

ERNEST HAYCOX

**MURDER
ON THE
FRONTIER**

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Ernest Haycox

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MCQUESTION RIDES

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When Matt McQuestion came through the throat of the low pass and paused to regard the ranch below he already had made a thorough and unobserved survey of the roundabout hills; and there was in him a rising belief that the man he wanted—a legal John Doe whose face he never had seen—was at present sheltered down there.

Proceeding down the slope, Matt McQuestion observed all things with the senses of an old hunter. A sodden, cloud-congested sky lent an uneasy dimness to the day, and the wind ripped wildly against higher trees to create the fury of some vast cataract pouring into a chasm. Faintly through this sounded the beating of the ranch triangle, announcing noon; a pair of riders cantered homeward from an opposite slope. House and outbuildings seemed to crouch beneath the tempest and in a distant hillside corral a bunch of horses stood passively dejected, backs humped and tails driven between their legs. As McQuestion drew beside the house porch a stout and florid man emerged.

"Light an' come in," he bellowed. "Judas, what a day to fare forth! Lonny—come, take this horse to the barn!"

But the rider kept his place until he had observed the necessary amenities. "My name," said he, "is Matt McQuestion, sheriff of the county."

"Heard of you and mighty pleased to have you drum your knuckles against my door!" shouted the ranchman. "I'm French Broad-rick! You're just in time to eat! Get down, sir, get down! We're too condemned polite for good health! Lonny, take the horse!"

McQuestion dismounted then, surrendered his pony to an appearing puncher and, at Broadrick's continued gesture,

moved inside. Crossing to the bright maw of a fireplace, he stripped off slicker and hat while Broadrick kicked the door shut. The boom of the storm diminished to an endless muttering groan about the eaves, a table lamp thrust lanes of topaz light against the false shadows, and from some other part of the house rose a clatter of dishes. Broadrick rubbed his hands in front of him with a gusty, growling satisfaction and though there was now no need to raise his voice against the storm it had an unruly manner of smacking into the silence. "Mighty pleased to have you as a guest, Sheriff. Our trails have often crossed but this is my first pleasure of meetin' you in the flesh. Right ahead of you, sir, is the dinin'-room door."

The sheriff went through it and paused, at once becoming the target of a sudden scrutiny from eight men and a girl seated around the table; and as he stood there he seemed very little like a law officer who had spent the major part of his life in an exceedingly rough country. Dressed in neat black, he made a distinctly genteel, clerk-like appearance. Though tall, there was a worn fragility about him and the slight stoop of age. His wrists were thin, the hollows of neck and cheek considerably accented and a gaunt Adam's apple terminated a series of thoughtful features rendered almost melancholy by the presence of a drooping, silver-streaked mustache. A pair of mild blue eyes met the general stare diffidently and fell without seeming to have observed much of the scene.

"My crew," said Broadrick. "And my daughter, Marybelle. Boys, the sheriff. Be good now, blast you. Sheriff, the chair at my right."

McQuestion bowed slightly and sat down, observing the sharper interest of those at the table when his profession was mentioned. The girl sitting opposite him smiled and as this sudden light broke across her candid, boyish face there was a flash of spirit that at once commanded McQuestion's instant adherence. She was no more than twenty, unmarked

as yet by the sadness of the sheriff's world. Pale gold hair ran softly above fair temples; and in the firm, fresh lines of shoulder and breast was the hint of a vital fire that would one day burst from its prison. She spoke with a lilting, melody-making voice: "Who could be bad enough to bring you out in weather like this, Sheriff?"

"Outlaws," said the sheriff, "always pick poor weather."

"You're on that kind of business?" asked French Broadrick.

McQuestion marked the pause of sound at the table. And because he was by inclination a poker player on an errand requiring the finesse of poker strategy, he let his words fall distinctly into the calm: "I'm lookin' for a man who passed this way about a week ago, wearin' butternut britches and ridin' a stockin'-legged strawberry."

The deep silence held. There was no reaction from the men although Matt McQuestion's mild glance unexpectedly ranged down the table, no longer diffident. French Broadrick offered a platter of beef to the sheriff, still casually jovial. "What crime?"

"Murder," said the sheriff bluntly.

"Murder?" grunted Broadrick, easy humor vanishing. "Murder, you say?" His big shoulders advanced on the sheriff. "Or justifiable homicide? There's a difference between the two things."

It was on the sheriff's tongue to explain the case but he checked the impulse. For he knew at that moment logic and instinct had made one of their infrequent unions. His man was on the ranch; more, his man was within the room. The knowledge came not from any overt signal or from the faces of the punchers who sat dull and stiff around him. It came from Marybelle Broadrick. At the word "murder" she flinched visibly. Her head came up and turned toward the crew, to be the next instant drawn back as if warned by an inner voice that this was betrayal. She stared now at McQuestion, plastic features losing color, rigidly still, and a mutely

agitated query moving in her widening eyes. But this too was betrayal and she looked into her plate, hands withdrawn from the table.

French Broadrick spoke again, ruddy cheeks broken by concentric, scowling lines. "Murder or justifiable homicide, Sheriff?"

"Might be an argument in that," replied McQuestion, lying gravely. The girl's eyes lifted and touched him once more. He saw hope faintly replace bewilderment.

"What's his name?" pressed Broadrick.

"On the warrant it appears as John Doe."

"You don't know him?" said Broadrick, surprised.

"Never met the man. It's a blind chase after a stranger in the county. But the circumstantial evidence against him is mighty strong and there's a couple men who saw him from a distance when he was on the run."

"How in thunder do you expect to find him?" Broadrick wanted to know.

"One item is the horse."

"Which he could soon swap for another," countered Broadrick.

"The butternut pants," mused McQuestion.

"He's probably thrown 'em away," said Broadrick. "What's left? Nothing, it seems to me. I'd hate to start after a man on information as slim as that."

"One detail yet to mention," said the sheriff in a slowly casual manner that instantly tightened the interest of the room. "When we got to the scene there was the dead man, past tellin'. No witnesses and no messages. But a few feet from this dead man a dribble of blood ran along the rocks—no rain that day. The dribble went as far as some hoofprints. The hoofprints led away. You see? The dead man got in his shot before he fell and wherever this John Doe may be, he's packin' a hole in him that won't wash off."

There was a brief, awkward silence. The girl ventured another straight, momentary glance toward Matt

McQuestion and he detected a stiffening antagonism in her which at once strengthened his estimate of her character. She was partisan by nature and her loyalty, once fixed, would never waver. She would close her eyes and go unflinchingly the whole distance, to hell or to heaven.

So, at least, the sheriff guessed—and felt a more profound admiration for her. French Broadrick cleared his throat, staring above the heads of his men. "Well, that's enough to hook him up with the shootin'. But if nobody saw this affair, then nobody knows what brought it about or the justice of it. And you ain't caught your man yet, Sheriff."

"The trail," said McQuestion, quietly, "leads this way." His coffee was cold from stirring. All the while he had been exploring the table and at each successive glance he discarded one puncher and another from his mind. It took a certain toughness of fiber and a certain mental make-up to run with the wild bunch. Most of these fellows were middle-aged, plainly old retainers and lacking the impulses of a gun-toter. But a pair of younger men at the foot of the table increasingly interested him. One was a tall, slim character with deep red hair and a remarkably rippling coordination of muscle and nerve that expressed itself in each restless shift of his body. The other sat stolidly silent, dark and rugged and a fighter in every observable fiber. Contrasting the two, he heard French Broadrick bring the dinner to a curt close. "We'll go on with the work in the sheds this afternoon."

Rising with the rest, McQuestion let his eyes follow the crew out of a dining-room door as they filed into a rain-soaked yard. The red-haired man walked slowly and he took the descending steps with a faint stiffening of his carriage. The more rugged man brought up the rear; looking back, he caught the sheriff's glance and closed the door swiftly as he passed through. Somehow the gesture seemed almost protective of the red-head. McQuestion preceded his host into the living-room and put his back to the cheerful flames. The girl had disappeared. Broadrick moved aimlessly about

the room, mind obviously struggling with a difficult thought. Presently he came to a stand in front of the sheriff, bluntly speaking: "You've told mighty little of the story. What's the rest of it?"

The blue glance of the sheriff narrowed against the firelight; still holding his place, he answered Broadrick: "In my life I've frequently had the disposition of some fellow's future at my command. It's no easy thing to play the part of judge and I'll not say I always decided right. It weighs on me sometimes the mistakes I made. I'm slower to act than I used to be. Any sucker can make an arrest. The difficult thing is to know when not to."

Broadrick's face was increasingly somber. "If this John Doe's what you say, where's the problem?"

"Unless I'm wrong he's not the only one to consider now," said the sheriff.

There was a quickening light in French Broadrick's eyes and a sudden ridging of face muscles. "I understand how you got your reputation. You're a lean old wolf, McQuestion."

McQuestion nodded, knowing then Broadrick grasped the situation. He knew, too, that whatever the final issue, Broadrick would never reveal the hunted man. It was one of the oldest laws of the range—sanctuary of a sort. If there was trouble, Broadrick was prepared to settle it in his own way, within the confines of the ranch. Comprehending this, McQuestion reached for his slicker and hat. "I'll be lookin' after my horse," he explained and passed back through the dining-room. When he stepped into the sheeting, tempestuous descent of rain he heard the girl's voice rising from another part of the house, troubled and high-pitched. The barn was straight ahead; left of it stood the bunkhouse in which the crew idled through noon. To the right of the barn and past the last outlying corrals he saw again that hillside compound where the loose stock was held; but, though his attention straightened on that area, the dull gloom of the day defeated his search for a stocking-legged

strawberry. He entered the gray alley of the stable, found a section of clean burlap and proceeded to rub down his pony.

His chore was not done when he abandoned it, left the barn and walked toward the bunk-house, through the windows of which glimmered a fogged, crystal lamplight. Opening the door with a preliminary rattle—he wanted no surprises yet—he went into quarters similar to a thousand others throughout the land.

A solid, rugged young man reared up from one of the lower bunks, bawling gravely: "Have a chair, sir."

"Thanks, but I'll stand," was McQuestion's courteous answer. "Been sittin' in leather all day long."

"And a poor day to travel," said the rugged one in the manner of a man making talk to be agreeable.

"Can't pick and choose," replied the sheriff, letting his glance stray. All the lower bunks were filled, but only one upper. That was occupied by the red-head, who lay sprawled on his back. The red-head stared above him, cigarette drooping from a lip corner, and without turning to the sheriff he spoke with a lazy, sardonic drawl:

"Outlaws should be more considerate of the constituted authorities."

"Well, Red," said the sheriff, "as long as they're considerate enough to leave tracks behind, I'm not carin' about the weather."

"Did this one?" queried Red, making no comment on the sheriff's application of a nickname.

"Yes."

"Mighty careless of him," mused Red. "Must of been a greenhorn."

"I'll know more about that later," said McQuestion, and then silence again descended upon the room—silence of men guarding their tongues.

"Time," said the rugged one, "to get back on the job."

He opened the door and went out, other punchers rising to follow slowly. Red rolled, put his feet over the edge of the

bunk frame and let himself to the floor carefully, knees springing when he landed; and for a moment he faced the sheriff, grinning out of a wide, thin mouth. He was not handsome. The conformation of his face was too angular and his eyes a too definite and unblinking green. But beneath the surface was a personality not to be mistaken, one at once restless, dominating, utterly self-certain. McQuestion caught the hard, unruffled competence behind that grin, and a lurking mockery.

"Was he a bad man at heart, Sheriff? Real bad?"

"I'm wonderin', Red," said the sheriff. "And I hope to find out."

Red turned casually and left the bunkhouse, a shadow of stiffness in his gait. McQuestion wheeled slowly where he stood, making a complete circle and taking in once more all that the room had to offer him. But it was an unnecessary move, for he knew then the identity of John Doe. "It's Red, for a certainty," he muttered. "The heavy boy with the good face is out of it."

But, strangely enough, the more or less definite end of his quest left him without the usual elation, without the hardening impulses preliminary to a capture. And as he paused in the open doorway another incident appeared through the weaving screen of rain to sway the even balance of his mind. Yonder on a side porch at the house Marybelle Broad-rick stood beside Red, looking up to him and talking with swift gestures of her hands. Red was smiling. The smile broadened and he shook his head; one hand touched the girl's shoulder in a manner that seemed to the sheriff possessive and confident. The girl's body swayed back slightly and Red, turning, crossed the yard to an open shed. McQuestion, bent on having an answer to the increasing problem in his mind, ambled likewise to the shed and loitered there. An added hour or day didn't matter. There was such a thing as charity, even above justice, and

that did matter. So, idling in the shed, he watched the working men with a patient interest.

In a kind of orderly confusion they were overhauling the ranch gear. At the forge one of the punchers bent livid iron over the anvil with swift, ringing strokes of his hammer. Another filed mower blades. The carpenter of the outfit ripped a board, saw whining into the anvil echoes. Meanwhile, the foreman had attacked a heavier chore. Pressing his back to a wagon frame, he began to lift, all his broad muscles swelling with the pressure. A helper stood by, attempting to slide a jack beneath the rising axle; but the weight was unwieldy and difficult to manage. Releasing his grip, the foreman looked about to find an unoccupied hand. His eyes touched the red-head slouching indolently at the forge and the sheriff saw the level features of the rugged one tighten up with a cool speculation. But it was only for a moment; the foreman called to another: "Bill, give me a hand here."

The red-head was aware of the fact that he had been passed by. The smiling irony of his face increased to a grin and he spoke to the crew generally: "Mighty muscles of our straw boss seem to grow weary."

"But not my tongue," observed the foreman, softly.

"Meanin' mine wags too much, uh?" murmured Red, grin widening. "Old son, you ought to be learnin' by now that muscle is cheap and brain rare. Anybody can sweat but blamed few can scheme well."

The appointed Bill came forward to help at the wagon, but the foreman stood still, features frowning on Red with an even-tempered concentration. "That may well be," he drawled. "But I'm inclined to wonder where the schemin' led. Consider it," he added gently, "as an idle question."

McQuestion turned from the shed and walked to the house, head bent against the rain and his blue glance kindling.

"He could of asked Red to put a shoulder against that wagon. He could of made Red suffer with that game leg and let me catch on to the fact Red packed the injury. But he didn't because he's a dead sound sport. And how does Red pay back the compliment? By goadin' the foreman.

"He understands he's safe on these premises and so he uses his sharp tongue to hurt. Reckless—and a mite of a fool. There's one crooked play to his credit but the chance is still open to him to go straight, if he wanted. Hard to tell how this girl, if he got her, would affect him. She might pull him right, but if she didn't he'd force her to his own sad level. He's got a glitter—and that attracts her now."

The living-room, when he reached it, was empty. Saddle-weary, he sank into a leather arm chair, and fell into a doze. When he woke the room was darker and the pound of the storm had increased. Out on the front porch voices rose, suppressed but still near enough for him to hear. The girl was talking swiftly: "I know you wouldn't give him away. You're not that kind, Lee. I only asked what you thought of him, now that the sheriff has told us the story."

"Why ask me?" countered the foreman's voice, blunt and angry. "What difference does it make to me? I'm not his keeper, and not yours."

"Lee, it means nothing to you? Look at me and say that!"

"One of us is a fool, Marybelle. I can look at you and say this much. I have played faithful Rover around here a long time. I seemed to get along fine until he came here. Not beefin' about it, either. If you like him it's your business. And you brought this up. Don't expect me to tattle on him."

The girl said: "I'm not fickle! I like him—but I want to know what men think of him. Lee, can't you understand a girl doubts her heart sometimes?"

"Better make up your mind. I'm not stayin' on the ranch if he does. We don't mix."

"Lee—you'd go! Would it be that easy for you?"

"Easy or hard, I'm not playin' faithful Rover any more. If you want him I'll not complain. But I ride—as soon as the sheriff leaves." There was a prolonged silence, ended at last by the girl. "I never knew you cared that much, till now. Or that you cared at all. You have never spoken, Lee."

"Good lord, Marybelle! Where's your eyes?"

"Looking for something they couldn't find till this minute, Lee."

They moved away. McQuestion looked at his watch and found it beyond three. Rising, he picked up his hat and walked out into the gloom, adding fresh fuel to his thoughts. "The foreman was high card until Red came. The girl's troubled by his han'some manners. There's a little of the gambler in her and she catches the same thing in Red. But she ain't quite gone on him yet."

He came to an interested halt. A pair of men filed across the yard with a wagon tongue between them. The red-head held the front end of it, now limping obviously. Once he turned and called back to the other man, who twisted the tongue about to a different angle. The red-head slipped to his knees, dropped the tongue and ran back. There was a set rage on his cheeks, visible even through the murk, and his mouth framed some round, violent word. Deliberately he slapped the other man with both his palms and strode away. McQuestion withdrew, grumbling under his breath:

"So. He'll never soften up. That's the part the girl don't see. He'd destroy her, break her. What good's a bright mind if the heart's rotten?"

French Broadrick entered from the front, water cascading down his slicker. Marybelle came in from the kitchen, slim and graceful against the lamplight. Seeing her, Matt McQuestion's mind closed vault-like on all that he had learned this dismal afternoon. "I'm ridin'," said he, and moved toward his slicker.

"In this weather?" queried Broadrick. "Wait it out. Till mornin' anyhow."

"Spent too much time on a cold trail," said McQuestion. "Should be back in Sun Ford this minute tendin' more necessary business. I'm grateful for your hospitality."

Broadrick's round face was strictured by inquisitive lines and he stood there surveying McQuestion like a man listening beyond the spoken words. Marybelle rested silent in the background.

"You asked me if it was justifiable homicide or murder," proceeded the sheriff. "I'll tell you. This John Doe was out in the hills tamperin' with somebody else's beef. A line rider heaves over the rim. John Doe does a natural thing—slings lead. He takes a bullet in reply but his first shot lands the line rider in the dirt. The line rider lies there, alive. John Doe does what only a natural and cold killer would do. Steppin' up close, he puts a second bullet into the back of the man's skull. Personally, I consider that murder. I bid you good day."

The girl's fists slowly tightened; a small sigh escaped her. McQuestion bowed and moved toward the dining-room, Broadrick following. Together they walked to the barn where McQuestion saddled. When the sheriff swung up and turned to leave the barn, Broadrick broke the long silence:

"You're a wolf, a gray old wolf. I don't get all this and I ain't goin' to try. But my next chore is to get your picture and hang it on my wall. So long, and the Lord bless you."

"See you sometime," said McQuestion, and rode into the yard. The foreman was at that minute leaving the shed and McQuestion swerved to intercept the man and to lean down.

"My boy," he said, "forty-one years ago I lost a girl because I was mighty proud and stiff. Along came another man who had the grace to speak his piece. And I've been a little lonesome ever since. You've got to tell the ladies what they want to hear. Adios."

Well away from the house, he turned from his due northern course, broke into a steady run and cut about the little valley, through heavy timber and across rugged defiles. Half an hour later, he arrived at a road coursing to