



G U N S M O K E



GUNSMOKE

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G O N E S T R A I G H T

Matt Dillon was taking it easy in Doc Adams's office when Chester showed up and said there was a fellow in the marshal's office looking for Matt. He asked Chester who the man was.

"Wouldn't tell me. Close mouthed cuss. Looks like he's had a long, hard ride, though. Official stuff, I'd say..."

Matt turned to Doc Adams. "See you later at supper Doc? We can finish our talk then."

"I'll eat with you, don't worry," Doc said. "Want to tell you a few more of the Facts of Life, son!"

Matt said so long and went out with Chester. The weary looking man slumped on a chair in the marshals office had a drooping roan mustache and faded blue eyes. He got to his feet when Matt and Chester entered.

"You Marshal Dillon?" he asked in a brittle voice.

"That's me," Matt said.

"Zach Parker." He extended a hand. "Special deputy for the New Mexico Stock Raisers' Association."

Matt shook. "You're a long way from home, Parker."

"My work often brings me far afield, Dillon. You've heard of the Association, of course?"

Matt said he had. He offered the makings to Parker and when the man refused, taking out a stogie instead, rolled a smoke for himself. Parker struck a match, lighted Matt's cigarette, then his own stogie. Matt watched him through the billowing smoke.

"What's on your mind, Parker?"

"Marshal, I have a warrant with me for the arrest of Dane Shaw."

Matt searched his memory and came up with a blank. Chester said, "Never heard that name around here."

Parker reached a folded paper from an inside pocket.

"Here it is, Marshal." He handed it to Matt.

Matt sat down at his desk, unfolded the document, looked at it idly. "Who issued this warrant?"

"Judge Blent...Santa Fe."

Matt inspected it more carefully. It seemed all in order.

It called for the arrest of one Dane Shaw; it bore the signature of Judge Blent, and an official seal.

"You intend to serve this warrant, Parker?"

"I'm not empowered to serve warrants, Marshal. It's up to you."

"Well," Matt said, "aside from the

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fact I don't know who or where Dane Shaw is, I'm not at all sure I have the authority to serve it either. After all, this was issued in New Mexico."

"You're a marshal, Dillon. Let's not stand on technicalities."

Matt looked at him. He didn't like the man's tone or his manner. He curbed an impulse to tell him so. After all, his job was the law, and it was true enough that on the frontier technicalities did not want as much as they did in more settled, stable communities.

"You have any idea where this Dane Shaw is supposed to be?"

"We have information that he may be in or near Tascosa," Parker responded.

"Tascosa!" Matt was frankly puzzled. "That's down in the Panhandle, mister. Out of my territory by quite a bit."

"I was instructed to deliver this warrant to you," Parker said simply.

"Why don't they get an officer down around there to handle it?" Matt demanded.

"Marshal, we want this man taken alive. He's dangerous, and he would recognize any of the lawmen from New Mexico or around Tascosa with nerve enough to tackle him. He won't know you. We want to avoid

bloodshed, if possible."

The man's tone was placatory now. Matt knitted his brows.

"What's Shaw wanted so bad for, anyhow?"

"On charges of rustling, banditry, assault to kill. But the big thing is he used to ride with Billy the Kid."

"Used to'?"

"Shaw quit Billy's gang two years ago. Quarreled with him, apparently. If we can get him back to New Mexico to face these indictments, we figure maybe we can persuade him to testify against the Kid. We want to pin a murder charge on the Kid, make it stick, see him swing. We've got to break the back of this rustling gang."

"Sounds like you're pretty sure you'll take the Kid," Matt said.

"We've got Pat Garrett working on that," Parker said.

Matt whistled. It looked as if they really meant business.

"Suppose I locate Shaw and get the drop on him, deliver him to you. He still might not turn coyote on the Kid even to have you quash those indictments. Where'd that leave you?"

"We'd have him where he'd do us no harm, anyway," Parker said imperturbably. "He worries us some. He's a leader, like the Kid--probably

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why they couldn't go on working together--and the thought is he might get a new gang organized and come back. We've got enough trouble now."

Matt nodded. It made sense. Thousands of cattle were rustled yearly from Old John Chisum's Jinglebob spread alone. Other New Mexico ranchers were hard hit.

"All right Parker," he said. "You coming along to Tascosa with us?"

"Not me." His eyes shifted away from Matt. "Got business in Abilene. Ought to be back here in a week, ten days. I'll hope to find Shaw here in your custody when I return. I'll then take him to Santa Fe with me."

Matt grinned. "You're an optimistic cuss."

"You have quite a reputation, Marshal," Parker offered.

"Well, what does Dane Shaw look like?"

"Six feet, a hundred and eighty, black hair. About thirty-five years old. Pleasant talking, gives the impression of being easygoing."

"Not too much there." Matt said.

"He's supposed to have a knife scar across his ribs, left side."

"Think we could sneak up on him when he's takin' a bath, Mr. Dillon?" Chester asked innocently.

Matt's quick grin offset Parker's

frown. The marshal stood up. "Hope you have a good tip to Abilene, Parker," he said, "If you don't find us here when you get back, you better not wait. If we bring Shaw in later we can telegraph to you and you can send somebody to get him."

"Thanks, Marshal," Parker said. He tossed away his stogie and extended his hand. "We appreciate your help."

He turned to leave. "Luck to you," he said.

When he had gone Chester asked if he should see about getting their horses ready.

"Too long a piece, Chester," Matt said. "We better ride the stage. We can make it with one change, I think. If we need saddle horses when we get there we can hire some."

Tascosa was a small town on the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle. Formerly a meeting place for Indian bands and *comanchero* traders, it currently had some excuse for existence as a cattle-trail town but Matt suspected that a good share of the place's revenue came from illicit activities.

John Chisum sometimes trailed a herd this way to market, but hundreds of other head of Jinglebob stuff had gone through here hazed along by riders never hired by Old

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John. Rustlers and midnighters hung around here when they had money to spend. Their cash looked just as good as anyone else's to the few businessmen in town. Matt had been through the place before but it was new to Chester. He looked around after they'd gotten off the stage, and remarked favorably on the trees that grew round-about.

A couple of buildings looked new to Matt. Another one seemed to be under construction although no workmen were presently in sight.

"Don't look like it's goin' to be a house," Chester opined. "Or a store either. Not even a saloon."

"Might be a schoolhouse," Matt said; "but that I doubt it. Not enough honest citizens around here to figure they need a school."

"No citizens at all, honest or not, I guess," Chester said, looking around at the empty street.

Matt headed for the bigger of the two new buildings.

"Could be we can find out a few things in here."

Chester read the sign above the boardwalk. "The Red Deer--pretty fancy name for a saloon, ain't it?"

"Never judge a package by its wrapping, Chester. Let's withhold judgment till we sample their beer."

They pushed through the swing

door. The saloon's interior was as empty as the street except for the man behind the bar. He was of middle height and slight in build. His face, Matt noted, was tanned and weathered, not pale like the average saloonkeeper. He gave them his attention.

"What'll it be, gents?"

They asked for beer and he set it out. Chester drank thirstily. Matt took a swallow and put his glass on the bar top.

"Place has changed some," he commented.

"Yeah," the barman said. "Quite a lot, for a town this size. We're growin' up fast, you might say."

He grinned at Matt.

"Building going up down the street looks like a school-house..."

"Which is what it is. Few family men have come in. Kids needed a school, so we got one started."

"No offense," Matt said, "but I didn't think there was anyone here with enough sense of civic responsibility to get anything like a school under way."

"Only one man around meetin' that description," the bar-keep admitted. "My boss, Nat Timble."

"A saloonkeeper building a school?" Matt looked his surprise.

"Kind of unusual, I reckon. Guess

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you could call Nat Tascosa's leadin' citizen. I do myself."

"You make him sound like quite a man," Matt said. "He around?"

"Out back," was the answer. "Buildin' a hitchrail. You want to talk to him, the door's right there."

"Thanks." Matt laid a coin on the bar. "We'll do that."

He headed for the back entrance, Chester trailing behind.

"You're right, mister," the barkeep called after them. "Nat Timble's a real man."

As they emerged from the Red Deer the heavy-shouldered man who had been busy with hammer and nails glanced up. He laid down the tool and wiped the sweat from his face with a blue bandanna. He took a step toward them, then stopped.

"Looking for me?" It was pleasantly enough spoken but to Matt it sounded partly a challenge. He took stock of the man. He was all of six feet, Matt judged. The hair that showed under his broad-brimmed hat was black, streaked with a little gray. He was probably in his mid-thirties, but his weight was pushing closer to two hundred than one-eighty. A man of his build could put on that much fairly quickly, given easy living, Matt knew, and he wondered

if this could be the man he held a warrant for. Chances were that it wasn't, though.

"You Mr. Timble?" Matt asked.

He nodded. "Nat Timble."

"Matt Dillon," the marshal said. "This is Chester Proud-foot."

"Nice to know you gents," Timble said. His eyes stayed on Matt. "Your name sounds familiar."

"U. S. Marshal," Matt said easily. "Dodge City."

He was watching the man. He thought the facial muscles stiffened a tiny bit but he couldn't be sure. And when Timble spoke his tone was calm.

"A far piece. Must be here on business, Marshal."

"We are," Matt said. "Looking for a man named Dane Shaw..." He paused. Timble's eyes were steady. "You know him?"

"Can't say I do. Never heard of anyone around by that name, even."

"He's on the dodge," Matt said. "Might be running under an alias."

"Hard to tell, then," Timble observed, "No use denyin' there's enough men on the dodge around Tascosa, Marshal."

"Six foot, black hair," Matt went on. "Weighs a hundred and eighty."

"Fits a lot of men," Timble said. He chuckled. "Might fit me, even,

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was I fifteen, twenty pounds lighter."

"One other thing. He's got a scar across his ribs."

"You don't often see a feller without his shirt on, Marshal.

If you down him, though, you can make sure that way--just pull out his shirt-tail." The big man grinned.

"I don't figure on shooting him, Trimble, if that's what you mean. He has to be brought in alive."

"Didn't go to offend you, Marshal. I've heard tell you're not kill-crazy. Well, I wish I could help you, but I dunno how I can. What's this feller--Shaw, you call him?--wanted for?"

"Grand theft, in New Mexico. Used to ride with Billy the Kid. I was told he's under indictment and if they can get him back there they aim to go light on him if he'll testify against the Kid--if they manage to get the Kid roped and tied."

Timble digested that briefly. "Sounds like one too many 'ifs' there--the one about the Kid, I mean."

"Pat Garrett is heading it up," Matt told him quietly.

"Pat Garrett?" Timble echoed. "Well, it'll still take a lot of doing...But it's none of my mix. Got enough troubles of our own around here. Take my barkeep, for instance--Mike Postil in there."

"Seemed decent enough to me," Matt said. "Spoke like you graded out high with him, too. What trouble's he giving you?"

Timble waved a hand. "Oh no, I don't mean it's Mike. *He's* the one that's got the trouble." He lowered his voice. "Mike used to run with a wild bunch. I don't mean there's any secret about it--and I know well enough he ain't the man you're lookin' for, from the description. Used to be top gun for Harry Gunter. You heard of Gunter?"

Matt shook his head and Timble went on. "Gunter owns a ranch a few miles out and he runs a puny little herd of ticky stuff. But he has seven or eight riders out there, all hardcases, and he trails a lot of New Mexico beef through here off and on. Everyone knows what he's up to, but it ain't been proved on him. He's been riding high and mighty, anyways up till lately, and that mainly because of Mike."

"How d'you mean?"

"Mike's fast with a gun. Fast as I've ever seen. When he was siding Harry Gunter, why nobody was about to. brace Harry, and that's a fact."

"And now he tends bar for you... how come, Timble?"

"Mike got sick of the whole deal

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and decided he'd go straight. He told me one night he' was quitting Gunter's bunch. Didn't want to hire out his gun any more, and thought he'd best pull stakes. I told, him if he'd rather stay in Tascosa the bar job was his. I can't help feelin' for a man like that." Timble's eyes had a faintly troubled look as he paused.

Matt glanced at him sharply, and was about to speak but Timble went on.

"He'll make out all right, if Harry Gunter leaves him be. It's tough enough to break off like that and try to live an honest life when they leave you alone."

"You deserve a lot of credit for giving the man a hand " Matt observed; "but why're you telling me all this, Timble?"

The saloon owner looked at him, his face serious. "I was thinkin' about this other guy, Marshal--the one you're lookin' for. If he quit the Kid's gang two years back, like you say, and ain't been heard of since, could be he's tryin' to make a new start, an honest, one, somewheres. If he did I hope nobody gets to rawhidin' him, and forces him back across the line."

"It's an interesting point," Matt said, "but it all sounds pretty blue-sky to me. It isn't often that an outlaw suddenly decides to turn

honest, and then does it. If Mike Postil has done it and can make it stick, more power to him, I say. But I'm more interested in this Harry Gunter. If Shaw is living around Tascosa, it could be he's riding with Gunter's bunch. Do you know the men in it?"

"Most of 'em I've seen, anyway," Timble answered. "But the man who can tell you all you want to know about that is Mike Postil. Let's talk to him."

The three of them went back into the Red Deer, Matt questioned the bartender. Postil shot an anxious glance at his employer when he realized that Matt was a lawman but Timble assured him that Matt's sole interest was in locating a man named Dane Shaw. Postil had never heard the name, he said at first--under Matt's prodding he said he recalled hearing at one time that Billy the Kid was being sided by a man named Shaw. He hadn't heard the first name. Shaw had never shown up in Tascosa, to his knowledge. Neither had there ever been a member of Gunter's outfit answering the description which Matt gave him.

At the end of the session, Matt felt he and Chester needed a meal. Timble asked them to come to his house for supper but Matt thought

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they shouldn't put Timble's wife to the bother. Talkative over a beer, Timble told Matt and Chester that he'd brought his bride here right after their marriage, and she was well and happy here, although she'd always lived in Dallas. They were both raised in east Texas, he said he himself had spent several years in Colorado after serving almost four years in the Confederate Army. Finally Timble left to go home. Matt assured him they'd be around for some time and could take a meal with him and his wife later. The saloonkeeper had advised them to get their food at the Star, calling it the one decent eating place in the town. Matt and his deputy went there and had a long and leisurely meal. Tascosa's best proved to be none too good. Everything was overcooked but it was filling and the coffee was not bad. At the end of the meal Matt sighed, stretched back in his chair and rolled a cigarette.

"You think we'll locate this here Dane Shaw ever?" Chester asked him plaintively. "Don't seem like we got any-where a-tall today."

Matt glanced around. No one was near them. He looked back at his deputy. "Now you ask me, Chester," he said,

"I think we've found him already."

Chester was thunderstruck. "Why, that bartender cain't be him!" he said. "He don't fit the description one bit."

"I don't mean Mike Postil," Matt said.

Chester looked blank, then thoughtful, then doubtful. "Well, now...sure, he does look about like Shaw's supposed to... said as much himself...except he's too heavy...like he said, too..." The deputy narrowed his eyes, wagged his head.

Matt said, "It's not just the appearance, Chester. Timble knew that Dane Shaw quit the Kid two years ago: he thought I'd mentioned that but I hadn't. Bringing up this business about Postil going straight and comparing it to the possibility of Shaw's doing the same thing-pretty farfetched unless it was mighty close to home. Giving me all his back history when I hadn't asked for it..."

"Well, he does seem like a natural-born talker, Marshal," Chester pointed out.

"He does, at that," Matt admitted. He closed his eyes a moment. "Still, it all adds up. He breaks up with Billy the Kid, comes here not to recruit a new gang but to start new under another name. He probably went to Dallas first to marry this girl he'd known there before. Why he'd bring her here to settle down I don't

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know...maybe somebody back in east Texas knew about his record...but here he wasn't known by sight, and the law is conspicuous mostly by its absence. Things go good for him. Then this Postil business comes up, and out of a natural sympathy fur another ex-outlaw trying to walk the straight-and-narrow he goes out of his way to help him."

Finished, Matt stayed silent for a moment. Chester stirred.

"Well, if he's him, are you goin' to arrest him, Marshal--or ain't you just sure enough, 'spite of all that brainy talk?"

"Let's wait awhile, Chester," Matt said., "Not because I'm not sure, for I am--sure enough to risk an arrest, anyway--but because I'm not sure if I want to arrest Dane Shaw."

Chester stared at him. "Look, Marshal, we come here to--"

Matt waved him quiet. "Sure we did. But I don't know how much good it would do. If this man has guts enough to turn his back on his past, go straight and stay that way, and help another man in the same kind of trouble, I doubt like heck if he'd go State's evidence against a man he'd ridden with just to save his own hide."

"But Parker said they wanted him anyway, whether he'd coyote on the

Kid or not," Chester reminded him.

"Sure--because they were afraid he might go back there with a bunch of his own, don't forget. It doesn't look to me like he's getting ready to do anything like that. Why, he's got a settled look: getting fat and happy...or was until we came along."

"We lettin' him stay happy, then?"

"We're lettin' things ride for awhile, let's say." Matt stood up. "If you've had enough pie let's go."

They went out. Dusk had fallen while they were eating and it was difficult to make out the far end of the town's short street. Lights shone in the Red Deer and a few other places. Off-key piano music and a woman's shrill laughter emerged from one building. The music stopped but the high-pitched laughter went right on. Then it too ceased, at a hoarsely shouted obscenity. Matt and Chester ambled in the direction of the Red Deer, enjoying the light breeze which had developed after sundown. They were close to the saloon when a group of horsemen rode in swiftly from the south. Matt counted seven of them. They pulled up before the Red Deer and went in. As they did so one of them shot a low-voiced query at the man who seemed to be leading them, calling him "Harry." This man

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snapped back, "He'll be here!" Chester was remarking that they were a' mean-looking bunch when Matt snapped away his half-smoked cigarette, touched the deputy on the arm and hurried toward the front door. Once in, Matt led the way to a small table. He sat down with his back to the wall and put his attention on the group at the bar. Chester followed suit. The men standing there were clustered about the one Matt had heard addressed as "Harry." He was directing some comment to Mike Postil, but in such a low voice that Matt could not distinguish the words. Postil was leaning forward to listen. Then he went erect. His lips moved in speech and Matt guessed he was asking them what they would have. The leader crashed his fist on the bar top. In the silence that followed he said:

"We didn't come here to drink, durn it!"

"This is a saloon, gents," Postil said calmly.

"And I've seen better ones in the middle of, the desert!" the other retorted. "Never mind that. Postil, you're the first man ever walked out on me and I ain't going to stand for it!"

"I don't see what you can do about it, Harry," Postil said reasonably.

"I need-your gun," said the man who Matt was now sure was Harry Gunter.

"I'm all through sellin' my gun," Postil answered simply.

"That wouldn't be so bad, maybe," Gunter snarled, "but you know too dam much about my business!"

"Harry, you know me better'n that. I'm not goin' to talk about your business."

Strangely, the assurance seemed to enrage Gunter. He gripped the edge of the bar. "Sure you won't!" he fairly screamed at the bartender. "You won't because you're coming back to work for me!"

Postil took off his apron. Matt knew from seeing him earlier that he carried a gun in a leather-lined pocket-holster sewed to the right leg of his trousers.

"I'd like to know which one of you's goin' to bring me back," he said.

Gunter pushed back from the bar. Hatred blazed from him. He made an apparent effort to control himself.

"I'm giving you forty-eight hours," he said. "I want you back at the place by dusk day after tomorrow. If you don't show I'll ride in for you--with the boys. They're all with me on this--they figure we can't afford to have you running loose. Right, boys?"

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There was a growling chorus of assent. Mike Postil looked at them with no sign of concern. "The answer'll be the same then as now. You know me, all of you. You come after me shootin', I'll take some of you with me."

"YOU can't handle the whole bunch of us," Gunter rapped. "So think it over." He turned on his heel and started away. It was Nat Timble's voice that stopped him. The big man had come out of his office room in the rear halfway through the argument and had given it his quiet attention. Now he stepped forward.

"Now wait a minute, Gunter," he called.

Harry Gunter stopped and turned. "What d'you want, Timble? Seems to me you've made enough trouble already,"

"I'll tell you this--if you come back here again after Mike Postil it won't be just him you'll be facing. I'm dealing myself in on it."

"No, now, Nat," Postil began; "I won't--"

"Shut up, Mike," Timble said without looking at him. "You heard me, didn't you, Gunter? Count on me being here, too."

"So suit yourself then," Harry Gunter ground out. "If you choose to be a fool I can't help it. You hear

me: we're coming after Postil if he don't show up. If you're here in the way, we'll give you the same medicine we aim for him to get. Come on, boys."

On the way out his hot-eyed stare swept over Matt and Chester. He paused in mid-stride, gave them a flashing scrutiny, then proceeded to the door. His men tramped out after him. Matt went to the bar as Chester peered over the top of the swing door to watch them leave.

"Well, Marshal," Nat Timble said, "you've seen Harry Gunter in action."

"So I gathered," Matt said. "He talks mighty big."

"Ain't all talk, either," Mike Postil said, tying his apron back on. "He's always been mean, and he keeps gettin' worse. He don't need me that bad, and he knows dam well I won't talk. He just can't stand the idea of me quittin' him--messes up the big picture of himself he's got in his head, I reckon...He'll be back, all right--with the others."

"We'll face them down, Mike," Timble told him.

"I will, Nat--this ain't your nest o' snakes."

"I helped you get into this, Mike," Timble told him quietly. "And I'll see you through it."

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"It ain't your fight, I say!" Postil sounded exasperated.

Timble stood firm. "It is my fight. Any man willing to make the jump you're making deserves all the backing he can get. Am I right, Marshal?" he appealed to Matt.

"In a way, you are," Matt conceded. "I have to stay clear of it, though. It's not my job to keep the peace in Tascosa. I'm only here to serve a warrant on a man I haven't found yet. But I wish you luck. Both of you."

"Well, I didn't figure you could mix in here, Marshal. All I wanted was an expression of opinion."

Postil wouldn't give up. He turned back to his employer. "You got no call to do it, Nat. You're a married man"

"Nothing to do with the case," Timble announced. "We can't give in to a thing like this, anyway. Bad for the town. Frowning, he said seriously, "Mike, I never told you going straight'd be easy."

"Heck, you shoulda been a preacher." Postil untied his apron again. "I got to go eat. See you in a little while."

Timble watched him go, compassion in his face. Then he turned to Matt and chuckled. "Me--a preacher!" he said.

"Well, if business don't pick up I might give it a whirl at that..."

"Town's growing," Matt said. "You ought to do all right."

"Yeah," Timble responded, "It is, at that. Quite a bit, even since I been here."

Matt pulled out the makings. "How long did you say that was, Timble--that you've been here?"

"Almost two years," he said. "A year and nine months..." His eyes widened. He reached over the bar for a bottle of whisky. "Whew," he said; "thing like that calls for a drink."

Forty-eight hours passed. At deadline time, Mike Postil was calmly serving drinks behind the bar of the Red Deer. He saw Matt watching him and paused long enough to give him a wink and a grin. Matt glanced at Timble. The saloon owner's expression was drawn and grim.

The next morning, early, Matt and Chester rode south from town. A couple of miles out, they pulled their horses off the trail and concealed themselves in a scrub-cedar thicket. Chester seemed preoccupied and at last he said querulously:

"Marshal, I thought you said the other night that it wasn't our job to keep the peace in Tascosa and we

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had to stay clear of all this?"

"Chester," Matt said gravely, "a great man once said that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

"Well, yes," Chester said, "but what about what I said?"

"Listen. I've had plenty chance to talk to this Nat Timble, and watch him, I'm satisfied he's Dane Shaw, all right. So we may have to take him back to Dodge with us. But I'm also satisfied he's straight as an arrow now, no matter what he was once. Not only that but he's risking his neck to help Mike Postil which he doesn't have to do."

"Yeah," Chester said. "And you talked to Mrs. Timble--or Shaw, whatever her name really is--about him too, didn't you?"

"I did Chester. She impressed me as being a good woman, as I reckon she did you too."

Chester nodded.

"She told me her husband was the finest man alive, and I could see she believed it through and through. You don't get the respect and admiration of a woman like that unless you've got quite a lot of good in you, Chester. Love, maybe, but not respect and admiration."

"Guess you're right, Marshal." Chester sat erect in the saddle. "And yonder they come."

Matt, looking, saw a group of horsemen riding north toward them. They were coming at a good pace, riding purposefully. One man was in the lead; the others followed him in twos. Matt counted three pairs following the leader. Seven men. Gunter's bunch; riding to Tascosa. Coming after Mike Postil...

"That's them, all right," Chester said.

"You don't have to do this, Chester," Matt told him.

"You object to me usin' a rifle?" the deputy said.

"There's no rules in this game, Chester," Matt said bleakly.

Chester pulled his rifle out of the saddle boot. "Always feel a mite cozier behind a Winchester," he announced.

Matt drew his Colts, checked the loads, eased it back into the holster. He let the horsemen come on. When he thought they were close enough he said "All right, Chester."

They pulled out of the thicket onto the trail. The oncoming riders saw them and slowed to a stop. Their horses milled around. Gunter alone came toward them.

"Hold it, Gunter," Matt called.

"What is this?" Gunter said harshly. "Who are you?"

"U. S. Marshal," Matt said.

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"Dillon's my name--Matt Dillon."

"Them two was there the other, night, Harry," a burly, whiskered rider called. "At Timble's saloon."

"All right," Gunter said. "Clear the trail, you. I don't give a hoot if you're a U. S. Senator. You've got no business with us. Clear the trail, I said!"

"Turn around and ride south, Gunter. Back where you came from. Mike Postil's staying in Tascosa."

"So that's it!" Blood rushed to Harry Gunter's face.

"What're you doing in this game?"

"I dealt myself in, Gunter. Now do as I say. Clear out. Keep away from Tascosa from now on. Leave Mike Postil alone. Leave Nat Timble alone. Leave the town alone. Fade. away. Do you get that?" Gunter's eyes widened so that Matt could see white all around them. The man was gripped by fury.

"We don't need any lawmen down here, Dillon!" he shouted. "Why don't you line out for wherever, you came from? That'd be the smart thing for you to do!"

Matt heard horses coming from the north, behind him.

"Who's that, Chester?" he called sharply.

"Mike Postil and Mr. Timble," Chester answered.

"Well, Marshal," Gunter said in savage triumph, "it looks like we won't have to go into Tascosa! We can settle things right here!"

The saloon owner rode up beside Matt. "Missed you this morning," he said. "Thought you might be down this way."

Mike Postil grumbled, "Durn it, Marshal. First Nat, an' now you. This is *my* trouble."

Matt ignored him. "Well, Gunter," he said, "the odds are considerably lower than they were."

"They sure are," the whiskered man in Gunter's bunch said loudly. "The heck with this. I'm gettin' out. Come on, Harry. We kin fix Postil's wagon later. When there ain't such a crowd, maybe."

"Stand by me, dang it!" Gunter rasped at the man.

"You heard me," the other said. "I'm goin'."

"I *said stand!*" Gunter, his face livid, spurred his mount toward Nat Timble's. "You rat, you're to blame for this," he shouted.

"Keep back!" Timble cried at him. "No closer, I say!"

Gunter kept his horse coming. He grabbed his gun, pulled it out. "Get him first," he yelled at his men, "then Postil!"

"Drop that, Gunter" Matt yelled at

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him. His own Colt was out.

Gunter fired at Timble at point-blank range. The saloon owner, trying to draw his own gun, tipped from the saddle.

Matt dropped to the ground for accuracy's sake, holding his horse's reins with his left hand. He aimed and fired at Gunter, who was trying vainly to get a bead on Postil as his horse plunged wildly. Postil's own animal reared, and the bartender left saddle, let it go, and began firing calmly. Chester was working his Winchester, astride his horse. Some of Gunter's riders had broken and run when the fight started, but a couple, either desperate or suddenly battle-happy, were throwing lead promiscuously. It couldn't have lasted more than four or five minutes. To Matt, later, it seemed like an hour. He had plenty of time to empty his Colts, firing carefully at targets. Timble was stretched on the ground, not moving. Gunter lay in a huddled heap, and the two of his men who had stayed to fight were lying near by, one, silent, the other breathing in gasps and bubbling moans.

"Shall we chase the others?" Chester was saying.

"Never mind them," Matt said. "Timble's down, we'd better help

him." He walked over to the still form. "Look at Gunter and the others, Chester," he said.

Postil came up as he knelt beside Timble. "How is he, Marshal?"

"Shot in the head," Matt said.

"I told him not to come," Postil said. "We better get him back to his house."

"No use," Matt said. "He's gone. Probably before he hit the ground."

Postil cursed...

"I'm sorry, Mike."

"He'd done enough for me already Postil said. "Why'd, he have to do this? It was my fight, not his."

"Not the way he looked at it, Mike. He went straight himself a while back. He knew what a job it was."

Postil looked from Matt to the dead man and back. "You sure?"

"I came down here with a warrant to arrest him, Mike."

"He was...Dane Shaw?"

"Dane Shaw had a knife scar on his ribs," Matt said. "Right side."

Slowly, Mike Postil loosened the shirt, pulled it open.

He had his look. "Yeah," he said. "He was Dane Shaw all right."

Chester came over to them. "Those three are all done for," he said to Matt. "Gunter and the little guy are goners already. The other

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one's got a few minutes; I made him as comfortable as I could."

Postil was staring at Matt. "I can't figger you--comin' here to arrest him, then sidin' him and me against Harry Gunter and his bunch."

"Don't try," Matt told, him. "Just try to remember what kind of a man Nat Timble was."

"He was one really good man, Marshal," Postil. said fervently.

Matt turned to Chester. "You stay here with Mike. I'll send a wagon out from town. I've got to tell his wife."

Nora Timble turned her face and wept bitterly when Matt told her what had happened. He had her sit down and waited quietly till she could look at him, her steady blue eyes glistening.

"You...tried to stop it," she said. "Thank you for that."

"My job," he said. "What are you going to do, Mrs. Timble?"

"I may go back to Dallas," she said. "I don't know. Anyway Mike Postil will have to...run things now."

"Mike's all right," Matt said. "He'll

make out."

"Tell me...one thing, Marshal," she went on.

"What is it, Mrs. Timble?"

"Did you come here...to arrest my husband?"

He gauged her with a look. She had the basic strength. She knew, somehow, anyway..."Yes," he said. "I did."

"He'd told me what was behind him," she said quietly.

"I figured he had."

"If this thing today hadn't happened...would you have taken him back?"

He waited a moment. I can't tell you, Mrs. Timble. Because I don't know...But if I had, it would've been my last official act."

"You mean you would have quit afterward?" she asked softly.

"Yes," he said.

"Marshal," she said, extending her hand, "if you come back to Tascosa, please call."

"It would be a pleasure, Mrs. Timble," Matt Dillon said.

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G R A S S

Matt Dillon was thinking that Harry Pope was a long way from home, and not only in a geographical sense. Other men, a good many of them, had come from the East to Kansas and demonstrated their fitness to survive in a new, hard environment. A few of them even flourished and prospered in it. But not Harry Pope. The man just didn't fit in, out here on the prairie. Sitting in his chair, Matt studied the man as he stood at the bar, shifting his weight nervously from foot to foot as he sipped at his beer. Pope was a short man, slim to the point of frailness. Matt judged he'd be better off clerking behind a counter in some department store back in Boston, which was where Chester said the young man had come from..

"Yeah," the marshal said quietly, "he's come a long, long way from home. Can't figure what prodded him to come out here."

"Well," Chester offered, "his wife died and he couldn't stand it there any more, couldn't forget her. So out West he come. Been here about four months, built himself a soddy a few miles out. He's planted some corn, and he's tryin' to raise pigs!" Chester sounded slightly scandalized.

"Not much of a corn country," Matt said. "Still, Pete Kitchen raised garden truck and pigs in Arizona." "Pope's got a little water there. A real farmer could make out, I suppose, but he don't know any more about farmin' than I do--prob'ly not as much. Besides," Chester said, "he's scared to death."

"He tell you that, Chester?"

"Yeah, a couple times. I wish you'd talk to him; maybe YOU could get him straightened out."

The deputy was plainly worried about this pilgrim from Boston. Matt realized that Chester wasn't going to be satisfied until Matt talked to the fellow. Still, he wasn't anxious to do so.

"I doubt if anybody, could do that," he said. "From what you've told me, his trouble's all in his head."

Chester chose to interpret that as consent. He raised his voice: "Pope...hey, Mr. Pope!" He lifted his hand as Harry Pope looked back toward them.. "Over here..."

Pope walked slowly to their table. "Hello, Chester," he said in a low, not unpleasant voice.

"This here's Marshal Dillon," Chester said. "Harry Pope."

"Howdy, Pope. Sit down." Matt

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nodded at an empty chair.

"Glad to meet you, Marshal." Harry Pope perched himself on the chair's edge.

"Chester tells me something's got you worried, Pope. What seems to be the trouble?"

"It's those Indians coming around the place at night, Marshal. Yelling and whooping to wake the dead."

Matt stared at the man. He wasn't trying to hurraw Matt; his face was pale and he was in dead earnest.

"How often do they do this?" he asked carefully. "Every night?"

"Oh, no. Once a week or so."

"Sure they're Indians making the racket? Couldn't be coyotes?"

"Good heavens, I know what coyotes sound like, Marshal, even if I am a tenderfoot! It's human voices I hear."

"Well, what are the voices saying?"

"Nothing I can understand, you know--just insane screeching and yodeling. I don't see why the Army can't send some soldiers out and drive them off. If they catch me outside the house just once, I'll be done for."

"Pope, I don't think you've been hearing Indians. If it was Indians, you'd have been done for by now. But they just don't operate that way, whooping and yelling outside your

door, warning you not to come out. You've heard a lot of stories that have alarmed you, and your imagination has done the rest." Matt smiled at him reassuringly.

"Oh no, it's Indians all right--and I've heard them!"

Matt felt mildly exasperated with the greenhorn. "Well, why don't you shoot 'em?" he asked indulgently.

Pope's voice was small. "I--don't have a gun, Marshal."

"Know how to handle one?" Matt barked.

"Yes, I do," the greenhorn answered. "I did quite a lot of shooting back East. But I didn't bring a gun with me when I came out here, and I've hesitated to get one--afraid it would make things worse."

"Anyone needs a gun around here," Matt told him.. "Get one. Then if they come around again, use it."

"But if I shot one of them, wouldn't that get the whole tribe on my neck?"

"Oh I don't think so, Pope. I wouldn't worry any about that if I was you."

"All right then, I'll do it. I'll get a gun today and take it home with me. It's been nice talking to you, Marshal; good day, and thanks. Good day, Chester."

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"So long, Pope." Matt watched the little man go out, his thin shoulders straightened in an attempt to show that he was no longer a man afraid. The marshal glanced at Chester, winked, and shook his head. Four days later, seated behind his desk, Matt Dillon was staring incredulously at Ned Honeyman, whose ranch, a few miles out of Dodge City, bordered on Harry Pope's homestead claim.

"What d'you mean: Pope is a killer?" he demanded.

"I mean he shot and killed Joe Carter last night!" Honey-man said loudly. "Carter's worked for me for years, one of the best men I ever had! No more, though--that danged homesteader saw to that!"

"How'd it happen, Ned? Was there a fight?"

"Fight my eye! Pope shot Joe in cold blood--near that tumbledown soddy of his. Never give Joe a chance! I crave to see him hang!"

"You see it happen, Ned?"

"Not me, but Earl Brant was there, he seen it. Brought Joe back to the ranch. Earl works for me too, you know."

"I know," Matt said. "What did Brant have to say about it?"

"Why, just that they was ridin' by the stinkin' sodbuster's hut and he

bust out and shot Joe and killed him!"

"Ned," Matt said slowly, thinking of the talk he'd had with Harry Pope at Chester's instigation, "this whole thing could have been a sorry mistake."

"Mistake!" Ire pinked Honeyman's cheeks, popped his eyes. "Durn it, you going out there to arrest that feller or not?"

"I'll ride out there in the morning, Ned," Matt told him calmly. "Harry Pope isn't likely to run away."

His confidence was rewarded the next day. He and Chester saw signs of someone's presence as they approached Pope's homestead although they did not spot the Easterner immediately. It didn't look like much of a place, the sodhouse small and rickety-looking, the lines of fence ill-made and awkward-looking. Matt reminded himself that the man was a rank tender-foot, completely unprepared for this kind of venture.

"There he is," Chester said as they rode closer in; "over by the pigpen."

They reined over to the crude enclosure. Matt's horse fidgeted at the unfamiliar smell of the porkers. He stepped the horse around so as to get upwind. Pope turned to face them and Matt gave him a howdy.

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"Good morning, Marshal... Chester," he said. He looked more composed than when Matt had seen him last.

"Well, they came back again--night before last."

"Who do you mean, Pope?"

"Those Indians I told you about. But I'd got that gun you told me to get, and I used it. Scared 'em off, I guess. For good, I hope."

"How many--uh--Indians were there, d'you know?" Matt asked.

"Two, I guess--that's all I saw, anyway."

"And you used your gun on 'em, eh? Hit one of 'em?"

"That I don't know. I certainly tried, but it was too dark to see if I scored a hit or not."

Matt dismounted and Chester followed suit.

"Tell me all about it, Pope," Matt invited him..

"All right, but first won't you come in and have some coffee?" Matt said they would, and Chester tended to horses while the others got settled inside the little soddy.

"It began like the other times," Pope said while Matt sipped coffee and watched the Easterner. "Yelling and whooping outside, they were. I put out my lamp and got my gun. Then I opened the door a crack and

yelled at them.

They screeched back and fired a couple of shots at the house. The bullets went high but they thudded into the wall.

They didn't hit anywhere near the door so I opened it wider and I heard a horse off over to the west, and I saw something moving dimly. I let loose two shots and then another began shooting from somewhere else so I ducked back inside. I waited but they didn't do anything more--didn't even yell again. They seemed to have gone away right afterward. I don't believe they were very wild Indians."

"They weren't Indians, Pope," Matt said gently.

"You keep saying that, Marshal, but..."

"They were two of Ned Honeyman's riders, Earl Brant and Joe Carter."

Pope stared at him for a moment.

"You know this for a fact?"

When Matt nodded, he went on: "Well, then, what was their game?"

Matt ignored the question. "One of them, Joe Carter, stopped one of your bullets. He's dead."

Harry Pope went very pale.

"Marshal! Are you sure?"

"Brant took Carter's body back to the ranch," Matt went on. "It looks

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like you've made a serious mistake, Pope."

He gripped one hand with the other. "Then I--you say I've killed a man, this fellow Carter?"

"It looks that way. Tell me, Pope--has there been any trouble between you and these two men?"

"Why, no! I hardly know them. I've seen them in town, and they've ridden by here a few times. Marshal, I wouldn't have shot at them if I'd known who they were!" He paused, considering. "But how could it have been they? They were shooting at the house! Why would they have done that? It doesn't make sense . . ."

"Look," Matt said patiently. "You say you've been hearing Indians around your place here. Well, Indians don't act that way. But you think you've heard 'em. It's got worse and worse, and so the other night when you heard these men ride by you got panicky and started shooting."

"I wasn't panicky," Pope protested. "I was just fed up."

"Well, whatever," Matt conceded, "I don't figure you aimed to kill Carter."

"Then...you're not going to arrest me?" the home-steader faltered.

"No, I'm not," Matt said. "Not until I get the straight of the thing,

anyway."

"Maybe we oughta talk to Earl Brant, Marshal," Chester put in.

"All right, Chester," Matt said, "but we'll just let him come to us, I think. He'll come. Him and Honeyman too." He turned to Harry Pope. "Now don't go trying to make a run for it," he warned. "You wouldn't get very far."

"I know that, Marshal," Pope said fervently. "And I won't."

He followed them outside. "I'm not...a murderer, Mr. Dillon. You know that."

They left him standing dejectedly beside his sodhouse. Matt waved a farewell to him but he didn't seem to notice. He was probably wishing now that he'd never left Boston, Matt thought.

When they were beyond earshot, Chester said, "I'm sure sorry for that there tenderfoot. Even if he is loco."

"Well, Chester, I'm not at all sure he's loco. I expect Earl Brant knows something he hasn't told Ned Honeyman." He giggered his horse into a faster pace. "Anyway, we'll soon find out."

Ned Honeyman showed up in Matt's office the following morning. He had a tall, towheaded, moonfaced cowboy with him.

"Morning, Marshal," the rancher

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said, "You know Earl Brant, been workin' for me for some time."

"I know him, Ned." Matt nodded at the cowboy. "How are you, Brant?"

Brant muttered that he was able to stick on a horse. He kept his face screwed into a frown, giving the impression that he was trying to look tough, Matt thought.

"Figgered you'd want to hear Earl's report of what happened at Pope's place the other night." Honeyman didn't wait for Matt's approval. "Go ahead, Earl."

"Well, me and Joe Carter was good friends," Brant announced. "I don't aim to rest till that Yank sodbuster's hung."

"I'm listening," Matt responded. "Tell me about it."

"Well, there really ain't much to it. Me and Joe was ridin' past his place, and the bastard come out and started whangin' away at us. He knocked Joe outa the saddle and so I threw some lead at him and chased him back into that hut of his, and then I packed Joe back to the ranch."

The cowboy finished, eyeing Matt belligerently. The marshal got out his Durham and wheat straws.

"You'll swear to that in court, I suppose, Brant?" he asked.

"Sure he will!" Honeyman

interjected.

"Now why wouldn't I, Marshal?" Brant demanded. "That snotty little killer been tellin' you somethin' different?"

"Well, yes," Matt said. "Harry Pope thought he was defending himself against Indians."

"What?" Honeyman roared, incredulous. "Why, that miserable son..."

"Ned, you weren't there," Matt pointed out. "How do you know what really happened?"

"Earl here told me, that's how!" snapped the rancher.

Matt faced the cowboy. "Tell me, Brant--why do you think Harry Pope shot at you?"

"It happened right there at his place!" Brant blustered.

"I mean, what was his reason for shooting at you?" Matt persisted.

"Heck, I dunno, Marshal. He's loco, I guess. What difference does it make, anyhow? He killed Joe Carter."

"The difference between murder and something else, that's all," Matt shot back.

"Why don't you bring him out of his cell and ask him?" Honeyman said stridently. "If the fool tries any of his lies, I'll beat the truth out of

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him, I sure will!"

"I'll overlook that last," Matt told him, "except to say nobody abuses a prisoner of mine while I'm around. The fact is, though, Ned, Pope's not here." He spread his hands on the desk top. "He's not here because I didn't arrest him. I didn't arrest him because he told me he thought he was shooting at Indians--and I believed him."

Honeyman glared at him, his face mottled with heavy red.

"For Pete's sake, it looks like you're the one's loco!"

"You mean you ain't goin' to arrest him at all?" Earl Brant put in. He didn't seem too sure of himself now, Matt thought, as the cowboy refused to meet his gaze, instead looking expectantly at his employer.

"I'm not going to make any arrest till I've found out what this was all about," Matt said.

"Well, I've told you what it's all about!" Brant said irascibly. He started for the door. "Come on, boss, let's get outa here; we're wastin' our time."

The rancher lingered. The rancher's voice was heavy, his tones measured. "Marshal," he said harshly, "no man kills a rider of mine and gets out of it by claiming he thought he was shooting Indians. You hear that?"

You think I'd let anybody get by with that?"

Brant turned back from the door, seemingly emboldened by his boss's stand. "Joe Carter was my friend, too," he supported. "If the law won't see justice done, we will."

"I'll have to warn you, Ned," Matt said, matching Honeyman's grave accents. "If you try to take the law in your own hands, I'll arrest you."

Honeyman leaned his weight on the desk, propping himself on his huge fists. "Dillon, I always rated you a good man. Always respected you. Up to this morning. But now..." He paused, significantly.

Matt looked at the cowboy. "Brant, I'm inviting you to tell the truth," he said. "Whatever it is--tell it."

Brant moved toward the door again. "Ah, come on, Ned, like I told you, we're wastin' our time. This hombre's a tenderfoot-lover!"

Matt stopped him with a pointed-finger gesture. "All right, then--I'll tell you what I think. I think you and Joe Carter were fooling that poor devil...making him think there were Indians prowling around. I don't know why you were doing it. Trying to drive him out of the country, maybe?"

Brant was sweating but he wasn't

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giving up. "Marshal, you sound more loco all the time!" He opened the door, said, "I'm leavin', Ned," and stepped outside.

Honeyman did not move. "For the last time, Dillon," he grated, "are you aiming to do anything about the murder of Joe Carter?"

Matt stood up. His gaze locked with Ned Honeyman's. "It just wasn't murder, Ned. Can't you see that?"

"Joe Carter's dead," the rancher said with finality. "The bullet that killed him was fired by that lowdown pup, Harry Pope. That's all I need to know." He turned and called, "Wait for me, Earl!"

That afternoon Marshal Matt Dillon rode back out to Harry Pope's homestead. It was a nasty situation, and after Honeyman and Brant had left he'd sat at his desk thinking about it. Ned Honeyman was a bullheaded man, arrogantly sure of himself and his own rectitude. But he was also essentially an honest man, of that Matt was sure, and he'd been in the country long enough to have quite a stake in it. With Harry Pope, it was different. He was a newcomer, and an uneasy one; he didn't really belong in this land: he was born for an easier, softer existence. Now Matt sighed as he rode along. He wasn't happy about the conclusion

he'd reached, but it was the only clear solution he could see....

When he reached the place he found Pope busy hoeing the few rows of unpromising-looking corn he'd planted. The marshal ground-hitched his horse and walked over to Pope, who straightened up and looked at him hesitantly.

"Well, Marshal--changed your mind?"

"No," Matt said; "no, I haven't."

Pope looked his relief but he said nothing.

"I don't know what their reasons were," Matt went on, "but I'm satisfied that Joe Carter and Earl Brant were the 'Indians' you heard. Trying to throw a scare into you..."

"Well, Mr. .Dillon, I'm sure that you know about Indians and their ways, and I don't see why you'd lie about it. So if you say it was Carter and that other fellow, it must have been."

"Well, then, can you think of any reason why they'd be doing it?" Matt asked him.

"No, I can't," Pope said slowly. "None at all."

"Brant and Ned Honeyman want me to arrest you, Pope," Matt said, searching his face.

"But you're not going to--and I thank you for that, Marshal," Pope

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said warmly.

"I don't have any reason to." Then Matt added, "They're threatening to take the thing into their own hands."

Pope looked frightened again. "But can't you stop them?"

"I could have them put under bond to keep the peace," Matt told him. "If they moved against you then, I could do something about it--but it might be a little late for you."

Pope's face was grave and pale as Matt continued. "Maybe you won't like this idea, but I think the smart thing for you to do would be to pull stakes and go somewhere else. I know it's not your fault but you've got enemies now and--well, you'd be a lot safer in some other place."

Pope's face was still pale but now his jaw set. "No, Marshal," he said. "I'm not going to run away. Let them come. I'll fight it out with them."

It was foolish talk, coming from such a man, but there was a pride and a dignity in it, too, that Matt could not ignore. Apparently there was more to this greenhorn Easterner than he had reckoned.

"That would mean more bloodshed," he pursued. "Yours, likely."

"However, that isn't my fault--as you said yourself. And as I see it, a man has a right to defend himself."

Harry Pope looked inches taller as he said it.

"Sure," Matt conceded. "But you won't have any peace. You'll start jumping at shadows, always looking over your shoulder."

"Mr. Dillon," Pope said clearly, "I do not intend to leave."

Matt sighed. "Think it over, anyway."

"I have thought it over," Pope said calmly.

Matt looked at him for a minute, a scrawny specimen from Boston, Massachusetts, gripping the hoe handle as if it could give him strength, exuding a new and stubborn determination. Then he turned to his horse.

"Well, I've said all I can," he ended, looking down from the saddle. "I'm sorry about this, Pope."

"Thank you, Marshal," was the response. "I regret that I cannot take your advice. You're a good man, and I realize you mean well..."

Matt rode away with a clipped "Adios." He was getting sick of being called a "good man" by somebody who was defying him. First Honeyman, and then this fool sodbuster. He wished he could ditch it all and go fishing. But this Pope, now, maybe he'd do to take along, eventually. Had a lot of grit for a

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greenhorn...

He was half a mile or more away when he heard the shot behind him. Reining sharply around, he raced the horse back toward the homesteader's place. When he got there he found Harry Pope lying on his face between the corn rows, dead. There was a bullet hole in his back. Matt had his gun out. There was a saddled horse standing near the soddy. Matt edged around the sad little structure. Earl Brant was standing by the pigpen, looking at the grunting porkers inside. As Matt watched, Brant raised the gun he held in his right hand. Apparently he was going to end the pigs' existence too.

Matt stopped him. "Drop your gun, Brant....All right, now turn around."

The cowboy faced him. "How long you been here, Marshal?" he said, his voice higher than normal.

"Long enough, Brant. I saw Pope-- I mean I saw Pope's body."

"I shot the dang sodbuster," Brant said needlessly.

"In the back, too," Matt said in disgust. "You ought to be real proud of that."

"He killed a pard of mine!"

Matt wondered if the man actually felt the justification that he put into his words.

"Harry Pope didn't know what he was doing," Matt said.

"What were you two trying to do to him, anyway--you and Carter?"

"We was just havin' a little fun, that's all."

"Fun?"

"Well, Joe and me'd have a drink or two and then we'd ride over and give him a few war-whoops. The little fool'd set there in his hut and shake. Why, one night I sneaked up to the door and I could hear him in there cryin'--cryin', fer cripes sakes!" Pure contempt weighted his final words.

"That must have been a lot of fun," Matt said acidly.

"Next day we rode back," Brant went on, seeming to wring some satisfaction out of the memory of it, "and listened to him tell how the Injuns was after him...he wanted the Army to come out and run 'em off !"

"Yes," Matt said; "I know."

"We'd 'a' been all right if he hadn't went and got himself that gun." The simple-minded Brant was feeling a little sorry for himself now, Matt could tell.

"I told him to."

"You did! Then dam it, Joe got killed account of...you!"

"Your reasoning doesn't impress me much," Matt said. "Tell me,

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Brant, did you think you'd get away with this?"

"Shucks, I was goin' to leave the country. I been around here long enough to suit me. You'd never of caught me."

"Does Ned Honeyman know about this?" Matt demanded.

"He sure 'nough heard me say I aimed to git Pope."

"And he told you to go ahead?" Matt pressed.

"Well--he said he hoped somebody'd git him." Brant looked at Matt, suddenly sweating. "That makes it his fault don't it?" His voice rose eagerly. "He kind of ordered me to do it, you see?"

"Shut up!" Matt ground out. "Get your horse...No, wait--first we'll do what we can about Pope. Then we'll ride for Dodge."

It was too late to teach Earl Brant anything, if it ever had been a possibility. Ned Honeyman was a different matter; he was cut from different cloth--a man, Matt judged, of some intelligence and character. He wanted to be sure that Honeyman understood what had really happened. Otherwise, Matt feared, the rancher would set about spreading the word against the marshal and the law, and there were plenty of men in Dodge who'd be

ready to listen to him. He'd have to get to Honeyman early, or the big cattleman would be busy setting a fire that would be hard to get under control. It was after dark when they reached town, but Matt kept off Front Street anyway and rode up to the jail from the rear. Chester was there, and Matt had him lock Brant in a cell, telling him briefly what had occurred. Then he ascertained from the deputy that Ned Honeyman was in town. He headed for the rancher's favorite hangout, the Alafra-ganza. Honeyman was there, drinking in moody solitude at one end of the long bar. Matt went over to him. "Howdy, Ned."

Honeyman looked at him fiercely. "What YOU want?"

"I want to talk to you."

The rancher deliberately turned his back.

Matt controlled his urge to grab the man's shoulder and pull him around. "I talked to Earl Brant," he said. "I got the whole story out of him."

Honeyman maintained his stance and his silence, and Matt went on. "He said he and Joe Carter had been 'having fun' with Pope--hurrawing the man. Pretending they were Indians."

The big man turned on him

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wrathfully. "You told him that this morning!"

"He admits it's true."

"Even so, was that reason enough to kill a man?" he demanded.

"Pope was acting in self-defense--or thought he was. He didn't intend to kill Joe Carter. He wouldn't have shot if he'd known who it was. Carter brought it on himself."

"I don't believe it!"

In spite of Honeyman's vociferous avowal, Matt thought he could read uncertainty in the man's eyes. He pressed on: "Ned, you want law in this country, don't you?"

"Maybe that depends on who's enforcin' it," Honeyman countered, his voice harsh and unyielding.

"Ned, you're playing with words," Matt accused. "It's the law that counts, and you know it."

"Well, the law says you can't kill a man and go free, don't it?"

"The law says you can't murder a man," Matt corrected.

"So who decides which it is?" Honeyman jerked out.

"I'd like you to decide it this time, Ned." Matt said quietly.

"You mean that?" Honeyman said, pouncing.

"I do."

"All right, then--you go arrest Pope, see that he gets hung, like he

should--that's how I decide it!"

"I can't," Matt said. He let him have it then: "Harry Pope is dead."

The big rancher was taken aback for a moment. His mouth came open but he said nothing.

"You wanted him killed," Matt went on inexorably. "He's been killed, Ned."

"What the devil do you mean?" the other said hoarsely.

"This morning you said you'd take justice in your own hands, didn't you?"

"Well, yes--I did, but..." Honeyman waved his hands in a negative gesture.

"So now Harry Pope is dead," Matt concluded.

"When--how do you know?" he demanded weakly.

"This afternoon he was out hoeing that miserable little patch of corn he had," Matt said. "He forgot to watch behind him. He got a bullet in his back." Honeyman's defenses were crumbling, but Matt showed him no mercy. "Is that how you wanted it, Ned? All Harry Pope had was a sod hut, a few pigs, that sorry patch of corn. He didn't have much sense about this country, it seemed like, but he might have learned. We laughed at him, but I think now he might have fooled all of us. He didn't

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get much help, Ned. Your riders scared him so that he'd cower in that soddy and cry, Earl Brant told me."

"Marshal, I--" Honeyman began. "I ...Lord!"

"So he got a gun," Matt continued, "and one night when they came he went out to fight them. You know, Ned, that took a darned sight of courage, for a man like Harry Pope. He did it, though. That should have tipped me off to the kind of man he was, but today I went out there and told him he'd best clear out, leave his place and go somewhere else--that you and Earl Brant were threatening to give him trouble."

As Matt paused, Honeyman leaned forward a little. "Well, what'd he say?"

"He said he wouldn't do it. Harry Pope stood up like a man and said he'd stick there and fight. So he stayed," Matt went on wearily, "but he didn't get a chance to fight. After all, what would a man like Harry Pope know about protecting his back?"

Ned Honeyman's face was drained of color. "Brant?" he said in a low voice. "He did it?"

"Earl Brant shot him in the back," Matt said. "Pope had a hoe in his hands."

"Matt " the rancher said, "what can

I say?"

"I arrested Brant. He's in jail. He'll be tried for murder."

"Lord," Honeyman breathed. "And I'm...as guilty as he is."

"Brant will try to pin it on you, Ned. And you might have stopped it...but you encouraged it. You were hollering for 'justice', Ned. Fast justice. Not the law kind."

Honeyman bowed his head. "I...didn't understand."

"You didn't take the time to, Ned. The law was too slow for you." He raised his head and there were tears in his eyes. "I ain't at all proud of what's happened, Matt," he said.

"No," Matt said slowly; "and it is a shameful thing. Men like you could give this country strength--if they threw their strength behind the law, instead of bucking it, or going around it."

Honeyman's outstretched hand was fumbling, beseeching.

"Would it help any--help the law, I mean--if I was to get up in court and take my share of the blame for this?"

"Yes, Ned," Matt said gently. "That would help. It would help a lot."

The law was young out here on the frontier. Sometimes Matt Dillon thought that the only time people wanted it was when it could be made

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to act the way they'd act themselves if there wasn't any law to do it for them. But it wouldn't work that way. If you were guilty of violating the law YOU were punished. If you were innocent, you were protected. People seemed to be reluctant to accept that. Until they did there wouldn't be much justice under law.

Men like Harry Pope would go on dying no matter how many Earl Brants got hanged. But with more men like Ned Honeyman seeing the light, there would be fewer needless deaths....The law, in all its majesty, would be there, to punish the guilty, to protect the innocent.

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H O T S P E L L

Sometimes Matt Dillon wondered if he was the right man to fill a marshal's job. Most of the other lawmen he knew took a simple view of their work. They were--or anyway, they represented--the Good. They carried on a kind of war against the Bad, which composed all lawbreakers, big and small. There didn't seem to be anything in between, for them.

To Matt Dillon, though, there was an in-between, and it was a sizeable one. In fact, when you thought about it, it probably comprised almost everyone. He had jailed a good many men whom he didn't consider very evil, or much of a threat to society. Some of them had got a wrong start and couldn't get untracked. Some preferred to take the easy way out rather than trying to make an honest living. Some actually liked the danger and excitement of a life lived outside the law. Most of these were not essentially vicious men--or they didn't act vicious, most of the time.

Once in a while you found one who seemed all evil. Not very often--no more often. than you found a man who seemed all good. You called a man "good" if he was reasonably upright, kept his word with others,

and practiced the accepted virtues most of the time. He could slip once in a while and nobody would blame him much for it, if he didn't slip too badly. If he did make a bad slip--well, Christian talk said he should be forgiven even then. The trouble there was that most professed Christians weren't really very *good* Christians--but that, Matt realized, was a part of the whole picture that kept worrying him.

Take the business of Cope Borden and Rance Bradley. In the simple division of things favored by most lawmen, Borden was one of the Bad. He wasn't one of the all-evil men--that extreme category that Matt Dillon seldom encountered--although he might have approached it. He was certainly cruel and arrogant and ruthless. There was probably little that he would not have done to satisfy his own desires and impulses. But in this *mix-up*, this Borden-Bradley business, what he did and what happened to him was not as troubling to Matt Dillon as what Rance Bradley did, and what happened to Rance.

Rance Bradley was, by the same simple standard, one of the Good people. Matt himself had always

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reckoned Rance a "good" man. That is, he was reasonably upright, generally virtuous, and his slips had always been little ones. He was sober and hard-working and he had won people's respect in and around Dodge City. When he wasn't working he might come in to town for a drink or two with some cronies. He wasn't as generous as some people, but you could trust him not to cheat at poker.

One day, though, Rance Bradley fell from grace, not once but twice. He did it both times by trying to take the law into his own hands. Lynch law, to Matt Dillon, was no law at all--rather, the negation of law, so that, to Matt, Rance Bradley's offense was just as culpable as one committed by a common criminal. And, in both cases, his outburst was directed at Cope Borden.

Nobody in Dodge City paid much attention to Borden the morning he rode in. He was unimposing enough in appearance that he didn't draw a second look from most people. Those few who did look at him attentively saw a low forehead, a surly expression, and small, mean-looking eyes. He had a couple of drinks in a saloon, and when he went back to the street he found Rance Bradley looking closely at the horse

he, Borden, had ridden in.

The horse was branded Bar Lazy B, which was Rance Bradley's iron. Rance couldn't identify the horse as a horse, but he had plenty of saddle stock and there wasn't anything distinctive about this bay mare that Borden had been riding. Anyway, there wasn't any question that it was burned with his brand, so Rance didn't lose any time labeling Cope Borden a horse thief.

In view of Borden's record as it was subsequently revealed, it all might have ended with a gun fight then and there, but Rance had several friends with him and Cope Borden was no fool. He laid a rough tongue on the rancher and asserted that he owned the mare. He either couldn't or wouldn't offer any proof of his ownership, though, so Rance and his friends started to administer some summary justice. Matt Dillon was supposed to be out of town so they must have thought they could get away with it.

They had Borden sitting in the saddle of the Bar Lazy B horse with his wrists tied together and a noose around his neck beneath the projecting ridge beam of a livery barn, when Matt arrived on the scene and broke it up. He had returned to Dodge late the night previous, and

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no one but Chester and a couple of other people knew he was back.

"Rance!" he exclaimed when he rode up. "What do you think you're doing here?" He looked around at the others. "Jim ... Ed ... Frank ... Tim ... what's the matter with you?"

"He stole a horse of mine," Rance Bradley said, unabashed.

"So that means you can lynch him...?"

"Hangin' a horse thief ain't lynching," Rance retorted.

"This heat must be getting to you," Matt said. "All of you. It's making you all act crazy."

Rance Bradley set his chin. "Somethin's got to be done," he announced. "We're here to do it. YOU got no right to interfere."

Matt stared at him, amazed. "Whatever's got to be done, the law will do it," he said. "If this man can't prove he owns the horse he'll be tried. He'll be punished if he's guilty. You all know me, boys. Now clear out of here. All of you. Go find some shade and sit in it. Cool off."

They all gazed at Matt, unspeaking. No one moved.

"You heard me," Matt said. "Get going. I mean it."

"What kind of lawman are you?" Rance exploded at him. "Interferin' with justice!"

"*Justice'?*" Matt repeated. "You know better than that, Rance...Boys," he addressed all of them, "I'm not going to say it again. *Break this up.*"

They exchanged glances. Slowly they turned and drifted away-- all but Rance Bradley. He stood still in seeming indecision. His eyes burned at Matt. Matt pointed at the sixgun tucked inside Bradley's waistband. The rancher's own gun rode in its holster.

"That his?" he asked, gesturing at Cope Borden.

"Yeah."

Matt held out a hand. Rance pulled the gun out and tossed it to the marshal.

"*You're* makin' the mistake," Rance said bitterly. "We could have handled this better." He nodded at Borden. "Look at him. You can tell a gunman by the looks, well's I can. Look at that holster. Look at the butt of his gun."

He jerked around and walked away, stiff-legged. Matt watched him go, then glanced at the gun. There were several notches crudely carved on the butt. He shucked the cartridges out of it and tucked it into his hip pocket. Then he turned to Cope Borden, who had not said a word since he arrived on the scene.

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Now he spoke.

"I'm glad you happened along this mornin'. Ain't often the law gives me a lift."

Matt took out his knife and cut the rope from the man's wrists. Borden reached up and got the noose from around his neck. Then he dismounted.

"Say, what's your handle?" he asked.

"Dillon."

"Cope Borden."

"I've seen you before," Matt said. "seen your face on wanted posters, anyway."

"Any on me now, Dillon?"

"Not lately," Matt admitted.

"They shouldn't be," Borden said, his face hardening. "I just finished six years at Prison Hill."

Matt moved around so he could see the brand on the horse's flank. Borden watched him.

"I didn't steal this horse," he said.

"Rance Bradley brands with a Bar Lazy B."

A humorless grin touched Borden's lips. "Lot o' people use the same burn as that!"

"Not around here."

"Who said I got this mare around here?"

"Well," Matt said patiently, "where did she come from?"

"Arizona. Bought her three weeks or so back, just before I left the Territory."

"Who from?"

"Horse trader in Yuma."

"He give ybu a bill of sale?"

"Might of." Borden's lips twisted, "I don't keep papers much."

"What's his name, then?"

"Ain't sure I can recall..."

"You'd do well to think hard about it," Matt said.

Borden thought. "Sampson, or something like that...no, Saunders--that's it, Saunders."

"Saunders," Matt said. "In Yuma."

"Yeah."

"Did you tell that to Rance Bradley and those others?"

Cope Borden sneered. "Them? Heck, folks like them I don't tell nothin'. Honest, law-abidin' citizens', I suppose they call themselves." He touched his belly. They give me a sick feelin', here in the guts."

Matt looked at him and said nothing. It was plain that Borden cherished the very resentment that he felt against ordinary, honest people. Probably he fed on it, using it to counter some secret desire to be respectable folks himself, an impulse that he felt he had to be ashamed of, and therefore fought against.

"How about my gun?" he was

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saying.

"I'll keep it," Matt told him, "for the time being."

Borden bristled a little, then relaxed. "Well, what happens now?"

"A jail cell for you," Matt said, "while I send a telegram to Yuma. It'll be cooler than here on the street, anyway."

"Yeah," Borden said. "Maybe that's why I'm gonna let you put me in your jail, Dillon--so's I can get out of the heat. But I've had all I want of jails. I better get a fair shake, or I'll bust your egg crate wide open and I don't care who gets hit with the pieces."

"You're making pretty tough talk, Borden," Matt said coldly.

"Why shouldn't I?" he demanded.

"You think I owe you somethin' because you saved me from hangin'? Well, I don't! You never done it for me, I know that. You don't like me. All right, I don't like you." He paused. "I just thought I'd let you know where we stand, mister."

"We can leave it right there, then," Matt said. "I'm afraid I don't want it any different, Borden."

When the answering telegram came in from the sheriff's office in Yuma, Matt was waiting for it in the telegraph office. He took the message from the telegrapher and

read it. It confirmed that Cope Borden had purchased from a horse trader named Saunders a bay mare branded with a Bar Lazy B brand. The trader, had got the horse from Dave Burns, who ran stock east of Yuma under that brand.

Matt stuffed the telegram in his pocket, tossed the man a half dollar, and went out to the street. He headed for the jail. As he passed a saloon he noticed Rance Bradley's horse at the hitchrack. He went into the place.

Rance was standing at the bar with a half-empty bottle of beer in front of him. He mopped the sweat from his face with a blue bandanna as he talked to the bartender. Matt stepped up beside him.

Rance turned his head. A faint frown settled over his face as he waited for Matt to speak.

"I aimed to ride out to your place later, Rance," Matt said. "Now I won't have to."

"What's on your mind?" Rance said brusquely.

"It's about that fellow whose neck you were aching to stretch."

"Look, the last I knew I had two head of saddle stock missin'," Rance began; "then this hombra waltzes into town ridin' one--"

He stopped as Matt took the

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message from his pocket and extended it toward the rancher.

"Read this," the marshal said. "Just got it from Yuma."

Rance took it slowly. He read it through. His lips pouted out. He looked up and handed it back to Matt.

"Guess I made a mistake," he said sourly.

"Yes, Rance," Matt said, "you made a mistake."

"A natural one," Rance persisted. "Why, his looks--you know how a gunman looks, same as I do. I'm tired havin' so many of his kind around Dodge City."

"Well, I don't like his looks or his kind any more than you do," Matt said. "But he hasn't done as much as look cross-eyed here, as far as I know."

"Not here, maybe--but he's done plenty before now, in other places. I know the breed. You do too!"

"Rance, it' sounds almost like you're mad because he *didn't* steal your horse."

He sniffed. "Look, I said I made a mistake."

"If you had lynched him, I'd be holding you for murder right now," Matt pointed out. "You might not be so lucky again. Put some thought on it, Rance."

Rance Bradley's face was flushed and angry as he stared back at Matt. The marshal continued to regard him for a moment. Then he put the message back in his pocket and turned to go out.

"You'll be makin' a mistake," Rance flung at his back, "if you don't run him out before he does pull something raw around here!"

Matt watched Cope Borden as he sat behind his desk and pushed the man's gun across it toward him. Borden grinned as he picked it up, patted it, then dropped it into his holster.

Matt handed him the telegram. "It's as good as a bill of sale," he said, "in case anybody asks you about that horse again."

Borden read it and tossed it down on the desk top. "I got a better answer than that, if any of them 'honest, law-abidin' citizens do ask any more questions." He touched his holster.

"Forget that," Matt warned him. "I protected you when your rights were threatened. I'll arrest you just as quick if I have to."

Borden leaned an arm on the desk and thrust his face close to Matt's. "You goin' to arrest Bradley and them other honest citizens?"

"I am not."

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"They was breakin' the law, wasn't they?"

"They had you pegged as a horse thief," Matt commented. "You wouldn't go out of your way to prove any different."

"Dillon, I wouldn't give that kind the satisfaction of explainin' anything! No matter what I said to 'em they'd've hung me just the same. I know them, I tell you!"

"I know you, too, Borden," Matt told him quietly. "You're a man that's had a lot of trouble. You can still have a lot, if you want it."

Borden stood up straight. "I don't want nothing I can't handle."

"Borden," Matt asked, "where were you headed for when Bradley and the rest grabbed you?"

"I was headin' for Missouri--then," he said defiantly.

"Got a job waiting for you there? Any family?"

"I got nothing there," Borden told him flatly. "Nor anywhere else." He let a disagreeable smile stretch his thin lips.

"Reckon I'll stick around Dodge awhile, Dillon. Now that you know I'm clean as a hound's tooth. I'll walk the streets along with all your other law-abidin' citizens."

Matt decided to run a bluff. "You can walk from one end of town to

the other in five minutes."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Borden demanded.

"It means you've got five minutes. Get out of town, Borden."

"Tell me why I have to," he said softly.

"I don't like you," Matt said. "Reason enough."

Borden beamed as if he had received a compliment.

"Well," he said good-naturedly, "there's no law says you got to like me." His voice grew sharper: "But then there's no law says I got to leave town, is there?"

Matt looked at him mutely.

"Is there?" he demanded.

"No, there isn't," Matt said. "I wish there was."

Borden grinned at him. He cuffed down the brim of his hat and started for the door. He turned his head and winked. "Buy you a drink, Dillon?"

Matt glared at him. Borden shrugged and went out. Matt sat down at his desk again. He ran his fingers through his hair. He wished to heaven he had some real excuse to drive Cope Borden out of Dodge City.

Before the day was out Cope Borden hit the Long Branch. He had a couple of drinks and then sat in on a poker game. Jase Hughes was

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running the game. He wasn't a houseman but he operated in the Long Branch more than anywhere else. Jase was a young man, for a professional gambler, in his twenties. He hadn't been in Dodge long but, although Matt didn't think there was much to the man, he had a courteous manner and an easy grace to his talk that had led a good many folks to feel well disposed toward him.

Cope Borden didn't know any of this. It wouldn't have interested him anyway. The only thing that interested him, after he had lost a pair of big pots, was the way Jase Hughes was dealing. He accused Jase of dealing off the bottom of the deck, proved it, and when Jase started to whip out a pocket derringer beat him to the draw and put a bullet through his heart.

Matt Dillon reached the Long Branch within minutes after the gunfire echoes had faded away. There wasn't much he could do, despite his desire to get something on Borden that he could at least use to force the man to leave town. There were plenty of witnesses who testified, reluctantly, that it looked as if Jase Hughes had been cheating, and that certainly he'd gone for his gun first.

Borden was smirking by the time

they finished telling Matt what they had seen. "You see, Dillon?" he said. "It was self-defense, no question. You'd 'a' done the same thing, in my place."

Matt looked at him searchingly. "You provoked him to draw. You called him a cheat to his face, in front of everybody."

Borden sneered. "That's what any man would 'a' done!"

There was some truth in that, Matt knew. On the frontier, men acted directly. There was scant room for the niceties, the balance of thought and consideration that might uphold a plea of "provocation" in legal proceedings back East. Matt was on thin ice even thinking of it, and he admitted it to himself.

"It was self-defense, wasn't it, Dillon?" Borden repeated, softly, intently. Maybe he wanted Matt to deny it; he might have been wishing that Matt would try to arrest him, and thus force gunplay.

Matt Dillon never knew. The sense of truth and fair play that was in him spoke for him: "It-was self-defense, Bor-den."

Cope Borden's lips showed the ghost of a smile. He looked casually at those gathered around. "Good-by, gentlemen," he said, sarcasm and defiance festooning each syllable,

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and went out.

Kitty came up to Matt. She had been there through it all. "He didn't give Jase much of a chance," she said.

"I'm afraid he didn't have much of a choice," the marshal said.

"You going to devote your life to backin' up that gun-sharp?" Matt looked around. It was Rance Bradley. The rancher's face was dark with an uncontrolled passion.

"That's no kind of talk, Rance," Matt said.

"Who was right about him?" Rance challenged. "I told you he'd pull something raw if you let him hang around Dodge, didn't I?"

Matt's eyes went to the crumpled form of Jase Hughes. "Maybe he's the one that shouldn't have been allowed to hang around."

"You call that the right kind of talk?" Rance threw back at him. "Well, I call it mealy-mouthed blather! Jase Hughes wasn't no Sunday School teacher, but he didn't go around shootin' people up!"

"Well, he tried," Matt rejoined. He was stung by the rancher's accusatory talk. "Jase must have known that if he made free and easy with the pasteboards he'd get called on it."

"I don't say he was an angel,"

Rarice conceded. "What sticks in my craw is that he lost his life because we got a lily-livered lawman that'd rather coddle a killer than stretch the precious law enough to keep a town clean of crawlin' scum that's dangerous every minute they stay!"

"I've had about enough of that, Rance," Matt warned him.

"All right. I just want you to know where I stand." Rance looked at the other men there. "I don't figure I'm alone in this, either. You had your chance to keep the peace here. You muffed it. Now you're aiming to take the easy way out again. There's some of us with guts enough to stand up to a gunman."

He waved his hand and started toward the door. Half a dozen others trailed after him. Matt's gaze as he looked after them was a mingling of pity and indignation.

"There they go," he said to Kitty. "Self-appointed guardians of the law. If Borden only jumped on his horse and fanned it out of town I wouldn't have to worry about them. But he wouldn't do that. He wouldn't want anybody to be able to say he left Dodge in a hurry." He turned to a man standing near the bar. "Would you go look up Doc?" he said. "He'll take care of things here."

The man nodded vigorously and

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started out. Matt headed for the door himself. Kitty looked after him and her lips moved in silent sympathy. This day was a tough one for Matt Dillon. Sometimes the people he served got under his skin.

When Matt reached the street he saw at a glance that the situation was as he had feared. Instead of shaking the dust of Dodge City quickly, Cope Borden had been taking his time. He'd checked his gear, inspected his horse's hoofs, led the animal to a watering trough for a leisurely drink. He had still to hit leather when Rance Bradley came marching out of the Long Branch with his little contingent of self-righteous Citizens.

Now he was standing and facing Rance with a disdainful expression frozen on his face. Rance was posing spraddle-legged at what he probably thought was proper gun-fight distance. The others were spread out to either side of him. As Matt emerged from the saloon he heard Rance say loudly, "Get goin', Borden!"

Cope Borden had time to reply simply, "Make me," and then Matt was between them.

"Rance," he said, "forget this. I'll handle it."

"Handle, handle!" The rancher's

voice rasped at him. "You forfeited your right to handle it. You let him stay here and get away with shooting down that boy. Now we'll handle it my way!"

"Get out of the way, Dillon" Borden said in a tight voice.

"I'll take care of him, and his pals too. Just get out of line."

Matt walked up to him. "Sure," he said, "I know YOU could kill him. And I know one of the others would get YOU."

"You aim to let 'em shoot me down?" Borden demanded bitterly.

"No one's going to be shot down," Matt said patiently. "I was hoping you'd have sense enough to clear out before this developed. Well, you didn't, and now it's up to me to save your worthless hide."

The gunman's eyes brimmed with hate, but he let some of the tension run out of his body. Matt turned back to Rance and the others.

"Defendin' a killer." Rance Bradley's tongue' coated the words with the acid of contempt. "We don't aim to let you get away with it."

Matt did not answer him. The men beside Rance clustered closer, their animus now concentrated on the marshal. Matt's quick side glance located Chester standing to one side of the crowd of watchers. The

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deputy moved up quickly in response to Matt's nod.

"Take Borden back to the office," Matt told him. "He'll be safe there."

Chester took Borden by the arm. The gunman shook his hand off but at a word from the deputy started walking down the street beside him, in the direction of the jail. Someone in the crowd hooted. Borden looked back over his shoulder and grinned. Rance Bradley's voice matched the hardness on his face.

"Don't think this ends it," he said to Matt. "I want him." He corrected himself, looking at the men around him: "We want him, I mean. We're goin' to get him."

"I told you once today," Matt said to them, "now I say it again. Go somewhere and cool off. Go home. Leave this to the law."

Nobody moved. He saw they weren't going to. He'd be a fool to try to run a bluff on them now. Without another word, he turned his back to them and set off after Cope Borden and Chester.

Rance Bradley had his last word. "That what you call law? Protectin' a killer? Turnin' your back on us?"

Yes...that was law. Protecting a dangerous stranger in your midst. Turning a stony face toward your friends and neighbors. Doing it to

protect them--against themselves. Doing it whether they appreciated it or not. Doing it while the stranger laughed at you, mocked you for doing it. Holding up your head in the face of scorn and abuse. But most of all, Matt thought suddenly, protecting the law--protecting it against the onslaught of those who stood to gain the most by upholding it....

The gunman and the deputy were standing in the office when Matt entered. Borden looked unconcerned and indolent. Chester was tense and nervous. As soon as Matt came in he went over to look out the window.

"Give me your gun," Matt said to Borden.

He handed it over to Matt, grinning, getting a big kick out of all this.

Matt looked at him in anger. "That's a good man out there. I mean Rance Bradley. He's worth ten of you, Borden. I never had one bit of trouble with him before, nor did any other honest man. Now, for the second time in one day, he's talking lynch!"

"Look, Dillon," Borden said condescendingly. "I ain't a coward. I'd just as soon take care of this."

"Sure. And shoot four or five men while you're doing it. You'd enjoy

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that, wouldn't you, Borden?"

"You called it," Borden said. "I ain't going to claim the sight of a little blood makes me sick. Especially 'upright' citizens' blood."

Chester turned from the window. "Better take a look, Marshal," he said.

Matt went over. Down the street he could see a small compact group near the Long Branch. Rance Bradley was the center of it. He'd gotten a rifle from somewhere. He had more men backing him now. At least fifteen clustered around him. Matt could see that he was talking to them. He seemed to be making a speech. He raised a clenched fist to emphasize points a couple of times, and when he did Matt could hear the others' blended voices growling endorsement. Finally he pointed a finger dramatically toward the jail and stopped talking. They let loose a ragged cheer.

Chester looked wide-eyed at Matt. "They gonna come down here?"

"Looks like it, Chester."

"Great bunch of law-abidin' citizens you got here, Dillon," Borden said. "Every time I turn around there they are, wantin' to kill me."

"Maybe they're all drunk," Chester said.

"If they were I wouldn't be worried about it," Matt told him. "They're sober, so I'm afraid they mean business."

"Should I put him in a cell?"

"Wait a minute." Matt looked out at the scene on the street. The crowd had come part of the way to the jail. Now they halted. Rance Bradley stepped forward.

"We want that man!" he shouted through cupped hands. "Give him to us or we'll take him--which'll it be?"

Matt looked over at Borden. The gunman seemed untroubled.

"Well," he said, "you goin' to let 'em take me?"

"Go bar the back door," Matt said to Chester. The deputy started for the rear and Matt added, "Bring the shot-guns here."

"Hey," Borden said, "you're talkin' my kind of law now."

Matt pressed his lips together. He kept looking out the window. Borden laughed, a jumble of grunts and wheezes. Matt gave him an angry glance.

"Dillon, I'm likin' this! You have to do your blasted duty, no matter if you hate my guts. You have to protect me and you could stop a slug doin' it. But I reckon you're a good shot, so you'll get some of them out there too!" He winked at Matt.

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"Friends of yours, Dillon?"

"Shut your mouth." Matt said.

Chester came back carrying two shotguns and a box of shells. "All barred up," he reported.

"They'll have to try the front," Matt said. "They wouldn't sneak in the back anyway, the way they're feeling."

"How are they feelin', Dillon?" Borden asked. A second later all three of them hit the floor as a bullet smashed a window pane and whipped across the room.

"Does that answer your question?" Matt said as they lay there.

Rance Bradley's voice floated in from the street. "That show you we mean business?...You hear me, Marshal?"

"They could shoot this place up pretty good if they feel like it," Borden muttered. For the first time he sounded a little worried.

Still on the floor, Matt reached out a hand. Chester gave him one of the shotguns. He took some shells from Chester and loaded the gun. The deputy loaded the other one. Borden watched them.

"Shotgun can tear a man up pretty bad," he said musingly. "I have to hand it to you, Dillon, you know what you're doin'. Let 'em get close enough and you oughta be able to

down two with every shot."

Matt and Chester looked at each other. Outside, Rance Bradley was shouting again.

"You hear me in there, blast it?...I'm givin' you five minutes to hand over that skunk!...If you don't we're bustin' in!"

The others outside shouted their approval. Matt took a deep breath and set his jaw. Chester swallowed audibly. Borden started talking.

"All my life people like that 'a' been gettin' me arrested, throwin' me in jail, kickin' me out of town. Fine honest, up-right citizens. Oh sure." He looked at Matt. "I never been able to get back at 'em the way I wanted. This is the kinda day I've had comin'. Dillon-a lawman doin' it for me."

Chester crawled across the floor and raised himself enough to peek out the window. "Looks like they're gettin' ready to rush us," he said.

Matt got to his feet and went to his side. He looked out. Rance Bradley was tucking his watch back into his pants pocket. The rancher was keeping his eyes on the jail building as he spoke over his shoulder to the others.

"Come on. Time's up. He ain't going to shoot us."

Rance started walking toward the

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jail. Matt poked the barrel of his shotgun out the window. "Don't come any closer, Rance," he called. "I'm warning you!"

The rancher checked his movement. "I give you five minutes, and the time's up. I said we'd bust in, and we're comin'." He took another step forward.

Matt's eyes narrowed. He nestled his cheek on the gun-stock and drew a bead. Borden had got to his feet and was standing behind him. The gunman could not contain himself.

"Man, if this is law I like it!" he crowed.

With a muffled oath, Matt turned on him. He punched Borden in the face, concentrating all the vexation and frustration of the day into the blow. Borden fell and his head bounced on the floor. He rolled over but did not try to get up.

"Chester," Matt said, "how can I shoot people who never did anything wrong till today?"

The deputy stared at him. "What you goin' to do?"

"Unlock the door," Matt said to him.

Chester hesitated an instant, then did as he was told. Matt handed his shotgun to the deputy. "Watch Borden," he said, and opened the door.

Rance Bradley was close now, and the others were right behind him. They all stopped when Matt came out.

"Well, come to your senses?" Rance demanded. "Goin' to give him to us?"

"Yes, I'm giving him to you!" Matt said. He didn't raise his voice much but it crackled with the emotion he felt. "He's all yours--he's right in there, unarmed. Go on in and take him!"

They all looked at him, and then at the door. Some of them looked at Rance, and some of them at each other. Not one of them moved. Not one said anything.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Matt flung at them. "He hasn't got a gun, I told you. Go on in and get him. Take him out, and string him up!" His eyes were hot on them.

"Then I'll track you down, every one of you, and see that you're tried for murder...After that I'll turn in my badge and see if I can forget it."

He waited. Nobody moved, or said a word.

"Well, go on in!" he yelled.

They were shifting nervously. No one was looking at him now. Finally Rance Bradley cleared his throat. He put a hand out in front of him. He seemed to be brushing at something

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unseen that was obscuring his vision:

"I--don't know what got into me, Matt " he said haltingly. "Made me kind of crazy." He looked down at the ground. "I'm sorry...I guess it was the heat."

"I guess it was, Rance," Matt said quietly.

"I'm goin' home," Rance said. He turned to the others. "All of us better go home."

He didn't look at Matt again. He walked away, his shoulders drooped. The rest of them broke up, a few mumbling words of regret aimed at Matt. He lifted a hand to them.

After that, Chester and Cope Borden came out. Borden's face was swollen where Matt's fist had rocked him.

"His horse is saddled," Matt said to Chester. "Go get it."

When the deputy had gone, Matt turned to the gunman. "Now, get out of Dodge," he said. "All the way out. Keep on going. Don't come back, ever. This isn't the law talking now. It's me."

"Yeah," Borden said. "Sure." He seemed chastened then, but when Chester brought his horse and he stepped into the saddle the hard bright cruelty showed through again. "You ain't so smart, Dillon. If they'd rubbed me out I'd never be no problem to you. Now you'll be wonderin' when I'll be comin' back."

Matt stepped close to his horse and looked up at the twisted face. "I said get out...and I said don't come back, ever."

Cope Borden let his gaze lock with the marshal's for a moment. Then he jerked his eyes away and reined around. He went riding off at a trot.

Chester wiped the sweat from his face and shook his head. "A man like him...and you had to defend him," he said sadly.

Matt looked somber. "You know, I was just wishing he had done something here I could have jailed him for." He reached for his tobacco. "It must be the heat; all right." He sighed deeply. "Let's go put those shotguns back in the rack, Chester."

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O V E R L A N D E X P R E S S

A man named Joe Bodry rode into Dodge City. He was a stranger to the place; no one seemed to know where he'd come from. He stayed long enough to let his name be known and to kill a man in a gun fight. His saddled horse was handy and Bodry didn't waste any time hitting leather and making his getaway. By the time Matt Dillon was notified, got to the scene, and asked a few questions, the fugitive had better than half an hour's start.

Matt and Chester got on his trail--Bodry had taken out across the prairie to the northwest--and gave chase. When it became clear that they wouldn't be able to overtake him in a hurry they settled down for a drawn-out pursuit. Matt judged that since Bodry had ridden into Dodge that same day, his horse wasn't too fresh, although it had enough left for an initial fast run. His estimate proved out. Bodry made it across the Smoky Hill River some ninety miles out of Dodge. There his horse played out and fell. Bodry forted up behind the downed animal and waited.

Matt and Chester approached close enough for the marshal to call to Bodry to give up. Bodry responded

by opening fire on them with a sixgun. Matt, who knew Bodry had no rifle, had thought they were beyond effective revolver-fire range. Bodry proved a better shot with a Colt's than he had any right to be. Four shots and one minute later Matt and Chester were both crouched behind their own downed horses, Matt's dying and the deputy's crippled.

Matt and Chester were both equipped with saddle carbines. They pulled them free and got ready to put them into action. Matt didn't feel much like temporizing but he sent one shot a few inches above the spot where he judged Bodry had his head ducked and shouted a last challenge. It brought results. Bodry cautiously fluttered a soiled white handkerchief and called that he was ready to quit. Matt told him to throw out his weapons. One revolver arched up in the air from behind the fallen horse and plunked to the ground several yards to one side. A second one followed. Then Bodry stood up slowly, his hands raised in the air.

Chester looked at Matt anxiously. "You think it's a trick?"

"I don't know," Matt said. "You keep him covered." He called to

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Bodry to stay where he was. He laid his carbine down got to his feet, drew his sixgun, and walked slowly toward the man. When he was ten feet from him he called to Chester to approach. When the deputy was close Matt told Bodry to turn his back. He had Chester look him over for a hide-out gun.

"You satisfied now?" Bodry said.

"Yeah." Matt told him to turn around. Bodry was young, scarcely more than a boy. His face was unlined and pleasant-looking, close to handsome. That made no difference; Matt Dillon had met baby-faced killers before this.

"I'm sort of curious," he said to Bodry; "why didn't you shoot it out?"

"I didn't want to kill anybody, Sheriff," Bodry said.

"Marshal," Matt corrected him. "You killed a man in Dodge."

"He went for his gun, Marshal," Bodry said. "I had to draw. It was him or me."

"A dozen men saw it happen. Some of them say you drew first."

"Sure," Bodry said bitterly. "He had friends there. They were sayin' it the minute after he hit the dust. It's a wonder they didn't start sayin' it with their guns. Maybe because mine was already in my fist. Anyway, that's

why I lit out."

"It made you look guilty," Matt said. "You should have stayed and faced the law if you weren't."

"What kind of a shake would I have got in Dodge?" Bodry protested. "Nobody knows me there."

It irritated Matt. "No matter what you've heard," he said, "we have some law in Dodge besides gun law. I'm a peace officer, not just a lead slinger. 'Lawman,' they call me, and I try to live up to what it means. I don't aim to see innocent folks punished. Or guilty ones go free, either. So you're going back to stand trial," he ended simply.

Bodry looked at him curiously. "Say, who are you?" he said suddenly. "You named yourself 'Marshal'-is it Marshal Dillon?"

"Matt Dillon, yes."

"Yeah, I heard talk about you in Colorado," Bodry said.

"You're all right, accordin' to that. Maybe I made a mistake..."

"Say, how're we goin' to get back to Dodge, Marshal?" Chester broke in. "We ain't got a whole horse between the three of us."

"We crossed the Overland route four, five miles back," Matt said. "We'll have to walk there and wait for the east-bound stage to come

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along. We can ride in to Fort Downer, borrow some Army mounts, and turn them in at Fort Dodge when we reach home."

Chester groaned. "I sure wish your horse had give out closer to the road, Bodry."

"Will it be all right if I lug my saddle back with me?" Bodry asked. "It's about the only thing I got that's worth much."

"Sure," Matt said. "We're not going to leave ours."

Chester groaned again.

Five miles was a long, wearisome walk for men accustomed to horseback travel. Packing heavy saddles made it worse. The three men reached the stage road stumbling with fatigue. They threw themselves down to wait. Matt had some water left in his canteen. They drained it. Bodry, who seemed surprised and grateful when he got an equal share, lay back, closed his eyes and went to sleep. Matt made sure that he wasn't feigning; then he and Chester cat-napped by turns. Time went by. Matt was sitting up, his senses alert. Chester murmured in his sleep, then slowly opened his eyes.

"Think that stage went by 'fore we made it here, Marshal?"

"Get off your back and look down the road," Matt said.

The deputy jumped to his feet and shaded his eyes. "Yonder she comes!" he said happily.

Matt roused Bodry, who yawned and stretched the stiffness from his limbs. He squinted at the far-off, approaching vehicle.

"Suppose they won't stop for us?" he said.

"Driver'll spot our saddles," Matt said. "He'll know we're not road agents."

"Marshal," Bodry said in a quiet voice, "you don't owe me nothing, but...well, I never been arrested before. I wish the people on the stage didn't have to know. I'd be kind of ashamed."

"What do you expect me to do about it?" Matt asked.

"Just don't let 'em know you're takin' me in," Bodry pleaded. "It won't make no difference to you."

Matt looked at him searchingly. "All right," he said finally. "I'm not wearing a badge, anyway."

Bodry relaxed in relief and Matt added, "It's possible the driver or a passenger might know me, I can't help that." Then he warned, "You make one wrong move and it's all off: I'll hogtie you and make you ride on the roof."

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"Don't worry, Marshal," Bodry said.

The stage was nearing them. The driver had slowed up a bit. The three could see a shotgun messenger perched beside the ribbon handler. Both of them were giving the waiting men all their attention. Chester raised his arm. The stage came on, more slowly. The driver pulled to a stop. He and the guard looked down at them suspiciously.

"Take a look at the gent ridin' beside me," the driver said warningly. "That's a shotgun he's totin'."

"He won't need it," Matt answered. "All we want is a ride."

"Where's your hosses?" the driver demanded.

"Lost 'em," Matt said, feeling like a fool. He hoped he wasn't making a mistake, protecting young Bodry this way.

"Ye don't look like greenhorns t' me," came in response.

"We're not," Matt snapped. "It can happen to anyone."

"Truth in that," the guard said to the driver. "I think they're safe enough, Hank."

"All right, it's your treasure box," Hank said. Then to Matt: "How fer ye goin'?"

"Fort Downer," Matt told him.

"'Bout sixty mile, that is. Cost you fifteen cents a mile--you'll be crowdin' us," Hank said, take-it-or-leave-it. "Payable now."

"That's nine dollars." Matt reached for his purse.

"Apiece," Hank said.

Matt counted out two eagles and seven silver dollars. "That's high but we're in no spot to argue." He handed it up to the driver.

"All right," Hank said. "Git in. I dunno how the other passengers are goin' to like this," he muttered.

Matt had been conscious of eyes staring out the coach windows at them. He walked to the door.

"Room for a couple more in here?" he asked, looking in.

There were four men inside. One of them, a white-haired old man with a beaked nose and brilliant blue eyes, said in a cracked voice, "Anybody fool 'nough to lose his horse oughta walk home!"

"There's room for two here, maybe." The speaker was a hard-faced man of forty. His black eyes flicked from Matt to Chester and Bodry. "Not three."

"I guess you're right." Matt turned. "Chester..."

"Aw look--" Chester began.

Matt stepped closer to him. "Well, I don't want Bodry on top," he said

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in a low voice. "You'll have to ride up there."

Chester mumbled but gave in. He tossed the three saddles up and the guard stowed them away. Then he climbed up himself, complaining as he did so that his fare should be less if he couldn't ride inside.

"Overland guarantees a ride, mister," Matt heard the driver fling at him; "comfort's the passenger's problem!"

Matt grinned as he motioned Bodry to enter and then climbed in after him. They squeezed into middle positions on opposite seats, facing each other, Bodry flanked by the hard-faced man and the oldster, Matt by a derby-hatted drummer and a timid-looking Mexican.

Hardface looked at Matt. "You seem to be the boss of this outfit, mister," the black eyes bored at the marshal.

"You might call me the boss," Matt said mildly.

"D I catch your name?"

"I don't see how you could have," Matt said. "It happens to be Dillon."

"Zimmer here," Hardface identified himself. His eyes slid past Bodry, flicked at the old man. "Gramp here calls himself Gant."

The old fellow snorted. "My name is Gant, and I don't give a short hoot

in Hades what any of you call yourselves."

Zimmer grinned. "Kinda crusty, ain't he?" His eyes inventoried Matt, lingered for a moment on the holstered gun.

"What business you in, Dillon?"

Gant snorted again. He glared at Zimmer. "Godamighty, where was you hidin' when they passed the manners out?"

Zimmer's black eyes glittered. "I wasn't talking to you, old man."

"No, but I have t' listen--what's your name?...what's your business?...next'll be where you from, I s'pose! Huh!"

Zimmer leaned forward. He showed his teeth. "Now look, old man," he grated, "any more out o' you, and I'll..."

"Don't try to spook me, I'm too old!" Gant interrupted. He looked at Matt. "Eighty-five mister--'d you believe it?"

"Well, no, Mr. Gant, I wouldn't." Matt welcomed the diversion. "I would never have suspected that."

"Knew Meriwether Lewis, I did," the old man said. "Met him in St. Louis after he come back from his Pacific expedition. Him and Clark went, it was. There was a real man." He glanced contemptuously at Zimmer.

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"Now look who's doing all the talking!" Zimmer jerked out venomously.

"No harm in passing the time, Zimmer," Matt said mildly.

"You trying to mend my manners now?" he demanded.

Matt stared at him. What was rankling in the man? "Take it easy, Zimmer," he said.

The black-eyed man lapsed into a moody silence. Old man Gant rattled on, recalling days and men long past. Matt listened, occasionally putting in a word or two, The miles slipped by. Soon after dusk they rolled into Monument Station, an overnight stop. It was a long, low sod-roofed hut of crude mud-colored bricks. One end was an eating-room; the other contained several bunks for stage passengers.

After an unsavory meal of fat pork and poorly cooked beans, Matt and Chester took Bodry outside for a smoke.

They leaned on the corral fence and rolled cigarettes. Puffing, Matt glanced at Bodry. The young fellow had said little during the ride. Certainly he had given no sign of wanting to escape. Matt was satisfied he had resigned himself to returning to Dodge and facing the music. Nevertheless he did not

intend to relax his watchfulness.

"You said you came from California, Bodry?" He was referring to information the man had given while they were trudging to catch the stage.

"Yeah." Bodry seemed to be thinking about something else but he went on. "I was born in Sacramento. My old man was a Forty-niner. Never struck it lucky, though. He was workin' day labor on a town job when he died."

Chester announced that he was going to sleep outside. The building was poorly ventilated, and smelly within.

"Fella'd suffocate in there," he said.

"All right," Matt told him, "but don't get too cozy. You'll have to stand guard over our friend here half the night. I'll watch him the other half."

"I'm not goin' to run away," Bodry said.

"Maybe not. I recall you did once," Matt said drily.

"Look, Marshal," Bodry's voice went low and earnest. "You don't trust me--yet. Maybe you've got reason not to. But I'm going to tell you something that'll make you believe me. Believe that I'm not an outlaw, I mean."

"What's all this, now?"

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"It's about Zimmer--or this fella that calls himself Zimmer..."

"What about him?," Matt came alert. He'd been thinking about the man some, turning the problem over in his mind. It could be that Zimmer was just one of these naturally testy, prying men, always seeming to look for trouble. Still, he'd thought he'd sensed something more, a tension, a nervousness born of nothing that he could discern on the surface in the stagecoach, not the simple product of a long, wearisome trip.

"Zimmer ain't his real name," Bodry said. "Or anyway it wasn't the name printed under the picture of him I saw tacked on a tree back in California."

Matt dropped his cigarette stub, ground it under his heel. "Go on. Bodry." he said.

"The name on that was Chip Ryan. I think the reward was five hundred dollars."

"You sure it was his picture, though?"

"That I'm sure of, Marshal."

"What was he wanted for?"

"Road-agenting--holding up stages," Bodry replied. "I heard tell how he operates. Or does sometimes, anyhow. Rides in a coach as a passenger, and when his pardners halt the stage, in a canyon

or somewhere, he pulls a gun and cows the other passengers and takes care of the men on top if they're puttin' up resistance. They have an extra horse along and he rides away with them."

"He couldn't pull that very often, once his face was known," Matt observed.

"Sure not," Bodry concurred. "Maybe that's why he's moved east--California's on to him."

Matt was silent. Bodry might be telling the truth. Or he might be fabricating the whole thing. Again, he might actually have seen such a wanted poster and simply be mistaken about the man. Zimmer had seemed tense and unnecessarily irritated by the old man in the coach, but that wasn't much to go on. He might just be ugly-natured, a chip-on-the-shoulder fellow; the frontier had its share of such...

Chester broke in on his thoughts. "You goin' to arrest him, Marshal?"

"Let's use our heads about this," Matt said, a little sharply. "All we have is Bodry's unsupported charge--that this Zimmer is really Chip Ryan, wanted in California for stage robbery. I've never seen a picture of Ryan. You've never seen a picture of Ryan. We don't *know* if one exists. Bodry here asserts that one exists.

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Come to that, we can't be sure such a person as Chip Ryan exists..."

Bodry started to protest.

"Now simmer down," Matt told him. "As a matter of fact, I kind of feel you're telling the truth as you know it. I don't see any reason why you'd be making this up--if it's untrue it wouldn't get you anywhere: probably it'd do the opposite. Still, you might be mistaken about it. Maybe your sudden zeal for righteousness is carrying you away. Anyway, I can scarcely put Zimmer under arrest on such puny evidence as there is. All I can do is keep an eye on him, till we reach Fort Downer. There I can try to check on him."

"The stage'll probably be held up long before we get to Fort Downer, Marshal," Bodry objected.

"If it is, those holdups will have a fight on their hands, Bodry. If it does happen like that I'm thanking you for this. For your sake, I hope you're telling the truth. Now, Chester, I want you and Bodry to go into the station. If you can speak to that shotgun guard without letting Zimmer over-hear you, ask him to come out here where I can talk to him. Then you and Bodry start some talk with Zimmer and keep him occupied till either me or the guard

comes back inside. Buy him a drink if you have to--here's some money, Chester..."

After Bill Berryman, the express guard, had come out and Matt had identified himself, the two held a rapid, whispered conference. Berryman divulged that the express box held almost \$50,000 on this trip. The likeliest place for a holdup this side of Fort Downer would be at a spot called Willow Bend about ten miles east of Monument Station, where some scrubby trees would afford cover for lurking men and saddle animals. Matt told Berryman to instruct Hank to tool the stage through Willow Bend as fast as he could. Chester would be on the roof to give him a hand and Matt would be inside to trump Zimmer's ace and organize the other passengers for resistance.

"Dillon," Bill Berryman whispered tensely. "You sure they're gonna try to pull it this way?"

"No, I'm not sure of it," Matt returned, wondering how much of a straw man he'd been so busily setting up. "I don't even know if they're going to try to pull it at all." If he was honest he'd have to say he didn't even know if "they" existed. "But you've been riding gun long enough to know we've got to play it safe, be

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ready for anything."

"Yeah," Berryman said. "I know."

"And Bill," Matt cautioned, "when you go back in, don't let on anything about all this. Or who I am."

"Okay," Berryman said grimly; "I ain't figgering to spoil our fun, Dillon. Only theirs."

Matt watched him go back in. Berryman would be all right. He knew how to handle trouble when it came. He went on living, and making fair-pay, because he did know. When trouble came beyond his capacity to handle, his life might come to a sudden end, along with his career. Matt Dillon knew a quick poignant hope that tomorrow's span would not encompass such an end for Bill Berryman. If, due to young Joe Bodry's warning, it did not, Matt would see that the kid got the full benefit of his move.

The Overland stage for Fort Downer left Monument Station the next morning after sunup. The Willow Bend danger spot awaited them, some ten miles ahead. Once past that, they should be able to look ahead to a presumably safe journey the rest of the way. Farther east lay a small station, manned by a lone stock tender, which they should reach in the middle of the morning.

Horses could be changed there, but it was not a scheduled passenger stop.

Matt managed to get himself established on the right outside of the forward-facing seat. There he would have his right arm relatively free in case some quick gun work was indicated. Old man Gant was in the middle and Zimmer (unless his name was Ryan) sat on the left side. Bodry again occupied the center position of the opposite seat, between the derby wearer, whose name was Folsom, and the silent Mexican.

Zimmer seemed nervous, clearing his throat and spitting out the coach window on his side when he wasn't growling impatiently about the jolting they were getting--in fact, he seemed to Matt too nervous for an experienced road agent. He wondered if the man had spotted him for a lawman, making him jumpy. Old Gant was less loquacious than yesterday; he directed a couple of comments to Matt but ignored Zimmer entirely. Bodry rode backward, his body swaying with the motion of the coach, his eyelids lowered as though he napped. Matt noticed that his legs were held stiff and straight, and hoped Zimmer didn't. They rolled along at a

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moderate pace until Matt judged they had covered almost ten miles. Suddenly Hank, up on the box, popped his whip and shouted at the leaders. The coach gave a quick jerk ahead so that those on the forward seat had a hard time keeping their places.

Matt's eyes were on Zimmer. The man showed a fleeting surprise at the unexpected acceleration but no undue concern. He spat out the window again and snarled to no one in particular that the fool driver didn't know his business. Old Gant put his hat straight on his head again and allowed the driver was one of the best he'd ever known--and, likewise addressing no one in particular, pointed out that he'd rid with a passel of 'em." Zimmer shot him a hot glance and muttered something that Matt didn't catch. Whatever it was, it made the old man tighten his lips, but he would not retort.

They passed what Matt estimated must be the danger area. The driver eased off the pace. Glancing at Zimmer, Matt saw that his face was calm. The marshal drew a deeper breath and let himself relax. He looked at Bodry, whose eyes were open now. The young man's expression was troubled. Matt began

to wonder whether Bodry had been lying or just mistaken.

They jounced along. Matt tried to make talk but no one would respond except Gant. Even the old man seemed to have a check rein on his tongue, today. Perhaps he was nursing his rancor against Zimmer. After a while, however, he started to crane at the passing scenery and identify land-marks. Finally he saw something that led him to announce that they weren't far from the little change station. Immediately afterward Matt heard a shout from Berryman, riding above.

Matt leaned out for a quick look ahead. The station was in sight, a tiny one-room adobe hut with a corral near by. The corral was empty and there was not a horse anywhere in sight. A thin stream of smoke was coming out of the window facing them. Matt pulled back into the coach.

"Something's wrong at the station," he clipped. He had his gun out. "Be ready for trouble."

Zimmer was sweating. He started to pull his gun.

"Hold, it," Matt said to him; "too crowded in here." Zimmer glared at him. "Just have it handy," Matt said. Zimmer was agitated but he nodded and made no further move toward

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his weapon.

The stage was slowing. Gant cursed. Bodry kept his eyes on Zimmer. The derby-hatted Folsom's face was white and he was trembling. The Mexican turned his head and looked quickly outside. "Indios," he whispered, and crossed himself.

The driver pulled and whoa-ed the teams to a halt. Matt heard him set the brake as Bill Berryman said, "What the devil!" and dropped to the ground. Matt opened the door and stepped out, trying to keep an eye on Zimmer at the same time. Once on the ground he shot another glance at the station. There were a couple of arrows embedded in the half-open door.

Berryman was stalking around, keeping alert. "Indians been here!" he said needlessly to Matt.

"Stealing horses," Matt said. "Wonder how the stock-tender made out."

The others were emerging from the stage. Zimmer was in the lead. He held his gun in his hand now. Gant was close behind him.

"C'manches!" the old man shrilled. "Look at them ar-ruhs!"

He hobbled quickly toward the hut.

Zimmer grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute," he said; "let me take a look

in there."

"We'll all take a look Zimmer." Matt said. Everything seemed to point to an Indian raid, but he still had a nagging suspicion that all was not what it seemed.

The driver, Hank, fell in behind them. "Where's that pore devil of a stocktender?" he said nervously. "They kill him?"

"I'm afraid he's a goner, Hank," Bill Berryman said.

"C'manches for sure!" Gant repeated. "I kin tell them arruhs anywhere!"

They pushed into the hut. The light inside was dim, and vision was further obscured by the smoke that rolled up from a pile of stuff in one corner.

"Tried to fire the place but it's just smolder-in'," Berryman said. "Look..."

The others saw what he did. Three men lay on the floor, one apart from the other two. They stepped forward quickly.

"Ain't this the stocktender?" Berryman asked. "He's breathin'!"

"Yep, that's old Aaron," Hank said. "But who are those other two?" He took a step toward them. Zimmer was there before him. "You can forget these," he said; "they're dead."

"Scalped, too!" Gant almost

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seemed to be enjoying it. "C'manches, I tell you--just like they always was, the murderin' devils!"

Matt doubted that they had been Comanches. Kiowas, maybe. They hadn't done any big-scale marauding since the Palo Duro Canyon defeat but small bands still went hell-raising once in a while. It didn't make much difference, anyway...

"Let's get the stocktender out of this smoke," he said. "Help me carry him out, Bill."

Together they got the frail old man outside. He groaned weakly as they eased him to the ground. His eyelids fluttered open. Matt saw the wound in the man's belly now, and judged he'd be out of his misery in ten minutes.

"It's all right, partner." he said. "The stage is here."

The man's lips moved. "Indians..." he whispered. "Didn't hear 'em...too late..."

"Ask him who them other two was," Hank said plaintively. "What they were doin' here."

"Leave him alone!" Matt heard Zimmer say behind them. "The man's dying!"

The stocktender's eyes opened wide for a moment and he looked at Matt with a terrible urgency. "Drink..." he muttered.

"Get some water, Chester," Matt said. The deputy ran for the water bag on the stage.

"Scalped 'em and stole the horses!" Gant was saying. "They'll never change, reservations won't ever do no good, you can't civilize redskins!"

Chester came with the water bag. Matt took it and helped the old man take a couple of mouthfuls. Most of it ran down his chin but he opened his eyes wide again and looked at Matt.

"Can you hear me?" Matt said.

His lips moved.

"The two men in the station," Matt said; "who were they?"

The wide eyes stared at Matt. A faint frown came. "Don't know...come in, pointed guns at me..." The voice faded. "Was goin' to hide till stage come...sounded like they had partner...on stage..."

"Watch Zimmer!" Matt whispered fiercely to Chester. He saw Bill Berryman straighten up quickly. He bent to the old man again, demanding, "The partner--what was his name, do you know?"

The stocktender tried to say something. It came out a bubble. His eyes clouded, went blank, his slight frame jerked, went lax. There was the sound of a scuffle behind Matt. Bill Berryman cursed.

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Matt let go of the dead man's shoulders and came around. Zimmer had grabbed Gant and was using him as a shield, his left hand a vise on Gant's arm, his right pushing a gun into Gant's back, as they moved backward toward the halted stage. The old man's face had gone pale, his lips quivered as he saw the menacing postures of those facing him and Zimmer. He moved his lips in a voiceless appeal.

"First one makes a move, I kill Gant," Zimmer said hoarsely.

"You know this tags you, Ryan," Matt said.

"Easy!" Gant said shrilly. "This fool's nervous!"

"Driver," the outlaw commanded, "you move over, slow, to the lead team. Take off one's bridle and lead the whole shebang down the road till I say stop. Gant and me are gonna take the stage alone."

Hank looked helplessly at Matt.

"Better do what he says, I'm afraid." Matt told him. "He'll shoot the old man."

Hank moved toward the horses. Ryan backed away farther, trying to keep both the driver and the others within his range of vision. He stumbled and swore. Hank, near the horses, stopped and looked at him. He loosed a flood of profanity at all

of them. It was going to be too hard for him to manage. Matt grasped at his opportunity.

"Listen, Ryan. You've made your play and lost. Give up now, and you face an attempted robbery charge. Keep on, and it will probably be murder."

The bandit glared at him over Gant's shoulder. "Who in blazes are you anyway?"

"Matt Dillon, U.S. Marshal...Ryan, I tell you to submit to arrest."

"You ain't arresting nobody," he said "Unless you want Gant to die, see?" He saw Hank take another step toward the horses. "Wait, you!" he shouted. He was going to lose sight of someone or other, doing it this way. "Get back there with the rest of 'em," he told the driver. "I've changed my mind. All of you line up. Stand apart from each other...then lift your guns out, usin' thumb and one finger, and drop 'em."

Matt played for time. "The westbound stage comes through here sometime today," he said. "You can't hold Gant in front of you forever. What do you think you can do when it comes?"

"He's right," Hank chimed in. "Be here not long after one. I drive it myself half the time. I oughta know."

"Never mind that," Ryan told

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them. "Do what I said. And remember, anyone tries anything, I blow a hole in the old man here."

Chester looked at Matt. "Think he would?" he whispered.

Matt said, "I wonder he hasn't done it by accident already."

"Come on, come on!" Ryan said fiercely.

"Better do what he says, I guess," Matt conceded.

"You first," Ryan said, "I mean you, shotgun."

Slowly Berryman pulled the gun from his holster, gripping it in the delicate way he had been instructed to. He dropped it to the ground and looked blackly at Ryan.

"You next, lawman." It was Matt's turn. He followed suit. He could see no alternative. Ryan held the high cards and there was no point in risking Gant's life. If the bandit made his getaway, which seemed in no wise certain, he would almost certainly be caught again later.

Chester tossed his weapon on the little pile. Hank, the driver, did not carry a gun. The Mexican also was unarmed.

Somewhat to Matt's surprise, Folsom unloaded a small-caliber gun from his pocket and added it to the others. It came Bodry's turn.

He stepped forward. "I got no

gun." he started.

"Hold it right there!" Ryan snapped. "All right, I seen you was wearin' empty holsters when you boarded the stage yesterday. What's the game?"

"The marshal here took 'em," Bodry said. "I'm his prisoner--or was."

Ryan held silence a moment before asking, "What's he takin' you in for?"

"*Was* takin' me in," Bodry corrected. "No more. I killed a man in Dodge. They'd hang me for it."

"What's this 'is-was' stuff?" Ryan growled at him. "I ain't taking you with me, friend."

"Be smart, Ryan," Bodry said. "I can help you, you can help me." His back was to Matt. He moved his left hand be-hind him and made a circle with thumb and forefinger so Matt could see it. "I can hold a gun on these men while you unhitch the horses. We'll ride two of 'em, bareback, and scatter the rest. Head north, keep off the road. It's our only chance." He spread his fingers, wiggled them.

"Bodry," Matt said explosively, "you do this and I'll run you down if I have to chase you to Canada!"

He was watching Ryan as he said it. Bodry must have been, too, as he said, "Better than hangin', anyway,

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Marshal. How about it, Ryan?"

The bandit realized this might represent his one good chance. He grasped it. "All right," he said. "Pick up a gun. Get over here."

Bodry bent and retrieved one of the discarded guns.

"Bodry, I'm warning you..." Matt said loudly.

Bodry said, "I figure I'll live longer this way, Marshal," and stepped toward Ryan and Gant, who was still held in front of the bandit. "Unhitch the horses, Ryan," he said. "I'll keep 'em covered here for us."

It nearly worked. Ryan hesitated. Then he said, "No, friend, I think I better keep *my* gun on 'em while you unhitch the horses."

Bodry looked at him a moment, then stepped around the outlaw and the old man. Ryan put his attention back on the others, his gaze leaving Bodry. He was annoyed when he saw the smile on Matt's face.

"What the blazes you grinnin' at, Marshal?"

"Your new partner has his gun pointed at you, Ryan."

The outlaw felt a gun muzzle poked into his own back.

"Drop it, Ryan, or *you're* a dead man," came to him in Bodry's voice. "I mean it."

"I can still...put a bullet in Gant,"

Ryan said tightly.

"You want to die?" Matt said quickly. "Or face a murder charge? Or just attempted robbery?"

"Drop it," Bodry said again, behind him.

Ryan's face went bleak. His chin quivered, his mouth sagged open. His right arm dropped to his side, the fingers opened to let the gun they held slip to the ground.

"You're all right, Gant," Matt said to the old man. "You're out of danger." He squatted and picked up a gun.

"It worked, Marshal!" Bodry said gleefully. "By golly, it did!"

Old man Gant turned around and spat at Ryan. "I figgered you was no good, Zimmer!" he said. "Now you're headed fer jail, and I say good riddance!"

"Bill," the driver said to the express guard, "we got to put that danged fire out in the station. Them two fellas 're still in there, too!"

Chester had his own gun back now. Matt got out some rawhide thongs and the deputy tied Ryan's wrists behind him. Then Matt turned to Bodry. "I'll take the gun back now."

Bodry stared at him. "You goin' to take me in anyhow?"

"I am."

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"It...well, what's fair about it?"
Bodry said indignantly.

"Look," Matt said. "I'm not a judge. I'm a marshal. You'll get a fair trial. I'll testify to what you've done here. It ought to go all right for you,

Bodry. Now give me the gun."

"All right, Marshal." Bodry handed it over, "I--well, thanks."

"Thanks?" Matt said. "All I did was my job. I'm thanking you."

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T H E P E S T H O L E

A conference was taking place in Matt Dillon's office. Doc Adams was talking earnestly, directing his comments to the three grave-faced men who stood before him. A nervous Chester fidgeted in the background. Matt sat straight in his desk chair, his solemn gaze on Doc Adams.

Tall Kyle Mather, exuding a faintly supercilious arrogance in his professional-gambler get-up, sounded antagonistic. "You was calling this food-poisonin', Doc. What made you change your mind so sudden?" he demanded.

Doc looked at him irritably. He seemed about to make an angry retort, but he did not. "The symptoms, Mather, the symptoms." he began.

He stopped as Kitty Russell, eyes wide and face pale, entered from the door leading to the jail cells. She wore her gaudy Long Branch costume, partly obscured by the white apron she had tied over it.

Ignoring the others in the room, she crossed to Matt and whispered in his ear.

Matt nodded, letting his face show nothing, and Kitty turned and went back. Doc and the others looked at

Matt questioningly. He gestured for them to continue.

"What's this about 'symptoms,' Doctor? What symptoms might you be talking about?"

The speaker was Abe Botkin, a short, stocky man who ran a clothing store on Main Street. As senior member of the city council, he was standing in for the mayor at this meeting.

"I'm talking about high fever," Doc replied. "Nausea. Languid pulse." He paused, then added slowly, "Everything that goes with typhoid."

"Typhoid!" Mike Hanna, the silver-haired, heavy-faced proprietor of the Dodge House, sounded badly shocked.

"You sure of that?"

"I will be sure, as soon as one of them dies on me," Doc said sardonically.

Matt pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

Kyle Mather started waving his hands. "You should've waited for it to happen before you turned the jail here into a danged hospital and sneaked them Long Branch women in here!" he snapped.

"Hold up a minute now," Matt intervened. "It's happened already."

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They all stared at him. "Otto Richter's dead," he said. "Kitty just told me."

They were shocked silent for a moment. Doc Adams rubbed the back of his neck wearily. Mike Hanna cleared his throat.

"As owner of the Dodge House," he said, "I want to offer every co-operation I can," He looked doubtful. "Within reason, that is," he added.

Abe Botkin rubbed his hands together nervously. "What is the next move, Doctor?" he appealed to Adams.

"Discover the source of infection," Doc said quickly. "Find the common cause that's leading to all these cases."

"Very good." Mike Hanna sounded suddenly hopeful. "That'll give you something to shoot at . . ."

"Now don't get ahead of me," Doc warned. "First, we'll have to go on isolating everyone who comes down with it, just as I've been doing here. If that doesn't work, we'll have to quarantine the whole town."

"Now wait!" Hanna blurted.

"Even if it means asking the Governor to call out troops," Doc went on inexorably.

"Hold up one minute now, as our friend the marshal says," Botkin

pleaded. "You can't do this to Dodge City, Doctor."

"The trail herds are due to start rolling in next month," Hanna said. "Think what they mean to us!"

"Gentlemen, Dodge City needs that business," Botkin added. He pointed a finger at Doc. "Without it, maybe we all go broke!"

"Now look," Matt said impatiently, "Doc just found out about this typhoid thing, he didn't invent it."

"Marshal," Kyle Mather said, "I got every dollar I own invested in my place. I need trail hands with pay in their jeans if I'm goin' to stay solvent. Treating sick people is the Doc's business. Closin' people out of Dodge City is somethin' else again!"

Botkin was suddenly conciliatory. "Now, now, gentle-men, let's not get excited." He turned to Adams. "You got an idea, maybe, how it all started-this common-cause thing you mentioned?"

Doc looked unhappy. "Flies...bad food...contaminated water...rotten sanitation," he said. "Who knows?"

"You're a doctor," Hanna barked at him; "you must have some kind of an answer!"

"So far, I've got just one thing to work on," Doc said slowly "Ten days back, the five men that we have here ate dinner together in Bedino's

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cafe. They were making plans for the Germania Society picnic."

"Well, now we're getting someplace," Hanna said importantly.

"I always said Bedino was poisonin' half the town with that filthy rot he calls chili!" Mather crowed.

"Not so fast," Matt said. "Lots of people eat there every day. Nothing's happened to the rest of 'em."

Mather ignored him. "Close up Bedino's, then. Run him out of town. I'll pay him a little visit tonight and tell him to shut down for awhile. No more typhoid." He had it all solved.

"Nobody's going to do anything like that without a court order," Matt told him. "Or unless Doc says so."

They turned to Adams expectantly. "I suppose we ought to close the place up for a few days," he said, "so I can look it over, see if anything's wrong."

"I'll see that a court order's issued," Botkin said eagerly. "I'll get it all ready for you, Marshal."

Matt nodded. Looking relieved, the three men started to go out. Botkin turned at the door.

"Remember, gentlemen, we'd better keep this quiet. The welfare of Dodge City may depend on it."

"What about Kitty and Big Elsie?"

Chester demanded when they had gone. "Couldn't they catch it from them men, Doc?"

"We don't know much about typhoid, Chester," Doc answered. "The most recent medical textbook gives it eight skimpy paragraphs. But it is known that there has to be a common source of infection. That's what we've got to find." He turned to Matt. "I'll go in and look at Richter. Then I'll see about getting him buried."

"It's lucky he hasn't any kin to start asking questions," Matt commented.

"You said a true thing there," Doc responded gravely. "Nothing can start a panic any faster than the little word 'plague.'"

Matt was deeply worried. At first the little medico had been mildly surprised at the seeming coincidence of five unconnected cases of food poisoning, Matt knew. Then he had discovered that all the sick men had eaten dinner together at Bedino's eating place several days before. He was puzzled for a while. He couldn't understand why, if they had eaten some contaminated food, it had taken so long for the results to show up. Then the high fever had appeared, along with the nausea, and he had immediately taken alarm. He confided his troubles to Matt. He

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needed a place to isolate them and he wanted to keep the thing quiet until he was sure. Matt offered to let him use the block of jail cells, which fortunately was currently totally vacant. Doc moved the patients in under cover of darkness. He needed someone to nurse the men, so Matt appealed to Kitty Russell. She had assented promptly. Somewhat to Matt's surprise, she had been able to persuade Big Elsie, one of the Long Branch's favorite entertainers, a tall girl with bountiful physical attributes, to come along and help her. You never really knew people, Matt had reflected, until something big in the line of trouble developed.

Now, armed with a court order, secured on the application of Abe Botkin supported by Dr. Adams's affidavit, he could go into action himself. Up to now, he had been operating as Doc's ally and errand boy. Even this was somewhat foreign to his usual duties, but it was law work, of a kind. Taking Chester with him, he set out for Bedino's place.

They found the building that housed the restaurant darkened. There was nothing surprising in that; Bedino generally closed fairly early. Bedino lived in a couple of rooms in the rear of the building. There was

no sign of a light there, either.

"Maybe he's took sick himself," Chester ventured.

"More likely he's just gone to bed," Matt said. "He opens up early mornings."

"What'll we do, then-come back in the mornin'?"

"Better get it over with now," Matt said. "No sense in letting him beat us out of bed, maybe, and start getting things ready for his breakfast business. We'll go wake him up, break the bad news, and put a padlock on the front door."

He tried the door. It was on the latch. He opened it wide and they went in. The sight revealed to them by the dim moonlight entering by window and open door stopped them in their tracks.

Some of the tables were overturned. Smashed chairs and shattered dishes lay on the floor. For a few moments they stood there in a silence accentuated by the ticking of a clock that sat on one end of the lunch counter.

"Lordy," Chester breathed. "It sure looks like Mather wasn't fooling none."

"Find a lamp somewhere," Matt said tightly. He moved about slowly as Chester struck a match to start his search. Skirting one overturned.

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table, he saw another beyond it that he hadn't noticed before. It looked too small for a table. It took the shape of a man's torso and legs. He hurriedly lit a match of his own and bent over.

The restaurant owner lay sprawled on his back. The wavering matchlight played over his face. His eyes were open wide, staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

"Never mind, Chester." Matt called.

"What is it?" Chester asked, and came slowly toward Matt.

"It's Bedino." Matt let his match flicker out and dropped it. "I don't need a lamp now. *He* never will."

"What do we do now?" Chester said after a minute of silence.

"I go looking for Mather," Matt said. He stayed there in his kneeling position for a while, one fist clenched. When he slowly rose to his feet he thought he had never felt wearier in his life.

He went to Kyle Mather's gambling hall. Fortunately Mather was alone in his private office when Matt got there. He seemed surprised that Matt should see fit to arrest him for what had happened. He tried to argue the marshal out of it but he didn't make any gun trouble.

"I tell you you're wastin' your time,

Dillon," he insisted.

"The man was killed; you'll have to stand trial."

"No jury'll convict me when they know the facts of all this," Mather asserted. "Bedino shouldn't have tried to stand up to me and my boys."

"No use talking," Matt told him. "I'm taking you to jail. Hand over your gun."

When they reached the marshal's office they found Doc there, talking to Kitty. She looked haggard and drawn. When he heard what had happened, Doc turned on Mather in fury.

"You murdering fool! I had questions I wanted to ask Bedino! What those men ate. Where he got the food. Other things. Now I'll never know!"

"Don't yell at me!" the gambler lashed back at him. "If he'd been reasonable he wouldn't 'a' got hurt. I was doin' the town a favor; nobody knew for sure if Botkin could get that court order."

"You couldn't wait for the law, eh?" He turned disgustedly away from Mather and said to Matt, "Well, Richter's taken care of. Luckily I'm coroner as well as attending physician, so there'll be no trouble about that. I suppose I ought

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to go and view Bedino's body."

"No hurry about it," Matt said. "Chester's over there; he'll see that nobody else comes in."

"Kitty held the fort while I was away," Doc told him. "Nobody seems to be any worse."

"I sent Big Elsie back to the Long Branch," Kitty said. "If both of us stayed away all night people might start wondering."

A soft groan sounded from the cell block. Doc glanced that way.

"It's that Linden boy," Kitty said. "He's been calling for his mother. I'll go see to him." She turned away.

Doc watched her go, his face softening. "A good nurse has to be all things to all men...Well, let's have some coffee."

There was a pot on the little stove in the office. Doc picked it up and started to pour a cup.

"Wait'll I salt Mather away, then I'll join you," Matt said.

They heard a faint knock at the door. Doc looked at Matt, put his cup down, and went over to open it. A middle-aged woman with a shawl around her shoulders stood there. Matt recognized her; she was the wife of Fred Sauer, a farmer with a place a few miles outside of Dodge. She leaned against the door jamb, obviously weak.

Doc extended his hand to her. "What is it, Mrs. Sauer?"

"Somebody said you was here, Doctor," she said in a faint voice. "I hitched up the wagon....drove in from our place lookin' for you."

Doc took her arm, led her to a chair. "Sit down here, ma'am," he said. "Where's Fred, anyway?"

"Him and the boy went way over to Morrison's fer somethin'," she told him. "They wasn't comin' home till mornin'."

"You're ill, Mrs. Sauer?"

"I feel so sick an' weak...oh I don't know what's wrong with me, Doctor..."

Having hastily taken her pulse, he put a hand on her brow and looked closely at her eyes. "Little fever, all right." He glanced at Matt and nodded slightly. "Bring my bag, will you, Kitty?" he called. "Now listen to me carefully, Mrs. Sauer."

The woman nodded, closing her eyes.

"Have you eaten any food in Bedino's restaurant lately?"

She shook her head.

"You sure you know the place I mean, Bedino's, over on Front Street?"

"I ain't even been to Dodge fer two months or more."

Matt looked at Kyle Mather. The

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gambler met his eyes, then nervously shifted his gaze.

Doc nodded grimly and came over to them. "Looks like it *was* just a coincidence, those five eating there at the same time," he said in a low voice.

"A good night's work," Matt said bitterly to Mather. "There was no reason at all for what you did..."

Mather cursed. "Why did the fool have to put up a fight?"

Doc, having been handed his bag by Kitty, had it open and was rummaging in it, talking to Mrs. Sauer as he did so.

Matt took the gambler's arm. "In we go," he said. "We'll move the man that was in the cell with Richter out into the corridor."

Mather sounded panicky. "Look, you can't put me back there with them!"

"Get moving," Matt said grimly.

When the shift had been made and he had left Mather standing tense and frightened in a locked cell, Matt came back into the office.

"What about her, Doc?" he said, indicating the ill woman.

Adams was closing his bag. "You stay here with her while I go over to Bedino's," he said. "I'll tell Chester to come and drive her home. From now on I'll isolate the cases where they

occur--and hope for the best."

"She picked it up twelve miles out on the prairie, Doc?" Matt asked curiously.

"It looks that way," Doc replied. "Lord knows how many others have got it," he added tiredly. "Or how they got it."

Twenty-four hours later Doc and Matt had eleven cases logged, and another one of the original five patients had died. In spite of their efforts, some garbled information had made the rounds. A good many people were getting uneasy and curious, Matt was about to enter his office when a gaunt, heavily bearded man hurried up to intercept him.

"Hey, Marshal!"

Matt turned. "Howdy, Dawson."

He saw that the man was extremely agitated. "What's on your mind?"

"Say, I heard Doc Adams has got a lot o' sick fellers cached here in the jail."

"That's right," Matt admitted.

"They say Hank Schiller was one of 'em, and he jest died today."

"That's true, too," Matt said calmly.

"Well, what in the devil is wrong with 'em? What have they got?"

"Seems to be a rash of food poisoning; anyway, that's what the paper says."

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"But why's the Doc got 'em roped off here like this?" Dawson persisted.

"Well Doc's only one man, and he's got an overload of cases," Matt said. "It was handy for him to put 'em in here."

He turned away. Dawson tried to grasp his arm but Matt eluded him, stepped inside, and shut the door in the man's face, Dawson stood there for a moment, red-faced and angry, and then went away.

Kitty was still on duty, drooping a little with fatigue, but she summoned up a small smile for Matt.

"When Chester gets back from the Schiller place," he said gently, "you better go get some sleep. You're wearing yourself out."

"I'm all right," she told him. "Just call me Florence Nightingale."

"I figure even Florence grabbed a few winks now and then," Matt said, patting her arm. "I'm going over and see if Doc's in his office. Don't forget what I said now, if Chester comes in before I get back."

"Okay, boss," she said as he went out.

The light was on in Doc's office but no one was there. Matt rolled a cigarette and slumped down on the bench in front of the place. He had just finished it and flipped the stub away when Doc's buggy rolled down

the street and stopped. Doc was singing in an off-key voice and swaying perilously on the seat. Matt jumped up and hurried out to the rig. Doc wrapped the lines around the whip socket and peered at him foolishly.

"You're drunk," Matt said quietly.

"My boy, you're a diagnostician," Doc said, having some trouble getting the word out. He groped for his bag, got it, and hopped awkwardly out of the buggy.

Matt caught him under one arm. "Doc, this isn't like you."

Doc drew himself up. "Ne' mind all the talk; I've got work to do."

Matt took time to loosen the horse's reins and hitch it to the rack before he followed the medico into the building.

Doc had slipped out of his coat. He dropped it on the floor.

"Gotta cut a couple more notches in m' stethoscope," he muttered. "Blame bugs took two more patients t'day."

"All the more reason for you to stay sober," Matt told him.

"Know what I'm labelin' it now?" Doc demanded, looking blearily at the marshal. "Intestinal complications,' 'f you please!" He took a lurching step toward his desk.

"Take it easy, Doc," Matt said.

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Doc swung around and glared at him. "Know where I come from just now? Meetin' with a committee of virtuous, civic-minded citizens!" he announced loudly.

Matt closed the door quickly. "All right, tell me about it."

Doc pushed a pile of opened medical books and periodicals off the desk top and set his bag down. "I'll tell you what those self-righteous pups did! They practically threatened to lynch me if I said anything in public about an epidemic! They'd brand me a liar, they'd ride me out of town on a rail, they'd..."

"Easy, Doc," Matt pleaded.

"Let me add," he went on, "that our Mr. Botkin and some of the others have sent their families to Topeka!"

He bent over and picked up a book from the floor. "Sewers leaking into the Thames...bugs in the water... \so they get typhoid..." He threw the book down again. "No sewers around here, Matt." Tears came into his eyes. "I'm stuck, Matt...beat..." He let the tears roll down his face. His shoulders started to shake and he sobbed.

There was a pitcher of water on a washstand in a corner of the room. Matt grabbed it and emptied it over the weeping man's head. He gasped,

raised his head and glared at Matt, sputtering, then he sat down in the chair behind his desk, got out a kerchief and wiped his face.

"Well, that was quite a demonstration," he said. "You're an officer, though, and a conscientious one, so you can understand. You can't live with yourself when you're only doing half a job."

Matt took a sheet of paper from his pocket and put it down on the desk top. "Tell me what you think of this idea of mine."

Doc leaned over to squint at it. "This is a list of all the ones that have come down with the typhoid so far. Can you read it?...The names are all German--every one."

Doc looked at it quickly. "So were the two new ones today--Lindlahr and Kuhn."

"Remember the first five?" Matt prodded. "They were at Bedino's--making plans for the German picnic."

Doc rose to his feet. "Lord, yes--the picnic!"

"Could be all these people were there, coming from miles around."

Doc gripped his shoulder. "Matt, maybe you've put your finger on it!" He picked his coat off the floor. "Let's go."

"Where to?"

"The jail. I want to talk to those

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patients we've still got over there."

A few minutes later, they were sitting next to the bed where Alex Berkleman lay. He listened while Doc read him the names from the list Matt had written down. When he had finished the pudgy German thought for a minute.

"Ja," he said finally. "They was all there, Doctor; I'm sure of it."

"What about the food you had to eat?" Doc pressed.

"*Schlachtfest*," Berkleman said. "Pork feast, it means. We ate nothing but pork, just like we do every year. Pork cooked all kinds of ways."

"Who was the cook?" Doc was crumpling the list in his hands.

"Franz Pelzer."

"Pelzer the blacksmith?" Matt asked, surprised.

"Sure," Berkleman said weakly. "Franz was a fine chef, in the old country."

Doc stood up slowly. "Thanks, Alex. Thanks very much."

Matt followed him out of the cell.

"Pelzer the next stop, Doc?"

"Come on!" was Doc's only answer.

They had to get Pelzer out of bed to answer the door. After he let them in, he sat on the edge of his rude cot, a red-faced, fleshy man, his hairy

chest showing through the gaps in his long underwear. He listened as Doc talked, a frown building on his heavy features. When Doc finished, he turned to Matt, his face wrathful.

"What is this, Herr Marshal?" he demanded in a thick voice. "What is he saying to me?"

"You heard him, Pelzer," Matt said.

"*Ja*," he said. "*Ja*, I heard und I don't like what I heard!" He swung his huge head back at Doc. "You are saying my food makes people sick! But I am saying you are wrong, Herr Doktor! Back in Pilsen a chef I was! No woman cooks as good as me!"

"All right, all right," Doc said. "You're a good cook, Franz. Where'd you get the pork you used?"

"At Peter Schrafft's farm," Pelzer answered, somewhat appeased. "Fresh-killed, it was. I was there...I dressed it myself, mit my own hands." He held out his huge paws.

Doc looked at him and frowned. "Have you been feeling a little feverish lately, maybe?" he said, hopefully.

"Hah! I never felt more good in my life!" Pelzer exploded again. "*Und* I eat more sausage than anybody. All der spices I used, *und* I had to make it just right, so I tasted und tasted!" He sat up straight and thrust out his

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great chest. "I look sick, maybe? Go ahead, Doktor, examine me! Nobody is stronger than Pelzer."

Doc shook his head, smiling a little. "No need for that; you look fine, Franz." His voice went lower. "Look, Franz, let's be friends, eh?"

The German shrugged. "Everybody is Franz Pelzer's friend..."

"All right, then," Doc said, "how about cooking a batch of sausage for me tomorrow? Right here on your own stove?"

Pelzer looked at him suspiciously.

"A joke you are making, Doktor?"

"No, Franz, I mean it. I'll go out to Schrafft's and pick up the pork myself."

Pelzer shrugged again. "Sure, I do it," he said. "I make you some sausage--goot sausage."

"Fine!" Doc got up. "We'll be here around twelve o'clock. If you don't mind, we'll bring a young lady with us."

The German looked puzzled but gave his assent. Doc and Matt went out. When they were outside, Matt said: "'Young lady'? Who'll that be, Doc?"

"Kitty Russell," Doc said. When Matt looked a further question at him, he added, "Pelzer is going to cook sausage for *me*. Kitty's going to

cook some for you."

Matt couldn't make him say what he was up to.

The next day at noon they were in Franz Pelzer's big kitchen. Doc had brought in the pork from Schrafft's farm, as promised. Matt was there, and so were Kitty and Chester. Big Elsie was on duty at the jail-infirmary.

Franz Pelzer was happy when they set him to work grinding and kneading the sausage meat. His smile changed to a look of bewilderment when Doc set Kitty to work on another batch of the pork. Matt watched it all with interest. Chester looked on, as puzzled as the ponderous German. Pelzer, watching Kitty frowningly, decided he wanted to help her. She wasn't getting enough seasoning into her batch, any *dummkopf* could see that. He started to remedy the lack. Doc caught him in time, made him desist. He glowered at Kitty until she smiled at him timidly and spread her hands, then he went back to his own kneading. Anyway, he'd show these *Amerikaners* who knew how to make the best sausage...

When they had the meat prepared, Doc had Pelzer cook four sausages made from his batch in one skillet, Kitty four from hers in another.

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Pelzer fussed over his, his huge frame hovering above the hot stove, on ludicrous tiptoes. Kitty handled her skillet matter-of-factly on the other side of the big old wood-burner. The German leaned over and sniffed the aroma rising from his sausages, his fat face registering deep satisfaction. Then he glanced at Kitty's skillet and his face hardened. Her eyebrows went up. She caught Matt grinning at her and she winked at him surreptitiously. Bending over her own skillet, she took a deep breath and let a beatific smile show on her face. Matt chuckled. She beamed over at the scowling Pelzer. When the sausages were done, Doc had Matt sit down at the table. He placed the ones Kitty had prepared on a plate in front of the marshal. Then he ladled some out of Pelzer's skillet onto another plate and went to the other side of the table with it.

"Sorry, folks," he said to the others. "This has got to be a private *schlachtfest*. Are you ready, Marshal?"

Matt started to pick up a fork, then changed his mind. He put the fork down, got to his feet, and went part way around the table.

"I move we call this off," he said.

"What's the matter?" Doc said chidingly. "Afraid of Kitty's

cooking?"

"I've got a feeling this thing could cost us a doctor, that's all," Matt said quietly; "and we can't afford to lose one."

Pelzer was staring at them, open-mouthed. "Gentlemen, what iss this? Please, you are going to eat my goot sausages?"

"Yeah, what you arguin' about, anyhow?" It was Chester's voice, coming from near the stove. "This here sausage the Dutchman cooked is right tasty!"

Matt and Doc swung around simultaneously. Chester was standing by the stove. He had just finished swallowing. He was spearing the fork he held into another portion of sausage left in Pelzer's skillet.

Doc fairly leaped at him. He grabbed the skillet, knocked the fork out of Chester's hand. Chester stared at him as if he were out of his mind.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "There was some left here, and I was only--"

"Oh shut up!" Doc barked at him. He turned and said to Kitty, "You and Chester take a little walk outside, will you?"

She didn't understand this any more than Chester did but she nodded to Doc and head-gestured at Chester. His face still a mystified

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mask, the deputy followed her out the door.

"You too, Franz," Doc said to Pelzer. "I want to talk to the marshal alone."

The German looked at them, his face red. He started to say something, and then decided against it. He was clearly dealing with unbalanced people. He sighed heavily and went out.

Matt looked at Doc. "Well, are you going to let me in on it now?"

"Sure," Doc said. He brushed past Matt, sat down at the table, and calmly started to eat the sausages Kitty had fixed.

"I'll gladly let you in on it, now. Until you interfered, in your high-handed way, I was conducting a controlled scientific experiment."

"Then what are you doing now?"

"I'm eating the food Kitty cooked, since Chester helped himself to what Franz cooked."

Matt looked at him. "So whatever you expected might happen to you may now happen to Chester?"

"Exactly," Doc said. "If I'm right in my guess, Chester will get typhoid, and nothing will happen to me."

"Figured it was like that."

Doc chewed another mouthful and swallowed it. "At first I was sure it must be the food those people ate at

the picnic. But this big hulk of a Franz said he ate more than anybody else there, and looking at him, I had to believe him. He was still walking around, sound and healthy. So I had a sudden hunch."

"What d'you mean, Doc?"

"There's nothing like it in the medical literature, or at least I haven't seen it if there is. But maybe--just maybe--Franz Pelter carries the bug around with him. He prepares food, other people eat it--and bang!"

"But why wouldn't he get it himself?"

"I don't know, Matt. Somehow he's got a natural protection against it, within his own body. He takes it around with him but it never makes *him* sick. That's a guess, no more."

"So if Chester comes down with it, you'll be sure what caused the epidemic?"

"That's it," Doc said gravely. "To prove my point, Chester has to get sick. Maybe die."

All they could do after that was wait. Doc would have liked to spend all his time watching Chester, but he couldn't afford to. Several more cases turned up, all among the Germans in and around Dodge who had attended what Doc was now privately thinking of as the fatal picnic; and there were two more

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deaths. It all made a heavy and wearisome task, added to his usual rounds, but he maintained a pace and a light-hearted manner that continually surprised Matt.

One day, right after Doc had gone over Chester painstakingly and found nothing wrong. Matt was talking to the medico when Abe Botkin bustled in. He was beaming; he bore good news, he thought.

"Came over to tell you that you win, Doctor," he announced.

"People have been talking plague and they're beginning to get frightened. We've decided to send a telegram to the Governor."

"Now hold on," Doc remonstrated, as Botkin, who was already on his way out, looked back at him inquiringly.

"This time I'm asking for a few days."

"By your own report, we've got eighteen cases now!" Botkin exclaimed. "Can you say that the end is in sight, Doctor?"

"I'm waiting for the outcome of one particular case," Doc told him. "If it comes out the way I think it will, I'll be able to give Dodge a clean bill of health."

With Matt adding his plea to Doc's, Botkin finally agreed to hold off for another day. The added

twenty-four hours were enough. The next morning Matt suddenly realized that Chester had been wiping his forehead a great deal. When the deputy wondered aloud why he'd been feeling so doggone thirsty all morning, Matt hot-footed it to Doc's office.

"Come on!" he said, sticking his head through the door-way.

"Something's wrong with Chester!" When they got back to the marshal's office, they found Chester sprawled on the floor.

That was the beginning of the end. They let Botkin in on it all, and he postponed indefinitely the sending of the appeal to the Governor. A public announcement appeared on the front page of *Dodge City Times*, as Matt had asked, quoting Doc Adams to the effect that the epidemic was under control and that anyone who skinned out of Dodge on account of it was a triple-dyed fool.

Matt read it through. "What d'you mean, Doc: 'under con-trol'?"

"I mean Pelzer," Doc answered. "As long as he doesn't touch any food that people put in their mouths, we won't have any problem."

"Did you make him understand that?" Matt said.

"I had a real heart-to-heart talk with Franz," Doc answered. He gave

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a little chuckle. "When I was through he was so scared he swore he wasn't going to cook for himself, even."

"Any idea where *he* could have picked up the bug?"

"Well, he was in Kansas City not long ago, visiting a sister of his. He probably got it there somehow. He doesn't know."

"All we've got to worry about now is Chester, I guess," Matt said. "Don't worry; I think he'll pull through."

If care meant anything, Matt thought, Doc had to be right. With Matt and Kitty and Doc all deeply concerned, Chester got around-the-clock attention. Less than twelve hours after Doc had made his optimistic prediction, Chester opened his eyes and, for the first time since he'd been put to bed,

recognized Matt, who was standing anxiously beside the bed.

"Welcome back, Chester," Matt said with a wide grin of relief. "You left us kind of sudden, boy."

"I'm sure glad...to be back," Chester said weakly. He made an effort to raise himself up on one elbow.

Matt eased him back, "No hurry getting up," he said. "I expect you'll be a mite under the weather for a few days yet. I'll do my best to keep things under control till you get around again."

Chester smiled faintly. "Just le' me know if you need any help, Marshal." Then: "What in heck happened, anyway?"

"We can spell it all out later," Matt told him. "For now, we'll just say it was something you ate."

T H E E N D