything was done right! Again Roden felt admiration for her. Most of the women he knew would be in tears, or barricaded in some inaccessible room. But not a Square. The Square women were of the old stock. Lou was of the caliber that would keep on loading and firing her rifle over the dead body of her son, giving way to grief only when the last redskin lay twitching from her own rifle ball.

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Roden pressed the swing door and entered the kitchen. A maid worked at the sink, a mountain of dishes on the drainboard to the right and left of her. She was Claudette, the slim octoroon brought in from Bennington to serve the Squares. Mrs. Square had picked her up and brought her in, insisting on a white starched collar and white cuffs. The cuffs were now pushed to her elbows, revealing slender strong arms almost white.

She turned her head at Roden's entrance, then made a quick sidewise movement of negation, as though she would get him out of her kitchen. But he approached till he stood beside her. The

window gave on the back yard, permitted a view of the head of the lane, of Fred Sutton now pounding stone in the cow lot. From some such vantage Beth had watched for him, putting out the light and running out at his signal. And then Roden remembered that the morning before, when he and Lefferton had come toward the house, Beth had tarried nervously by the upper barn door.

Claudette said shortly, "Do you-all want somethin'?"

Roden smiled at her, wishing to be friendly, troubled by a vague remembrance of something he had beard about her and Ben Neal, about her and Big Nig. But all the men of Niggertown ran after her, and the gossip had passed from his mind.

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He said innocently, "I'm jest stretchin' while Mr. Lefferton does his work."

There were footsteps in the dining room. The swing door opened and Mrs. Square came in, followed closely by Beth. The old lady stopped when she saw Roden, lifted the pince-nez to her nose. Beth spoke up behind her,

"Let me go, Mother. I know where they are."

Mrs. Square turned upon her, her face hard and implacable. "I shall go myself." The words were like a cold wind.

"That'd make Big-Boy lift his hackles and growl," Roden thought.

Beth recoiled, her lips twitching. But she did not retreat. She

seemed desperately determined to do all she could for Manny Square. The outside door was made to swing back against the wall, and it was open to let out the heat from the cook stove. Beth swung it half shut and reached for a wrap that hung behind it.

“Put this on,” she said hastily, and held out a gray sweater.

It was an unusual garment. The yarn was not tight-wrapped and hard as in most sweaters, but was loose-woven and fluffy like the pelt of an opossum. Blown upon, the wool would have parted and sprung away. Or it was like the nap of a thick rug, only fluffier and longer. At the extreme tips, the gray became almost silver.

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Mrs. Square took the garment, threw it about her shoulders. Beth turned again to the row of hooks back of the door, but almost at once she faced the room empty-handed and perplexed. She looked about the kitchen, on the chairs.

Mrs. Square intercepted the glance and her face grew even bleaker, though a slow flush crept over her cheek bones. “If you are looking for Manny’s coat and hat,” she said, “I put them away last night. They are not to be worn at a time like this.”

Beth’s shoulders sagged at the reproof. She bit her lips, tried to smile. “I don’t need them.” Her voice was little above a whisper. “It’s not very cold outside.”

“There is no need for you to go.”

“Kin I be of help?” Jess Roden asked politely.

Mrs. Square answered him. "You cannot. We want some goose down to line the coffin. It is in the barn. I shall go for it."

She swept solidly through the door, took the path. Beth threw her hands to her face as a sob caught in her throat, and ran blindly through the swing door to the dining room. Roden started to follow her but thought better of it. He stepped to the window and watched the strong sweater-clad back march steadily down the path.

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"So that's where the bits of wool come from!" he said.

"What you-all sayin'?"

Roden had forgotten Claudette. But he said with a grin, "They don't love each other, eh?"

"What you-all sees ain't no business of yourn."

"Right-o, Claudette. Guess I'll look around."

It was a break that the coffin had to be padded. That would take time, maybe an hour. Roden stepped to the yard and down the slope. He lingered above the barn till Old Lou came out, a striped tick held firmly under her arm. When she disappeared in the kitchen he entered the upper front door of the barn and found himself in the big storage room. There was a ladder, a pile of sacks, harness. A great cupboard with dusty doors stood against the north wall. Roden looked in. It was empty save for some gallon cans of neat's-foot oil and a few discarded currycombs. He opened the big Z door to the areaway. The place was deserted. From the cow lot came the methodical thuds of Sutton's sledge on stone.

Roden crossed to the horse stalls. He was looking for the wire which had bound the mule shoe to the sledge. For the shoe had been removed on the night of the murder; the wire had been disposed of then. Although he had not consciously searched for it, Roden thought he would have noticed it had it been anywhere around yesterday morning.

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There was a waist-high small door back of the stalls, through which manure was pitched to a pile below the barn. Roden glanced down at the floor. The stalls had been recently cleaned. He shoved back the door and looked out. Fresh manure topped the pile. He found a pitchfork, thrust it through the opening, and fretted the top. There were many wires, some still holding the square shape of a bale of hay. It was an ideal place to toss a bit of wire, as it would be inconspicuous among its neighbors.

The piece he was seeking was down near the edge of the manure pile. He recognized it at once, tried to slip the fork into it and draw it to him. But it rolled beyond his reach. He stood the pitchfork back where he had found it and circled round the front of the barn.

Here again there was no doubt. The wire held almost the shape of a small basket, so faithfully did it follow the contours of the sledge. And at one end there was a series of uneven spirals where the binding had been loosed from the handle.

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Roden examined the two ends. "The ends of a wire often tell a story," he said to himself. "They may have been cut with pliers, and all pliers don't leave the same mark. Some are loose and hit the two sides of the wire at different places; some are tight and

cut clean. Or the wire may have been worried in two by twisting it round and round, like a crank. And it's sometimes possible to tell where a wire come from by matchin' the ends with the piece it come off of."

Here the ends had been cleanly cut, as with pincers or tin snips, the edges of the cut being almost directly opposite each other and the ends themselves smooth and new. "So," Roden said as he pressed the wire together and stuffed it in his hip pocket. "It wasn't done so long ago, and I'm lookin' for a nice new set of pincers." He patted the pocket with a certain controlled satisfaction, for this was the first evidence he had found as to when the sledge had been wired. It might be an important find.

He heard the distant rumble of stones at the quarry, and glanced at the sun for the time. Lefferton would soon be coming along, but there were things to be done while Roden had an excuse for being on the hill. The big heel print, for example—it might be Heard's or it might be Ben Neal's. Now was a good time to find out.

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But the heel print belonged to neither man. Roden loitered near them until he was sure, in spite of Heard's crustiness. Ben Neal wore a pair of shapeless sneakers, his enormous feet spreading out over the litter like bundles of meat. Heard's heel print, displayed here and there in the deep stone dust, was narrower and longer than the broad flat track at the top of the quarry. Nor did it have the breaks in the curved portion back of the instep.

Roden was just preparing to leave the pit, pretending only a general and fugitive interest, when he saw Big Nig. The giant was over on the west bank, lying on his back with his knees

drawn up and crossed, his position one of elaborate relaxation. He appeared to be asleep and snoring, the deep inhalations of his breath followed by a noisy fluttering of the lips. Roden glanced from the lazy and recumbent figure to Ben Neal bending over the crank of the trip hammer. An appreciative small smile twisted the sheriff's thin lips as he took in the comedy of the situation. For Ben Neal, glistening with sweat from his huge exertions, was fully aware of the recumbent figure on the bank. His eyes rolled in his surly face, and he accomplished the circle of the crank with swift viciousness.

“It'd take a lazy nigger to figure that out!” Roden chuckled to himself. “Big Nig's lazin' up there jest to ta'nt Ben, and Ben's got no more sense 'n to show he's mad!”

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On his way out, Roden circled to the base of the pit and from the corner of his eye looked for the big sledge. It was gone. He took time to make sure, thinking he might have miscalculated the exact spot in which he had left it. But it was not there.

“Chickens go home to roost,” he said as he climbed out of the quarry. “When I find that sledge again, I'll know where it belongs.”

But he was still occupied with the heel print. A sledge could wait; it would always be somewhere. So would mule shoes. But a track was quickly obliterated. Besides, people changed their shoes. A heel print was something you had to identify quickly.

It wasn't Heard's and it wasn't Ben's. Nor was it Fred Sutton's or Beth's. That left Wayne Square, and by now Wayne would likely be at the house. Roden ascended the slope swiftly. He

found Lefferton on the point of leaving; he and Square were discussing final arrangements, out in the front yard.

Roden appeared only to be hanging about, waiting. He eased himself down with his hands to the big flagstone before the door and dropped his chin in his palms. In such position his eyes quite naturally fell on Wayne Square's shoes. They were yellow and blunt, with a double line of perforations ornamenting the toes. They had recently been polished, and shone dully. The heels were rubber and worn down slightly at the back.

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Wayne Square shifted. His foot left the flagstone which was one of an uneven series running to the palings at the top of the yard, and pressed the earth at the edge. When he shifted again, Roden appeared to rise; and still stooped as if to dust the seat of his pants, he brought his eyes close to the track. The heel was broad and worn at the rear; there were chips out of the curved portion back of the instep, as if the rubber had been broken by sharp stones.

Wayne Square had stood above the quarry last night.

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CHAPTER 7

Big Nig joined them on the way off the hill. They skirted the east bank of the pit and he was on the west. But he heard them and lifted to a sitting position, extending his powerful arms and yawning prodigiously.

“Ouff!” he said, expelling his breath. “This sho has been a good rest! Come hours and hours in dis job o’ mine when I ain’t got nothin’ to do but jest doze around!”

The voice was calculated to carry far. Ben Neal had left the trip hammer and was leaning on the sledge. At Big Nig’s words he brought the great iron down in a way that sent splinters of stone flying in all directions.

“Don’t mash that stone—split it!” Grady Heard cried out, his voice ragged with suppressed violence.

“Ouff!” Big Nig said again. He looked complacently at the sun. “Ain’t midday and de work all done. Drop down to de cool bottom an’ paddle home. Mebbe have an old catfish on de line. Fry him in skillet grease and have another rest!”

Ben Neal, conscious of Grady Heard’s critical eye, pretended not to hear. Big Nig stretched again, and slouched down the bank. While still within hearing of the two men in the quarry, he called out loudly, “Dat be all de work for today, boss?”

Roden left the canoe at the leaning sycamore below his house and crossed the bottom. The dogs met him halfway and turned the quiet morning into an uproar. Dace ran round and round in a circle, putting on the speed; Carlo snuffed and wagged his plume till it flashed in the sun. Even Lead put out his head and licked Roden's hand, beaming at him with timid affectionate eyes. Big-Boy managed to get in front of his master, directly in the way, where he impeded Roden's steps, looking delightedly up at him.

"Good old fellers!" Roden said over and over, loving each one. "Good old fellers!"

And then he was in the hickory-bottomed chair, his hands laced behind his head; marshaling what he already knew, systematizing and arranging it, so intensely absorbed in the murder of Manny Square that for the time being he was almost pure brain, flaming. He had found out what he already knew, he told himself, merely by keeping his eyes open. The trouble with most people was that they didn't see things. Oh, they saw them all right, but too largely, too generally. He regarded the tangle of wire which lay on the table and addressed a question to an imaginary person who sat opposite him.

"What's that?" he said, nodding.

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"A wire, ain't it?" was the imagined reply.

"What kind of a wire?"

"M-m-m. Balin' wire, I'd say."

"Anything else?"

“No-o. Bent some.”

And that would end it. To the average person it would be a piece of bent baling wire. But seen minutely it was as individual as a collie dog or a chestnut leaf. It was a new wire which had not been exposed to the weather. It was number eleven black wire. Straightened out, it would measure approximately four feet. Both ends had been cut at the same time and with the same tool, as though the binding had been done with a much longer piece both ends of which had been snipped off once the mule shoe was secure.

The ends themselves were not just ends but distinct entities. They had not been made by the usual cutting device found in the crotch of pliers. They were too even, too smooth. On one side the cutting blade had not penetrated so deeply as on the other. The blade edges had come together, not in the center of the wire, but a fraction to one side of the center. The deep cut had been made by the upper blade of the cutter, the lower blade serving more as a block or steadying base.

Why, when you got right down to seeing these ends, they possessed an individuality as definite as the sawed ends of a log; and in their way they would match the pieces from which they had been cut as surely as the log ends would fit, ring for ring, saw stroke to saw stroke.

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That was it. You had to *see* things. And when you did, the world was full of seemingly small objects which jumped out at you big as a horse. It was like one of these sound magnifiers which takes up a small sound and magnifies it till it roars. If you had eyes to see, everything was itself, and large. A piece of wool, for

instance. It might be small like a fluff or down, but there it was, big as a ham. It had come from someplace—from a sheep's back, or a mitten, or a gray sweater.

And that led to the matter of incongruities. A thing took on meaning according to where you found it. If it was in its proper place, it belonged; if it was not in its proper place it was an incongruity, and as such deserved attention. A piece of wool on a sweater belonged there, as did a sliver of wood on a rail. But a sliver of wood did not belong in a sweater, and a bit of wool did not belong on a rail or in a broken handle. The same was true of the imprint of a mule shoe on a man's face: it didn't naturally belong there, but if it had been put there it had to conform to pattern. If it didn't, you were justified in asking questions, looking around.

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And then there was the point of knowing what to look for. Once you got started, that was important. But once you had your start, it was not so hard. One thing led to another. A man had been killed by a mule shoe. So what? Since the imprint did not conform to a mule kick, there had to be some way of smashing the shoe into the face. It couldn't just be pushed in; the man couldn't simply fall against it. It had to be driven home in simulation of the real thing. And so you were looking for a heavy timber or a hammer. And since the blow would have to be delivered from above, you found yourself in the hay mow, looking down.

It was a running from effect to cause. And when you got far enough along, you could reverse the process and go from cause to effect. Motive came in then, and you had a brother desperate for money with rich acres lying under his nose, and a young wife

with her personable lover. You had a dangerous and taciturn man spoiling to get even. You had a job on your hands, then, to estimate the force of motives and what they would lead to. But you knew what to look for; you were not just pawing around in the dark.

The thing to do now was to find out everything you could, run each small clue to earth. Somewhere along the way a pattern would begin to form. It would take shape slowly or quickly, according to events; but once it began to assume outline, it would grow increasingly definite until it became a finger, pointing.

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Sheriff Jess Roden dropped his feet from the table to the floor. There was one thing you had to watch: you had to watch that you didn't mull over a lot of confusing facts till you lost your perspective. You could get too close to a thing, fish up too many angles. It was good now and then to forget and come back fresh.

Under the bed he found his Chinese checkerboard. The game had but recently struck Deer Lick, and it had found quick favor. Roden played it alone; he had many a pleasant game with Ed Lefferton. It wasn't a deep game, but it had its points. It got hold of you. For instance, there must be a perfect offense, a lineup that couldn't be beat. And Roden was searching for it. The trouble with Lefferton was that he didn't make the best possible moves; he just picked up a marble and dropped it in a hole regardless of the fact that he might have done much better. That made a scientific drive against him awkward, since his clumsiness nullified your plans. But with Grady Heard, now—well, Heard put up a good game.

Roden slid the board on the table and sat for a half hour, regarding the star-like configurations, estimating the effectiveness of straight moves, side moves. When he finally straightened, he was hungry. He rattled the grate of the stove, laid a fire. He peeled potatoes, sliced deep into a shoulder. He mixed corn dough and poured a thick pone into a long black pan. And eventually he ate, swiftly and with keen pleasure. The dogs sat flanking him, tense, saliva dripping from their tongues. When he himself had finished, he let them out and gave them what was left—thick blocks of pone sopped in the rich grease of the skillet, bits of ham fat and rind and succulent cracklings, leavings of fried potatoes; scattering the stuff and seeing that each dog got its share.

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Then, diverted and refreshed, he went back inside and addressed himself to the task of finding the hidden mule shoes. It wasn't necessary to go out of the house to find them, for eventually they would be located by elimination, and he could do the work one place as well as another. The shoes had been hidden. But where? They would be hidden where discovery of them, if they should be discovered, would not excite too much comment. The killer would not expect them to be found, but he would be clever enough to secrete them where they might conceivably belong, so that if they were found they would not seem to have been hidden by one desperately determined to put them out of the way. They wouldn't, for instance, be buried in the ground. Mule shoes were not taken out and buried; to discover them so would at once point to a definite and telltale fear back of their concealment.

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So. Some place where they might naturally be, but where they would not likely be found. Old Lige was the only mule around;

mule shoes would consequently be in natural use only on the farm of Manny Square. Where hidden? They might conceivably have been thrust in the manure pile, but not likely. The manure was frequently forked to a wagon or sled and scattered over the Square acres. It might be done today, tomorrow, and then the shoes would be found. Nor would they be hidden in the storage room. It would be the first place searched, should suspicion ever arise. And they might be uncovered there accidentally—Old Lou had already rummaged in the place for the goose feathers.

Then where? Roden's mind prowled the big barn like a ferret. There were two possible places. The walls back of the stalls were boarded up to the height of a horse's back. The shoes might have been dropped between this siding and the outer wall. The other place was between the ceiling and the floor of the mow. The ceiling had been put on for added snugness in cold weather. It ran unbroken from wall to wall, save about the square hole where the ladder lifted to the loft. Here the apertures had not been closed. To the north and south the dark oblong holes extended between the heavy beams.

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“That takes care of the shoes,” Roden said softly.

But his face clouded. There was a possible flaw in the reasoning. The shoes might have been concealed in some other barn—where they might conceivably be, but a barn to which the killer alone had natural access. Then he could keep the telltale evidence under his own watchful eye. This would mean the killer's barn, not Manny Square's.

“I might have to look around a bit,” Roden amended.

He bent over the table, his eyes on the three tiny threads of wool which lay under a tumbler. One had pulled out of the gray sweater as someone slid off the fence. Another had caught in a brier as the killer had cascaded down the hay after hiding the sledge. But the one found in the broken handle was a problem by itself. It had had to be *pressed into* the break—you couldn't slide off a handle or cascade down it. Yet nothing but firm pressure could have forced the yarn into the break. A mitten? It wasn't cold enough for mittens. Besides, the wool was out of the gray sweater.

Then Roden caught his breath with a prolonged whistling sound. He sprang to his feet and with only a negative shake of the head to the clamorous dogs, went trotting up through the pawpaw patch toward Ed Lefferton's. Lefferton was out raking up the litter of shavings and wood ends left from his recent work on the coffin. Roden spoke without preliminaries.

"Do you have a sledge hammer, Ed?"

"Somewhere."

"I'd like for you to do something for me."

The sheriff's eagerness was manifest. He spoke quickly, his fluid eyes aglow. Lefferton leaned on the rake handle. His slow mind seemed to be groping. He finally raked toward him, twice, then faced the sheriff.

"Your business is your business, Jess. But somethin's in the wind."

"I know it, and I'll tell you when the time comes. But I can't

now. Where's the sledge?"

Lefferton knocked about in the woodhouse, finally appeared with a mud-encrusted sledge. "It's not been used for some time."

"Listen, Ed, and don't ask questions. I want you to put it here on the ground, and when I tell you, pick it up and carry it down yonder and throw it as far as you can."

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Lefferton hesitated, shrugged. But he dropped the sledge and waited. Roden ran perhaps fifty feet down the path to the river, where he stopped and held up his hand.

"Now!" he called. "Pick it up and bring it down here and throw it on toward the river."

Lefferton stooped for the handle. He swung the sledge pendulum-like once, twice. Then he flung it to his shoulder and strode toward the sheriff. When he came abreast, he stopped, pulled down on the tip of the handle, thrust up his shoulder smartly, and sent the sledge end over end down the path.

Roden had watched every move with strained attention. Only when the sledge struck the ground did he seem to breathe. Then he relaxed and stood grinning, rubbing his hands with evident satisfaction. Lefferton regarded him dourly.

"Is that all?"

"The worst's yet to come," Roden said nervously. "I want you to take it back up there and go in and ask Mayme to do the same thing."

Lefferton's big square face looked doubtful. "Ask Mayme to do it?"

Mayme Everett was his housekeeper, a doubtful helper to be called in for anything which was not perfectly obvious. And between her and the sheriff no love was lost.

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"I doubt if she'll do it, Jess."

Roden hit on a plan. The sledge was taken back to the corner of the house. The two men took up a position fifty feet or more down the path and stooped over a heavy peg which they had secured and placed tentatively in the ground. They held it carefully, as if to take their hands off it would mean the destruction of a very laboriously calculated measurement.

"Now call her," Roden said.

When Mayme appeared it was to see the two men so occupied with what they were doing as to be unable to move. Lefferton called, "We gotta have that sledge, Mayme."

Her face hardened, but she stooped impatiently to the sledge. She started to lift it, felt its weight. Then she took both hands and slid it up under her right arm, the iron in front and part of the weight held by the pressure of her arm on the handle. She stepped waspishly down the path.

"Throw it from there!" Roden said, as if her nearer approach might obliterate some marking.

Mayme stopped, her wiry body bent sidewise with the weight. Then she waggled the heavy iron and let loose,

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the handle sliding from under her arm and the sledge dropping almost at her feet. She was evidently aware of the bungling, for she whirled without a word and went back to the house.

But Roden had seen what he was looking for. A man carried a sledge one way, a woman carried it another. A man slung it over his shoulder, threw it by a simultaneous upward thrust of the shoulder and a downward pull on the handle. A woman worried it up under an arm and hopped along clamping it to her body. She dropped it rather than threw it, following it with her body, releasing it while still clamping it against her, the handle sliding from under her arm as through a mittened hand.

That was the thought that had caused Roden to catch his breath. He was pretty sure a woman and a man didn't carry an axe in the same way, and it ought to be so with a sledge. A woman didn't pull like a man, either. She took hold and applied the force with her shoulders, leaning back. A man dropped almost to a sitting position and got the power by straightening his legs.

A woman had thrown the sledge down the quarry, and the thread had pulled out of the sweater as the handle slid under her arm. Almost audibly, as the certainty dawned upon him, Roden heard the voices of Fred Sutton and Beth Square.

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“Did you do just like I told you?”

“Everything!”

That was like a woman—let a man tell her to do a thing, and she did it with a faithful and absolute literalness. She wouldn't think of it herself; she wouldn't trust her own judgment if she did. But let a man command her, and she accepted his decision and

followed his directions with the docility of a robot.

“Just a little more, missy,” Roden said to himself, “and I’ll be able to announce that your husband was murdered.”

CHAPTER 8

And yet, if Beth was mixed up in it, she was only the tool of Fred Sutton. She was not the kind to commit murder. She was too essentially faithful and loyal. She might not love her husband; she might even love another man. But it would be in her nature to consider her commitments to Manny Square as final and not to be recalled. And so she would stay with him, even being a little more humble and considerate as conscience-stricken by her inner disloyalty.

Nor was Fred Sutton to the manner born, for that matter. He was quietly expansive, with a turn toward humor; swaggering a bit, yet essentially gentle. He might wish Manny out of the way; might commit murder in his heart. But to steel himself for the final moment of the killing, to lie in the loft and swing the big hammer, seeing it sweep toward its target—that just wasn't Fred Sutton.

Yet Roden knew something of love. It got hold of you gradually. At first you could smile at it, refuse it satisfactions. But it grew, entered the blood stream, permeated the very marrow of your bones. And there came a time when nothing else really mattered; when reputation or honor or the claims of others seemed cheap beside the overwhelming need of possession. It cooled off after possession, Roden thought shrewdly, remembering his married friends. But there was that one overmastering period when it mattered more than anything else in the world. Fred and Beth might be there now, might think that they simply could not live without each other. And there was

such a thing as temporarily shutting the inner eye, swinging a sledge with the critical faculties held in subordination, rushing ahead in willful blindness to all but the one great desire.

“It looks bad for them, anyway,” Jess Roden said. He put on a bit of paper the case as it stood against them.

Fred and Beth:

1. In love with each other
2. Beth unhappy in Square household
3. Both at barn on night of murder
4. Bits of wool tracing Beth
5. Beth now near hysteria
6. She had thrown sledge down quarry

But at that there were too many other facts to be explained. What had Wayne Square been doing at the quarry last night? Why had Grady Heard told Big Nig to beware of the dynamite and then lied about it? When you accused a person of murder, 132 you wanted a clear case; you didn't want to go off half cocked and have the county laughing at you and the accused on your tail.

Roden glanced impatiently at the window, then rose. It would be dark by the time he got up on the hill. He was just leaving the bottom for the stiff ascent when he heard voices above him. The early darkness was mellow and crisp, shutting off his view. He halted, stepped into the bushes by the side of the road. Whoever it was loitered along, their feet dragging on the gravelly path.

“You-all suah?” It was the low contralto of Claudette the octoroon.

Ben Neal smothered a laugh. “Suah as suah!” he declared.

“What did Big Nig say?”

“He didn’ say nuttin. I’s done got de job.”

“You-all dat close to me all day, an’ I didn’t know it!”

“I’ll be closer dan dat soon, sugah. I’ll be sleepin’ wid you!”

“How come he fiah Big Nig?”

“Dat’s a secret.”

“You-all don’t have no secrets f’m me.”

“Us done Mistah Heahd a service,” Ben said importantly.

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“Tell yo’ Claudette.”

But he changed the subject. “Us is fixed now, sugah. Ol’ Manny out o’ de way. Cain’t git in his lip agin me no mo’. An’ me got a job.... How Ol’ Lou treatin’ you?”

“Pffft!”

“You be walkin’ out on her soon now.”

“Pffft!”

They passed Roden. He could just see them, their arms locked about each other. He sat for a moment after they had gone by, then stepped to the path and began the ascent. He didn’t know quite what he was looking for, but whatever it was would be up there, not down at the house. But he was hardly prepared to find

the sledge. It was leaning against the trip hammer. There was no mistaking it, in spite of its new handle. There was the same heavy iron, the same splintered face. The vague rubbings of the wire had been obliterated by handling, but the eye still formed a sharp triangle away from the wood. The handle had recently been put in—hammered through and tightened by a wooden wedge driven in from the front. The white hickory had been rubbed with dirt or mud, as though to take away the new sheen.

Roden dropped the sledge abruptly and cut diagonally out the hill toward Grady Heard's. The house and outbuildings were half a mile away, just above the road that skirted the hill up the bottom. Roden reached the barn and drew up cautiously. If the mule shoes had followed the way of the sledge, they would be in there somewhere.

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“Where no one but the killer is likely to run onto ’em,” Roden thought grimly.

He was vaguely acquainted with the place. It was as big as Manny Square's, and even more pretentious. The upper side was dug out of the hill and walled with smooth stone from the quarry. All the runways were of crushed gravel—that had been a reason given by Heard for Manny Square's jealousy.

Roden opened the door, cautiously, lest a bull or a five-hundred-pound boar charge out. He stood still for several minutes. The stalls under the hill seemed empty. Horses occupied the lower stalls. There was an intermittent scurrying in the loft overhead. Mice, no doubt.

He turned on the flash, holding his palm over the beam at first,

then letting it play on the floor and finally to right and left. He was in a harness room, perhaps ten feet square. The rafters overhead were crisscrossed with cobwebs heavy with hay seed.

Roden swung suddenly at a sound behind him. His foot struck a three-legged milk stool which fell with a crash. He waited, tiptoed to the door to see what had made the initial sound. But he could not see anything that might have done it.

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He let the flash play over the floor so he would know where to step, and saw the pile of horseshoes in the corner. There might have been fifteen of them—old shoes of different sizes and shapes, some rusty and thin, one practically worn in two at the toe. He stepped closer, peering. The nails were still in some of the holes, their big heads worn flat and smooth, the points bent.

But the shoes were not dusty. Roden noted the fact, swung the small torch to other objects littered about. They were all heavy with dust. He poked a broken horse collar with his foot; dust cascaded from it to the floor. Then he stooped over the shoes, pushed at them cautiously. They were a tangled mass, interlocked and caught with the nails. The mule shoes were scattered among them; not in a single bunch but distributed, as though they might have been tossed on the heap and then kneaded in by worrying the whole mass over and over. They were Lige's shoes; they had hung back of his stall yesterday morning.

Jess said slowly, his voice almost soft, "Some place where they might naturally *be* found, but where the killer alone would have access to them."

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He heard the sound behind him again, looked swiftly over his shoulder. Grady Heard stood in the doorway, big as the frame, his stormy eyes intent on the sheriff. Roden sprang to his feet, backed against the wall without knowing he did so. The torch left Heard, returned to him again.

“Well, Jess Roden?”

“Well yourself!” Roden said, his big voice raw.

“This happens to be my barn.”

“I’ll not quarrel with you there.”

Heard took a step forward, two steps. Then he stopped and his big chest rolled like a barrel. “You’ve been prowling around altogether too much—up the quarry and now here. I’ll give you ten seconds to explain.”

Roden was not a big man, but there was something about him. At certain critical moments he seemed to grow large, not so much physically as with an imponderable and ominous power. It was so now. Standing against the wall, holding the flash on Grady Heard, he grew the big man’s equal, even his superior; and when he spoke there was a graveyard rumble to his voice.

“All right, Grady Heard. You’re askin’ for it.”

“I’m listening.”

“Manny Square was murdered, Mr. Heard.”

Heard’s breath caught, as at the preliminary to a sneeze. He fell

back a step. His huge body, which had thrust demandingly up, somehow folded in upon itself and was not so threatening. But almost immediately there was another change. It came first to the eyes—a dawning comprehension of what the sheriff had said. And then to the mouth, in what was unmistakably a twist of satisfaction.

“You don’t say!” And here it was in the voice—an eagerness which he tried to suppress because it was so obviously out of place.

Roden’s eyes, missing nothing, were upon Heard. Later on he would figure the big man out; now he was interested only in letting him have it and seeing what he did. “Lige didn’t kick him at all,” he said. “He was killed by a mule shoe wired to a sledge.”

Heard’s glance wavered to the little pile of shoes over which Roden had been stooping. But he had hold of himself now. He drew a quiet breath, said evenly, “That don’t explain what you are doing here.”

“I was lookin’ for some mule shoes that someone sneaked out of Manny’s barn last night.”

“And why here?”

“Because they’re here—in that pile there.”

Heard took a step toward the rusty heap and was already bending a knee to drop down when Roden thrust his wiry body in the way. Heard’s mouth twisted to form a quick protest, but the sheriff spoke first.

“No you don’t, Grady. I’m handlin’ this.”

Heard’s face grew livid. “You fool! Those shoes have been picked up all over the farm. They are tossed there when they are found anywhere on the place.”

“And on Manny’s place too?”

“What do you mean?”

“You have no mule, Grady. Them’s Lige’s shoes. They was lifted off a peg back of his stall and put in here last night.”

“You mean you suspect *me*?”

“I’m not suspectin’. I’m jest gatherin’ things up.”

“Jess Roden, if you so much as hint that I had anything to do—”

“Then maybe you’ll explain a few things. That sledge up there with the new handle. Where did you get it?”

“I found it in the quarry.”

“And put a new handle in it?”

“Yes. The old one was broken.”

“How did it git in the quarry?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do. It was thrown in last night. That was the sledge the shoe was wired to.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I’ve been lookin’ around.”

Heard’s lip curled. “So I see. And now—”

“Another thing, Grady. You told Big Nig to stay away from the quarry. You said the dynamite was there. What did you tell me yesterday?”

“I told you—” He stopped suddenly.

“Yes? Go on.”

Heard took his time about it. Finally he said, “I won’t go on. My business is my business.”

Roden shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said, and flicked the torch toward the door.

Heard started to march out, but stopped and turned slowly. “You are making a mistake, Sheriff. I don’t know how you found out that Manny Square had been killed, I don’t know how the sledge got in the quarry, or how those shoes got in here. But if you mean you think *I* did it—”

“It’s no more than you said you’d do.”

Heard smiled awkwardly, his face pale below his slick black hair. “That! Oh, I know. But that’s not saying I’d *murder* him, Sheriff.” His voice changed, grew confidential, helpful. “Just to show you—I’ll do all I can to help. Look around, do anything you want to. And if there’s anything I can do—”

“What were you doin’ out here tonight!”

Heard’s mouth shut like a trap. Then he said, “There are reasons why I had to keep an eye on things around here.”

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“But not now, eh?—not with Manny dead.”

“I never could be sure it *was* Manny. I—” But he caught himself, stopped.

“So that’s it. That’s the why of the dynamite, eh?”

“Would I give you the run of the place, put myself at your disposal, if I had killed him?”

“Why not!” Roden said shrewdly, his thin face canny as a fox’s. “You tried to stop me, didn’t you? And when you saw you couldn’t, you put yourself on my side. It’d look better to be with me than fightin’ me.”

Heard’s big body was trembling. “There’s no fool like an old fool,” he said. “Manny Square and I might have been neighbors. Instead, we were at it hammer and tongs. It’s ruined my life.”

“This is a funny time to find it out.”

“I’ve known it for a long time. But there seemed no way to stop.”

“Only by blowin’ him up and pinnin’ it on him, eh?”

Heard recoiled, looked at the sheriff with something like awe. “I didn’t kill Manny Square, Sheriff.”

“But you’re glad somebody did. That’s the way you looked a minute ago when I told you.”

“God forgive me! Maybe I did.”

“It would’ve sounded more convincin’ if you’d said that a month or two ago, Grady.”

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“Don’t do it, Roden!”

Jess said crisply, “Here’s how it stands with you. You and Manny was feudin’ over that quarry. It had gone on, as you said, till you couldn’t stop it. You lied either to me or Big Nig about some dynamite bein’ in the quarry. If you had it there, it was to pin the blame for killin’ your stock on Manny, wasn’t it? Then Manny was found dead. He was killed by a shoe wired to a sledge. The sledge is in your pit. The shoes is in your barn—sneaked out of Manny’s, and you prowlin’ around out here keepin’ them under your eye. And then you say, ‘Don’t do it, Roden!’”

“I’ll tell you why I was out here tonight!”

“You’ve already told me.”

“But there was more to it than—”

“There’s more to a lot of things!”

“Not so fast! I heard someone out here last night.”

“You did, eh? What time?”

“About midnight. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I did. So tonight I’ve been keeping an eye open.” He stopped, waited.

“Is that all?”

Heard dropped his conciliatory manner. “It’s all there is.”

“You won’t own up?”

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The big chest rolled again. “I have nothing to own up to.”

“Then to hell with you! I’ve shilly-shallied long enough!”

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CHAPTER 9

When the news burst upon Deer Lick, it spread like a broomsedge fire, crackling. The grapevine telegraph snatched it first and popped with the breathless story. The *Squares*. . . . Not old Lige at all. . . . Jess Roden had ferreted it out—trust old Jess; there was something on his head besides the hair. . . . And after all the dog the Squares had put on! Now they'd snub Lizzie, would they? They weren't good enough for *her*, come right down to it.... And all them city fellers writin' for the papers and tellin' the world all about it. The Squares couldn't squirm out of it now, could they? Ha, ha!

Horsemen reined in at backwoods clearings, called 'hello,' and crossing a leg over the saddle pommel, gave the grisly details. Boatmen on the river paddled their skiffs together; they held them gunwale to gunwale with red water-soaked hands and had a nice long visit, finally exchanging chews and hurrying to spread the news.

Back in inaccessible hollows toothless old grandmothers held their hands behind their ears so as not to miss a word, their lively old eyes burning. They snapped up the details and then went to the kitchen where they rattled the stove lids with big-veined bony hands and told tall tales of their own—of giant fabled mules, ramping; of little girls kicked to death as they sat in buggies between their parents; of the family of Squares when old Emanuel first fetched his bride to the county.

Zeke Stout seized upon the horror and roared from brass lungs

that it is appointed to man once to die and after that the judgment. Finding his hearers bug-eyed at the tragedy, he squared his herculean shoulders, lifted his long arms with the bulging biceps, and called upon high heaven to witness that now is the accepted time, now is the day of the Lord. And hearing the news thus publicly discussed, the hodgepodge congregation took it up and added to it till not only Manny Square was dead, but Old Lou also, and Lige the great mule gibbeted from a whiteoak limb, his mangy flanks riddled with rifle balls.

For once Parker Bray, railway agent and telegraph operator at Deer Lick, achieved his ambition of being in the thick of things. When he was picking up telegraphy as a roustabout helper on the C & C, he had dreamed of being a lightning-slinger, hurtling the dots and dashes of the Morse code over fabled distances and at incredible speed. The dream had dimmed with years of ‘o-s-ing’ the local freight and billing out household goods and hogs, leaving him with only an unsatisfying pride in his patent-leather shoes and his 21-jeweled Elgin.

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But over night he found himself caught in the storm. For Manny Square was an important man and there was no war in the Balkans to claim front-page space. The great Humbolt Paul of the Bennington *Morning Chronicle* had sent Fielding Billings his crack reporter to Deer Lick to cover the case; and not to be caught napping, W. W. Ackerman of the *Evening Journal* had dispatched the diminutive and disillusioned Jimmy Hart to the spot. Both these young men came romping in. They struck the platform jumping, their portable typewriters like suitcases in their hands; and in an incredibly short time they began to feed their stories through the little round-topped wicket behind which stood Parker Bray.

Parker Bray was not conceited; he was good. And so he flipped open the circuit, dropped two fingers on the round black button of the telegraph key, and turned on the heat. His hand flashed up and down, rolling; the long sateen sleeve-protectors which ran to his elbows flapped with the turmoil; the brass sounder in a resonator by his ear sizzled and popped—holding for the dashes, cracking for the dots, poised for the spaces like a cottonmouth ready to strike. Lightning-slinger! He humped low, he swallowed in pure joy and exultation, his Adam's-apple a cork in his dark-skinned neck.

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And down in Bennington at the other end of the wire sat Screwball Andy, telegraph veteran of the Spanish American War and the San Francisco earthquake and the marriage of Alice Roosevelt—Andy, thin as a rail, lantern-jawed, a dead cigarette stuck to his lower lip; Andy looped over the big Smith-Premier with the double keyboard, putting in type the mystery of the death of Manny Square. And back of Andy loomed Pundy the press foreman, his white teeth flashing and a smudge of ink on his flaring Roman nose; snatching the sheets from the Smith-Premier and rushing them to the basement where he thrust them under the nose of Manly the linotyper, whence they went to the smoking presses and then to the cock-eyed world.

The murder of Manny Square was a sensation in three states. The Hereford Breeders Association memorialized him. Humbolt Paul, under a heading of THIS MUST NOT HAPPEN AGAIN, called upon the officers of the law through both the *Weekly Argus* and the powerful *Morning Chronicle* to apprehend the culprit and bring him to swift justice. Before the case was finally solved, Jess Roden's mail had become an avalanche. An astrologist named Mamie wrote him from Bennington that

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he might expect other murders in the future, since there were signs in the sun. An anonymous note from Pine Ridge declared that the writer had witnessed the murder of Manny Square and would divulge the identity of the killer upon receipt of fifty dollars delivered according to direction on a map which was enclosed. A crisp warning to Jess Roden to drop the investigation on penalty of personal harm came in a long envelope with a smudged postmark. A coy proposal of marriage arrived from a woman who signed herself 'Yours? Rachel Jarvis.'

But Jess Roden hopped to it regardless of threats or signs in the sun. With the bursting of the news came the inquest, when it was definitely up to him to turn his suspicions into a verdict of murder. The funeral of Manny Square had been set for Thursday afternoon. The county agents from four counties had arrived by noon to pay tribute. A representative of the State Agricultural Experiment Station was on hand to read a memorial to Manny for his work with pure-bred hogs. Big bugs from Pine Ridge and Leatherwood ate lunch at Wayne Square's and strolled leisurely along the laurel-bordered paths awaiting the time of the funeral. A dozen gentlemen from Bennington, together with a wide-mouthed and determined woman from the Bennington Delphian Club, got off the morning train. One of these gentlemen carried a cane, and the small boys from the depot followed him a half mile to see what use he would make of it, since he had no limp. But when he marched along carrying the cane hooked over his left arm, they dropped back, whispering.

In the big house on the hill there was hushed and respectful readiness. Little Manny Square lay small and peaceful in his coffin, the broadcloth of his burial suit blending with the hushed

black of the lining. Gwen Dixon was on hand from Riverside to sing *Abide With Me* at the behest of Old Lou. Beth Square with swollen dry eyes stood in the kitchen near the swing door, not daring to interrupt Claudette the octoroon who prowled the hot room like a jungle cat.

Into this decorous and saddened house burst the officers of the law. Otto Berg, justice of the peace from Pine Ridge, a tall man, totally bald, his dome-shaped head glistening, his bulging eyes popped behind prismatic lenses. Dr. Josiah Denman, once reputed the greatest surgeon of the state, now broken by morphine until his horse face sagged and his hands shook, but still in his saner moments possessed of the old witchery which had wrought phenomenal cures. John Greer, district attorney, oily-skinned, preternaturally solemn; an honest lawyer who talked little but saw much, his cold plodding mind lumbering like a steam roller. And with these men was Jess Roden, wiry and tireless, homely in his baggy clothes, his bigtopped head full of the things he knew.

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When their grim purpose was explained, Beth Square shoved the heels of her palms in her eye sockets and ran screaming upstairs. Old Lou, at first indomitable, tried to stare them down, holding the pince-nez like a lorgnette before her nose. But at last her iron control deserted her and she collapsed into a chair, biting her lips and locking her white-knuckled fingers. Claudette the octoroon heard the voices and edged through the swing door. She stood against the wall, a pagan smile on her full lips as she took everything in.

At the whispered suggestion of Ed Lefferton the coffin containing Manny Square was carried to the basement; and

there, with the north wall lined with ranking shelves of canned fruit and vegetables, and with leatherbritches hanging from the ceiling, the inquest began.

“Suppose you tell us, Sheriff, just why you suspect foul play.” It was Otto Berg speaking, his eyeballs large, his finger and thumb pulling at his lower lip.

“This, for one thing.” Roden’s hand hovered above Manny Square’s face. “Take a look. If Lige had kicked him, the mark wouldn’t be like this.” Then he explained.

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“But suppose the man was looking down, his head bent over?”

“The blow would have knocked his head back,” Roden said. He held up a mule shoe. “This one killed him.”

“So?” John Greer said. He took the shoe, squinted. Then, “What do you say, Doc?”

Dr. Denman took the shoe. He ran his long fingers over the iron with the minuteness of a blind man. “First,” he said, speaking with a certain remote dignity, “I must compare it with the imprint on the face.”

All shakiness left him; he was the deft surgeon, molding human flesh. Under his exploring touch the wound on Square’s face flattened out, grew to its natural form. Then he held the shoe above it and squinted as through a microscope; held it away and looked directly at the broken features; returned it and squinted again.

“I would say this shoe had killed him,” he said at last.

John Greer protested. "But wouldn't all the shoes of that one mule be alike?"

"Hardly," Dr. Denman said. "The nail holes here are all open. They would be filled if the shoe were on a foot. Besides, there are marks of the wire running laterally from them."

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Jess Roden looked at Dr. Denman with respect: here was a man who saw things. He said humbly, "There's one other thing, Doc. I found this in one of the little grooves."

Something small and white lay on his extended palm. It might have been a minute fragment from the sap side of a bit of birch bark. Dr. Denman stooped over it, sniffed delicately. Then he gave the sheriff a keen look and tipped the fragment to his own palm.

"This will take a little time," he said as he turned toward a window. "There are treatments. You had better go ahead with your work."

"All right," Otto Berg agreed. "What else, Sheriff?"

"This is the sledge it was done with."

"Ah! A new handle. Where did you find it?"

"Back of the hay in the mow. It had a broken handle then."

John Greer looked sharply up. "It did?"

"Just a minute," Berg said. "We'll take your word for that,

Sheriff. Now what?"

"This wire. The shoe was bound with it."

"Excuse me," Dr. Denman said, still with his distant dignity. He was going up for some salt—one tenth of one per cent in water would provide a solution of normal salt, the same medium as the body tissue. The solution would restore the bit of skin so that it might be roughly matched with the broken place on Manny Square's face. "Excuse me," he said again, and ascended the stairs.

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John Greer fingered the wire. "Do you have any way of knowing about when it was put on?"

"Not long ago. The end cuts is fresh—two or three days."

"And is that all?"

Roden experienced his first moment of fear. He had shown them and they were asking for more. Suppose they couldn't *see* things. Now if it were Dr. Denman.... "I guess that's all," he said.

Otto Berg leaned back, pulled at his lower lip. "Suppose we have a few of them down where we can talk to them. Who would you suggest?"

"Fred Sutton," Roden said. "He found the body." Then he added quickly, "And fetch Beth Square with him. I want to see them together."

Berg nodded; and at something in his bulging eyes Roden felt

more at ease. Sutton came presently, with Beth Square behind him, her face strained. Sutton himself seemed self-possessed enough. He nodded at the men, smiled, the scar on his lip white but the rest of his face normally ruddy. Beth stopped just at the foot of the stairs, shrinking against the newel.

Otto Berg said, "I understand you found Mr. Square dead in the barn."

"Yes, sir."

"How was he lying?"

"He was slumped, like he had sort of dropped down on himself."

"Legs bundled under him?"

Sutton cocked his handsome face, trying to remember. "Yes and no. They might've been a little to one side."

"Suppose he had been killed in front of the stalls and dragged to where you found him. Would he have had to be lifted over the mangers?"

"No-o. The big door where you take the wagons in could've been slid back. Then he could've been drug outside and back of the stalls."

"You say his legs might have been to one side. Was it the side next the door?"

"Yes, it was."

“You work here, don’t you, Mr. Sutton?”

“I do.”

“Did you know Mr. Square was to be away?”

Sutton hesitated. His eyes flicked in the direction of Beth. There was a slight hollowness to his tone as he said, “He mentioned something about it.”

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“Then why didn’t you stable the mule?”

“I—Mr. Square usually done that himself.”

“But if he was to be away?”

Sutton grinned engagingly. “I didn’t much care—it would have been a blessing if that mule *had* got killed.”

Berg leaned back, pulled at his lip. “You anything to say, Sheriff?”

Roden stood where he could see both Sutton and Beth. He said, “When did you leave that night, Fred?”

“A little after dark.”

“Did you come back?”

Beth Square’s mouth was open—pathetically caught in utter suspense and fear. Yet, Roden thought, it was a beautiful mouth, full and gentle, with white even teeth back of the open lips. Fred Sutton clearly wanted to see her too, but she was diagonally

back of him.

“I don’t usually come back,” he said.

“But did you that night?”

Sutton’s voice grew firm, loud. He might have been calling over his shoulder. “I did not.”

“I guess that finishes with him,” Roden said. “We might ask Beth a few questions.”

John Greer motioned Beth forward. “Your husband intended to be away for the night, didn’t he, Mrs. Square?” His tone was considerate.

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“I think so.”

“You are not sure?”

“I—yes, I am sure.”

“Get hold of yourself, Mrs. Square. Why did he come back?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who usually put up the mule when he was away?”

“Sometimes I did. Or Fred—Mr. Sutton there. Anyone who thought of it.”

“You didn’t think of it Monday night?”

“No,” she whispered.

“Were you at the barn that night?”

Her breast heaved. A sob caught in her throat. “No!” The word was a wail. She threw up her hands to her face and began to sob hysterically. Sutton’s eyes bugged out. He sprang to her, seized her roughly by the shoulders.

“Lizzie!”

Roden stepped between them, turned Beth away from Sutton. “Beth’s kind of nervous,” he said to the room at large. And then he turned apologetically to Fred. “Women’s often that way,” he said mildly. “It’s a good thing Beth don’t know anything. A clever lawyer could turn her inside out.”

For just an instant Sutton and the Sheriff stood face to face. But it was long enough. Sutton’s face turned a peculiar color, pale yet flushed, as though exasperation warred in him with fear. Then he turned to Otto Berg, tried to speak calmly and only partly succeeded.

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“Is that all, sir?”

“What say, Sheriff?”

Roden nodded. “Have the old lady down.”

Mrs. Square did not lose dignity even in descending the steep stairs. She looked old. Deep wrinkles grooved her whole face. Her skin was dry and tight. But after the initial collapse she had regained her self-control and now stood determined and iron-willed before Otto Berg.

Berg spoke, a bit apologetic and pontifical. “We regret this, madam. Might I ask whether your son had any enemies who—who could have wished—”

“I wouldn’t ask that!” John Greer put in quickly. “We are trying to determine whether—let me ask you this, Mrs. Square. Your son considered the mule somewhat his special charge, did he not?”

“Yes. There was an attachment between them.”

“When your son was away, who usually saw to such things?”

“I did. Then he knew they would be done.” Her head lifted; there was challenge in her eye.

“But you did not do it the night of the—on Monday night?”

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“I heard the mule bray about dark. It sounded in the barn. I concluded someone had looked after him.”

“Who?” Roden slipped the word in quickly.

Mrs. Square turned slowly. “Fred Sutton, or possibly my daughter-in-law.”

She left them then, without asking leave, walking steadily.

“You’ve got to hand it to the old girl!” Roden said when she had disappeared up the steep stairs. “She’s got what it takes!”

“But this isn’t getting us anywhere!” Berg complained. “They

didn't know he was murdered, so how can they help?"

"There's a little nigger girl I'd like to talk to."

Claudette was vaguely disturbing. Even Dr. Denman looked up from the small table where he was working under a window and regarded her speculatively. She was almost white. The dress she wore was short and held her soft-curved body like a sheath. There was a pagan glow in her eyes, and her mouth was provocatively impudent and full. When she curtsied, a bare knee peeped from beneath the short skirt.

Otto Berg questioned her. "You were here the night Mr. Square met his death?"

"In de house." Her voice was husky.

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"Everything went on here as usual?"

She made a slight sniffing sound through her nose.

"What do you mean?"

"Dey was at it like always!"

"Who?"

She shrugged in the direction of the upstairs.

Roden said, "The two ladies."

"Then you didn't see anything unusual during the evening?"

“I saw a white man down by de bahn.”

“Yes? Who was it?”

“I couldn’t make out de face, on’y it was white.”

“How did you happen to see him?”

“I was lookin’.”

“What were you looking for?”

“I had a date—I was watchin’.”

“Ben Neal, eh?” Roden put in, grinning at her.

The copper of her lips returned his smile. “Ben was to Pine Ridge,” she said. Then, demurely, “I has several frens.”

“I don’t doubt that!” Jess said gallantly.

“Tell us about the white man. Was he large or small, fat, lean—”

“A big man,” Claudette said. “On’y it was too dahk to see was he fat.”

Roden said, “You was lookin’ for a darky, eh—that why you took note of his white face?”

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Her lids dropped demurely.

“That’s all, miss,” Berg said shortly. Then to Roden, “Who could it have been?”

“Wayne Square might have been around.”

But Wayne Square declared that he had not been around. He had been at home all evening. His wife could tell them so if they wished any corroboration. But John Greer declared that Square’s word was adequate.

“You told me Mr. Manny was at Pine Ridge?” Roden asked.

“Yes. And he hadn’t meant to come back. That’s what I say—this one time when he had expected to be away—”

“Did he go to Pine Ridge often?”

“Once or twice a month.”

“You often go there?”

“Not often.” The words were spoken fatuously, with some condescension. “I usually go to Bennington.”

“How long since you’ve been to Pine Ridge?”

Wayne Square thought it over. “I can’t just recall. A month. Two months.”

Jess Roden looked at him steadily. “Two months, eh?”

Wayne shrugged. “Pine Ridge has few attractions.”

“You have no idea why your brother returned?”

“Not the slightest. But I keep thinking—if he had just done like

he had planned, this would not—”

Dr. Denman approached them. He had for two or three minutes been moving about the room—from the window to the coffin, back again. He now stopped beside Otto Berg, waited respectfully.

Berg said, “That’s all, Mr. Square. And thank you.”

Wayne went heavily up the stair. Roden noted that he now wore black shoes, not the yellow ones of the previous day.

All trace of lassitude had left the physician. He stood tall and somewhat stately, immensely alive. “I have restored the bit of skin in a solution of normal salt,” he said. “It matches the abrasion on the face.”

Roden’s eyes glowed. “Manny’s skin, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you picked it out of that shoe?” Berg demanded of Roden.

“Out of this groove.” Roden picked up the shoe, showed him.

John Greer said slowly, “The man was murdered, Berg.”

Berg nodded.

“You needn’t give out all I’ve told you,” Roden said guardedly. “I don’t like people to know too much.”

CHAPTER 10

Roden pushed through the swing door to the kitchen just as Mrs. Square stepped in from the outside. She had evidently run out and back hurriedly. She jerked the gray sweater from her shoulders, hung it on its peg back of the door, and turned angrily to Claudette.

“Claudette, have you been wearing that sweater?”

Claudette was at the sink. She faced the old lady impudently, her lips insolently full. “No’m,” she said. Then her breasts lifted defiantly and there was a flutter of her wide nostrils.

“Somebody has!” Old Lou stormed. “It has tobacco on it!”

Claudette’s defiance gave way to impudence again. “Dey’s others in dis house dat smoke,” she said, her voice low and insinuating. “An’ you done took de coat away.”

Mrs. Square drew up imperiously, then saw Roden just inside the door. She groped for her pince-nez, pawed at the black button, found it enmeshed somehow in her waist, and seemed at a loss as to how to put the sheriff in his proper place.

“Sir?” she said.

“Sorry, Miz Square. But we got to think of everything now. I was wonderin’ about Manny’s saddlebags.”

“What about them?”

“They might tell us why he come back.”

“They do not. I have been through them.”

“Where are they?”

“They are in my room—with the other things.”

“What other things?”

“His clothes, what he had in his pockets.”

“I’ll have to ask to see them.”

She stared at him, then said wearily, “Just a minute. I’ll go up and straighten things up a bit. You haven’t done my room, Claudette?”

“No’m. You-all said not to.”

“I guess I did.” She passed a hand over her eyes, started for the door.

“If you don’t mind,” Roden said, “I’ll go along.”

“Do you—as you wish.”

It was a large room on the second floor, fitted out as complete living quarters. There was a fireplace, easy chairs, a studio couch. The bed stood in an alcove, a curtain drawn before it. Mrs. Square went to a walnut chest and pulled out a drawer.

“His things are in here.”

Roden looked. “The saddlebags?”

“They are in the closet.”

“If you’ll show me—”

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She opened the closet door and stooped. The saddlebags leaned against the wall. Almost too quickly for the eye to see, she lifted the flap, thrust in her hand, and drew it out again, letting it fall to her side. With the other hand she lifted the bags and held them out to Roden.

He took them. “Thanks, ma’m. And now if you don’t mind I’ll take what you’ve got in your other hand.”

“You shan’t have it!”

“Don’t make me take it off of you.”

She stiffened angrily, but held out her hand. It contained a bracelet of yellow gold, perhaps half an inch wide. Roden lifted it from her palm, stood turning it round and round in his fingers. He held it closer, the better to see the shallow inscription inside —‘Love Manny to Beth.’

“He was fetchin’ it to her, eh?”

“She shan’t have it!” The words vibrated with the bitterness of jealousy and strong hate. “She shan’t have it! As if she cared for his love!”

“From what this says—‘Love Manny to Beth’—he didn’t think so.”

“He was blind! All she cared for was a place—as if she could fill it!”

“This ought to go to her, ma’m. Manny’d wish it.”

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But the Square pride had gained the upper hand. She regarded him steadily, once more in command of herself. “Take what you wish,” she said, indicating the open drawer. “Only return them to me when you are through with them. They mean much to me.” Her voice was strained at the end, but she kept the quiver down.

Roden came as near sympathy as he ever allowed himself. He nodded understandingly. He even made a move to pat her arm but thought better of it. “I’ll see that everything comes back,” he said. He did not tarry long in the room.

He went downstairs. The front of the house was in confusion. In spite of the delay it had been decided that the funeral should be held. Manny Square had been carried up; the coffin stood in the west end of the big living room banked with flowers. Dr. Collender from Pine Ridge was beside it, Bible in hand; now with eyes downcast on his squirming fingers, now looking hopefully up as if to implore order. Gwen Dixon sat at the upright piano fiddling with the music. But still the crowd milled, coming in one or two at a time, reluctantly. There were hundreds in the yard, standing, sitting on the fence. Three of the gentlemen from Bennington stood decorously inside the door, the pallbearer flowers in their buttonholes. Grady Heard occupied a chair in the second row from the front, his face,

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always white below the slick black hair, now whiter still. His body was bent contritely forward.

Roden took one look, then pushed at the swing door. It bumped Claudette who had been standing just behind it, peeping. He grinned at her, motioned her over toward the sink. She followed pertly, evidently willing at last to be friends with him.

“Some doin’s, eh, Claudette?”

She laughed throatily, flung her head.

“That man you saw at the barn—he must’ve had a real white face, eh?”

She nodded.

“Whiter’n mine?”

She looked at him. “Lots.”

“Whiter’n Wayne Square’s?”

“Mistah Wayne’s pasty-faced.”

“Hah! Trust a purty girl to see a pasty face. Mr. Wayne come around here much?”

“Him ’n’ ol’ Manny didn’t hit it off.”

Roden chuckled. “Manny didn’t approve of Wayne.”

“Mistah Wayne has his points.”

“But no money. And Manny had money but no points. Funny, eh?”

Claudette cocked her head. The piano was starting up.

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“When was the last time you saw Wayne down here?”

“’Bout a week ago. He was hittin Mistah Manny up for a loan.”

“He was, eh? You heard it?”

She smiled secretively. “I heahs a lot.”

“And Manny turned him down, did he?”

“Said if Mistah Wayne had money it’d jist go down de rat hole ’long with all de rest.”

“That made Wayne sore, eh?”

“Lawsy no! You-all cain’t make *him* sore. He patted his belly and grinned.”

“Hah! Who was the feller you was lookin’ for Monday night, Claudette?”

“Wouldn’t you-all like to know!”

“You’ve got ’em eatin’ out of your hand, Claudette. But if you think Manny had it in for Ben, you’re mistaken. Manny wouldn’t persecute a flea.”

Claudette drew a deep sure breath. It lifted her breasts, set her

in a stance of triumph. “Did he want to, he couldn’t now!” she said.

“That’s right. You know, it’s a good thing Ben’s got an alibi for Monday night. People say he had it in for Manny.”

“He was to Pine Ridge!”

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“What was he doin’ over there?”

Claudette’s eyes flashed. “He wouldn’t tell. I asks him, but he wouldn’t tell!” She checked herself, turned abruptly to the sink.

“You don’t think Manny had it in for Ben, do you?”

“Why you-all askin’?” she demanded. “I got wuk to do.”

Roden went to the swing door and listened a moment. ‘. . . the resurrection and the life . . . in me shall never die.’ He turned back to Claudette but she was vigorously rubbing some small glasses with a large white cloth. The back door stood open; he stepped out. This would be a good time to take a look up at Wayne’s. The place would be deserted.

Wayne Square’s acres were not so productive as Manny’s, but they were more beautiful. The fact that the fence rows were a tangle of vines and briars gave them a look of age and mellowness; and some of the vines were honeysuckles. The rambling old house, restored according to the wishes of Emanuel Square, looked easy as an old shoe under the three ancient pines. It had a separate kitchen approached by an uneven flagstone walk; the ell to the west of the house proper was a later addition and had a different floor level. Only the ridge

beyond the house was not according to pattern. The great trees had been cut, and in their falling they had stripped the small saplings so that they now thrust like broken spars from the tangle of dead limbs and underbrush which littered the ground.

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“One feller can soon tear down what was a long time growin’ up,” Roden said as he approached the place.

If there was any wire around, it would be at the barn. And there would no doubt be some, as the Squares baled quite a bit of hay to get it out of the way. The trouble would be to identify it as the wire he was looking for. Then he remembered that he had not seen the familiar roll anywhere about Manny Square’s barn. There were broken pieces on the manure pile, but no considerable roll, such as was used in baling.

He stepped into Wayne Square’s barn, found it deserted save for some dominick chickens which scratched and sang and pecked about the place. It was built somewhat after the pattern of Manny’s, but it did not have the orderly and efficient air of the dead man’s barn. The stalls needed cleaning, the mangers were clogged with cornstalks, very little grain was stored in the areaway.

But the wire was there—a heavy roll two feet in diameter, still bound in one place by the small circle which kept the numerous strands from spreading and becoming tangled. The end piece which thrust up was bent not far from the binding, showing that when Wayne Square wished a bit of wire, he pulled it round and round through the loop to the desired length and cut it off without loosening the entire roll.

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But it was not twisted as it would have been had the piece been worried off by turning. It was cut clean. Roden dropped to his knees. The cut had not been made by the usual device found in the crotch of pliers. It was too even, too smooth. On one side the cutting blade had not penetrated so deeply as on the other: the blade edges had come together a fraction to one side of the center. Nor was it a cut that would have been made by pincers. The jaws of pincers come together absolutely on center; if this wire had been cut with them, the ends on either side of the tiny ridge which marked the dividing point would have been exactly opposite each other. But they were not. One was infinitesimally longer than the other.

The wire had been cut with a very sharp and tightworking device one blade of which was to the side of the other. New pliers might have done it. Tin snips were more likely. They work with great accuracy, cutting true. Roden rose from the wire and let his eyes roam over the walls. He entered the storage room. A pair of new tin snips were lying on the floor—not the eight-inch but the twelve-inch kind, still black in the original paint, the steel edges gleaming. Roden picked them up, returned to the roll of wire. He pulled the free end several inches through the loop, slid the snips over it, and bore down. When the wire snapped in two, he bent the two ends together, held them close. Save that the slight dividing ridge of the new cut was more nearly in the center, the marks were identical.

Roden sucked in his breath. He stuffed the wire in his pocket, slid the tin snips inside his shirt, and went outside. Far below, he could see the crowd motionless in Manny Square's yard. The funeral sermon was clearly a long one. Roden shrugged. These

preachers were used to pretty thin congregations, and seized upon funerals when the houses were packed and the emotional tension high, to drive home their warnings to the living. Old Collender was not as bad as some; in Pine Ridge he was known as a 'society' pastor. But he was evidently down there now, pouring it on; himself caught in the general drama, pausing grandly for his periods, thundering.

"Gives me plenty of time to look for the shoes," Roden said, and went to the house.

But the shoes were not there. Roden spent a full ten minutes searching for them. He even went out to the kitchen to look, in case Wayne had changed there. But the big yellow shoes were not anywhere around.

171

"That's somethin'," Roden told himself as he dropped down the saddleback toward Manny's. "When a feller takes off his shoes, he leaves 'em somewhere. He don't hide 'em, and they can't run off. Funny. . . ."

He changed his mind before he reached the point. He couldn't do much down at the house with the crowd milling around, so he might as well go over the ridge to see whether Wayne Square had liquored up recently. A mile northeast and a half-mile drop into the hollow brought him to the rendezvous of Pegleg Buckner. It was a remote and squalid place—a shack below, and a well-worn path which led to a rock cliff where smoke rose from a fissure between the stones. Here Pegleg made his brew, and here came the few who knew his secret.

He was dozing in the sun, his back against a leaning rock which

served as a portal. He rose at Roden's step on the path. The sleep left his eyes. His long pointed chin lifted alertly. He reached for a rifle which leaned against the opposite slab.

Roden lifted swiftly up the path, a grin on his face. "Put down the gun, Pegleg. I'm makin' you a little social call."

Buckner's voice was round, hard: the sheriff of Deer Lick county might come in either of two capacities.

172

"What do you want?"

"Somethin' to wet my whistle, first." He flipped a quarter in the air. It whirled, catching the sun; fell in Pegleg's hand.

"Ain't nothin' here, Sheriff."

"Sure not. But I'm dry as leatherbritches."

Pegleg disappeared, returned carrying a pint bottle. "Not bad," he said, holding it out. "I fetched it f'm Pine Ridge tother day."

"They got good stuff over there," Roden said soberly. He pulled the cork, tipped the bottle. Then he said, "Wayne Square come over here now and then, Pegleg?"

Buckner's face hardened. "Not lately, he ain't."

"Always broke, eh?"

"I'm an honest man," Pegleg declared thinly. "I tend to my business and ax others to do the same. And I carried Wayne Square's long's I could. But when his bill riz to forty dollar, I called a halt."

Jess whistled. “That’s a lot of money.”

“You’re darn’ tootin’ it is! A bill gits up that high, it ain’t *never* goin’ to be paid.”

“You told him, eh?”

“*I’ll* say.”

“When was he here last?”

“Monday. But I told him nothin’ doin’.”

173

“Not a drop, eh?”

Buckner hesitated. His face had been triumphant at memory of how he had told Wayne Square. But he hedged now, grinned sheepishly. “I let him have a quart,” he said. “But I told him that was the last.”

Roden tipped the bottle, drank sparingly. “If it was like this, it was good stuff.”

“All my likker’s good stuff.... Have they shot old Lige yit?”

“No.... Lige didn’t kill him, Pegleg.”

Buckner had not heard the news, so the two men spent fifteen minutes in absorbed conversation. When Roden finally dropped off the ridge toward the point, the crowd had dispersed from Manny Square’s yard. Fred Sutton was turning a corn sheller in the areaway of the barn. Roden, always curious about machinery, stopped to watch him. Sutton grinned, fed in a big

ear of yellow corn, leaned on the wheel. The door of the storage room opened and Beth Square's face appeared in the opening. She saw Roden and drew back quickly.

But he had seen her also. "Come in, Lizzie. I was jest passin'."

She shrank in, eyes downcast, said almost in a whisper, "I was putting things away."

Fred Sutton continued at the wheel.

174

Roden drew the bracelet from his pocket, motioned to Beth to come closer. "Glad you come in, Lizzie. Here's a trinket Manny had fetched you from Pine Ridge. I was meanin' to give it to you."

Her eyes dilated as he held the circle of gold out to her. She drew back a step, her hands clutching at her breast. But as he continued to hold it out, she checked herself and advanced toward him as if mesmerized. She extended her hand slowly. A sob caught in her throat as her fingers closed over the metal.

"Look inside," Roden said.

She did so.

"What's it say?" Roden urged her.

"Love Manny to—" Her voice broke. A piteous look came over her face. She tried to hide her tears, leaned against the wall and sobbed into her arms. She turned finally, crushed and miserable, at the very bottom of despair.

“And to think we could!” she said.

“Could what?” Roden asked quickly.

Fred Sutton left the wheel. He took one long step, two. His big hands fell on Beth’s shoulders, and his face dropped close to hers. “*Get hold of yourself!*”

The words were tense. Beth lifted her head, bit her quivering lips. Then she wrenched free of him and ran blindly from the areaway, leaving the door open behind her.

175

Roden looked at Sutton with a small grin, shrugged. “She had somethin’ to tell,” he said.

Fred Sutton was running his hand through the shelled corn, lifting it and letting it slide through his fingers, testing its quality. Then he fed in an ear and took his place at the wheel, saying nothing.

“Not that it matters,” Roden said mildly. “Before long I’ll git her off somewhere and pump it out of her.”

He stood grinning at Fred, his eyes molten and fluid, racing like quicksilver. Sutton did not look up, but the scar on his lip was now red, the rest of his face white. The corn sheller sang steadily under his hand.

“That’s the way with women,” Roden went on. “They can’t keep a secret.”

Then he went out, seeking Claudette. He found her at the edge of the garden, pouring water from a dishpan on Mrs. Square’s prize

chrysanthemums. She emptied the pan at his approach and lifted her voluptuous face to him, smiling.

“You got an eye in your head, Claudette.”

She waited.

“I’m huntin’ a piece of wire that was brought down here from Mr. Wayne’s. Balin’ wire about a yard long. You ain’t seen it, have you?”

176

“Not since Mistah Wayne hung it on de fence.”

“Where did he hang it?”

“Down at de head of de lane. He rid down. I seen him loop it oveh de rail and den go on.”

“When was that?”

“Las’ week some time.”

“Thanks, Claudette, till you’re better paid. I’ll go down and see if it’s there now.”

But he knew he wouldn’t find it.

177

CHAPTER 11

He found Grady Heard at the quarry. The big man was stalking aimlessly from one spot to another, hands thrust deep in his pockets, his expression restless and dissatisfied. He looked at Roden with a blend of quick annoyance and something deeper. At first he might have been watching the approach of a particularly pestiferous mosquito come at an awkward time; but a bit later he might have had a wary eye out for something far more dangerous.

“Wanted to talk to you, Grady.”

“What is it now?”

“I want to know what you was doin’ at Manny’s barn Monday night.”

“What nonsense is this?”

“That’s what I want to know—why was you up there?”

“And who says I was?”

“Claudette. She seen you.”

“She lies.”

Roden looked at Heard steadily, and seemed to grow taller, broader. The air was at once surcharged with a portent with

which there was no trifling. “Grady Heard, you was up at that barn jest after dark Monday night. You was seen there. You tell me you wasn’t, and you want me to believe you, but I don’t. I’m after you, Grady Heard. And when I find out what I want to know, it won’t go easy with you for standin’ in my way.”

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“If you must know, I was up there.”

“What for?”

“Here of late my stock’s been getting down the quarry some way. I’ve taken pains to find out how Manny got hold of it. I couldn’t understand it unless he kept a few head shut up in his barn. So when I saw him ride off Monday, I waited and went up —”

Roden cut him short. “There’s another thing I don’t like. The two men around here who had it in for Manny are you and Ben Neal. Now you’ve taken him on, and it looks fishy. Why did you fire Big Nig?”

“You can keep a nigger just so long, Roden. You know that. At first he is tickled to death; he works like a horse. But before long he gets used to it. He slows up, gets too shiftless to live. I kept Big Nig as long as I could.”

“Or until he told me about the dynamite. I don’t like it, Grady. You fixed it so you’d be able to prowl without anyone around.”

“You forget one thing. If I was after Manny Square, I wouldn’t go after him on a night when he was to be away!”

179

“It’d be a good time as far as everyone else was concerned. With him away, the hands’d scoot the minute they could.”

“Maybe they would. But with Manny gone, what could I do?”

“You sent Ben Neal with a note’t would fetch him back—fetch him when everyone else was away.”

Grady Heard looked quickly about. His face was gray. His eyes glowed like a camel’s, with a strange frustrated fire. When he spoke, it was with an obvious effort at lightness. “You are good at thinking things up, Mr. Roden.”

“Maybe I am. And jest as a reward for takin’ the note and keepin’ still about it, you give Ben Neal a job.”

“Have it your own way. All I ask is that you don’t *do* anything till you know what you are about.”

“I don’t aim to.”

Roden thought it over as he left the quarry. Grady Heard knew all the answers, but he gave them only when he was cornered. What more did he have concealed under that sleek black hair? He had been at the barn Monday night. Now if it could be established that he *had* sent the letter that had brought Manny Square racing home. . . .

And there below him on the road, slouching along with the awkward ground-covering stride of a bear, was Ben Neal. He was dressed up—a faded blue shirt open over his broad chest, thin blue slacks, tan shoes cut to ribbons over his toes for comfort.

“You’re goin’ the wrong way, Ben,” Roden said when they met.

“I’s goin’ and I’s comin’, Cap’n.”

“What’s the attraction up on the hill?”

Ben laughed, an ascending and ebullient ‘Hi!’ his teeth gleaming.

“I’ve got to talk to you, Ben.”

“I’s powerful pressed, Cap’n.”

“Claudette can wait.”

“But de dance’ll be stahtin’.”

“Another dance, eh? It can wait too. You come with me.”

For a moment the big black seemed about to refuse. Then he shrugged and went surlily with Roden down the bottom. The dogs came pouring up the pawpaw patch. They ceased their clamor when they saw Ben, went to him one at a time and smelled his heels. Sweat popped out on the black face. When Big-Boy, with a questioning and unsatisfied air, dropped behind to bring up the rear, Neal could stand it no longer.

“Keep de dogs back, Cap’n.”

“They won’t bother you long as you don’t bother them.”

“Us sho don’t crave to bother ’em none.”

The dogs followed them in the house, prowled the room. Roden stood with his back to the fireplace, while Ben stopped uneasily just inside the door. The sheriff looked at his man till the silence grew strained, but he did not speak till the negro began to paw for the door fastening behind him.

“Tell me why you went to Pine Ridge Monday.”

“To see de big town. Us likes to tromp oveh de plank walks.”

“What time did you start?”

“Left heah afteh I’d et.”

“Was anybody in the livery stable when you got there?”

“Lib’ry stable?”

“When you went in to leave the letter.”

Ben’s face grew visibly longer; the whites of his eyeballs glistened in their mahogany setting. He glanced at the door as if it meant escape, put a hand to the latch.

“Tell me,” Roden said peremptorily.

The surliness returned to Ben’s face. “Us don’t know nothin’.”

“You’re hidin’ somethin’, Ben Neal!”

“Sweah to God, Cap’n.”

“You know what happens to a feller who conspires to defeat

justice, don't you?"

Neal slid his tongue over his lips, but he said only, "Us don't know nothin'."

"When did you come back from Pine Ridge?"

The heavy face lightened. "Way long in de mawnin'."

"You're lyin', Ben. I'll give you one more chance to tell the truth."

Neal squirmed. Once he seemed on the point of saying something, but his heavy face settled in determined lines. "*I am* tellin' de truth."

Roden said briskly, "All right. We'll soon find out. Ever hear of a third degree? Come with me!" He opened the door, pushed Ben out.

"Wheah at we goin', Cap'n?"

"I'm goin' to turn Big Nig loose on you."

"Says what?"

"Big Nig'll beat the truth out of you."

The dogs were around them, leaping.

"Yip!" Roden said to them. "You can come this time."

They yelped out their joy.

Roden turned to Neal, hurried him. "When Big Nig gits through with you, you'll talk."

Neal made a furtive gesture toward his right armpit.

183

"Feelin' for your razor, eh? Listen to me: you two are goin' to fight fair and square. The first one't starts any monkey business, I'll sick Big-Boy on him. Come here, Big-Boy."

The big dog zoomed over, tall as a calf. His muscular back was wide, cleft down the backbone. His great head was flat, and his mouth stopped just short of being an English bull's; for he was a mongrel. He looked at his master, grinning.

Roden patted the flat head. "Big-Boy here," he said. "First one of you't starts any shenanigans, I'll have Big-Boy eat 'im up."

They reached Niggertown a little after dusk. The shacks squatted on either side of the road and bagged down toward the river. There was a smell of dust and slop and a distant dump heap. Doors stood open, some dark and some yellow with the light of kerosene lamps. Numerous dogs, mostly red hounds, slipped out as the two men passed, but at sight of Big-Boy they stopped and stood silent, watching.

Big Nig was sitting alone before his one-room small house. He wore only a pair of pants, bound at his waist by a quarter-inch hemp rope. He seemed wearily pensive.

"That you, Big Nig?" Roden called.

The black was on his feet instantly. "Sho am, boss."

184

Roden stopped, grasped Ben Neal's arm. "Know this feller?"

Big Nig thrust out his face. "Yazuh, boss. But I don't know no good of him."

"Says who?" Neal demanded. The flaring arm tightened under Roden's hand. Neal did not straighten, or square off, but seemed to expand and spread out, as with a loose-jointed and swinging power.

"So you two's done been after each other, eh?" Roden said.

"We ain't." Neal spoke with contempt. "He's sore 'cause Claudette done gib him de mitten. Hi!"

"You and yo' Claudette!" Big Nig said. He tried to put contempt in his voice also, but a certain hollowness revealed his defeat and hopelessness.

"Hi!"

Roden said, "I'm not takin' sides in your personal quarrel. That's your own affair. But Ben here's lyin', and I got to make him tell the truth."

"I ain't lyin'."

"I'm askin' you, Nig, to make this feller talk."

"Does you wait till *he* makes me talk, you'll be heah all night."

A banjo strummed down the bottom, signal that the dance was getting under way. Dark shadows drifted along the darker

road. Once there was a low quick laugh, and a yellow girl ran by with a man in hot pursuit. And then the banjo was joined by a fiddle in a black-bottom stomp with a furious and barbaric swing.

Big Nig spoke eagerly. "You mean I whups him, boss?"

"Till he's willin' to talk. It's to be a fair fight. First one starts anything crooked, I'll sick the dog on him. Let's git inside."

The room was little more than twelve by twelve, furnished with two chairs, a table, and a pallet on the floor. It was soon cleared. Big Nig hitched at the rope round his waist, pulled in his belly. He thrust his arms straight down and began to circle warily. Roden stood in a corner, critical and impatient for the finish, regarding the fight only as a necessary means to an end. The big dog stood beside him panting; the saliva dripping from his tongue; looking at Roden one instant and at the two men the next.

Big Nig was the county's colossus, tall and powerfully built. Ben Neal was shorter but he spread like a beam. At Nig's evident readiness for business, he dropped his head and thrust out his jaw. And as Nig circled, Ben pivoted and followed him, crouching, hunching his shoulders.

Big Nig drew first blood. He lifted to his toes and looped one over that caught Ben on the nose. It was a good solid blow, enough to stagger an average man. But Neal only grinned, slowly and a bit stupidly, like a bear put upon but not quite ready to strike back. Big Nig feinted with a left and then drove powerfully with his right. But Ben rolled back and

took it lightly.

“C’m on an’ fight!” Nig taunted. He spread his long fingers and gave Ben a terrific and contemptuous backhanded slap on the cheek.

Ben rolled in, still crouching. He straightened and leapt simultaneously. His close-clipped skull caught Big Nig on the chin. There was a sharp clack of bone on bone. Nig’s head snapped back and he reeled to the wall. Neal followed, now standing up and pouring it on—a smashing drive to the cheekbone, a left that hammered the naked ribs. But Nig used the wall as a leverage and catapulted himself forward. The two rocketed together, Big Nig towering but Neal broad as a beam, loose and swinging.

They ceased being fighters and became wrestlers—big black bodies bending in the yellow light of the smoking glass lamp, their necks corded and muscles popping out all over them. Jess Roden, still critical and appraising, watched from his corner, while Big-Boy quivered beside him, tongue titillating and saliva dripping to the bare floor.

In the frightful clench, Ben worked his elbow till it dug with unbearable savagery into Big Nig’s throat. It cracked his windpipe, brought his breath whistling through his open mouth. And as Nig finally leapt back to free himself, Ben’s knee shot up and caught him in the midriff. He coughed, bent low.

187

“C’m on an’ fight, does you?” Neal returned, and himself swiped Nig’s temple with a shattering blow of the back of his

hand.

“It’s about time you was startin’ in on him, Nig,” Roden barked sharply.

Big Nig straightened and towered. He threw back his head and laughed. Then he made a flying tackle that put both men on the floor where for a prolonged minute they were a rolling and clawing bundle of legs and arms. Nig wormed on top. He avoided the flailing legs that sought to dislodge him, slid down on Neal’s body as in a saddle, thrust surely and ponderously for the throat. But Neal did a thing Jess Roden thought no man on earth could do—he sat up, he gathered his big feet under him, and lifting the weight of the giant, he rose magnificently until he was up again and face to face.

For the first time Roden displayed uneasiness. “I’ll call it off if you say so, Nig!”

But Nig did not seem to hear. He brought round a swinging right which cracked off Ben’s chest. He lifted a left which caught the ribs. And then Ben sobbed—just a single hoarse catching of the breath which was neither fear nor pain. He leapt at Nig, circled him, buried his teeth in the bare shoulder. He sobbed again, his vast bulk shaking with uncontrollable fury. A heavy fire shovel, forged by old Oddler the blacksmith, stood by a small flat-topped stove, a shovel with a loop in the black iron handle. Ben swung for it. He snatched it and held it back and down as one holds a bat when he is using only one hand.

“Cut it out!” Roden’s voice ripped the sudden deadly stillness.

“Git ’im, Big-Boy!”

The dog flattened as though dropping to the floor. Then he was hurtling forward, his forepaws spread. Ben cringed back. His eyes glistened. And before the dog could land he was circling, lopsided like an ape, watching for a chance at this new foe.

“Drop that shovel!”

Ben dropped it just as the dog checked his headlong rush and whirled for another try. The iron clattered to the floor. Big Nig caught it with his heel and sent it against the wall. Roden sprang forward and seized the dog. The two blacks were again face to face.

Ben Neal said suddenly, shrugging his vast shoulders, “Us’ll talk.”

“You will, eh?” Roden cried, relieved. “Let ’im alone, Nig.”

189

“’Pears lak I ought to finish de job, boss.”

“We ain’t got nothin’ against Ben. He’s a good nigger. We jest want him to tell us a few things.”

Big Nig looked doubtful.

“One thing, Ben,” Roden said. “Why did you go to Pine Ridge?”

“Us took a note to Mistah Manny.”

“Yes? Who sent you?”

“Mistah Heahd.”

“Heard did, eh? What was in the letter?”

Ben shook his head.

“What did he give you for takin’ it?”

“He takes me on at de slag pit.”

“You needed a job, did you?”

For the first time Neal looked aggrieved, injured. “Us prit-nigh stahved last winteh.”

“No one wanted you after Manny let you out?”

“Guess dat’s it.”

“How long did you stay over at Pine Ridge?”

“Once us is dere, might ’s well see de sights.”

“When did you come back?”

Ben spread his hands. “Mawnin’.”

Big Nig took a step toward him.

Roden said sharply, “What is it?”

“He come home fo’ mawnin.”

“How do you know it?”

“He was at de dance. He left befo’ it was oveh.”

“What time did he leave?”

“Not so late. Ten ’r so.”

“He left with Claudette?”

Nig glared.

“Hi!” Ben said.

Roden turned on him. “Did you take her home?”

“Yazuh, Cap’n.”

“Then you’d be on the hill about the time Manny got bumped off.”

Ben shrugged.

“Where did you put the letter when you got to Pine Ridge?”

“On de table in de lib’ry stable. Mistah Heahd said not to let no one see me.”

Roden dropped his inquisitorial manner. “Thanks a lot, Ben. Sorry we had to beat it out of you. Maybe that’ll teach you not to lie to me.”

Ben grinned.

“You two fellers shake hands.”

They did, but without enthusiasm.

“Now you can go git your girl.”

Neal sprang alive. “Yazuh, Cap’n. Us is on de way!”

“You goin’ to the shindig?” Roden asked of Nig.

Nig looked away, his face desolate.

191

“Hi!” Neal chortled from the darkness outside. “He ain’t got no wooman to go with!”

Nig took a helpless step after him.

192

CHAPTER 12

Roden was once more in the house, going over the case in his mind. You had to keep the threads separate. If you didn't, you forgot something which might be important, or you let a clue point the wrong way. It was like the twine you salvaged from store wrappings—if you took the trouble to straighten it and roll it into a ball, it was always ready, usable; but if you just bunched it together and threw it into the drawer, it tangled, the few knots grew into dozens, so that you had to pull and break and untie endlessly.

Nor could you jump at conclusions. Right now it looked bad for Grady Heard. He hated Manny, he had been at the barn on the night of the murder, he had sent the note that brought the little man racing home. But there were other clues pointing different ways. Before one case could be made, the others must be unmade; and in the process of unmaking them something might turn up that would render them valid. If there was the slightest chance that any of the suspects might flee, they could be locked up for safekeeping. But they could not get away; and if they should try it, that would be about as damning as anything they could do. No—go slow, play it safe. Roden pondered the sheet of paper before him, trying to remember everything.

Wayne Square:

1. Had been at Pine Ridge reading will
2. Had been trying to borrow money
3. Bought whiskey before the murder
4. Owned roll of wire that piece had come from

5. Claudette saw him bring the wire down
6. Had tin snips that cut the wire
7. Was at quarry night sledge was thrown down

It would be a mistake, Roden told himself, to minimize the fact that Square had been to Pegleg's place before the murder. Normally Wayne was a wastrel but pleasant, inclining to jokes and horseplay. But when he was in his cups he turned waspish and irascible. His very features changed, from a kind of bland pleasantness to a dyspeptic thinness. Get him about half stewed and he became suspicious, he imagined grievances. At such times the whole perspective of events must have altered for him. He would not see himself as one who had had his fun and must now pay the piper, and Manny as prospering because of a Scotch-like frugality and a continuous application to work. He would see himself as ill-starred and Manny as getting all the breaks. And it must have been insufferable in such a mood for him to think that he had actually reached the end of the rope, that there was no remaining acre to mortgage, nothing ahead of him but an unbearable and astringent poverty. So, goaded by drink and his own grievances, he might well have whipped himself to a half-maudlin fury and removed the one obstacle which stood between himself and renewed wealth.

194

Roden shoved Wayne's page back and pulled toward him the one he had previously made for Fred Sutton and Beth Square. He went down the list, added a point, and sat pondering the case as it stood against the lovers.

Fred and Beth:

1. In love with each other
2. Beth unhappy in Square household

3. Both at barn on night of murder
4. Bits of wool tracing Beth
5. Beth now near hysteria
6. She had thrown sledge down quarry
7. Fred accustomed to using sledge

It was the final point that Roden added. When a person turns to murder, he takes his daily self along with him. That means he works in the manner to which he has been accustomed. A soldier turned murderer would shoot, a pharmacist would poison, a barber would cut. Fred Sutton was broken to the sledge. For the greater part of the summer he had been pounding stone in the barnyard, lifting the big hammer, bringing it down. So that if and when he thought of the crime, he would have thought of wiring the shoe to the sledge.

195

And just as Wayne Square might have been in his cups, so Fred and Beth had their passion to goad them on. About the only sure way they had of getting each other was to put Manny Square out of the way. Beth had no grounds for a divorce; it was doubtful whether she would have applied for one had she possessed grounds. And she was not the one to give up honor and go away with Fred. Besides, at Manny's death she stood to inherit a third of the estate. This fact would not have influenced her, but it might well have been in Fred Sutton's mind. And Roden was still of the opinion that, if Fred and Beth committed the crime, Sutton was the prime mover and Beth little more than an inactive and reluctant accomplice.

Grady Heard:

1. Hated Manny
2. Lied about dynamite

3. At barn on night of murder
4. Sledge found in his quarry
5. Mule shoes in his barn
6. Method of Manny's death natural for him
7. Sent message which brought Manny home

196

The case against the big quarryman had almost boxed the compass. Take him to court and direct against him the hammer blows of what Roden knew, and he wouldn't stand a chance. Or if he did by some miracle have all the answers, they would implicate him in some other way almost as damning as the murder. Roden was confident that if Heard was not the killer, he was at least up to something almost as bad. Only, it was hard not to think of him as the killer. He was the only person who knew that Manny Square was coming back. Here was a point that had troubled the sheriff—that those who might have planned the crime were close enough to know that Manny Square was to be away for the night. But here at last was the man who might have planned it, and who also took steps to see that Square returned. And with Heard, far more than with Fred Sutton, the manner of Manny's death would occur as an ingrained habit. His use of the padded sledge, of the trip hammer, made such a means of death almost second nature.

Roden intended to go to Heard the first thing in the morning to confront him with the new knowledge. The only thing that kept him from taking the big man summarily to Pine Ridge was the fact that almost as good a case could be made out against Fred Sutton. Obviously both men could not have committed the crime; and as long as they appeared equally guilty, the only thing to do was to dig for more evidence.

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Roden shoved the paper back, hesitated. The name of Ben Neal kept coming to his mind. Neal hadn't killed Manny Square—of that the canny sheriff felt certain. But these blacks were hard to understand. All of Roden's methods of deduction rested on the assumption that he was dealing with minds essentially like his own. But with the negroes he sensed a difference; they seemed moved by other values, ridden by alien and imponderable motives. There was Claudette. She might have been properly sympathetic, considerate. Instead, she seemed only curious, curious and impudent, insinuating her pagan sensuousness in the very presence of the dead. And Ben Neal—he wasn't worried enough for one in the fix he was in. In desperate need, he could still rush Claudette and exult in his triumph over Big Nig. No, you couldn't figure these blacks out, you couldn't put your finger on them. But the case against Neal was general; it rested more on what he might have wanted to do and what he could have done, than on any positive implication.

Ben Neal:

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1. Had it in for Manny
2. Was on hill night of the murder
3. Had taken letter to Pine Ridge

Only Grady Heard and Ben knew Manny was returning, and conceivably Ben did not. But it was likely that he had instructions to hang around and make sure that Manny got the letter; and in such a case he would have seen the little man heading for home.

Just one thing could be said of all four suspects in common: they had been on the hill the night of the murder. Heard, and Fred and Beth had been on the spot at one time or another; Ben Neal was

there a bit late, perhaps; Wayne might easily have slipped down to the point. But of the four, only Heard and Ben knew that Manny was coming back home. Fred and Beth might have known when he arrived, might have been surprised at his unexpected return. But only the two men knew of it long enough in advance to make plans based upon the knowledge.

Roden next began to weigh the implications of Manny Square's wealth. Measured by any standards, it was considerable; reckoned as Deer Lick would regard it, it represented a fortune. For while Wayne Square's portion had gone down under his mismanagement, Manny's had increased. He was forever putting value back into the soil, carefully spreading manure, experimenting with bone fertilizers; so that acre for acre the very land steadily increased in worth. He had done considerable cross-breeding with hogs, so that head for head even as with the land acre for acre, they were more valuable than they once were. It was, consequently, not merely a question of the inheritance of the property as he had received it, but of the vastly increased wealth which his own energy and ingenuity had created.

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The question now was whom the distribution of this wealth would affect. For Roden knew that where considerable sums of money are concerned, there can be no total indifference. Old Lou, and Beth, and Wayne—they would get it. To Old Lou the share could mean little; she was already pretty comfortably fixed. Her land was temporarily unproductive, but it represented sufficient potential wealth to take care of all her needs. As to Beth: she would be provided for, but she would have much less than before Manny's death. For whereas she would now receive a third, when he was alive she enjoyed the virtual possession of

all. Only to Wayne Square would the inheritance come as a saving windfall, for it would replenish his coffers and enable him to take up once more the life of profligate abandon which seemed so necessary to him.

200

Only Wayne. Or was he the only one? Fred Sutton.... Fred stood to profit through Lizzie. That was something to keep in mind—how Fred’s actions might be influenced by the fact that he was to come in for a share of the Square fortune. Still—

Roden started at the clamor of the dogs outside. Dace spoke sharp and loud, his bark a warning woo! woo! Carlo snuffed through his loose lips and was evidently running, as the sound came now from one point and now from another. Lead stood just outside the door, whining. Big-Boy alone remained in the yard, but his growl rumbled unmistakably.

Jess went to the door, stood listening. It was eleven, perhaps twelve o’clock. The bats were out. A veil of fog lifted from the river, spread up over the flanking hills. Dace and Carlo were up near the pawpaw patch. Roden called to them to come back and they obeyed. But it was reluctantly—they backed to the yard, still barking. Roden heard the woman’s voice then. It came out of the darkness, irresolute and frightened.

“Mr. Roden!”

Jess stepped out in his bare feet. “Yes, ma’m. What is it?”

She had evidently wished reassurance against the dogs, for he heard her footsteps hurrying toward him. When she reached the bar of yellow light which fell from the doorway, he recognized Lizzie Square. Everything about her gave the

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appearance of haste and desperation. The lower part of her skirt was slashed with long dusty marks as though she had run through weeds. The gray sweater was askew. One shoe was spattered with mud.

At his gesture she stepped inside. He followed her and closed the door. She did not go far into the room, but turned to face him, her hands clenched between her breasts. Every feature of her face seemed separately distressed—the chin quivering, the lips flapping in spite of her efforts to control them, the eyes wild and desperate and filled with tears. She was, Roden saw at once, on the verge of hysteria. Excite her a little, and she would go all to pieces, laughing and wailing, biting herself.

He spoke reassuringly. “I was jest thinkin’ about you, Lizzie.”

“Then you *do* know—you *are*—”

“Take this chair, Lizzie. No, I was wonderin’ about the division of Manny’s estate.”

The matter steadied her, got her mind off herself. “Nothing has been done about it yet.”

“Manny was pretty well fixed.”

“I—I suppose so.” She was almost calm.

202

“It’d be nice if you could git the house.”

“I’d like it. But she—*she* don’t want me to have it!”

“Old Lou, eh? What did she say?”

Beth's answer came in a whisper. "I can't tell you what she said."

"You got a hard row to hoe, eh?"

"Manny always said he wanted me to have the house." Her lips quivered suddenly. She looked down, began to pick at the long nap of the gray sweater, pulling out small particles of yarn and letting them fall.

Roden spoke mildly, to divert her again. "Wayne has a house; he wouldn't need two. Be too bad to let the place git out of the family."

The words had the desired effect. Beth was alarmed. "You don't think he will want to sell it?"

"You know Wayne!"

"Yes. He thinks he got the worst of the bargain in the first place. He has been wanting Manny to make a new division on the basis of what each section is worth now."

"He has, eh? When did he ask that?"

"He's been at Manny for months."

The dogs clamored again. Dace ran up the bottom a way, stopped and barked a peremptory challenge. Beth started violently. All her earlier distress returned magnified. She rose to her feet, began to twist her trembling fingers.

"Mr. Roden. . . ."

“What is it, Lizzie?”

“I came to tell you.”

“Take it easy, Lizzie. What do you want to tell me?”

“You’ve been making an investigation—you found the sledge and everything, didn’t you?”

Roden nodded. She was so near a break that he feared to speak lest any word might precipitate her collapse. She took a deep quivering breath. Dace was nearer now, still barking. The dogs in the yard were growing noisy. Beth seemed desperately eager to get on with what she had to say, but was unable to begin.

“What is it, Lizzie?”

“I told Fred I couldn’t!” Once the words started they poured from her in a torrent. “It was different when Manny was alive. It was like he was there, to take up for himself. But now that he’s dead—don’t you see? He is helpless! Oh, if he hadn’t brought me that bracelet!” The words caught in her throat, stopped.

“Old Lou was hidin’ it. She didn’t want you to have it.”

“She wouldn’t!” Then her voice dropped and she went on more calmly. “I don’t much blame her, Mr. Roden. I wasn’t worthy of Manny.”

204

“We’ve all got our faults. What did you want to tell me?”

“It was about Fred and me. That night Manny came back, we had been down—”

The clamor outside grew to an uproar. But it was no longer mere barking. It was the business-like sounds of a pack of dogs going efficiently about an ugly task. A big voice cried out in pain, then cursed roundly. A dog yelped at the sound of a vicious blow, but seemed to return, growling. Roden sprang to the door, threw it open.

“What the hell’s goin’ on out there!”

“Call these dogs off!”

“Who says so?”

“I do!”

Fred Sutton sprang from the writhing pack, dragging a dog which seemed frozen to his leg. He kicked savagely, struck out with his bare fist. The dog’s hold was broken and Sutton sprang to the doorway. Blood covered his hands; his trousers were gashed. But he had eyes only for Beth, who stood by the table wringing her hands. She did not look at him.

“Have you said anything?” he demanded, striding toward her.

With a strangled ‘Oh!’ she dropped to the chair and flung her arms out over the table, sobbing into them. Sutton bent over her, grasped her shoulders. He would have lifted her and forced her to talk had not Roden forestalled him. The sheriff’s eyes were hard, his voice round and steady.

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“She’s had enough trouble without fightin’ you,” he said.

“What did she tell you?”

“That’s her business, young feller.”

Beth raised her head. It was as if her purposes had changed completely, now that Sutton was here. “I didn’t tell him anything.”

The blood rushed to Sutton’s face. He grew almost giddy with relief. He drew in his breath, smiled at the girl. “Good for you!” he said, patting her shoulder. He lifted her to her feet, sheltered her in the crook of his arm, and turned briskly to Roden. “Lizzie’s shot to pieces,” he said. “All this has been too much for her.”

“She come to tell me somethin’.”

“Just what we’d all want to tell you—that we’ll be glad to help you in any way we can. That was it, wasn’t it, Lizzie?”

She looked at him dumbly, nodded her head.

Roden shrugged, concealing his anger. It would be impossible to get anything out of the girl so long as she was under Fred’s hypnotic spell. But there was always another day ahead, tomorrow and the day after. He warned back the dogs, showed the two out the door.

206

“I’m obliged to you,” he said. “I’ll be seein’ you again, Lizzie.”

Fred had been leading her, his face flushed with relief and triumph. At Roden’s final words he hesitated and opened his mouth. But he did not say anything. Instead, he regarded Lizzie with a blending of helplessness and pure vexation.

“He sees he’s leanin’ on a broken reed,” Roden said softly when they were gone. “He knows he can’t watch her *all* the time.”

Then he dropped to his hands and knees and groped about for a few small strands of gray wool that lay like down on the floor. Having found them, he bound them neatly with a bit of white thread and placed them under a tumbler with three other pieces of a similar nature.

CHAPTER 13

But Beth Square was killed some time that night. She was found clothed only in a pink silk nightgown, just outside the kitchen door. A powerful blow on the back of the head had crushed her skull. It was impossible to determine whether she had been going out of the house or coming in. She had evidently been dead when she toppled off the low stoop. There was a mark where her shoulder had struck, and one where her hip had lain, but there was no sign that she had so much as moved after she hit the ground. The grass was clipped short, but there was enough of it to have been frayed had she floundered about in her death agonies. Apparently she had fallen and lain absolutely motionless where she fell.

There must have been fifty people around a few minutes after Roden arrived. Fielding Billings of the *Morning Chronicle* and Jimmy Hart of the *Journal*, having kept Parker Bray pounding his key for a day, had resigned themselves to a rather boresome wait while Jess Roden fumbled with the case. Billings had found a way of amusing himself in Niggertown and thought he could stand a few days in Deer Lick, but he knew that Humbolt Paul would demand copy. Hart, having no way of amusing himself, had envisioned a period of perfect boredom. But the two reporters charged up the hill as to a fire. They shouldered their way through the crowd, pads ready, and were greeted by the hillmen with deference and awe. But when they would have pressed close to Jess Roden who sat on the low stoop and contemplated the ground, he looked up quickly

and spoke a sharp warning.

“Keep away from this spot,” he said. He drew an imaginary half-circle which included the stoop and about a yard of the grass bordering it. “I’m studyin’ this place.”

Billings drew up, grinned. He winked at Hart and nodded to several of the natives who stood near. They understood that he had something in his mind, and pressed closer. Hart, his disillusioned eyes disdainful on the sheriff, shrugged an assent. Billings stepped to the exact edge of the imaginary circle, toed it carefully.

“This as far as we can come, Sheriff?” he wanted to know.

“About there.”

“Wouldn’t hurt if I’d edge over an inch, would it?” He pushed one toe tentatively forward.

Roden said nothing. He leaned back till he could see inside the kitchen. “Come here a minute, Claudette.”

209

The octoroon stepped out, preened herself.

Roden took her by the shoulders and turned her till she stood at the outer edge of the stoop facing the door. Then he stepped to the ground behind her and lifted his hand. “That’ll do, Claudette.” Then he said to those standing about, “The stoop’s low enough ’t a person standin’ on the ground behind Lizzie could’ve delivered the blow that killed her.”

“A deep point,” Billings said, winking at Hart and at the crowd.

“And if he was a tall man he might have had to stoop down.”

Roden said, “He didn’t stoop. He had to be below Lizzie to hit her like he did.”

“Hm-m-m. By the way, Sheriff, do you have the fingerprints off that sledge hammer? I understand you found it under the hay.”

“No. But I have a bit of wool that come off on it.”

“Wool? Where somebody used a glove to wipe the fingerprints off?”

“It wasn’t a glove. The sledge slid out from under her arm when she threw it down the pit.”

“She? Was it a woman?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?” Billings had lost some of his banter, was becoming the reporter.

“I’ve been keepin my eyes open.”

210

“Oh!” Billings lost interest, grew sarcastic. “I suppose you can see all kinds of things, looking around.”

Roden said chidingly, “That bridge in your mouth makes you hiss-like, when you talk. Too bad.”

Billings shut his mouth, turned red. He thought the bridge was entirely unnoticeable. He let his upper lip hang slightly when he

spoke again. “You have been all around the place, have you?”

“Some. Saw you down in Niggertown last night.”

Billings spoke sharply, annoyed. “And what were *you* doing down there!” He looked about for approval at the counterthrust.

“Lookin’. You can see a lot if you keep your eyes open. You chew tobacco. You stoop like you was dustin’ your shoes when you spit. You carry it in the left side, under your tongue.”

Billings did chew, but he was ashamed of it; he thought it was common. “I say!” he began. “You have no right—”

“You’ve let your left little fingernail grow till it’s near a half inch long, and you wear invisible suspenders under your shirt. You wear silk shorts and have your initials on your undershirt. You wash your socks out at night and hang ’em—”

“Stop it!”

“You are twenty-seven years old, you weigh a hundred and fifty-nine pounds, and you shave with a safety razor. You got your front teeth knocked out in an automobile wreck.”

211

By this time the crowd was roaring. Billings forgot the imaginary line. He strode angrily to the sheriff, thrust out his jaw. “You infernal—”

Roden held up a hand, said innocently, “I was jest showin you a feller could pick up a few things by keepin’ his eyes open.”

“Go on with it, Sheriff!” Hart cried heartily. “I want all the dope

I can get on him for blackmail. Where did you find it out?"

"A lot of it from a driver's license he dropped at the depot," Roden said, grinning. "And I heard a few things from where he stayed last night. The rest you can see for yourself. Way he's standin' there with the sun behind him, you can see his short pants."

Billings jumped, edged away from the sun.

Hart spoke with a certain respect. "This wire the shoe was bound with, Sheriff. Do you have it?"

"Yes, I have it. I know the roll it was cut off of, and where the roll is. I've got the tin snips it was cut with."

"You have!" It was Billings, fingering a Leika camera. "Would you let us—"

But Roden waved them away. "Not now, boys. I'm busy."

212

"One other thing, Sheriff!" It was Billings again. "What could this woman, clad only in a nightgown, have been doing out here in the middle of the night?"

"Now I could say more about you," Jess Roden said. "I could say that you are a city feller, brought up in the city. Where there's bathrooms and people don't *have* to go out."

It was an unfortunate half-hour for Fielding Billings. He turned a slow red again, looked around at the contemptuous eyes fixed upon him. He muttered something that sounded like 'hillbillies.' He stooped over as though to examine his shoes, dropped a

small chew, and strolled around the house with what he hoped was a proper nonchalance.

Roden entered the kitchen. Claudette had been standing between the door and the window where she could hear without being in evidence. She had evidently not expected Roden's sudden appearance. She was smoking, surreptitiously shielding the cigarette with her hand and blowing the smoke so that it drifted out the window. She started guiltily when Roden stood beside her, and expertly flipped the cigarette behind the door.

"Hello, Claudette! You smoke?"

She said nothing.

213

"Want to watch where you throw them butts. You'll set the house afire." He swung the door sharply, glanced behind it. The gray sweater hung on the wall, a frayed package of cigarettes stuffed carelessly in the shallow pocket. He lifted them out, looked them over. "These yours?"

"Nozuh. Dey belonged to Miz Beth."

"Was she wearin' this sweater when you found her?"

"It was kinda throwed around her shoulders."

"She always put something on when she went out, did she?"

"Nights, and when de mawnin' was sharp."

"She smoke a lot?"

“Not much. Not *none* when de ol’ lady around. You ax me, Miz Beth done slip out las’ night to take a little puff when someone up an’ brained ’er.”

“She could have smoked in her room.”

“Ol’ Lou a powerful sniffer. Dat’s why I throwed it behind de door when I sees you. Ol’ Lou snoop around an’ give me de dickens.”

“Pshaw! Smokin’s nothin’, Claudette. My grandma smoked a clay pipe.”

“Wish you’d tell *her* dat!”

“Maybe I will. . . . You say you found the body, Claudette?”

“First thing when I goes out.”

214

“And it was there at the left of the stoop?”

“On de ground. Kinda stretched out.”

“Was she cold?”

“Ugh!”

“Think—was there any dew on her nightgown? Was it damp?”

“I didn’ notice.”

“Was she stiff?”

“Like a log.”

“When did you go to bed last night?”

Claudette pouted. “Think I can tell? With *her* around, a body nebber knows when de work’s all done!”

“Old Lou keeps you at it, eh?”

She shrugged.

“Did you hear anything in the night—doors openin’, noises?”

Claudette considered, shook her head.

“What time did you git back from the dance last night?”

He heard the breath suck through her nostrils, saw a brief widening of her eyes. Then she grinned at him, and there was a voluptuous slow widening of her lips. Her lids fell briefly in the barest of invitations toward her round breasts, her body.

“Ben told me he was comin’ for you,” Jess explained.

215

She was instantly hot with anger. “Dat nigger won’t tell me nothin’! I axed him—”

“When did you git back up here?”

“I didn’t look.”

“Did you come in by the kitchen—by this door?”

She nodded.

“Would you have seen her if she’d been there?”

“In de pink gown—yes.”

“Was Ben with you?”

“He stopped at de stable.”

Ed Lefferton came through the door, tape trailing from his hand. Claudette edged to the sink, whirled, and almost ran from the room. Ed pumped a cup of water from the pump at the sink and drank it avidly. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stood for a moment looking out the window.

“This is gittin’ deep, Sheriff,” he said finally.

“You mean easier.”

“Easier? With Lizzie killed too?”

“That’s it, Ed. Before she was killed, I had to figure out who wanted *Manny* out of the way. Now, it’s who wanted *both* of them out of the way. That makes it a lot easier.”

Lefferton’s brow furrowed. “I don’t git you.”

“A lot of people might want to kill Manny, but not many had anything against Lizzie. The field’s now narrowed down to someone that wanted to git ’em both out of the way.”

216

“I don’t think anyone had it in fer Lizzie.”

“Looks like someone did,” Roden said grimly.

But Lefferton had got the point and was thinking his own

thoughts, slowly, his big square face strained with the unaccustomed effort. Finally he turned to Roden, a startled look in his eyes. He opened his mouth but closed it again, and ran his hand worriedly over his forehead.

Roden was regarding him shrewdly. “What you thinkin’, Ed?”

“I don’t know as I’d ought to say.”

“Speak up, man!”

“Like you said, it’s someone ’t wanted ’em *both* out of the way. There’s Wayne Square, Jess. He had one third of the property with only Manny dead, but he gits more now.”

“See? That’s what I meant—someone that wanted to kill ’em both.”

“Now you mention it, Wayne’s actin’ mighty funny, Sheriff.”

“I didn’t mention it. You did. What do you mean—actin’ funny?”

“He sent one of his kids down after me. Told me to come quick, without stoppin’ for anyone.”

217

“Not bring me this time, eh?”

“That’s what I jest thought. And he acted like he wanted to fix the body all natural like before anyone seen it.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You ought to see him.”

Roden looked at him sharply. Then he said, "All right—let's go in and have a look."

Wayne Square and his mother were in the front room. They were standing, talking earnestly, but they drew apart at the approach of the men. Mrs. Square looked as if she had not slept. The skin under her eyes had dropped to small semicircular sacs. Her hair was wild. But she still turned toward the men strong and self-possessed. It was Wayne Square the sheriff noticed. He was shattered. Never very compact physically, he was now actually flabby. The flesh sagged back of his chin. In a queer way his belly seemed to have dropped. It was no longer round and firm, rolling from his ribs, but circled his body lower down, like a loose bag.

Roden took the man in, said only, "Is the doctor through yet?"

"He's in there now," Wayne said; and the wattles back of his chin shook flabbily.

Grady Heard opened the front door, saw them, and came diffidently in. He went straight to Mrs. Square. "I want to apologize to you, Mrs. Square," he said, "and I want these others to hear me. I've acted like a fool all these years, and I am sorry. It's too late now to do much good, but I want to help all I can. Fred is not at the barn. Maybe I can help with the work."

218

"He hasn't come this morning," Old Lou said coldly.

"The stock needs tending to. If you'll give me the privilege, I'll look after things."

"I forgot about the stock!" Wayne said. "I forgot all—"

His mother interrupted him. "You had better go home and get some rest, son," she said, and inclined her head imperiously toward the door.

"Maybe I had." He hesitated, looked around vaguely, and shuffled out. He was wearing the black shoes.

Mrs. Square seemed relieved to get him out of the way. She thawed perceptibly toward Grady Heard. "It is thoughtful of you to wish to help. My servants have chosen this as the time to desert me."

"I saw Fred was not at the barn—"

"He is not at the barn. I sent for him, but he was not at home. I understand he had not been there last night. At least his bed had not been slept in." She shrugged her strong shoulders.

"No one saw him around, eh?" Roden put in quickly.

219

She stared at him, took her time about answering. "Is it likely?" she said at last.

"I would send Ben up," Grady Heard said. "But he is planning a trip down the river. He asked me this morning for a few days off."

Claudette stood in the dining room. When she caught Mrs. Square's eye, she bent a knee briefly. "You need me any mo' now, Miz Square?"

Old Lou said icily, "No. Finish your packing." When the octoroon had disappeared up the stairway, Mrs. Square said, "I

would rather do the work myself than have her around.”

“She’s leavin’?” This from Roden.

“She is. My son had given her notice before his—his death. That was one of his purposes at Pine Ridge—to find a suitable white girl.”

“Why is she goin’?”

“She is insufferable!” Old Lou’s voice was hard. “Besides, she has all the bucks from the bottoms hanging around this place!”

“I might send our Effie up for a few days,” Grady Heard said. “She is a good girl.”

“It isn’t necessary. I may have to go to Bennington myself to find some suitable help.”

But she stopped abruptly. It was as if the same thought had occurred simultaneously to all of them: she might no longer be the directing genius of the place.

220

Heard averted his eyes. “I’ll go out and take a hand—”

“I am obliged to you. If you really wish to help, I will show you where things are.”

She visibly gathered her energies. She stood erect, once more strong and sure, and went with Grady Heard toward the barn. Roden watched her retreating back with admiration.

“The old girl’s got what it takes,” he said to Lefferton. “She’s

the kind that'd take one of these local anesthetics and direct the doctor while he cuts her leg off."

"She's a shrew, if you ask me. She kicked about Manny's coffin. She said it would warp."

Roden grinned: the surest way to rouse Ed Lefferton was to criticize his cabinet work. "You've got her wrong, Ed. But you're right about one thing: Wayne's shot to hell."

CHAPTER 14

Roden's fingers poised above the Chinese checkerboard, dropped to a blue marble, and transferred it deftly to another hole. Then he began to look ahead, planning his own offensive and anticipating Grady Heard's possible moves. They were in the areaway of the big Square barn, sitting on milk stools, the wooden board on their knees. Heard considered the move the sheriff had just made, himself anticipating. Then he put out a big paw and rolled a white ball forward. He had done the milking, cleaned out the stalls. And then Roden, chancing in with a board under his arm, had challenged him to a game.

Heard had not questioned the rather unusual circumstance that Roden should be carrying the board: the sheriff's fondness for the game was pretty well known. Nor did Roden explain. The meeting seemed entirely accidental, the challenge a mere expedient for killing time while both men waited.

They bent over the board. Roden's attack was to move left from the right corner. He jumped two men, and ever so carefully lifted his eyes to Heard's Greek-like face. Heard's eyes were down. The zest of the contest was already upon him, and he determined to take his time. The sheriff had ample opportunity to study his man.

222

For the game was no accident. Roden had a theory, and this was a trial of it. It was that any act of a man is a sample of all his actions. It was like a blood test—to test a person's blood you didn't need *all* of his blood. A tiny drop was enough; it gave you

a sampling of what all of it was. In like manner, if you got a sampling of a man's actions, it would hold for all of them. It would show you what he would do.

Roden had first got the idea in church. The text had been, 'For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.' At first Roden thought the judgment unfair; it wasn't reasonable to condemn a person as bad because he broke one law. And then he saw the point: one breaking of the law was a sampling of what the man *would* do. It was enough. And then he thought about another passage in the Bible which says that the mere giving of a cup of cold water to a thirsty person was ample evidence of goodness. It wasn't much, Roden demurred—just a cup of water. But it was a sample, and as such it stood for the whole man. In time, the complete idea laid hold of him—any act of a man is a sample of all of them. You put him on record in one case—even a cup-of-water case—and you have his total potentials, spread out before you.

223

Roden looked at the board. The big man's designs were beginning to express themselves. He was throwing a spearhead of men across the board, spaced with a hole between each two. In a little while he would have a bridge across, over which he could jump again and again. It was a risky offensive, for it exposed him to a crisscross flank attack, and Roden might contrive to use the bridge as well as Heard could. But Grady Heard was a man to take risks.

That fitted. A killer must be a man willing to take risks. No murderer save an idiot is such a fool as not to know he is sticking his neck in a noose. He may get away with it, but he

knows the risk is there. He has to be reckless or he will back out before the final step. Roden had thought about that, wanted to see just how far Heard would go.

He had thought of other things, too. A killer is not one to give up an advantage. He is hard. An opportunity presents itself, and he seizes it. He even makes an opportunity. And there were ways, even in this cup-of-water game, to find out whether an opponent would yield, refuse to take advantage. Also, a killer will strike when you are not looking; that is the essence of his act. A killing is not a contest, not a fair fight. It is a shot in the back, a blow in the face while an unsuspecting victim sorts feed at the table below. Well, Grady Heard should be given a chance to show whether he would try to put something over while Jess was not looking. And last of all was the fact that a killer doesn't have self-control. If he did, he wouldn't commit murder, for all the social controls are against it. A killer gives way, forgets restraints, slashes out.

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Roden plumped a man between two of Heard's, effectively blocking the bridge. Heard nodded, shoved a ball to his right to make possible a flanking run. Roden himself used the bridge, and over Heard's own men jumped to the ultimate hole. Heard closed the gap with a clever move that would allow him to zigzag across the board.

Roden appeared to ponder for a long time. When he finally extended his hand, the movement was tentative, uncertain. Clearly he was not sure of himself. He lifted the marble slowly, carried it down the board, lowered it slowly, and withdrew his hand. But almost at once his fingers shot toward it again.

“I didn’t mean to stop there! I wanted to go on down—”

Heard touched the descending hand. “No you don’t,” he said. “You will leave it where it is.”

Roden looked up, grinned.

“The fun of the game,” Heard said as he pressed his advantage, “is to play it according to the rules. No second thoughts, no changes. You had plenty of time, and you had the chance to move it where you wanted to.”

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“I guess that’s right.” And before he moved again, Roden checked off the point in his mind—Grady Heard was a hard one. He gave no quarter and asked none. In a game or in a feud with him, you could expect him always on your tail, crowding you. A risk-taker and a hard one—a killer was both of these.

And then for a little while Roden devoted himself solely to the board. If the sampling he was after was to be complete, Grady Heard would have to face defeat in the game. The deliberate misplay had placed the sheriff at a disadvantage. He took all of two minutes to run the possibilities through his mind; and then an obscure move was like the closing of walls about Grady Heard. The big man fought back, but he was losing the game by a single move.

His error had been in not clearing the way for a long jump to the farthest tip of his goal. Two men lay together before it, and it would be necessary to move one of them without jumping at all, before he could place his remaining men. Just the one man in the way—if it were differently placed, Heard could sweep to his goal in two moves.

“Jest one man in the way,” Roden was thinking. “That’s the way it is with a killer: there’s a man to be removed before—”

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He jerked up his head suddenly. He sucked in his breath and made the noises preliminary to a sneeze. He took one quick breath through his open mouth, two. Then he began to settle down as one does when a sneeze has not quite come off.

“This dust gits me,” he said, and bent forward to get at his handkerchief. He drew it out, coughed into it, and blew his nose. Finally he put the cloth over his eyes, mopped his forehead. If Grady Heard would strike when you were not looking, he had had his chance.

Roden stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket, bent over the board. Heard was holding it with one hand, against the juggling of the sheriff’s movements. The other hand hovered over the marbles as if to stop them should they be displaced and start rolling around. But the setup had not been changed. Heard still stood to lose the game by a single move.

Roden jumped three men. “Looks like I’ve got you, Grady.”

Heard nodded, a bit ruefully. “This time,” he conceded. “But we will try it again.”

Perfect control, that, and equanimity. Roden had seen men lose at croquet, or even make a poor shot, and react by flinging the mallet away, or beating the ground with it, or striking the recalcitrant balls. They were the men without control, flying into a rage when things did not go to suit them. They were the potential killers. At least they had one of the

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qualities of the killer. But Grady Heard swept his men back to him with a big steady hand and hitched the milk stool under him. He was reckless, and he would play an eye-for-an-eye game, but he neither flew off the handle nor struck when you were not looking.

“Don’t quit now!” he bantered, misunderstanding Roden’s inaction. “Try me again!”

He liked a fight. It would be a grim fight, but—

Ed Lefferton stepped through the door from the storage room. “Doc wants to see you, Sheriff. He’s through up there.”

Roden stood up. “What did he say?”

“He’s waitin’ in the yard. Got out of the house because Wayne was wartin’ the guts out of him.”

They emerged from the barn.

“Wayne? Is he back?”

“He’s back, and worse’n ever. Him and the old lady’s at it hammer and tongs.”

“Old Lou? What’s eatin’ her?”

“He was askin’ about some wire and she was tryin’ to ca’m him down.”

“What wire?”

“I didn’t hear the start of it. I guess they thought we’d gone. But it sounded like he’d brought some wire down and wanted to know where it was.”

“What did she say?”

“Like I said—she’s tryin’ to ca’m him down. He’s nuts.”

They were near the fence at the head of the lane. Roden stopped abruptly. A peculiar expression came over his face. It grew sensitive, almost transparent. His eyes assumed the luminous and quicksilver aspect, and he sucked in his breath with a small whistling sound.

“You tell the doc I’ll see him later,” he said. “Right now I’ve got other things to do.”

CHAPTER 15

For Lefferton's words had given him what he had been seeking, answered the question that had troubled him each time he had pondered the lists at the pine table. Here was the one small relevant fact, seeking its place as iron filings leap to a magnet. From the moment of Beth Square's death he had felt much nearer a solution, for with her death he had to find a motive that would cover both killings. That would mean the narrowing of the field to someone who would desire not only to put the man out of the way, but the woman as well. And Lefferton's words were like the opening of a camera's lens, flashing the completed picture upon his brain.

He hurried to the kitchen. Claudette was not there. He stood listening for an instant at the swing door. A man's voice and a woman's came vaguely from the front room. He pushed the door open an inch and peeped through. Mrs. Square and Wayne were out of sight in the west end of the big living room. Roden entered the dining room noiselessly, slipped up the stairs.

Claudette's room was over the kitchen in the south end of the house. He stopped before her door. He could hear her cat-like tread, the opening and closing of a door, the shutting of a drawer. He knocked cautiously. There was an instant of silence, then the rich voice, carefully guarded,

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“Who dat?”

Roden opened the door and went in. The octoroon wore slacks,

with only a thin garment of silk over her melon-like breasts. A waist was in her hands—she was just running her arms through the sleeves preparatory to drawing it over her head. She stopped at sight of Roden, but did not try to cover herself. Instead, she withdrew one hand from the sleeve and allowed the garment to trail to the floor from the other. She arched her head, smiled in a veiled fashion.

“Hello, white man.”

“Howdy, Claudette. Glad to see me?”

“Hit don’t matteh.”

“I wanted to ask you somethin’.”

Her lashes dropped. She said, “Yeah?”

“You know all ’t goes on around here, don’t you, Claudette?”

She stiffened noticeably. “Guess I does.”

“About Fred and Lizzie—you knew that?”

Her expression hardened. She returned to the waist, drew it over her head. “What about dem?”

“You knew they were at it, eh?”

She sniffed.

“How did you find out?”

“You ask dat—de smart sheriff! Any *woman*’d know!”

“They’re smart, eh?”

“Dey is dat.” She spoke like one wanting to put another in his place. “When a woman’s in love, dey’re different.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

His skepticism goaded her. “Dey looks different and dey acts different.”

“That’s what put you wise, eh?”

“Miz Beth couldn’t fool little Claudette!”

“But didn’t you *see* anything?”

“Sho, after I caught on. I watched ’em.”

“She sneaked out to the barn, did she?”

“All hours o’ de night.”

“Manny didn’t suspect anything, eh?”

Claudette snapped her fingers contemptuously. “Dese men! Dey think dey’re smart, when dey don’t know nuttin!”

“But women *do* know, eh?”

“One woman cain’t fool another about bein’ in love.”

His eye was caught by a piece of paper. It was lying on the

combination seat and chest built in under the window. Claudette was looking at him when his eye fell upon it, and she whirled to see what he was looking at. She started violently, began to make little movements as of tidying up the room. When she reached the window, she dropped indolently to the seat, yawned and stretched. She completely hid the paper.

“What’s on the paper, Claudette!”

“What papeh?”

“The one you’re settin’ on.”

“I on a papeh?” She made as if to slide over and have a look, but only her sinuous waist moved. “Ain’t no papeh.”

But the alertness of her eyes gave her away.

“Stand up.”

She slid lower, leaned back. Her body was like a cat’s, boneless, bending to the wall. She let her arms drop to her sides, relaxed. Her lids fell partly over her eyes, while a flush crept over her high cheekbones. Below them, her lips parted, smiling and full.

Roden stood before her.

“Comin’, white man?”

“I want to see that paper, Claudette.”

She sprang up, furious. “Den look at it!”

He picked it up. It had been perfectly flat, but was now dish-shaped from the pressure of her body. He saw the writing upon it; but before he read he glanced inquiringly at Claudette.

“If this is none of my business, Claudette, say so.”

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“Go ahead.” She had regained her impudence. “Read it.”

He dropped his eyes to the page.

Mr. Roden—

Fred says I ought not to tell. Mr. Heard thinks so too—he was at the barn the night Manny was killed. He says it would do no good to tell that any of us were there. He says it would only stir up a lot of suspicions and do nobody any good.

But Mr. Roden I *must* tell. I can’t with Fred around. You saw how it was. He *stops* me. But my conscience will never give me peace if . . .

The writing ceased abruptly. Roden looked up at Claudette. She was smiling at him, taunting him.

“Where did you git this, Claudette?”

“In Miz Beth’s room. I looked in after I found her.”

“Before you gave the alarm, eh?”

“Yes. She must a been writin’ it when she had to go out.”

“Was there any more to it?”

“Don’t you wish dey was!”

“What were you keepin’ it for?”

She breathed deeply, said nothing.

“What did you want with it?”

“It might be worth somepin to Mistah Heahd.”

“Oh!”

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“Ben ’n’ me needs money to git down de ribber on.”

“A little blackmail, eh?”

“So what?”

But Roden grinned suddenly. “Don’t worry, Claudette. This might be worth money to me. It shows Grady had good reason for wantin’ to shut Beth up.”

“Dat’s what I thought.”

“You think he killed her, eh?”

“*Somebody* did!”

“Right.” He looked again at the unfinished note, folded it and put it away. Then he said, “Listen, Claudette. I want you to do somethin’ for me.”

“I’s leavin’.”

“Not jest yet. I’ll make it worth your while—plenty.”

“What am it?”

“Wait here a minute.”

He slipped to the door, listened a moment. “Don’t leave, now,” he whispered over his shoulder, and darted out the hall to Mrs. Square’s room. He entered, stayed but a minute or two, and emerged carrying a hurriedly rolled bundle under his arm. He returned to Claudette, and for near a quarter of an hour they remained behind the closed door.

When Roden once more stepped from the kitchen door, he made a bee line for the barnyard where he found an old frayed pair of cotton gloves which Fred Sutton had sometimes worn when pounding stone. He stuffed one in his pocket, vaulted the fence, and took the path off the hill.

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At the depot he found Bo Strange. “I need you, Bo.”

The thin small body was at once tense with eagerness and energy. “Yes, sir.” The sheriff was his hero.

“Git Paul and Denny to help you.” They were other boys of Bo’s age. “I want to find Fred Sutton. He wasn’t at home awhile ago, and they don’t know where he is. My guess is he’s off somewhere drunk. You boys are to find him and take him up to Manny Square’s.”

Bo was poised on one leg, ready to be off.

Roden said, “You’d better take a couple of my dogs—Dace and

Carlo. This is Fred's glove. Well let 'em smell it, and then they'll help you."

"Yes, sir." Bo's eyes were shining.

The dogs set up a mighty cacophony as the two appeared below the pawpaw patch. Dace raced to meet them. Carlo followed, his red plume flashing. Big-Boy trotted majestically behind them, tall as a calf, grinning. Lead brought up the rear, bony and sad-faced, his nose to the ground as though he could proceed only by scent. Roden patted their heads, cuffed them lovingly, singled out Dace and Carlo.

"I'll keep the others back," he said to Bo Strange. "I wouldn't want Big-Boy to mix it with Fred. And all Lead'd do would be to jump a rabbit and chase it the rest of the day."

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He thrust the glove under Dace's nose, under Carlo's. He said "See?" urgently and waved his hands in a general way. Dace charged up the bottom, returned; Carlo sniffed through his loose lips and pranced wildly, waving his red plume.

"All right, Bo! If you find him, take him to Manny Square's. I'll be up there."

Boy and dogs shot up the bottom.

Roden followed quickly, but took the path up by the quarry. He found Grady Heard oiling harness in the storage room. But Jimmy Hart had seen the sheriff enter the barn and now came excitedly in. His aggravation was apparent when he saw Heard.

He said, "Could I speak to you outside, Sheriff?"

Fielding Billings pressed through the door.

"What's goin' on here?" Roden demanded.

"Something has happened, Sheriff. We know it. This man—"

He hesitated and Fielding Billings supplied the name.

"Lefferton."

"Yes. This man Lefferton said you were up to something."

Grady Heard let the harness slip through his fingers, fixed mesmerized eyes on the sheriff's face. "Have you —" he began, but left the sentence unfinished.

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"Listen," Roden said softly. "I'm waitin' for some boys. When they come, I'll have somethin' to tell you. Go back up there and stick around. Grady and me's goin' to have a game of Chinese checkers."

But the big quarryman's mind was not on the game. He made his moves mechanically, with an unsteady hand. Nor did Roden try to betray him into any particular moves. Instead, the sheriff devoted himself solely to the game, like a quarterback who has rehearsed all the signals during practice and seizes the time out to gather his energies for the next play.

But he did not have long to wait. Bo Strange pushed open the door, hopped in. "We got 'im, Mr. Roden."

"He was at home," Paul Kapp said caustically, as though he had

been cheated out of an adventure. “He was at home sleepin’ it off.”

“I throwed a bucket of water on ’im,” Denny Andrews said, grinning at the memory.

Roden said, “Thanks a lot boys.” Then to Heard, “We’ll be wantin’ you up at the house, Grady.”

Heard rose unsteadily, swayed. “You are not—”

But Roden was already in the yard. “Come on. Go up to the house and wait for me. Where’s Fred, boys?”

“Up yander settin’ on the fence.” Paul spoke as though to say that anyone could see Sutton if he looked for him.

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Roden veered to the left. Fred Sutton was not a pleasant sight. His blond hair was still wet from Denny’s dousing. His eyes were bloodshot. The scar on his lip was white in a mottled face. His clothing was tight and wrinkled, his trousers drawing up from his big shoes.

“We want you in the house, Fred.”

“I can’t face it.”

“You’ll have to—you’ve been askin’ for it.”

“I’ll tell you all I know out here.”

“You—go—in—the—house.”

Sutton slipped from the fence, his shoulders drooping and round. “Then hurry and get it over with,” he said as he started wearily across the yard.

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Roden went to the kitchen. Once again he pushed back the swing door and peered through. Grady Heard was just entering the big room. Fred Sutton was hesitating on the flagstone step. Roden slipped across the dining room and ran up the stairs.

“Ready?” he demanded of Claudette.

“If you says so.”

He stood her in the middle of the room, unrolled the bundle he had brought in earlier, worked with her. When he had completed the task to his satisfaction, he tiptoed to the door and looked out. The hall was deserted. There was not even a sound from below stairs.

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“All set,” he said. “Wait a few minutes, then go out the back way and around to the front door. Stand near enough to hear me, but don’t let anyone inside see you till I call you to come in. Sure you understand?”

She nodded, half grinning, looking down at herself.

Roden descended the stairs, stepped into the room. Wayne Square was on a davenport, but he was not still. He leaned back, folded his arms on his chest. Then he blew out his breath noisily, dropped his elbows across his knees and smote his hands together. He leaned back again, crossed his legs,

uncrossed them; hitched himself to a different position and began all over again. Old Lou was not far away, to his left, straight in her chair and regarding her son coolly. She had fixed up a bit from the early morning. Her hair was done, her face was carefully powdered. The pince-nez swung from the black button above her ample breast. Fred Sutton was in a far corner, bent over his knees, his forearms on them and his hands hanging listlessly. He did not even look up as Roden entered.

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Grady Heard had not sat, but stood gigantic by the fireplace, his face white below the slick black hair. Ed Lefferton, square-faced and solemn, had appointed himself a sort of grim sergeant at arms. He was at the front door, keeping out the crowd. He had flatly refused admittance to Fielding Billings and Jimmy Hart, but they had pushed up a window and now stood in a flower bed with their heads in the room. The Leika clicked as Jess Roden drew up.

He stopped only for a moment, then took another step, was in front of Fred Sutton. "Look at me, Fred Sutton."

Sutton lifted a face of despair and hopelessness.

"Why didn't you tell me you were in the mow Monday night?"

"It wouldn't have helped any."

"Nights when you and Lizzie had dallied too long, you went up there and slept, did you?"

"Yes. It saved time."

"How long had you been meetin' her out that way?"

Sutton sobbed, dropped his face in his hands.

“You knew you were doin’ wrong, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Were you asleep when Manny got back?”

“I must have been.”

“You told Lizzie to be careful?”

“Yes. But not last night, I didn’t! If—”

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“Did you know Manny had come back?”

“No.”

“Didn’t hear any commotion?”

Fred said miserably, “I sleep sound.”

“And when you found him, you couldn’t let your secret git out by tellin’ you was there. Is that right?”

“That’s about it.”

“And then you got afraid Lizzie’d break down and tell.”

Sutton did not raise his head.

“You followed her down to my place to keep her from it.”

The Leika clicked. Roden looked up, annoyed. Billings and Hart

hung over the sill. Back of them the crowd packed to the fence. Ed Lefferton was having trouble at the door. Somewhere outside, a baby started to cry and its mother's soothing 's-s-s-s' accompanied its plaint in a gentle susurrus.

Roden bared his teeth. "If she told what you'd been up to, she might lose every cent she stood to heir from Manny."

Sutton was on his feet. "It wasn't that! I swear to God I never thought of that! Let them have their stinkin' money!"

"What were you scared of, then?"

"Don't you see? She always fought me. She wanted to stick to her bargain with Manny. I didn't want scandal on her."

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Roden's voice dropped. "You were the last person with her, Fred."

"I know it. I didn't want her to come back to this house at all. I wish I'd *carried her away!*" His voice rose on the final words. He dropped back to his seat, shaken by uncontrollable sobs.

Roden's eyes glowed. "How did you know she was dead?"

"We had a signal when I came of a morning. When she didn't answer this morning, I went up to the well for a drink. I saw her then."

"But you hadn't been at home."

Fred's voice faltered. "I—there hadn't been time. We were out

late.”

“You didn’t go to the hay mow?”

“No. I quit that.”

“You laid out, eh?”

“Yes.”

“And when you found her, you went and got drunk.”

Fred dropped his head in shame. Finally he said, “That was the only thing left.”

“That’s not the way she’d ’ve wanted you to do, Fred.”

“I thought of that—later. Then I went home.”

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Roden paused, looked about him. Then he waved toward Sutton in dismissal and turned to Grady Heard, “A word with you, Grady Heard.”

The big man was trembling.

A diversion occurred at the window. Billings tore a sheet from a pad, thrust it into Paul Kapp’s hand, said in a stage whisper, “Run like hell!” But Jimmy Hart snarled, “Oh, no you don’t!” and himself pounced on the boy. And then Paul Kapp was off like a rabbit, carrying both flashes, and the newsmen were again leaning through the window.

Even Roden’s face had grown eloquent. It was live as a flame,

sensitive. His eyes held a peculiar phosphorescent glow as they fixed upon the quarryman. "I've got a crow to pick with you, Grady Heard. You was goin' to blow Manny up, eh?"

"You are wrong. I was intending to intercept the trespasser on my property."

"Like the wise guy says, that's a distinction without a difference. You was goin' to blow him up, wasn't you?"

"If he wanted to be where he had no business to be—"

"That's the way you play a game, Grady—you stand on your rights."

"I do."

Roden said with startling suddenness, "How did you find out about Fred and Lizzie?"

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The quiet hung in the room.

"I—" Heard began, but stopped.

"Go on!"

"I was up one night looking for my stock. I thought Manny must have it penned in the barn, ready to be thrown down the quarry."

"And you saw Fred and Lizzie?"

"I heard them."

“You knew what they were up to?”

“Yes.”

“And you knew they’d be sure to meet when Manny was away?”

Heard lowered his eyes. “I thought so.”

“That’s what I call a dirty trick, Grady Heard. You hated Manny, and suddenly you saw a better way of gittin’ even than by blowin’ him up.”

“I didn’t realize—”

“We never do! And so you sent him a letter that’d bring him back. You knew he’d catch Fred and Lizzie together. That’d be better than the way you’d planned, eh? It’d hurt more ’n to blow him up, eh?”

“I must have been mad.”

“No you wasn’t. You was jest mean.”

“All I can say is that I’m sorry.”

“Why did you come to the barn that night?”

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“I thought I would be around and see—”

“See the fun, eh? Did you know Manny Square loved his wife?”

“But he was bound to find out what she was up to sooner or later. I am not justifying myself, but—”

Roden snapped his fingers, turned to the reporters at the window. “Git his picture, and see that he goes in as the meanest man in the world!”

The Leika clicked.

Wayne Square sprang to his feet. “I’ve got to get *out* of this!” he screamed, clawing at his collar. “I tell you I’ve got to get *out* of this!”

“Jest a minute, Wayne. You lied to me about bein’ at Pine Ridge. You was there last week.”

“I *wasn’t*!”

“You were readin’ your dad’s will, tryin’ to borrow.”

Wayne turned to his mother. “He’s blabbing. I wasn’t!”

Old Lou smiled grimly. She put out a hand and cuffed his shoulder, as one might rebuke a naughty child. “Show a little more self-control, son.”

The words appeared to calm him.

Roden said, “You didn’t want your ma to know what was in your mind, eh? Was that the reason you wouldn’t tell?”

Wayne nodded miserably.

“What were you doin’ at the top of the quarry Wednesday night?”

“How did you know I—”

Roden glanced toward the window, grinned wickedly. “I’ve been keepin’ my eyes open.” But Fielding Billings returned the grin, without malice.

“I just walked out,” Wayne said. “We were all sitting up here, killing time.”

“That’s what I thought. . . . Wayne, the roll of wire is in your barn. I mean the roll the piece was cut from.”

Wayne Square sucked in his breath.

“You know—the piece that bound the shoe to the sledge. The roll’s in your barn.”

Wayne only stared.

The sheriff held up the tin snips. “These yours?”

“No!”

“Yes they are. They were in your barn too. The wire was cut with them.”

Wayne turned to his mother, beside himself. “Stop him! Stop him before he—”

She held up a hand, said only, “Wayne,” again as one would warn a child.

“One thing more,” Roden said. He stepped between mother and

son. “When did you find out who *did* kill Manny!” he demanded of Wayne.

Wayne’s jaw dropped. He tried bluster. “*Me? I know* who killed Manny?”

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The sheriff’s face was close, grinning. “Sure you do. You’re shot to hell, knowin’ it. You’re ready to blow up, jest knowin’ it.”

Then he stepped back and held up his hand. “I’ve got somethin’ for all of you to see,” he said. He stepped nearer the door, called out, “All set! Be sure to do jest like I told you!”

Ed Lefferton fell back from the door, gasping. Manny Square, the dead man, crossed the threshold, his back to the room. He tarried a moment, then stooped over as if examining the floor. But he came on, still backing—little Manny Square, his coat firm on his shoulders, his old hat pulled low.

“Now turn around!” Roden cried.

He did, and the octoroon stood impudent and grinning before them.

There was a vast intake of breath. The camera clicked. Hart wrote furiously, using Billings’s back as a desk. The roar of the crowd rose, making tumult. The baby cried once more, and again the mother’s whispering sound sought to soothe it.

Roden said, “And there you have it.”

“Go on!” Hart cried. “We don’t understand it.”

Roden said, “When Lizzie went outdoors, she usually wore Manny’s old coat and hat, like this.”

“Yes?” The words came from a dozen throats, urgent. The crowd pressed the door.

“So when Manny was away, Lizzie went out to tend the mule.”

Ed Lefferton’s big face was strained with his effort to understand. “I don’t git you, Jess. You mean someone mistook her for Manny?”

“It’s the other way around!” Fielding Billings cried. “It’s the other way around. Somebody mistook *Manny* for *her*!”

Roden said mildly, “Can you wonder they did? In the dark?”

Old Lou was standing flat-footed and sure, taking it all like a Square. When Roden faced her, something cat-like purred in his voice. But she met the quicksilver eyes with unconquerable calm.

Roden said, “You knew Fred and Lizzie were havin’ an affair, eh?”

“I did. *Any* woman would.”

“That’s what Claudette said when I asked her—‘any woman would.’ That’s what made me sure who the killer was.”

“You’re crazy!” It was Wayne Square, waving his arms.

“About as crazy as a fox!” Jimmy Hart said, licking his

chops.

Old Lou's eyes were on Wayne. "Be quiet, son," she told him.

Roden said to Wayne, "You found out she did it. That's why you went to pieces."

"I told him I did it," Old Lou said calmly.

"You hated Lizzie, eh?" Roden said to her.

"When she was dishonoring my own son behind his back? What mother would not?"

"How did you happen to think of wirin' the shoe to the sledge?"

"The quarry has troubled us too much not to suggest something."

"Then you got Wayne to bring the wire down."

"My son had no knowledge of how it was to be used."

"That's what I gathered when I heard he'd been askin' you what you done with it. Then you got Manny out of the way for the night, eh?"

"I suggested it."

"And sent Lizzie down to tend to the mule?"

"I told her to attend to the matter when the time came."

"And you went down and hid in the mow."

“I didn’t hide. I waited.”

“You waited a long time, didn’t you? She forgot about Lige when she met Fred, didn’t she?”

Old Lou said nothing.

“Did you hear Fred come up the ladder?”

“Yes.”

“He was asleep by the time the mule was brought in?”

“I hoped so.”

“And then you looked down the hole and saw Lizzie at the table.”

“But it wasn’t Lizzie!” Ed Lefferton burst out. “Manny’d come back!”

“She *thought* it was Lizzie,” the sheriff said. “She knew Lizzie’d be wearin’ Manny’s hat and coat.” Then to Old Lou, “When did you find out your mistake?”

“Not until I went down.”

“And then you had to go through with it, keep your mouth shut.”

“I would have told,” Old Lou said, her voice strong. “I would have told if it hadn’t meant leaving that woman to enjoy what she had tricked out of my son.”

“Oh! And even if you hadn’t been found out, you’d ’ve had to see her git the money. That meant you still had her to deal with.”

“Precisely.”

“You took the shoes to Heard’s barn.”

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“If anyone was to be suspected, he was the real murderer. He has virtually admitted it.”

Roden stepped closer, spoke softly. “Tell me this. You used a window weight on Lizzie. You later dropped it in the pit of the privy. But”—he stopped, looked wickedly toward Fielding Billings—“you struck her from behind, jest as she stepped up on the stoop?”

“That is so.”

Jess Roden shrank in size, like an inflated rubber figure when some of the air has been suddenly let out of it. His shoulders rounded. He lifted his hands in a palms-up gesture. “I guess that’s it,” he said. “She killed Manny thinkin’ he was Lizzie, and then she had to finish the job.”

“Wait a minute!” It was Jimmy Hart. He had left the window and pushed through the door into the room. “What made you suspect it *was* a woman!”

Roden looked again toward the window. But Billings was gone. “I found a bit of wool from a woman’s sweater on the sledge handle. There was more other places.”

“Whose sweater?”

"I thought at first it was jest *anybody*'s. But somethin' Miz Square said about tobacco on it started me thinkin' it was hers. Though after the hat and coat was taken away, Lizzie sometimes used it."

"And what made you think it was her?" Hart nodded toward Old Lou.

"Wayne was heard jawin' her about some wire."

"Say!" Ed Lefferton barked. "*Look!*"

Roden sprang at Old Lou. She still stood flat-footed and strong, her courage indomitable. She had just secured something from the folds of her waist, and was lifting it to her mouth as Roden leapt. He was too late. She threw back her head, swallowed. Then she took a single step backward and met his eye, unflinchingly.

"There are some you cannot reach, Jess Roden. And for *one* death, I will give you the secret in advance." She held out her hand. It contained only a bit of crumpled paper. "It was bichloride of mercury."

"The doc!" Roden cried. "Git the doc!"

"I sent him away," Old Lou said triumphantly.

THE END



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- Only in the text versions, delimited italicized text in _underscores_ (the HTML version reproduces the font form of the printed book.)

[The end of *The Strange Death of Manny Square* by A. B. Cunningham]