

REUNION '78

Dodge City's Long Branch saloon was enjoying an unaccustomed quiet night. The bar was lightly patronized and the two aprons moved back and forth behind it with a leisurely air, setting out a bottle, taking a coin, making desultory talk. The gaming tables in the rear were getting a fair play but the customers there were being surprisingly unvocal.

Seated at a table with Kitty Russell, Marshal Matt Dillon noted the relative silence prevailing in this normally tumultuous place and remarked on it to his pretty table companion.

"Kind of unusual for the Long Branch." He made wet circles on the table top with the bottom of his half-empty glass. "Unusual for Dodge City, come to that," he added.

"Thank heaven a time like this does come along once in a while," Kitty responded. "Believe me, Matt, we can use an easy hour when we get it. Both of us."

Matt smiled. "My work comes in fits and starts," he told her. "But you're going it hot and heavy most of the time. In fact, the reason I came in," he confided, "was to get you to sit down for a minute—didn't know then what a soft touch you were having tonight."

She gave him a mock salute. "Good Samaritan Dillon," she said, quirking her lips at him. "I don't know if I can stand you so saintly."

"Won't have to, long." He made some more circles. "Got to finish the street, get back to the office for a while."

Her eyes held his face for a moment. "Make it in again later," she said. "I might need you to slow me down then; I don't think this will last."

He sighed. "You're right. There's two trail outfits still camped a ways out. They'll be showing, sooner or later, and then there'll be no rest for the wicked."

"Meaning me, I suppose?" She tilted her head, eyebrows arched.

"Meaning all of us." Matt Dillon said it lightly, but his lips showed no smile. "Show me a man and I'll show you a sinner. We all tote a share of it—some of us more than others, that's all."

Kitty Russell looked at this lawman, her eyes warm and gentle. "I know how you feel, Matt. You—bear a heavier load than most of us, maybe because you let your conscience take on what a lot of other people shoulder aside . . . Oh, Matt, why don't you get away from this town?" she burst out.

"A lot of good people in Dodge City," he reminded her. "Not angels, maybe—but good people. I work for them. My job is to make this place tolerable. Later on, it'll be somebody's else's job to keep it a proud place to live. You know how I feel, Kitty . . . there are worse places than Dodge City."

"It's a better place because you're here, Matt," she said quietly. She looked up as a middle-aged, erect man approached their table. "Well, Pete, I didn't expect to see you back here so soon? Where's Belle?"

Captain Peter Wynn, breveted Lieutenant Colonel in the Civil War, was a retired U. S. Army officer with a little money who had been living in Dodge for several months, and spending a large part of his time hanging around the Long Branch. It was no secret that the place's attraction for him lay in the charms of Belle Archer, one of its prettiest girls.

"Outside," Pete Wynn answered briefly. He picked up the woman's garment draped over the back of the vacant chair at the table. "She asked me to get her cape and take her home."

Kitty frowned and started to rise. "Is there something wrong, Pete? Anything I can do to help?"

"No, thanks, Kitty," Wynn said. "She just said to tell you she's going to her room, that she doesn't feel so well." He looked uncertain. "Headache, I guess."

"That's tough," Kitty said. "Tell her not to worry about us, Pete. Have her take an aspirin and go to bed and get a good sleep for a change. Wait, I'll tell her myself."

Wynn nodded briefly to Matt and headed for the door, Kitty hurrying along with him.

Matt raised one finger to Wynn in a vague farewell gesture. He was engrossed in watching two men at the bar.

One of them was wearing "store" clothes. His appearance

was that of a town man, but Matt, who had talked to him a couple of times, felt that the designation somehow didn't quite fit the fellow. His name was Andy Culley and he was a hardware and farm-equipment salesman. He had recently added a new item—something he called barbed wire—to his line, and he was tiresomely voluble about it. Matt had been subjected to a rapid-fire talk on the new product's virtues earlier in the day and he suspected that the bartender, who had been serving Culley with a blank face and half-raised eyebrows, was being treated to the same dose.

A few minutes earlier a newcomer had sided Culley at the bar. He was in his middle or late twenties, Matt judged, lean and tanned, his face an interesting combination of strength and sensitivity. He wore the garb of a trail driver, and Matt, who had never seen the man before, assumed he was a rider for one of the two outfits that had just crossed the Arkansas with their herds and were waiting to get their stuff into the shipping pens.

The trail driver was obviously alone, but upon coming in he had unhesitatingly taken a position at the bar right next to Culley, ignoring the empty spaces extending on each side of the salesman. He had ordered a whisky and stood there, ignoring it after one quick sip, shooting glances at Culley, listening to his gab, seeming to size the man up.

As Matt observed the tableau, Culley appeared to be getting ready to pay his tab and leave. He wiped his mouth, straightened the hat on his head, spoke to Mike, the bartender, and reached into his pants pocket. The good-looking young trailsman interposed, throwing a coin on the bar, waving a hand at Mike, and looking expectantly and—Matt thought—challengingly at Culley. Culley said something and grinned at the younger man, but there was a tension about his face that made Matt Dillon, who had an eye for such things, sit straight in his chair, and bring all his attention on the two.

Kitty, who had followed Pete Wynn out to have her word with Belle, slipped back into her seat.

"She's a strange one," Kitty remarked.

"What's that?" Matt said, not turning his head.

"Belle Archer, I mean." Kitty lifted her drink and sipped it. "Not coming back. Headache, my eye. She acts like she's plain scared, to me. Of what, I don't know."

"Yeah?" Matt said, still looking toward the two at the bar.

"I can't help wondering about her," Kitty said. "Where she came from . . . what brought her here. She never talks about herself . . . she's kind of a puzzle to me."

Matt said, "I got another one for you—why's the cowboy picking the fight with the hardware drummer?"

Kitty's attention went to the scene at the bar. Culley, red-faced and sweating, was half-turned toward the door, as though anxious to get away. The trailsman was in the act of pouring another drink into the glass that Culley had already emptied, quickly once, at the other's insistence. The bartender was watching them worriedly.

Matt got to his feet and moved unobtrusively toward them. He got close enough to hear Culley say: "Sorry, mister, I've got to get back to the hotel."

He started away but the cowboy grabbed his arm. "Let's not get insulting, now," he said harshly.

The bartender leaned forward. "The man says no, he means no," he told the trailsman. He reached to pick up the bottle that sat on the bar.

The rider quickly put his own hand on it. "Leave it there." He pushed the shotglass full of whisky at Culley. "Drink it."

Culley looked at it, looked at the other's set face, looked away. "I said I'm going," he announced weakly.

"And I said drink it," the cowboy persisted. "Better bring another bottle, bartender. Andy here's goin' to drink to the old home town till he drops."

With a sudden movement of his left arm Culley knocked the shotglass out of the trail man's proffering hand and then swept the bottle off the bar top. Glass and bottle crashed on the floor. Men rose quickly from tables, faced about at the bar, staring.

With a muttered oath, the trail driver grabbed Culley's left arm, twisted it in a hammerlock, spun the man around and pinned him against the bar.

The drummer was sweating profusely now; from his pain-twisted mouth came a whining "Let go, let go!"

Matt Dillon stepped forward to break it up, then paused as the tense-faced young man, holding Culley tight with the hammerlock grip, shoved the drummer's right sleeve up to the elbow. Matt peered forward as the trailsman bent over the

exposed forearm. On the man's pale skin he saw tattooed a letter Q boxed by a diamond.

The rider's voice was harsh and strained: "I was right." Loosing his grip on the other's left arm he yanked him around. Culley's face was a study in fear. The trail man balled his fists. "I ought to kill you," he grunted. He punched the drummer in the face. Culley sagged and the other hit him again, a swinging smash to the jaw. Culley staggered back against the bar. The rider crowded after him and landed another punch to the drummer's face. Culley fell sideways to the floor and lay still.

The whole sequence of violent action had taken no more than ten or twelve seconds. Once it started, Matt Dillon had no chance to stop it. He'd been momentarily thrown off by the exposure of the tattoo mark on the drummer's arm. Now he had to act. He stepped toward the trail driver again, being careful to stay more than arm's length from him. It was always a mistake to get too close to a man who was quick with his fists.

Mike, the bartender, was leaning over to take a look at the half-conscious Culley. "Holy smoke," he muttered, and looked up at the defiant trail driver. Kitty's voice came to Matt above the murmuring of the other onlookers: "Get him out of here!" she was saying.

The trailsman had swung to face the spectators crowding about. "Stay back," he warned. "I'm not finished with him." His hand hovered over his holstered gun.

"Yes, you are." Matt's voice brought the other's head around to look at the lawman. "You're finished here, friend."

"Keep out of this, Marshal," the trailsman said in a level voice. "I said I'm not finished with him. I got a ways to go yet."

"That you do," Matt said. "About two hundred feet. From here to the jail."

The trailsman's hand moved almost imperceptibly nearer the butt of his holstered gun. Matt stood still, ready himself, not wanting to use his gun if he could help it, watching the other's eyes, keeping his own face calm, thinking that this shouldn't have been allowed to develop, that he should have moved in sooner, when he first saw the conflict brewing in the tension, in the attitudes of this man and the drummer, pleading silently that the other's gun hand be stayed.

"Don't do it," he said quietly.