

# GUNSMOKE

Showdown on Front Street

Authorized edition based on the CBS Television Series

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A WHITMAN BOOK

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1

*The Threat*

WHAT IN BLAZES . . ." gasped the fringed-shirted buffalo hunter as he poked his head out of the general store and gaped up Front Street. "Hustle back inside! Fast!"

The aproned storekeeper, a step behind his customer and carrying a heavy box of supplies, stared out unbelievably at Dodge City's main thoroughfare. Down the wide, dirt, store-lined street came an undulating sea of dusty beef—a mooing mass of trotting cattle!

Past the general store and the bank the herd clumped, now moving faster and bellowing louder, as if asserting their claim over the town's only real street.

"Giaal!" shouted a drover with the herd, rising in the stirrups on his sorrel and waving his black hat at the cattle around him.

"Git along!" encouraged his companion, on a black horse, flicking his lariat right and left against the bounding rumps before him.

The two lean Texans, their faces half hidden by beards and moustaches that bore witness to their long trail drive north, shook with laughter as they watched the small herd push its way down the street.

"This'll give the proud marshal a taste of things to come," the red-haired one shouted, waving his sombrero and racing along to haze two steers toward an open doorway.

"That's it, Red!" The other cowboy roared with laughter while Red sent the two steers up onto the boardwalk that fronted one of Dodge's hotels.

Inside, a bald clerk behind the mahogany counter was wiping his glasses in preparation for his day's labors over the guest register. Suddenly his jaw dropped in stunned surprise.

"Moooooaa!" bawled the lead steer, and close to a ton of Texas beef started plodding over the hotel's red carpeting.

"Out! Out!" shrieked the clerk, shoving his glasses on with one hand and with the other waving the register at the two steers.

The puzzled bovines snuffled and licked the unfamiliar carpet hesitantly. They grunted their disapproval of the taste. Maybe it *was* the most expensive imported carpet west of the Mississippi, but to the lobby-grazing steers it was a tasteless ground cover that could never replace buffalo grass.

"Get them out of here!" shouted the clerk. He came from behind the desk and thumped one steer on the side with the register.

"How about a double room for 'em?" Red, on his horse, had invaded the lobby, and the imitation crystal chandelier tinkled as he roared.

"The marshal will fix you—"

"Call him!" Red taunted. "I eat badge-toters like

your marshal for breakfast!"

By now more of the herd, with Frank, the second drover, had entered the hotel. Some of the steers had made their appearance in the staid dining room. Half a dozen breakfasting merchants and transient salesmen had dropped knives and forks, gulped down coffee, or darted for the kitchen.

"Swing some of 'em in there," Red suggested, pointing to a laundry adjoining the lobby. "Just tell 'em no starch, Frank."

Frank nodded and, with a grin, swung his lariat right and left, cutting out half a dozen steers. He sent them charging through the open doorway.

Two Chinese, industriously pushing heavy irons, looked up from their work. A wild flow of Chinese oaths and exclamations followed, all lost on the four-legged intruders, who were rapidly festooned with shirts, sheets, and petticoats.

Farther down the street, the local barber watched two of the cattle push open his door and begin licking the foamy shaving cream from the face of a dozing customer. "Find Dillon!" the barber pleaded—to no one in particular.

"Marshal! Marshal!"

Matt Dillon, checking a stack of WANTED! posters in the back room jail of his office, heard running footsteps.

"Come quick!" A breathless waiter from the hotel had burst into the back room, close to panic.

Matt Dillon straightened up. Well over six feet, he towered above his excited caller. "What's wrong?"

"Couple of Texans are stampeding a herd clean through every store and place in town, Marshall!" the man replied between breaths. "They sent their filthy critters into our hotel dining room and—"

"All right," Matt interrupted. His blue eyes turned cold, and he yanked his wide-brimmed white hat off its accustomed peg on the jail's brick wall. As Matt Dillon strode to the doorway, his right hand automatically swept to the butt of his six-gun. He eased it out of the holster, and then, assured that if he needed it the revolver would respond to his draw, he let it slide back.

"He looks lonely!" shouted Red, seeing Dillon emerge from the office doorway. "Let's give him some company!"

Before Matt had taken two strides toward the street, the playful Texans sent a dozen complaining steers trotting straight at him. Matt saw the bobbing horns bearing down on him, forcing him flat against the office wall.

"Back!" he yelled, waving his arms. They pressed closer, crushing against him. He felt a nudge in his side as one cow lowered its head and shoved. Despite his size and strength, Matt Dillon was spilled into the dust of Front Street.

"Hey!" he protested, landing on all fours.

Before he could rise, the Texans, now at either end of the street, sent several more of the herd trotting toward the fallen lawman. Matt tried getting to his feet, but the butting forehead of an oncoming white-face knocked him down again. Sharp hooves were

planted painfully on his back as the steer moved on. Matt rolled, jackknifing his knees in a desperate effort to avoid the trampling hooves and lowered horns.

"Don't we have us a real fine game going here?" Red laughed.

Frank nodded in smiling agreement. Through the cloud of dust the steers were kicking up, they caught momentary glimpses of Matt Dillon twisting and turning to escape being stomped on or horned.

"Cut that out!"

The speaker was Festus, and his bearded face was flushed. He swung up a shotgun that he had pulled from behind a support column, where he had cached it for just such an emergency. But before he could take aim at the taunting Texans, Frank sent his quarter horse racing for the scruffy deputy. Frank's lariat twirled and shot out in a blur of white. He yanked hard, and an astonished Festus felt the rope bite around his suddenly pinned arms. Another tug on the tightened noose forced him to drop the shotgun. Then Frank rode around Festus and the post behind him. After the fifth turn around the post, Festus was helplessly tied to it.

"Now, you just watch, like a good boy," jested the Texan as he dropped the free end of the lasso.

Festus fumed and strained, but he could not break free. Along the street, faces pressed against store and café windows, watching the helpless deputy stamping his boots in frustrated rage.

By now the whole street was a sea of cow flesh. At one end of the street Red sat tall, hazing the cattle back

when they tried to continue beyond him. At the other end, Frank cut through the whitefaces to block their exit that way. No one could leave a store without pushing against a side of sweaty beef.

"We got the town nice and boxed in," chortled Red triumphantly.

"Yeah!" Frank shouted back across the carpet of cow flesh. "And that marshal in the middle must sure look silly!"

Both Texans grinned and began looking for a sign of Matt Dillon. As the steers ebbed and flowed between the lines of storefronts, the pair searched in vain for the huge form of the marshal, who only moments ago had been sprawled in the dirt.

"Where is the badge-toter?" Red wondered half aloud, rearing his horse to get a better look down on the herd before him.

Matt Dillon was no longer on Front Street. While the two Texans had been busy with Festus, he had crawled between the legs of the steers to one side of the street. His face caked with dirt and his clothes a uniform outfit of grimy brown, he was hardly noticeable as he emerged at the fringe of the milling herd. Grabbing on to a trellis by the side of the general store at the corner of the street, Matt began climbing to the roof. He could have drawn his gun on the Texans, but he realized that a few shots would send the idly circling whitefaces bolting through town, smashing windows and doors and trampling people, in a panicky stampede to escape from the gunfire.

He would have to use another trick, and that's why

he was hauling himself onto the sloping roof of the general store. Staying flat, he inched forward. His estimate of the situation had been correct. The roof brought him directly above Red, who was riding playfully and proudly as he gazed at his handiwork, which now completely blocked the city's main street.

Matt rose to one knee, judged the distance between the roof and the rider below, and then hurled himself forward.

"Look out!" yelled Frank from the opposite end of the street.

It was too late! Matt Dillon's giant frame, hurtling from the roof, was already casting a shadow over Red.

The lean Texan caught sight of Matt, but by then the powerful hands were tugging at him. He was jerked from his saddle and slammed to the ground. Dillon cushioned his own fall by landing on top of Red.

The wind was knocked out of Red, but his reactions were not slowed. His right hand clawed for a white-handled Peacemaker that was poked under his belt.

"No, you don't," Matt growled.

His fingers tightened around Red's wrist as Red tried to turn the gun's nose toward the man on top of him. Matt's fingers squeezed harder; he shook the man's arm just once. Red winced, and the gun fell harmlessly to the ground.

"I'll fix him!" roared Frank, cutting his way through the cattle that lined the street. Just then Dillon rose, swinging his prisoner to his feet at the same time. Frank stopped short. He saw that he had no chance of rescuing his partner. Rearing his quick quarter horse,

he about-faced and, with an encouraging shout to Red, raced off in the opposite direction, heading for the toll bridge on his way out of Dodge. The herd dutifully trotted out behind him.

"Nice beef, aren't they?" commented Red with studied casualness, watching the street slowly being cleared of cattle.

"You can admire them from your cell window," Matt replied, shoving the Texan toward the jail.

"The cooler?" he gasped in feigned amazement. "Now, why'd you want to throw me into the cooler, Marshal?"

"For little things," Matt answered, "like endangering property and life—namely, mine."

"Why, Marshal," scolded the Texan, while Matt unwound the lariat to free Festus, "do you rightly reckon we'd have harmed a hair on your handsome head?"

Matt didn't reply, tugging instead on the noose and letting Festus step out of his bonds.

"Nice work, Matt!" shouted the barber from his doorway.

"Knew we could count on you."

"That'll tame those Texans."

Silently Matt wondered where all those encouraging supporters were only minutes before, when he felt so terribly alone lying flat on the street with dozens of hooves stomping around him.

"In you go!" commanded Festus, swinging open the cell door.

"Now, look here," protested the Texan, "I didn't

harm nobody. You know I didn't!"

"Pure luck," replied Matt, propelling him into the small cell furnished with only a bunk. Light came from a two-foot-square barred window in the brick wall.

The door slammed shut, and Festus dutifully turned the key and tested the lock. He walked back into the main office, returning the key ring to its wall peg. Matt sat at his desk, filling out the charge sheet.

"Look through the dodgers, Festus," he ordered, shoving a pile of slightly curling two-foot posters at his deputy.

Slowly Festus turned over each sheet, after studying the hostile face staring at him from under the blazing letters: REWARD.

"No, Matthew," he finally announced, replacing the pile on the marshal's desk. "Our friend in there's clean."

Matt sighed and, placing his hands on the arms of his wooden desk chair, rose reluctantly to his feet. He began slapping his clothes, half choking on the resulting cloud of dust. Taking a pad and pencil into the rear room, he stared coldly through the bars at their prisoner.

The twenty-year-old youth lay on the bunk, his flaming red hair resting on his bunched-up jacket as he twanged on a Jew's harp.

"Name?" demanded Dillon.

"Boys all call me 'Red.' Can't figure out why."

"The judge hereabouts is more formal," the marshal informed him. "Name?"

"Lawrence Fenton. Why are you wasting your time

with me on such a minor offense?"

"I don't consider assault a minor offense."

"Why, Marshal," pooh-poohed the youth, with a sparkle in his eyes. "You really reckon we wanted to hurt a hair on that tired head of yours?"

"The judge'll decide that, Fenton. Meanwhile, figure you found yourself a home for a spell."

"Not too long a spell, badge-toter!" Red sneered, swinging his feet over the bunk side and rising. "My pals will bust me out of this shack!"

"Been tried before," Matt advised him. "Didn't work."

The youth's eyes now almost matched his hair; they blazed in anger as he gripped the cold cell bars. "You don't know who you're tangling with, Mister Marshall! My outfit's big! Big enough to pull down your little jail and pull the town down over your ears! Check the brand on my horse—"

"Circle K," Matt informed him quietly. "I had a chance to study the brand on your steers—from ground level."

"Mister, you'd better say that outfit's name with a heap more respect. There's a crowd of them coming up the trail, not three days out of Dodge. We were sent with the advance part of the herd to stake us out some grazing space—space for fifteen thousand beeves. And when the boys hear tell that you dumped one of the outfit into the calaboose, you're dead!"

Matt Dillon didn't bother to reply. He was already striding toward the front door. But his eyes hardly hid his troubled thoughts.

Front Street was now quiet—or, rather, back to its bustling normal routine. A nine-yoke wagon lumbered down the street, carrying a buffalo hunter, drawing on his pipe as he flicked a whip over the oxen, and his skinner, an Indian, sitting straight as a ramrod and silent at his side. Behind them were piled over a hundred buffalo hides, stiff as boards after some five days of drying and curing. The wagon headed for the railroad, where the hides would fetch an average of two dollars apiece. Weeks of lonely hunting on the plains would finally pay off, but hardly a person bothered even to glance at the passing pile of hides. Well-dressed cattle buyers in city clothes were heading for the few livable hotels, news of the Texas herds' nearing the local stockpens having reached them. Matt saw a few poker-faced Tonkawa Indians shuffle across the street, blankets draped over their backs, lone feathers poking out of their braided hair. They moved toward the general store, clutching bags of gold dust with which to buy supplies. He noted the pearl-gray suit and black derby of a gambler who must have stepped off the morning train. His right trouser pocket bulged with a bankroll he hoped to fatten further when the trail hands received their pay.

Nodding greetings to the passing townfolk, Matt cut his way through the colorful crowd to the Long Branch. His large hand reached out, shoving back a swinging door. Smoke stung his eyes for a moment.

"Buy you some coffee," a friendly voice greeted him. "Almost figured you might be giving me some work, Matt."



Matt eased himself into a chair beside Doc Adams. The older man playfully stroked his gray moustache.

"Did I hear coffee ordered?" Kitty came to their table with two mugs of steaming coffee and placed them before the men. Matt glanced up at the handsome auburn-haired woman. His gaze met hers for a moment, and he sensed that someone was glad he had survived his trying, lonely minutes on Front Street.

"Take sugar," suggested Doc, spooning some into Matt's cup. "The way you burn up energy, you need it."

"But one of them got away," Kitty commented.

"He'll be back," Matt replied, after a trial sip told him the coffee was still far too hot, "and he'll bring company."

"Just a wild trail hand, Matt," Kitty ventured.

Doc nodded in agreement. They had lived in Dodge too long not to have observed the pattern of the seasons. Each year when the Texans pushed their beef over the long trail from the southern grazing lands to the rail line at Dodge, there was explosive horseplay in the cow town. After weeks of choking on dust kicked up by the slow-moving steers; after endless hours of chasing strays through the leg-lashing brush; after the days with no companionship but grunting whitefaces and bearded, grimy fellow cowpokes—after all those exhausting and demanding hours, days, and weeks, they hit Dodge. The end of the trail! Payday! The stores with the fresh-looking clothes, the bathhouse with its welcome hot water, the barber with his sharp razor, and the dance hall with its music

and flirtatious-eyed hostesses—these were what had spurred them on across the hundreds of miles of stifling plains. Why shouldn't they explode in joyous enthusiasm at the prospect of rest and fun? But Matt shook his head.

"No. Call it a hunch, but the way they hit me. . . . That wasn't the usual horsing around. It was like a calling card."

Kitty frowned in puzzlement. "Calling card?"

"Yes." Matt nodded, finally taking a gulp of the coffee. "The boy in the cooler warned me—more are coming."

"Of course more are coming, Matt," Doc scoffed. "Why, some two hundred thousand steers are hoofing it this way right now. And that means plenty of cowpokes will be escorting them."

Matt thoughtfully replaced the cup on the saucer. "No, Doc, this time I figure it's different. What you saw were just the opening shots. Someone's out to smoke up Dodge, and that means trouble—large trouble."

Kitty and Doc sensed the chill foreboding in Matt's voice. They exchanged a glance. Each was equally positive that Matt's close call on the street had colored his thinking. They were certain that he was wrong.

Three days out of Dodge, a strange covered wagon rested on the plains in striking splendor. Its canvas sides were painted sky blue. A matching team of six was hitched to it—powerful black horses, grazing now as they rested.

Inside, the wagon was decorated like a luxurious office. There was a small antique Louis XV desk, its highly polished brown wood gleaming. Two bronze student lamps with yellow globes softly lit the wagon's interior. A bookcase stuffed with leather-bound volumes, a small inlaid dining table, a bed with a sumptuous green velvet spread, and some plush upholstered chairs completed the unlikely furnishings of the cattleman's mobile headquarters. King Kincaid, owner of the Circle K, traveled in regal style.

His head of wavy gray hair could be seen through a thin veil of cigar smoke as he listened to a lean, tall Texan clothed completely in white—from his broad, white sombrero, white shirt, white trousers, and white gun belt right down to his white leather boots.

"You're certain, Clay?" King Kincaid demanded between puffs, his steely gray eyes focusing on the lithe gunfighter.

"Yeah, King," Clay replied, his right palm polishing his pearly white gun butt out of nervous habit. "Just about now, Frank and Red should be giving Dillon a sample of what's coming. If you listen real close," he laughed, "you might even hear Dillon starting to scream for help!"

## 2

*The Deadline*

THE DIAMOND in Kincaid's ring caught the slanting sunlight through the wagon's entrance and sparkled brilliantly as he stubbed out his Havana cigar. Clay studied the dying butt. It was a silent signal for his dismissal, but the cocky arrogance of a gunman who had faced and denied death over forty times kept him rooted to the thick Persian carpeting that lined the wagon's floor.

"I heard your report," Kincaid quietly noted.

"You're spending a heap of money on men," Clay replied, half leaning against the curving upholstered arm of an easy chair, as if he had been invited to remain. "My salary's chicken feed when you add up all the other gun toters on the payroll—"

"Making the payroll's my worry," Kincaid snapped sternly.

"I can help better if I know what it's all—"

"You'll get your orders day by day, Clay, even hour by hour. Just obey them. And the order for now is vamoose!"

"If you'll excuse me, Kincaid," the white-garbed

Texan drawled, slowly straightening up, "I've got to see if my horse is getting his proper feed. But if you need me—"

"You'll come running," Kincaid concluded softly. He watched the gunman start down the steps from the elaborate wagon-office.

Long ago Clay had learned to control and conceal his feelings. As a gunfighter, he realized his life depended on keeping his Colt clean and his emotions cool. Let anger shake up the other fellow. Taunt, tease, and torment him till rage made his hand tremble and destroyed his aim. That was the trick of his trade. Now, he realized, Kincaid was trying to tell him who was boss. "Let him figure he is, for now," mused Clay. "Long as he pays, he's boss. But something mighty big's at stake, and I'm not getting cut out of that for mere wages."

Clay's big silver rowels scratched a trail in the dust of the path to his horses. Around him the mooing, milling herd could be seen as far as the eye could gaze. Horns bobbed and flashed in the sunlight as cowhands slowly rode among the beeves, soothing and cajoling them to rest. Near the chuck wagon, already set up and sending out the warm fragrance of brewing coffee, the horse wrangler had set up a roped-off corral. The cowhands' extra horses trotted and stamped inside the close confines, awaiting their masters' attentions or a friendly pat from the sixty-year-old wrangler, who kept a watchful eye on every remount in his command.

"The black or white one, Clay?" the wrinkled-faced wrangler asked as Clay strode up.

"The white one," replied the Texan seriously. "I'm riding on into Dodge on a little business for the boss. Have him saddled by the time I change my outfit."

The wrangler nodded, dropped the girth he was repairing, and ducked under the corral rope, moving slowly toward a powerful white stallion.

Clay reached into the chuck wagon and fished out his bedroll. Untying it, he flipped it open and gazed at the black outfit that lay there. In a minute the towering Texan was transformed from the man in white to the man in black, even down to the black butts of the pistols that now rested in his jet holsters. He tossed his bedroll back into the wagon and came around to the front.

"What's ready?" he asked of the paunchy cook, who was stirring a pot over a low fire of cow chips.

"How about some pie?" the sweaty cook replied.

Sitting on a white saddle on the dusty ground, Clay wolfed down a slab of pie and washed it down with lukewarm coffee. There'd be a good meal at the end of the ride, he thought, unless Dillon ruined his appetite.

The Arkansas River was barely a trickle beneath him as Matt rode across the old toll bridge, with its loose, rattling planks, that marked one end of Dodge City. The trouble the day before had alerted him, despite Doc's and Kitty's reassurances. If he were correct, he realized, he had better start playing from a strong hand right now, before the herds and their attendant cowpokes came thundering into town.

Matt's horse trotted toward a blanket camp which could be seen a mile farther on. Around him the short buffalo grass was greening and growing in the early May sun. That wiry, low carpeting of gray-green was Dodge's guarantee that the trail herds would keep heading that way. The rails from the eastern slaughterhouses may have inched their way westward to Dodge, but without the buffalo grass, it would never have boomed into the thriving cattle town it now was. The grass was the herds' food. The cattle owners from Texas knew that once their steers reached Dodge after one, two, or even three months on the trail, they could be fattened before being shipped east, where they would be weighed and paid for. Nature had set out a lush, endless, rolling welcome mat of gray-green, from the southern plains to Dodge's front door.

Slowing his mount, Matt eyed the blanket camp. Some advance riders from one of the outfits had preceded their herd north to claim a place to bed down their fellow hands and the cattle. A chuck wagon stood in isolated majesty, and around it were clustered five horses. A few yards beyond, half camouflaged by the ever present billowing dust, lay six blanket rolls. Two men were buried in theirs, deep in slumber. The others were stirring, watching the Chinese cook tauntingly toss a flapjack higher and higher before their hungry eyes. A dozen steers were already eating, nibbling at the grass inside the wide area staked out by this advance party. Matt approached the chuck wagon.

"I'm blinded by the sun reflecting off of that tin!" chuckled one Texan, spying Matt's badge. A hand

shielded his eyes mockingly. A bowie knife, suspended by a leather thong around his neck, dangled in its sheath on his ample chest.

"Yeah, Les," his companion giggled, tossing his brown, shoulder-length hair back from his face, "don't it frighten you somethin' awful to see the law right here, so close at hand?"

Matt eased off his mount's reins and rocked back in his saddle, eyeing the long-haired speaker and his knife-equipped pal. Behind them two other cowhands, still dusty from the drive, looked up from a pan of water that served as a common basin.

"Ran into some of your friends yesterday, so I thought I'd drop by and give you the word personally." Matt paused, watching them exchange glances as they awaited "the word." "The toll bridge yonder," he continued, pointing behind himself, "is the deadline. There'll be no guns carried into Dodge City. There'll be a rack at this end of the bridge where you can check your guns. This is in accordance with Section Seven of Ordinance Four. I assume that's clear and—"

**Bang! Bang-bang! BWOOM!**

The explosions came from behind Matt and to the right. In one movement he slid off the left side of his horse, using its body for a shield while his gun hand came up with his Colt. Its barrel swung swiftly toward the blasting sounds. The Chinese cook stood to one side of his chuck wagon, a wide grin on his chubby face. One hand held a match, and the other clutched a piece of string, the only remnant of the half dozen small firecrackers he had just playfully set off.

"I welcome honorable lawman," he stated happily, pressing both hands to his chest and bowing his pig-tailed head slightly.

A roar of laughter louder than the firecrackers exploded around Matt. Sheepishly he shoved his gun back into its holster.

"Did you ever see him?" gasped Les, between convulsive laughs that sent the bowie knife's sheath bouncing on his chest.

"We sure got a nervous lawman," Harry managed to say, his long hair bobbing wildly as he nodded in agreement.

"Don't anyone say 'boo!' " cautioned another Texan. "Might give him heart failure."

"But he came up with his gun right quick," another smiling trail hand noted. "Bet during a storm he shoots right back at the thunder!"

"Just remember what I told you," Matt said, as evenly as he could, and turned his horse back toward Dodge City.

"We're more likely," Harry shouted after him, "to remember what you did. Why don't you try some nerve tonic?"

With their mocking laughter fading behind him, Matt Dillon clattered across the toll bridge. He was annoyed with himself for having reacted so foolishly to the popping of mere firecrackers. Still, he knew his life often depended on his immediate and instinctive response to any possible danger—and from the moment he had reined in at the Circle K's blanket camp on the plains south of the city, he had sensed danger!

Two hours later, his flat-topped, white sombrero pulled low over his eyes to cut down the glare of the bright midafternoon sun, Matt Dillon leaned against the south end of the toll bridge. To his left was a big wooden rack for checking pistols and holsters. His blue eyes, shaded by the broad hat brim were focused on the flat prairie that seemed to sweep endlessly before him. An approaching small cloud of dust announced the arrival of the first trail hands.

Moments later, Matt could make out Harry's thick mane of brown hair flaring behind him as he rode. The metal crossbar of the bowie knife flopping on Les's chest caught the sun for an instant and flashed menacingly. Matt moved a step to his right, square in the middle of the path onto the short plank bridge that crossed the river into Dodge.

"The rack's there," he said, jerking a thumb toward it, while keeping his eyes trained on the five men reining in before him.

"Mighty pretty," commented Harry.

"Now let's get to town," suggested Les.

"Anyone who crosses the bridge toting a gun," Matt cautioned, easing his six-gun from its holster and swinging it up on the riders, "will end up in the cooler."

The Texans shrugged and drew their guns. Matt stood his ground, his gun barrel swinging from one rider to another. The Texans began firing into the air, milling their horses in a tight circle, and then, suddenly, Harry broke from the circle.

"Dodge City, here I come, gun and all!" he shouted,

making a dash toward the bridge. But five yards in front of Matt, he pulled his horse up short. With a whinny, the quick quarter horse reared and changed direction.

Next, Les rode for Matt, his horse swinging right and left, and then it, too, stopped suddenly.

"All together now, boys!" urged Les, threatening once more to rush the bridge and let the horses trample over Matt.

"Just hold on!"

The voice boomed across the bridge. At the far end stood Festus, his shotgun held steady across the top bridge rail.

The Texans now saw two lawmen barring their way. Between Dillon's reputed speed with his Colt and the threat of stinging, scattered spray from the leveled shotgun, they had little choice. In a line, they made a final rush for the marshal, pulled their horses up short, and walked them peaceably to the gun rack. Silently they snugged their holsters over pegs and, as Matt stepped back, crossed the deadline in compliance with the Dodge City council's Section Seven of Ordinance Four.

Festus lowered his shotgun, his free hand giving his scraggly gray beard a relaxed scratch. "We buffaloed 'em, Matthew," he crowed triumphantly, watching the Texans ride slowly down Front Street.

"Let's not celebrate yet," Matt cautioned.

Matt took a reassuring look at the gun rack. From it dangled half a dozen guns that he would not find pointing at his back that day. He crossed the bridge

and walked on into town. If the Texans gave up their hardware once, it might become habit forming—he hoped.

A couple of hours later, another Texan reined in beside the gun rack. He smiled, unbuckled his belt, and hung up a pair of matching black-handled Peacemakers. Then Clay clattered across the wooden slats of the bridge.

Ahead, Front Street looked its bustling self after the long months between his visits. He noted some fine shirts in the haberdasher's window but didn't stop to shop. He headed for the Long Branch. The sound of rowdy voices could be heard through the swinging door toward which Clay strode. His pure-white horse watched its black-garbed master disappear inside and tugged testingly on its hitched reins.

Clay stood just inside the doorway for a moment, his eyes adjusting to the dimmer interior and trying to bore through the smoke haze. A few table loungers elbowed each other, attracted by the black sartorial splendor that clothed the gunhand's lean, tall body. Clay's eyes picked out two figures leaning on the long wooden bar. He advanced directly to them; he pushed Les and Harry a step apart.

"Clay!" beamed Les, dropping the hand that had angrily started for his bowie knife when he felt himself shoved to one side.

"How's the sign?" he asked, beckoning to Kitty for a glass.

"Everything's going fine," Harry responded, "except Red Fenton got himself dumped in the cooler by

Marshal Matt Dillon today.”

Kitty finished wiping the glass and placed it before the Texan, glancing appraisingly at him. He looked cold, methodical, and deadly to her.

“Dillon will be taken care of in good time,” Clay assured his cronies, pouring from their bottle.

At that last sentence Kitty hung back a step. The words weren't spoken with angry menace but with flat finality, with an assured matter-of-factness that chilled her.

“He called on us,” Les informed Clay. “Told us all about section something of ordinance something—”

“Thought I recognized your guns on the rack.” Clay grinned over his glass.

“Don't notice you bending under the weight of matching Peacemakers,” Harry joshed.

“No point riling up Dillon—yet.”

“Just how long we waiting?”

“The herd'll be pushing in maybe tomorrow or the next day,” Clay answered. “That means more boys will be around when we start to—”

“Save it!” whispered Les, jamming a silencing elbow into Clay's ribs. Then he nodded toward Kitty. Her back was toward them while she rinsed a glass. “She's Dillon's gal and could be listening to every word we're saying.”

Clay's right hand shot across the bar, and he lunged forward far enough to grab Kitty's left wrist. There was an exclamation of pain and surprise from her as his fingers tightened on her wrist and she was spun about. He yanked her hard up against her side of the

bar. Leaning close to her, he spoke softly.

“You're right pretty, ma'am. But if you overheard anything and go tattling to the marshal, you'll make a right pretty corpse!”

## *A Messenger With Money*

LET ME GO!" snapped Kitty, her eyes flaring angrily beneath her auburn bangs.

"You understand what I said?" Clay demanded, pinning her wrist to the bar with his tightening grip.

"You understand what the lady said, buster?"

The speaker was a short, stocky man, dressed, from moccasins to shirt, in buffalo skins. He jabbed two extended fingers hard into the lean Texan's ribs.

"Cut it out," muttered Clay, turning angrily. But the buffalo hunter planted his feet a dozen inches apart and jabbed at the black shirt again.

"Let the lady go—now!"

"Don't you go messing in," Les threatened, his right hand reaching up for the knife in the sheath dangling from his neck. His hand never reached the knife handle. The powerful bronze fingers of an Indian buffalo skinner circled Les's wrist and shoved his hand down smartly.

"Who in blazes are you?"

The round-faced Indian, his hair parted in the middle and flattened back in two braids, stared at him

from calm jet eyes. "They call me Ready Claw."

"Let's take 'em on," Harry suggested happily, moving closer to his two companions.

Kitty started to say something, but her protest went unheeded. Harry scooped the half-emptied bottle off the bar by the neck, and, as its contents splashed onto the floor, he began arching it back to strike at the hunter. Tim Travis' living depended on the speed of his reactions. A slow-shooting buffalo hunter is a poor one. As he saw the bottle being raised, he leaped a step to one side and jabbed hard into Harry's exposed chest. There was a grunt of pain. The bottle hand wobbled. With a slashing blow of his left hand, Travis sent the bottle spinning from his assailant's grip. It shattered against a table.

"Watch out!" someone shouted, foreseeing the wild melee about to break around them.

Kitty twisted hard and freed her smarting wrist from Clay's grip, now loosened as he turned to take up the challenge presented by the hunter and his Indian companion.

Once more Les moved for his knife, but Ready Claw's hand clutched the soft leather sheath, keeping the deadly weapon in its place. As Les tugged vainly, with his free hand the Indian slammed him in the stomach. Les staggered back. Ready Claw spun the sheath upside down, and the knife thudded ominously into the floor, where it quivered on its razor-sharp point.

Clay now had two hands free and was working over the shorter Travis. Harry rushed to join him.



"Don't like them odds!" snorted another hunter at the bar. "Typical of those rebs; only fight when they outnumber you."

When the second hunter joined the fracas, four Circle K hands tossed down their poker cards and began to plow into the growing melee.

"Teach these dang Yankees a little respect," shouted one, his fists flailing.

Kitty, at the door, took a sickened look back into her place as a glass shattered against a wall. Tables and chairs were recklessly overturned, and the battle began in earnest between the local hunters and farmers and the southern trail hands. Realizing she could in no way stop the roaring madness behind her, she ducked out through the rear door and hurried to Matt's office.

Matt glanced up from a report he was writing as she entered, her usually neatly piled hair disarranged and her calm, assured look replaced by an urgent, feminine plea for help.

"Trouble?"

"You were right, Matt," she acknowledged. "There's more to the Circle K trouble than Doc or I figured. I heard some of the hands chatting, and they're cooking up something big. Right now they're taking my place apart—"

Before she finished, Matt Dillon had uncoiled all six feet, six inches of himself from his chair and hurried into the street.

Matt rushed through the back door of the Long Branch, then stopped dead, just looking around him.

Not one table was standing, and only a few chairs were still right side up. A few were broken, as was one large mirror on a side wall. The bar's mahogany was almost hidden by broken glass. But all was calm; a man tinkered on a tinny-sounding piano, and the other remaining men were searching for and filling undamaged glasses. Matt looked for the Circle K men, but they were not inside. A blackening eye, a bruised cheekbone, a bloodied nose being dabbed by a dark kerchief, and water being poured over the head of an unconscious store owner lying amid the broken glass were silent testimony to the trail hands' recent presence.

Matt shoved a broken chair out of his path and made quickly for the front door. Outside he saw two Circle K hands supporting a groaning companion and easing him onto a horse. Clay turned angrily in his saddle.

"Don't meddle, Dillon," he warned, his mood matching his black outfit.

"If I need advice—"

"You'll need plenty of advice, Dillon," Clay snapped. "The boys don't like being manhandled by some Yankee buffalo chasers or change-counting store-keepers. When the main body comes in a day or two—"

"Inform them," Matt interrupted, "of the deadline."

The Texans spurred their horses and in a tight formation started down Front Street, their angry eyes fixed with challenge and the promise of revenge. Matt followed the horses and the battered riders as they filed across the toll bridge and reined in beside the gun rack. Each man paused, leaned down, and plucked his gun from the rack. Rearmed, the Texans seemed able to

forget the smarting bruises, the still painful puffed lips and cheeks. Their weapons gave them a new assurance, an almost defiant cockiness.

Harry, his right eye half closed and the cheek around it an angry, raw red, drew his six-gun and whirled toward the bridge. "I'm south of your crummy deadline, Dillon! Now you can be dead north of it."

But before he could bring his sights to bear on Matt Dillon, who stood at the far end of the bridge, his hand moving for his gun butt, there was a gasp of surprise from Harry. Clay's hand had chopped down hard on his wrist. The pistol exploded, sending the bullet plowing harmlessly into the trickle that bore the dignified title of "river."

"You related to him?" roared Harry.

"Shoot Dillon now, and the boss's plan won't work," Clay calmly whispered. "A dead lawman will get us a small detachment of peace officers or troopers from the fort. We don't want that, Harry."

"But Dillon," protested the cowhand, shoving his gun into his holster furiously. "Aren't we goin' to get that proud buzzard?"

"Sure," Clay replied, patting him gently on the back as they rode off side by side. "But in our own good time—when it'll really count."

Matt eased his gun back into its holster and watched the battered but still arrogant Circle K hands move off for their blanket camp. It had been only a minor ruckus, he realized; but then, only a small part of the Circle K hands had reached Dodge as yet.

With a sigh he turned and walked slowly back to-

ward the Long Branch. Before he entered he could hear brooms sweeping up broken glass.

Inside he saw Kitty, every hair beautifully in place, directing two carpenters who were repairing tables and chairs.

"Doesn't take you long to fix it up, Kitty."

"Maybe I've had too much practice at it. Shame the law only pokes its nose in after the damage is done."

"Any charges you want to press?" he inquired, letting her angry statement pass, seemingly unnoticed.

"No," she replied. "Can't risk jailing all my customers. Luckily, I have some friends."

He followed the direction of her nod. Ready Claw was holding a towel filled with ice to Tim Travis' closed left eye.

"Miss Kitty says she owes you some thanks," Matt offered, sitting down opposite the injured hunter.

"Almost takes the pain away." Travis laughed.

"Let me add my thanks."

"No need to. I got my repayment off the hides of some of those gun-proud rebels. We whomped 'em real fine."

"They have more friends pushing beef up our way," Matt warned.

"Numbers not scare us," Ready Claw replied.

"Don't get picked out as their favorite target," Matt advised.

"Man for man, I'll take on any of 'em," Tim replied, and then winced as the icy towel touched a patch of raw skin.

"But they not fight man for man," commented the

buffalo skinner contemptuously.

"Thanks for helping Miss Kitty," Matt repeated and moved toward the door. "Kitty, who makes more money, you or the concern that supplies you with glassware?"

Before she could turn her auburn head to reply, the swinging doors flapped closed behind him. Matt stared down a side street. Framed between the wooden slat walls of two buildings was the distant, endless prairie, rolling ever southward. Somewhere, just a day or two away, were the Circle K herd and the other Texas cattle. He knew he had allies in the buffalo hunter and his skinner, and Matt Dillon felt certain he'd need all the allies he could possibly find.

The razor moved slowly and reverently down King Kincaid's cheek. The cowboy barber studied his boss, who was seated in a deep easy chair, a white monogrammed bath towel tucked around his neck, his gray head exposed for grooming.

The cowhand took another look from the front and decided that both earlobe-length sideburns were shaved evenly. Then he cautiously offered his employer a mirror. King took the silver-framed hand mirror and studied himself. The slightly wavy gray hair gave him a look of age and wisdom, but the deep gray eyes, burning with challenge and fervor, contradicted any impression of a man in his mid-fifties and past the prime of his life. The small, thin-lipped mouth suggested a love of power and authority.

"You got the sideburns level for the first time,

Luke," he joshed, handing back the mirror. "Good!"

Rising from the chair, he yanked off the towel and tossed it aside. Where it landed was of no concern to King Kincaid. A hired English valet in dark trousers, white shirt, and black vest hovered a few feet away, ever ready to make his master's life and surroundings more agreeable. He scooped up the towel, emptied the cigar butts from the ashtray, and announced a rider's arrival from Dodge.

The flap of the wagon-office was thrown back, and the low rays of the morning sun blazed off the crystal glassware on a small table. A dusty rider, who had pushed his mount half the night, stumbled into the room, bits of the prairie flaking off his boots and clothes onto the deep carpet.

"Howdy, Pierce," greeted King. He motioned the man onto a straight-backed wooden chair. The valet sighed with relief. The grimy rider would do less damage in that seat.

"Let me get my wind back, King," Pierce panted. His face was a long one, distinguished only by a handlebar moustache and a piece of bandage plaster over his left cheek.

"Bit of trouble?" asked his employer, waving a newly lighted cigar at the dirty face plaster.

"Nothing the boys can't square when they hit town." He grinned.

The valet silently placed a silver tray of coffee and cake before the rider. Ignoring the heavy silver fork, Pierce grabbed up the cake and wolfed it down, drowning it with a long gulp of the coffee. He settled back

with a sigh, his belly nicely warmed. Then he told King of the fracas at the Long Branch and of Red's arrest.

"Things are moving along just fine," King allowed, flicking his ash into a fragile, multicolored Venetian glass ashtray.

"Glad you're so pleased, King," said Pierce, touching the face plaster and wincing at even that light pressure on the hidden bruise.

"Got another little errand for you," King stated as he strode to a fine painting of a Venetian canal. Sliding the bright, almost impressionistic painting aside, he revealed the face of a wall safe. Three turns of the combination lock opened its door. From it King pulled a well-padded money belt. Pierce watched silently as the cattle owner slammed the safe door shut, spun the dial, and gently eased the painting back into place.

"Want you to wear this to Haysville—"

"Haysville?" exclaimed Pierce in disbelief. "But that's hardly even a place. Just a couple of dugouts and a store or two."

"Long as you know *where* it is, Pierce, you figure I know *what* it is and *why* I want you there. Now wrap this around your belly."

Silently the cowhand rose, pulled out his shirt, and circled his lean midriff with the thick money belt. As he tucked his shirt back in, he couldn't help wondering how much money was surrounding his tired innards, but he knew better than to ask.

"Here's a letter for you," King added, taking a small envelope from his desk. Pierce could tell from the feel of the fine parchment stationery that it wasn't purchased

in any cheap general store in some small cow town.

"When you get to Haysville," King continued, "and not till then, open it. Then follow directions."

Pierce tucked the letter into his shirt pocket and sighed. "I've been in the saddle a long while, King—"

"Rub this where it hurts," laughed King, flipping a twenty-dollar gold piece to him. "Maybe then you won't feel saddlesore."

"Don't feel any pain. None at all!" Pierce replied, beaming as he pocketed the coin that represented a good part of his average monthly wage. He ran his hands down his shirt, felt that the money belt was secure, and left the wagon-office, calling to the wrangler for a fresh horse.

Ten minutes later King stood at the open wagon flaps and watched Pierce spur a palomino toward Haysville. He threaded his way through the hundreds of resting or grazing steers that dotted the prairie as far as one could see. Pierce topped a rise, then vanished in the direction of Dodge and Haysville.

An hour later, well beyond King's sight, he opened and read the letter he was not to open before reaching Haysville. But, he rationalized, he'd know what was in the letter sooner or later—so why not sooner? Now he realized the importance of his mission and felt fully the weight of the stuffed money belt around his middle. Knowing just how much money he was carrying and for what clever purpose had given him an inflated sense of importance.

"My lucky coin, too," Pierce mused. He ran his right palm over his trouser leg and felt the gold coin's

solid roundness beneath. Then his eye caught a flicker of movement to his left and just behind. In that moment the dusty messenger realized his luck had run out. Five Comanches came thundering out of a dry arroyo. The frisky golden palomino was a tempting prize, and a lone rider had little chance against a determined band of horse raiders!

## 4

*The Missing Man*

GIAA!" Pierce shouted to his horse, digging in his spurs, and his mount burst forward. His left hand clutched the reins tightly as his right flipped his Smith and Wesson from its holster. He turned to glance back at his pursuers. At this distance, they were five blurred figures, riding low, with a good stretch of gently undulating prairie between their Indian mounts and his racing quarter horse. He snapped off a measuring shot. He saw the dust spurt up perhaps twenty yards ahead of the lead brave.

"Out of range," he muttered half aloud, slipping his gun back into the holster. "Let's see if I can keep it that way."

He bent low on his horse, still holding the reins with one hand. His free hand began working on the rope that tied his saddlebag to the saddle. There must be ten or fifteen pounds of assorted gear in it, he calculated. The bag fell to the ground behind him, easing his horse's burden and slightly improving his chances of escape.

Half an hour later, with perspiration soaking his

shirt and beading his face, Pierce swung around to snap off another shot. This time he saw it plow into the ground twenty feet behind the close-riding pack of raiders. They were gaining, he noted with foreboding. But they were also in range. He tugged hard with his left hand. The well-trained quarter horse dug in, jolting to a quick stop. Pierce rocked back in his saddle, steadied himself on his motionless mount, and, aiming carefully, fired into the oncoming knot of pursuers. He heard a sharp cry of pain as one brave rolled off his horse, clutching his shoulder.

"Giaa!" Pierce urged his horse on again.

An arrow sizzled past him and dropped harmlessly a yard to his left.

A moment later he turned in time to see a second arrow fall ten feet behind him, but in his very tracks. The four pursuers were determined and obviously out for vengeance. He rubbed a dusty shirt sleeve across his wet brow. He kept warning himself not to panic. He had a lead, he had the range with his gun, and if he didn't lose his nerve. . . .

The ground ahead was rising, and some low trees broke the flat monotony of the plain. Pierce saw that he had a bare chance now, and he cut for the grove. He glanced back. The four pursuers were clinging to his trail, and one rode holding on with his knees and drawing back hard on his bow. Pierce imagined he could see the taut bowstring quiver as the Comanche released it. The feathered arrow was flung swiftly at him, but fell short by three yards. He breathed a little easier—but only a little.

Ducking into the grove, he again tugged out his gun. Using both hands, he reloaded. His horse automatically threaded its way between the trees as Pierce rode low to avoid the overhanging branches. Spying a thick-trunked tree, he pulled behind it. He rested the six-inch gun barrel on a shaggy limb and waited. He could make out the war paint on the first brave, who wore one notched feather dangling from his hair. He lined up the sight and squeezed off a shot. There was an exclamation of surprise and then a groan, and the Comanche pitched forward, landing face down. He lay motionless.

The remaining three braves separated, dodging behind the nearest trees. Pierce smiled. He had slowed and scared them, and he had one less to dog him now. Swinging his horse about, he lunged out of the grove toward the plains beyond. An instant later, with angry war whoops, the three Comanches were galloping after him. But their arrows sailed harmlessly into the ground dozens of yards behind him.

After another hour, Pierce could feel his horse slowing. Was the braves' persistence going to pay off? Ahead he saw a six-foot-deep, eight-foot-wide arroyo snaking across the dry plain, where it had been cut by countless flash floods. He had a chance again—he hoped.

"Down!" he coaxed his horse. The hard-breathing mount dug in his front hooves and slowly slid into the deep arroyo. Its bottom was packed and hard. The horse raced left along it. All the time, Pierce kept counting to himself, gauging the time it would take the

Comanches to reach the cut. Fifteen seconds short of when he calculated they would reach it, he urged his horse to climb up and out.

He leaped off the horse and began climbing a slightly angled dirt sidewall of the arroyo, tugging on the reins to help the floundering stallion scale the steep slope. As his head popped over the rise, he smiled. Fifty yards away the Indians had reined in and were studying the direction of his tracks. He fired two quick shots. Startled, the braves saw only one escape—plunging down into the arroyo.

“Missed!” Pierce cursed to himself. But still he realized he had gained the advantage of surprise.

With a hard tug, he helped his horse finally scramble onto the plain again. He mounted and raced for the spot from which the braves had leaped down. His gun was ready—but so was one Comanche. As Pierce leaned over and fired, the brave’s arrow sped upward. The slain Indian’s death groan blended with a shriek of pain from Pierce. His gun tumbled to the ground as his hand grabbed at the arrow deeply embedded in his shoulder. He could not pull it out. He felt the warm, wet flow of his own blood on his chest. He fought back a wave of nausea, knowing that to faint would be to die. He spurred his horse and, gathering speed, swung suddenly toward the eight-foot gap in the plain. With ease, the powerful stallion pushed off and vaulted over the arroyo, landing at full gallop on the far side.

The jolt on coming down gave Pierce a stab of pain around his oozing wound.

“Go, boy!” he half whispered.

Miles ahead, he recalled, there was a sodbuster’s cabin. It marked the way to Haysville. If he could reach it. . . . His eyes filled with exploding stars and sunbursts of pain as he looked back at the two braves, who were yanking their horses back onto the plain. The pursuit was still on. He had cut the odds and increased the distance, but now he was completely unarmed and growing weaker from a serious wound. Suddenly Pierce began to laugh hysterically. Never in his life had he carried so much money—and what good would it do him if he were to die out here on the plains, to be howled over by some scavenging pack of hungry coyotes?

A warm numbness seized every part of his body. He was tempted by an increasing desire to close his eyes and rest. . . . No! Fight it! Pierce shook his head violently. His shoulder pained more sharply from the movement, but he was conscious again of his actions—in command again. He was leaning forward, but he dared not lie flat against his horse’s neck, lest he jostle the arrow in his shoulder and widen the wound. He grunted at his horse and managed to strike one boot against its sweating flanks. Their speed increased. Behind him he could still see the two determined pursuers. To them it must seem but a matter of time. . . .

He had gazed at it for ten minutes, ever since he saw a tiny black stump on the distant horizon. Now it was a clearly outlined cabin with a thin column of smoke rising from its chimney. The sodbuster’s home—safety!

“Help!” he croaked as loudly as he could, cutting through a field of carefully cultivated furrows. A tall,

red-faced man in his forties looked up in dismay.

"What in thunderation—"

"Indians," Pierce managed.

Already the farmer's hoe was replaced by a Winchester. Fifteen shots in the rifle guaranteed their security. He eased Pierce off his mount, supporting him under one arm as they made for the cabin. As they stepped inside, an arrow thudded against the wall.

"I'll be okay," Pierce sighed, dropping into a chair. "Save my horse from 'em."

The farmer was already at his window, the repeating rifle blazing as he pumped bullet after bullet into the chamber; the Comanches heard the whine of the slugs as they passed threateningly close. Pierce's palomino was on the other side of the cabin. With a final, taunting war whoop, the Indians whirled their ponies and crisscrossed out of sight over the low, rolling plains.

The farmer reloaded his rifle and looked at Pierce slumping exhaustedly in the chair.

"Now, let's see if I can manage to get that out of you," he said, putting his rifle aside.

Taking a knife, he gently cut Pierce's shirt away from the arrow. Blood was caked around the still oozing entry wound. He placed his hands low on the arrow's shaft, then shook his head and let go.

"If I take that out of you, mister," he told Pierce, "I'll start the blood flowing, and I may not be able to stop it. Got to get you a sawbones."

Pierce stared up at him dully. "Dodge City?"

"It's a long time there and back," the farmer agreed, "but it's the only way."

He started to open Pierce's shirt, but the rider stopped him. Even in his weakened, dizzy condition, he recalled the fat money belt wound around his middle and realized the questions it would provoke. But he let the man help him onto the bed. The farmer brought a dipper of water and patiently let Pierce sip its coolness. Then he bathed his face and, seeing nothing more he could do for him, placed the Winchester by the bed.

"In case." He smiled down at Pierce.

"No, Comanches know when they're beat. Hurry. I'm late for an appointment already." He managed a smile for the departing farmer. Then, as he heard the horse trot off, Pierce finally stopped fighting and let merciful sleep take over.

Two hours later, Ned Redmont clomped over the toll bridge and entered Dodge. He had noted the blanket camp in passing and realized that soon his cabin window would be looking out on an endless parade of beef. But right now he headed purposefully for Doc Adams' office, where the wooden sign hung motionless in the late-afternoon heat. Redmont climbed the single flight of stairs and pounded on the door.

"Come in!" a friendly grunt responded.

Redmont entered the small office. Doc Adams was busy shaking a brown bottle before handing it to a tiny gray-haired woman, who was studying it as if salvation were contained in its sticky contents.

"Now, you be a good girl and take this tonic twice a day," he said to his watchful patient. "Come and see



me if your appetite isn't back in a week."

She tucked the bottle deep in her voluminous bag and, in a flurry of long skirts, departed.

"What's the complaint?" Doc asked, looking up at the rangy outdoor man before him. "Too much sun?"

"I'm not the patient, Doc," Redmont replied, refusing the offered seat. "Man rode to my cabin with a Comanche arrow stuck deep into him. If I tried removing it—"

"Smart of you not to," Doc broke in, one hand slapping his soft black hat onto a rumpled mass of gray hair and the other scooping up his black medical bag.

They hurried down the steps. Doc Adams flung his bag into the back of his buckboard and climbed onto the seat. Redmont sided his horse next to the buckboard to lead Doc Adams to his farm. With a flick of his reins Doc was on his way out of Dodge.

"You sure seem all fired on getting somewhere, Doc," a shopkeeper called. "Emergency?"

"Comanche arrow," Doc shouted back.

A moment later the buckboard and rider were across the bridge, and word had spread through Dodge of a Comanche attack. With no facts known for certain, the rumor grew as it spread. In an hour, the story in town was that the Comanches were on the warpath and their advance scouts had hit a buffalo hunter who had spotted them.

When Doc entered the silent cabin, it was almost dark. Redmont turned on a lantern, and they moved

toward the bed. The feathered end of the arrow still rose high above the groaning, restless sleeper there. Pierce's face was deathly pale, and his lips quivered as his words came stumblingly.

"Big . . . deal . . . no wonder . . . all that . . . cash . . . a killing . . . once they . . . burn . . . what a killing . . . and no more Dodge . . . just . . . his . . . place . . . but he always thought . . . grand. . ."

Doc turned from Pierce and eyed Redmont. "Make sense to you?"

Redmont shrugged, equally puzzled.

"Delirious," Doc commented and began cutting the remains of the shirt away. He whistled softly between his teeth. "If it's cash that's padding this. . . ."

His hand tapped the bulky money belt that still circled the wounded man's midriff.

"But my business is up there," Doc added, covering Pierce's money belt and chest with a towel.

Redmont winced at the sight of the discolored area around the arrow. He swallowed hard and heated some water as Doc Adams took surgical tools from his black bag.

"Going to need your help," Doc confided, "and it won't be easy if you're squeamish."

"I'll be okay; just worry about him."

Redmont took a deep breath and awaited orders on the other side of the bed.

Half an hour later, Doc Adams held the arrow up to the lantern and studied its reddened tip.

"It appears we got it all out," he noted with satisfaction.

"Then if you'll excuse me. . ." Redmont said tightly and bolted out the door for a breath of the cool evening air.

Doc had finished bandaging his patient when Redmont returned to the room.

"Big . . . plenty big . . . that's why . . . cash . . . and Dodge . . . finished . . . like the fourth!"

"At least I got his name," Doc reported. "'Pierce,' I think he said. He's coming around."

"But what's he talking about?" Redmont asked.

"I'm just a sawbones," Doc stated dryly, snapping shut his kit. "At any rate, if you'll play nurse to him for a day or two. . . ."

Doc started out the door, then stopped. "If that *is* money he's toting in that stuffed belt, tell him to drop by and we'll discuss my professional fee."

Redmont laughed and watched the buckboard vanish into a night silvered by a three-quarter moon.

By the time Doc Adams found his accustomed seat in the Long Branch, most of Dodge was armed and talking of hearing war drums or seeing Indian scouts on the horizon.

"How many Indians attacked him, Doc?"

"What'd he see, Doc?"

"How'd you get through their lines?"

"Coffee, Kitty, please," Doc Adams requested calmly.

"Stop the heroic gestures. How many painted savages you reckon are encircling us?"

Doc smoothed his gray moustache and eyed the last

inquirer disdainfully. "The only things out there with feathers are the birds!"

When the roar of laughter had died down, Doc recounted what Redmont had told him. To the best of his knowledge, two horse raiding Comanches were all that remained of some five hostiles who had wounded a trail hand a good distance from Dodge.

"Thanks, Doc. Maybe that'll put the lid on things." Matt's hand gave the doctor's shoulder a friendly squeeze.

"Sit down, and maybe I'll give you something to simmer about, Matt."

The tall lawman raised a puzzled eyebrow and sat down heavily opposite Doc Adams. As Kitty placed the coffee and some pie before them, Doc told of the wounded man's mysterious mutterings and dire threats to Dodge.

"And he was carrying a heap of money?" Matt asked, when the doctor had finished.

"I didn't open the money belt, Matt, but why wear one unless you're carrying cash?"

Matt sat silent for a moment.

"Doc, how'd you like to ride back and check your patient?"

"I figure he's getting along fine—"

"It might help Dodge City's health."

Doc considered that for a moment, rose, left some money for the coffee and pie, and started for the door.

It was a beautiful moonlit night out on the plains. Matt slowed his horse to keep pace with the doctor's

buckboard. The cries of migrating birds could occasionally be heard above the hoofbeats. A faraway lone coyote's howl seemed a solitary complaint against the brilliant three-quarter moon. Then, in the distance, Matt and Doc saw a light from the only human habitation to intrude upon the great majesty of the rolling prairie.

"They're still up," Doc commented as they neared the cabin.

"Hello, the house!" Matt shouted, half in greeting, half to prevent any frightened reaction from within at the sound of approaching riders.

There was no answer.

"Could both be bedded down by now," Doc suggested, reining in near the partly open door. "Redmont's got plenty reason for being tuckered out by now, and I figure the wounded man won't be up for a few days."

Matt pushed the door open and took a step inside before freezing in place. His hand swept down, and in the same swift movement came up with his gun. His gun and his eyes shifted from left to right as he took another tentative step into the cabin. Behind him Doc Adams watched in pure puzzlement.

"Here's why no one answered," Matt informed him.

Doc strode inside, then gasped. Redmont lay on his stomach, an angry slash down his back. The bed which had held the patient was empty. Doc hurried to Redmont's side and turned him over. He pressed an ear close to the man's chest, then reverently turned him back on his stomach. He looked up at Matt, his face

tightly drawn with angry regret.

"It'll be a long night yet, Doc," Matt murmured. "The farmer's been stabbed to death, and our mystery man is missing!"

*A Lost Trail*

AN HOUR LATER, hats pressed to their chests, Doc Adams and Matt Dillon stood silent, looking at the six-foot-long mound of dirt marked by a simple wooden cross. It stood ten yards from Redmont's silent cabin. The lonely farmer, who had so industriously carved himself a home on the buffalo grass plains, now lay peacefully under the soil which he had worked so doggedly.

Doc Adams thought of the waste of a good man's life. Matt Dillon's thoughts turned to bringing the knife-wielding killer to justice—and quickly.

"Head on home, Doc." Matt spoke quietly to his friend. "You've had a long day."

"What are you figuring on doing, Matt?"

"I'll sleep here," he replied, jerking a thumb toward the lantern-lit cabin. "Then at dawn I'll try to pick up the trail of Redmont's killer."

"They may need you in town."

"Could be this all ties in with town. Didn't the missing man mutter about a blazing end for Dodge?"

Doc nodded and climbed wearily onto his seat. With

a sigh, he flicked the reins and started rolling for home, hoping he'd have no more callers that evening.

Matt stood in the moonlit doorway, watching the buckboard grow smaller and smaller and then drop over a slight roll to vanish into the bright, cloudless night. He closed the door, removed his gun belt, and remade the bed. Turning down the lantern, he looked out of the back window. His horse whinnied and settled down by the hitching post. Beyond, showing clearly in the moonlight, stood the cross. Matt silently dropped down on the bed. A few hours ago a wounded man had lain there, wearing a well-filled money belt and mumbling dire predictions of tragedy for Dodge. The night before, the man whose determination had built the cabin had slept there—but by then Matt was too weary to be troubled by even that sad thought.

Matt Dillon blinked, opened his eyes, and stared at the unfamiliar surroundings. The first hint of the pre-dawn light had awakened him. The purpose of his being in that cabin came sweeping back into his consciousness, and he sprang eagerly from the bed. A few steps took him to the crude washstand, where he poured half a pitcher of cold water over his head and face. His hand raked through his slightly curled hair, and he was now wide awake. A baking tin of muffins sat near the stove. Matt plucked them out of their round metal cups and downed one as he strode outside. They were dry but not stale, and very filling. He ate two more, then offered the rest to his horse. The horse didn't bother to chew, simply downing the

small biscuits as if they were mere appetizers for a real meal to come. Leading his mount to the pump, Matt watered him and then began checking the ground.

The buckboard's comings and goings were pressed deeply into the soft earth. He saw a lone rider's trail going toward the cabin from the cultivated field. Probably those of the arriving wounded man—Pierce, if he remembered correctly the name that Doc had mentioned. He walked on until he came to the north side of the cabin. His eyes lit up. Two riders' tracks were clearly visible, heading away from the cabin.

"Got some work cut out for us," he confided to his horse as he mounted and guided him to the double set of hoofprints. A light morning dew glistened in the depressions, making pursuit all the easier. As the sun began to top the flatlands ahead of him, Matt found himself riding straight into that hot, red ball, for the tracks seemed to be moving directly east.

"Pierce was too weak to travel," he thought, following the tracks. "They'd move, but they'd have to hole up again soon. They couldn't have made too much speed. There's a chance—if the trail holds out."

An hour later Matt knew his luck had run out. Ahead, a huge dust cloud boiled up from the plain, and the tracks of the riders were headed straight in that direction. A buffalo herd must be dead ahead, he realized, tramping over and wiping out every sign of the fugitive hoofprints. Then he heard successive booms from a big gun. Matt galloped forward through the veil of dust until he could make out the lumpy forms of circling buffalo, a herd of several hundred,

twisting and turning, while to their left a hunter's gun boomed again.

Tim Travis knelt behind his sturdy cross stick, resting the barrel of his Sharps Big 50 in the crook of the steadying stick. He was milling the herd, a trick only an experienced hunter could perform—shooting down buffalo after buffalo but, by hitting the lead ones, managing to keep the herd turning to bring up fresh targets instead of sending the whole shaggy mass off in a wild stampede.

"Here!" exclaimed Ready Claw, hurrying to the hunter with a rag dripping water. He slapped it on the heated barrel to cool it. Overheating from the rapid firing could ruin the accuracy of his partner's aim. Matt dismounted silently and watched. Perhaps fifty carcasses already lay on the plains, but still Travis kept firing the big 473-grain bullets that staggered, stopped, and slew on impact.

After half a dozen shots, Travis yanked the sixteen-pound Sharps from the shooting stick and rammed a moistened cleaning patch through the bore. It came out dark, with black powder sticking to it. Then, hoping the other buffalo hadn't yet gotten the blood scent of the carcasses around them, he started shooting once again. Matt watched silently as another seven bulls trembled at the shock of impact and sank to the dusty prairie.

For the Indians, each buffalo was a walking food supply, from its back fat, which they nicknamed "Indian bread," to the tastiest tidbit—its tongue. The hide

served as clothing and tents and even shields and boats. To hunters like Travis, buffalo meant two dollars a hide for every cow and four for each bull. Some meat, like the hump, would be sold to the rail crews and the bones peddled by the pound to fertilizer plants back East. Still, men like Travis had helped to push the frontier west, had fed the rail crews, and were taming the plains for the coming range herds. But in the dead buffalo before him, Matt sensed the Indian's outrage at the waste and despoiling of what was once his private quarry and what would spell only big trouble in the years just ahead.

Travis rose, letting the gun butt rest on the ground. He had seen the herd leaders begin to take off, having scented death in their midst. His kill for the day had ended.

"Morning, Marshal. If you're looking for a belly full of meat. . . ." He laughed in greeting.

Ready Claw nodded a welcome and set off for the carcasses, his razor-sharp ripping knife in hand.

"Thanks, but I'm looking for the trail of two riders. That herd crossed it."

"Then it's good as vanished, Dillon."

"Did you see any signs of two riders passing last night?"

"No," Travis replied thoughtfully. "But we camped maybe five miles south of here. Came on the herd just after dawn."

"Well," Matt said, "I'll make a wide circle, but doubt if I'll find anything."

"Except buffalo gnats," grunted Tim, slapping one

of the pesky flies on his arm.

Matt rode down to where Ready Claw was astride a fallen bull. The bull was belly up to the Indian, who pulled his knife down from the beast's neck to its tail, along the midline of its stomach. Then he slashed along each leg and around the entire neck. Matt watched, impressed by the swift skill with which the silent skinner worked. Then he rode on.

Four times he circled the outer edge of the herd's churned up trail, but still he could not pick up the tracks of the two riders he sought.

Two hours later, as he headed back, he saw Ready Claw working the wagon's team. A rope went from the wagon to the neck flap of a buffalo lying on the ground.

"Giaa!" shouted the brave.

There was a sickening, ripping sound, and Matt turned away. Moments later, Ready Claw was pegging down to the ground the eighty-pound "green" hide, flesh side up, to dry.

"No luck?" called Tim, busy cleaning his valuable rifle.

"No, not a trace of them. So long!" With a wave, Matt broke from them and headed for Dodge City, leaving an unsolved murder behind him and wondering what might be simmering in the town that lay ahead.

"Well, Matthew, any luck finding that knifer?" Festus asked as Matt stomped into his office. "Doc Adams told me about it."

Matt tossed his sombrero onto a peg poking out of

the red brick wall and shook his head sadly. He gingerly touched the side of the coffeepot sitting on the stove and, finding it warm, poured himself a cup before settling down at his desk.

He eyed his official mail: a new poster on a bank robber up north and an information request on a horse thief who had vanished from Dodge weeks ago.

"Anything new?" he asked, looking at Festus, who was busy checking the extra rifles in the gun rack he had unlocked.

"Rumor. But you can bet your big foot it adds up to the truth. Trouble's coming up the trail with the herds. That's the word from the blanket camps."

Matt took it all in without comment. He felt his chin and pushed out of the seat. A shave would put him at ease and make him feel better. He crossed the street, walked past the garish red and white peppermint-striped barber pole, and flopped down in the vacant chair.

"Shave, Lou," he announced.

The bald-headed barber studied the marshal's face and plunked a warm, moist towel over it. Matt snuggled farther down in the chair. In a few moments he was dozing, oblivious to the razor's almost noiseless swish across his lathered cheeks. Then the hot towel covered his face again, and he began to sink softly and gently into a true, deep sleep.

Shots rang out!

Even through the warm layers of the comforting towel, Matt heard the gunfire. He yanked off the towel and shoved himself upright in the chair. Looking out

the window, he saw the long-haired rider, his brown mane streaming, gallop by on a horse with the Circle K brand on its gray rump. In his hand, well beyond the deadline, was a smoking Colt.

Matt strode to the door and saw Harry riding farther along Front Street, aiming at a tobacco store's sign: a huge bull looking up the street.

"Don't!" shouted Dillon.

Harry's gun exploded, and the wooden sign trembled, suddenly displaying a hole through the head of the advertising bull.

"Plunked another critter! Yipeeee!"

"Drop it, and *now!*" shouted Matt, moving into the middle of the street and watching the rider bear down on the sign of a mule painted over a skinner's stable. There was a puff of smoke, and the painted mule was holed between the ears. Harry rocked in his saddle with triumphant laughter.

"Throw it—" Matt started, but before he could finish his order, the noose of a lariat tightened suddenly and painfully around his arms and chest.

Matt Dillon fell to the street, his arms pinned uselessly to his sides.

"Hey!" shouted Les, the bowie knife bouncing on his chest in its sheath, "I roped me a maverick!"

Up the street, half a dozen other mounted Texans burst into laughter. "Bring him in for branding," called one.

Les spurred his horse, the rope tightened even more, and Matt was dragged along the ground, bouncing with every step of the frisky quarter horse. In vain he

tried to free his arms and slip the noose. As he twisted, his face was scraped and scratched by the gritty surface of the dirt street.

"Let him go!" shouted Festus. He stood just outside the jail, waving a shotgun at the roper.

But two other ropes were already sailing through the air toward him. Out of the corner of his eye, Festus saw one rope descending and brushed it aside with a swipe of the double-barreled gun, but the second noose dropped around him. The rider tugged hard, and the shotgun slipped from Festus' grip. Helplessly he watched Harry riding faster, cutting right and left and sending Matt rolling from side to side in the street, banging off one store's front steps and then slamming into the rough wooden stairs of the store across the street.

"That'll teach the maverick to go wandering off by himself," jeered a Texan.

At the opposite end of the street, a rifle thundered. Harry's hat flew off his long brown locks. He gasped in surprise. Far down the street, well out of range of Harry's puny six-gun, Tim Travis had fired his Sharps Big .50. He was lying flat on his back and using his boot toes to steady his aim! Harry knew that if his hat was hit, that was exactly where the deadly buffalo hunter had aimed. With the next shot, he might go for flesh. With a trembling hand, Harry released the lariat that secured Matt.

Again the gun fired, and another tall Texas sombrero went sailing off of a rider's head. Without a word the trail hands turned and spurred their horses down

Front Street toward the toll bridge, every man for himself.

"This'll slow 'em," shouted Harry. He snapped off a shot as he rode by the blacksmith's. Inside, the lantern was shattered, and flaming kerosene splashed over the dry bales of hay beneath. The sweaty blacksmith turned from his forge in stunned dismay. Flames were leaping three feet high and spreading from bale to bale.

"Fire! Help me! Fire!" he shouted, rushing into the street and waving his bare arms.

Fifty yards away, Matt was rising, the noose sliding to his feet.

"Fire! Fire!" The panic-stricken cry was relayed down the street. Every shopkeeper knew that the greatest threat to his flimsy wooden store was not the playful bullet of some hurraing Texan, but fire, fanned by winds off the prairies.

The fire bell clanged at the engine house. At the sound of the bell, shopkeepers, barmen, card dealers, clerks, and other citizens of Dodge who belonged to the fire company dropped their packages, glasses, cards, or whatever they were holding and streaked for the firehouse. On the way, several men struggled into their long red shirts, which partly made up the uniform of the vital volunteers. They raced into the firehouse, a startlingly elegant hall with a splendid Brussels carpet and a library, and ran for the hose cart.

Out onto the street hastened the Dodge City Hose Team Number Three, to the encouraging shouts of their fellow townsmen. They had set the record-breaking hose cart run in Denver, where they had won the



National Hose Cart Championship. Down Front Street they dashed in perfect step, the hose cart rolling effortlessly behind them.

Smoke, thick and black, billowed out of the blacksmith's as the volunteer fire crews started to work. The hose was aimed and the water pumped, and a steady stream of water was sent pounding against the fiery hay bales.

"You okay, Matthew?" Festus asked, hurrying up to Matt, who was still brushing the dust off his shredded clothing. He winced as he touched his scratched and bleeding face.

"They're beginning to bother me, Festus. They've had me down on the street once too often for my amusement."

"I'll allow how that's possible, Matthew. Well, if they haven't burned down the town, maybe you can settle accounts."

To the cheers of the watching crowd, the volunteer firemen efficiently played their hoses on the fire until only a smouldering bale or two remained to be more thoroughly doused. The fire had singed the interior of the smithy's shop but had not spread. The wooden facades of Front Street had escaped the threat of fire.

"This fire's out," Matt stated in a loud voice to the townspeople, "but trouble's still sparking on the plains. I'd like to meet with the Town Council tonight—at eight."

He didn't wait for a reply, but turned and disappeared into his office, where he began delicately to

wash his bruised and scraped—but cleanly shaven—face.

At eight that evening, in the firehouse, Matt faced the ten attending members of the Town Council. Their ties, white shirts, suits, and occasional gold-chained watches identified them as Dodge City's most successful and involved gentlemen—the natural decision makers in such a community.

"Gentlemen," Matt began, "I want an emergency appropriation to hire some more deputies. I'm not asking for much, law wages being what they are at this time."

"Multiply anything times ten men and it's a lot," cut in the general store owner.

"I figure two hundred dollars will get us through the next trying week, when the trail crews start really swarming in," Matt continued.

Two councilmen whistled at that figure. Matt persisted, explaining his own foreboding, the taunting threats, and the early signs of impending greater trouble. The councilmen countered with the fact of expenditures already twelve hundred and forty-five dollars beyond the estimated budget. They also cited lower sales returns due to bad weather, fewer prosperous transients, higher costs, poor help, and countless other equally qualifying reasons. Matt again stressed the seriousness of his need for help.

The vote for a supplementary appropriation for hiring extra lawmen was defeated by the Town Council—ten to nothing.

"Guess when trouble comes, that just leaves the two

of us," muttered Festus as he stood at the marshal's side.

Suddenly Matt Dillon's marshal star seemed to weigh a great deal heavier.

## 6

*Secret Mission*

MATT DILLON stared at the ten councilmen present. He could not catch the eye of anyone in the firehouse and realized that further argument was purposeless. If his earlier plea had not convinced them of the necessity for more deputies during the coming days, there was nothing he could now add that might change their minds. The delirious wounded man's words echoed in his thoughts—"Dodge ablaze"—but he dared not offer such evidence for his cause. It was only conjecture, and how much weight could one really give to the words of a man writhing in pain and fever?

"Well, Matthew," Festus stated with a smile as they turned for the open firehouse door, "you're now looking at the entire force of local deputies!"

He inhaled deeply, poking out his chest, and Matt managed a quiet chuckle.

"You're better than no one, Festus."

"But not much," he said ruefully, scratching his shaggy gray beard.

"I'll volunteer!"

The voice came from just outside the open firehouse

door, where maybe fifty men had gathered to listen to the deliberations. Matt turned to the speaker. He was Tim Travis, the buffalo hunter.

"Ready Claw deputy, too," Travis' skinner said stoutly.

Matt was taken slightly aback. "There's no salary in this job, you know. The councilmen inside just voted against any money for extra deputies."

"Any law against a deputy working for free?" Travis demanded.

"Two for free?" added the Indian.

Matt glanced at Festus. "I never heard of any law against it. . . ."

"Nope," Festus agreed. "But it could set a bad precedent. I mean, if deputies work for free, then folks might start questioning my measly, hard-earned salary and—"

"Just for the emergency," Travis assured him.

"Well, councilmen?" Matt demanded, turning to some of the exiting gentlemen.

The lawmakers of the cow town paused, muttered among themselves in a tight huddle just outside the fire company's building, and then allowed as how not one of them knew of any legal regulation against the use of nonsalaried volunteer deputies.

"As long," one councilman added slowly, with ponderous emphasis, "as they are duly sworn in."

"That part's easy," Matt agreed. "But, Travis, why do you and your skinner want to volunteer?"

"Well," Travis replied in a low voice, "as I see it, Dodge City gave me my chance to make a living and

get somewhere out in these parts, so I owe her something. This seems like as good a time as any to repay my debt."

A councilman coughed a bit self-consciously. Matt turned to the Indian, who was honing his skinning knife's blade on a stone.

"Dodge my home. Not like to see trouble in my home."

A guilty silence filled the street as the other townsfolk stared down at the ground.

"Count me in," a storekeeper announced, stepping forward.

"Likewise!"

The volunteer movement, sparked by two good men, had become contagious. In a minute Matt Dillon had picked up seven men who were willing to serve as deputies for as long as necessary and at no salary. A cheer went up from the others on the street.

"You see, Dillon," the president of the council intoned self-righteously, "there was no need, after all, for any supplementary appropriation. You have your deputies—free, thanks to these fine citizens!"

Matt refrained from making the obvious answer. Instead he beckoned to his seven volunteers, and they followed him toward his office, with Festus bringing up the rear, certain that, as the only *paid* deputy in town, his position must be somewhat higher than that of the volunteers.

Arriving at the office, Matt opened the door to the cell room.

"Hey!" shouted Red Fenton, shaking the bars of his

cell angrily. "When am I seeing a judge and getting out of here?"

Matt snapped his fingers as if he had completely forgotten about his raging guest. "Why, I am sorry. I'll get back to you just as soon as I finish a short swearing-in ceremony out here. Festus, see to the prisoner's wants."

With mock seriousness, Festus nodded and hurried to the cell door.

"Why, Mr. Fenton, I do apologize. Didn't we feed you tonight?"

"You call that garbage you gave me grub?"

"Perhaps you'd like to order something special," Festus suggested. He took a newspaper from the desk and pretended to read. "Why, it appears here the hotel dining room is putting on quite a feed tonight. Would you care to make your selections from their choice menu of—"

"If I was out of here. . . ." The bars rattled furiously.

"Oh, no need to come out." Festus tut-tutted. "I'll fetch whatever's your pleasure. Now, they are having ham hocks glazed with sauce, buffalo tongue, plainsman style, steer steak with a wine sauce, or—"

"Please!" Matt was calling from the office for silence. In front of him, the seven volunteers stood in a snaking line, their right hands raised to take the oath.

"I swear," Matt started, and the men solemnly repeated the deputy's oath after him.

"Festus," Matt called through the open doorway, "hand out the badges."

Festus returned to the office and dug a handful of

silvery deputy badges from a desk drawer. He dutifully passed them out, and the men pinned them on, each secretly feeling a sudden sense of dangerous responsibility. They looked—a trifle self-consciously—at each other, joshing one another about their new badges. But each man knew he was assuming a role that might prove vital to the safety of Dodge in the next few days.

"Thank you," Matt said. "I deeply appreciate what you gents have done. I'm hoping I won't have to call on you for any official work, but if I do, come fast and come armed."

The men nodded and started to leave. As Travis stepped outside, Matt caught his eye and gave him a look of silent gratitude. His example meant that Matt would now have some backing if and when trouble came.

"An Indian deputy," Festus noted, shaking his head in slight disbelief. "Never would have expected that."

"Why not?" Matt calmly questioned. "I've seen even stranger folks wearing the deputy's star."

He winked as he passed Festus and headed for the cell room, the key ring in his hand.

"You're opening it—" Red blurted.

"You want to stay here making clever observations, Red, or do you want to get out of the cooler?"

The startled prisoner bolted through the open door. In the office, Festus handed Red an envelope containing his money and valuables, then grabbed him as he started for the door; he had to sign a receipt for the return of his confiscated property.

"We'll be meeting again, Dillon," Red threatened, turning for a second in the doorway.

"There'll always be a cell waiting to accommodate you," Matt answered flatly.

The cowboy darted off into the night, shouting a loud "Yipeee!" in the exuberance of his freedom.

"How come you opened the door for him, Matthew?" Festus asked as he started to straighten up the newly vacated cell.

"I wanted him to hear me swear in those seven deputies and take word of it back to his pals."

Festus chuckled with admiration. The marshal was a clever hombre, at that. It certainly could not hurt to have the word circulating among the advance riders in the Circle K's blanket camp; and it might do some good if they knew that Dodge City was beefing up its law force for the arrival of the main body with the trail herd.

When Dodge City woke up the next morning, there was an air of expectancy throughout the town. Men hurrying to their shops and stores glanced southward. Others paused to listen. No one had made any announcement, and none was needed. Somehow they all sensed it—the big herds were arriving any hour now. If one had stood on the flat roof of the hotel and peered southward that morning, the plains would have seemed no different. But the townsfolk didn't have to look; they just knew. Four, five, six seasons had attuned them to the returning rhythm of the great trail herds. After all, that was what Dodge City lived for—

the arrival of the steers. The rail line so painstakingly built, the stock pens on the sidings, the blessing of the buffalo grass plain to the south of the town—these combined to make Dodge the cow capital of the West. Small wonder that its citizens were aware of unseen herds, certain that the first of them would arrive by noon that day.

"They're coming," the barber said as he gave his first shave of the morning.

"Yes," the man mumbled under the hot towel, "you can feel the critters shaking the very ground."

Matt Dillon awoke with the same restless awareness of the approach of the herds. He hurriedly ate breakfast, then immediately checked his office.

Festus poked his head in the doorway. "They're acoming, Matthew."

"See dust?"

"Don't have to," Festus replied. "You can feel it clean through your bones."

Matt Dillon was a man of icy logic and reasoning, yet he didn't challenge his deputy's last statement. He knew it was true.

At ten thirty a shout went up from a man peering out of a second-story window. Practically every head in town turned to the south. A thin cloud of dust could be seen. It spread a hand's width across the flat southern horizon. There was no doubt as to its cause: the shuffling of countless cloven hooves as the steers plodded north to Dodge!

Two hours later Matt mounted and slowly guided his horse over the toll bridge. Now he could make out

the low silhouette of the herd advancing across the plain, and he could see the riders loping along the flanks, chasing back the drifters who tried to break the massive formation.

Dillon reached the Circle K blanket camp a few minutes later. The small advance herd was peacefully drinking from a water-filled ditch. The cowhands stood at the chuck wagon, getting a quick meal before the rest of their herd came up. The men gazed at Matt with hostility. Harry nudged Red, shutting him up before he could utter an angry epithet.

Matt swung off his horse near the chuck wagon and looked at the unsmiling Chinese cook, who was facing him. "I'd like you to post this for me on your wagon, where the men'll see it."

He offered the cook a foot-long poster that informed all readers that the toll bridge was the deadline and that all guns must be checked there.

As he read the short notice, Les fingered the handle of the bowie knife lying against his chest.

"Heck," he muttered to the silent cook, "why not put it up? Maybe the marshal will do us a favor some day!"

"Like dropping dead?" Red asked, with a sly grin.

Matt ignored the laughter and watched the cook dutifully post the notice, tapping in the nails with the flat of his big meat cleaver.

"Let's welcome King and the others!" shouted Harry, vaulting onto his horse.

In a moment, half a dozen riders were racing over the plain, waving hats and yelling, heading for the two

point riders, who moved ahead of the sprawling herd.

Matt stood by the chuck wagon, watching the trail crew expertly drive some fifteen thousand steers into place, where the advance party had staked out their claim. But his gaze focused on the colorful wagon that rolled toward him. It halted a few yards from the chuck wagon. The driver hurried to the back and lowered the built-in, folding stairs. Down the red-carpeted steps walked King Kincaid, waving a cigar in approval at the sight of his vast four-footed and two-horned possessions, which had safely reached the trail's end.

"Why, Marshal," he greeted Matt as he noted the tall man studying him, "how nice of you to have come to welcome the Circle K."

"Afternoon, Kincaid," Matt replied above the cheering roar of the cowhands, who rode up and down shouting, jumping over their horses, standing on their saddles, firing into the air, and in every wild way conceivable announcing the triumphant end of their long, dust-choked push north.

"Won't you join me for lunch, Marshal?" the cattleman asked, offering a hand that Matt shook.

"From what I hear of your cook, that's quite an invitation."

"You flatter me, Dillon," scoffed King. "Why, I'm sure my man has prepared just my usual, simple mid-day meal."

A short time later, Matt drew up his chair to a table draped with a delicate, white, Venetian lace cloth. Heavy silver service flanked the expensive Wedgewood dishes, but the cattleman's "simple" menu was even

more astounding. Kincaid's man, now in a white jacket for serving, placed a small dish of lettuce-garnished *pâté de foie gras* before each of them. This was followed by onion soup. Next came veal *saltimbocca*, and Matt found himself thoughtfully savoring each mouthful of perfectly combined slices of veal, cheese, and ham. In keeping with the "simple" luncheon, dessert was a chocolate soufflé.

"Some fruit?" King finally offered as his servant placed in front of them a basket loaded with peaches, apples, grapes, and cherries. Matt realized that this incredible variety of fruit must have been brought in from some rail line by swift riders, whose only mission was to prevent Kincaid's suffering from a traveling cattleman's usual fare of beans and pork.

"Cigar, Marshal?"

"I don't reckon I could stuff another thing in my mouth, Kincaid," Matt replied. He opened his gun belt a notch.

"You could even leave the belt here," King said with a smile, "if that'll make you more comfortable. As far as my boys are concerned, don't expect any trouble."

"Seems we've had a little already," Matt replied. "They seem to take a fancy to having me sprawled in the middle of Front Street."

"I'm sorry to learn that, Marshal. I shall certainly speak to the troublemakers. But now that I am personally on the scene, I can control my men."

"I'm prepared to help keep them in line."

"Thanks," King responded, dropping an inch of

ash into the colorful ashtray his servant silently placed before him. "But I want all my men in camp, not in your cooler. I'm here to sell beef, not to pay bail. I figure a week's rest here, with grass and water, will bring my steers near the weight I like to count on for shipping purposes."

"I posted a notice about the toll bridge being the deadline—"

"Most helpful, Marshal. I shall read it to my men personally, when I pay them in an hour. Now, if you'll excuse me. . . ."

"Thanks," Matt replied, reluctantly pushing himself away from the table. "Can't recollect when I've had such a fine 'simple' midday meal."

Matt climbed down the carpeted stairs from the wagon and mounted his horse heavily. He was in no mood to hurry and jar his digestion. As he rode through the Circle K camp, he could feel the hostile eyes boring into his back, and he could sense the presence of men who played with the notion of buying a quick reputation by outdrawing Dodge's reputedly fast marshal. But he pretended to be unconcerned and trotted off toward the toll bridge. He dismounted beside the now empty gun rack, waiting to see just how effective Kincaid's little speech might be on his men's behavior as they broke for town after weeks on the hot, dull, dirty plains.

An hour later he saw the first Circle K riders slowly walking their mounts to the bridge. He stood leaning against the weathered wooden railing. The first rider had matching Colts jammed into twin holsters with

Mexican silverwork shining on them. Hardly a gunfighter, Matt decided—just a showy type. But even those two guns in Dodge could cause trouble. As the rider came abreast of the gun rack, he tugged hard on his rein, jerking his trained cow pony to a sharp stop. He unbuckled his belt, leaned over, and carefully placed his guns on a waiting peg. Then he thumped across the bridge for town.

“One less man to worry about,” Matt mused, eyeing the dozens still approaching.

True to Kincaid’s word, his paid help obediently checked their guns before crossing the deadline. He watched the men from the advance party—Red, Harry, Les, and a few other already familiar troublemakers of the previous days. All halted and shucked their weapons before riding on past him.

An hour later, seeing no one else approaching the bridge and not too concerned about the remaining Circle K trail hands’ behavior, Matt climbed onto his horse and drifted into town.

Walking through town, Matt easily spotted the trail crew. Every chair in the barbershop was taken, with others eagerly awaiting their turn as they flipped through copies of the *Police Gazette* with wide eyes and whistles. In the stores, men crowded around counters loaded with clean shirts and pants. The bathhouse steamed, luring a file of dusty men awaiting their first good wash in weeks. Every merchant and storekeep in town had a grin on his harried but happy face, and Matt Dillon could find no official work to perform on Dodge’s streets.

“Right peaceful-like, Matthew,” Festus observed as he drifted to the side of the marshal.

“That’s what worries me, Festus.”

“You just can’t abide hearing any good news, can you, Matthew?”

“I just don’t trust it, and here comes proof that I may be right.”

Festus turned his face toward the bridge and saw Clay trotting toward them. The lithe gunfighter was resplendent in his completely white outfit, which contrasted sharply with the pure black stallion he rode.

“Why, that fellow’s as unarmed as a naked, newborn baby, Matthew,” chided Festus.

“I still don’t reckon his visit here is for our good.”

“Matthew, you dote on trouble—that’s *your* whole trouble!”

Matt watched Clay rein in at a water trough and solicitously wait for his horse to drink. Then the Texan walked his horse over to a hitching post, tied him up, and sauntered into the Long Branch.

Matt moved slowly to a window and peered inside. He could see the trail hands eating, playing cards, chatting, and laughing, but not the slightest sign of any imminent ruckus could be noted. He shrugged. Maybe Festus was right, and he did have a sick compulsion to find trouble and couldn’t feel content until he had encountered it. He decided to wait in his office and let trouble come to him.

Two hours later Matt’s boots were resting on the top of his desk, and his white sombrero rode low over



his eyes, when Festus came in. He started to tiptoe past the marshal.

"I'm up," Matt said, swinging his feet down and pushing back his hat. "Been thinking."

"Well, that's the responsibility of a boss. Me, I don't have to think."

"Which is lucky, since you're not equipped for it," Matt replied, chuckling.

Festus laughed good-naturedly.

"Well, I've thought up a job for you."

"Why, Matthew, you don't have to put yourself out and go to all that trouble just to find something for me to do."

"It's important. We're playing a long shot—"

"You mean the dog races in town tomorrow—"

"No." Matt shook his head impatiently. "Doc heard that man Pierce muttering something while he was easing the Comanche souvenir out of him. It's been troubling me ever since. That gent with the handlebar moustache and the stuffed money belt may really know what's on King Kincaid's mind."

Festus began scratching his beard in complete bewilderment. Matt Dillon quickly jotted down a note and put it in an envelope which he sealed.

"Use this," he continued, handing the letter to Festus, "to get me copies of all the land records in Haysville's town hall."

"Haysville?" Festus exclaimed with surprise. "What can you learn there? It's a couple of hours' ride plumb to the middle of nowhere. It's got a name, but it sure ain't anything more'n a sign in the middle of the

prairie, where nobody ever goes!"

"But it's where the key to what's puzzling me may be."

"You couldn't even hide a key in that nothing town! Heck, it's only a couple of dugouts grubbed into the ground. But if you really want me skinning for Haysville. . . ." He sighed.

"Ride there, use that letter to get the records I want, and get back as quick as you can."

Festus shoved the letter into his shirt pocket, tightened the gray kerchief under his chin, and marched out the door on official business. Matt followed a few steps behind.

Minutes later, with a friendly wave of his hand and a doubting look on his face, Festus rode by, heading for the bridge and Haysville. Matt watched him gallop off on the secret mission. If his hunch were right, Matt knew why Dodge City was so calm now, despite the earlier threats from the Circle K trail hands. And he also realized that, if he were right, this was only a short calm before an inevitable and deadly storm!

## *The Prisoner*

IT WAS LATE afternoon when Festus started on his mission. Matt had told him it was a secret mission, and Festus couldn't help feeling that, despite his nondescript looks and his face half shadowed by his soiled white hat with its conical crown, every last cowpoke he passed was eyeing him knowingly.

"They can't all be so dang smart they know what I'm up to, now, can they?" he wondered as he passed three Circle K riders who stared at him and then exchanged silent glances with one another.

"If they see me cutting directly south," he thought slowly, "they could figure I'm heading to Haysville. Now, if'n Matthew is right and I'm up to something vital there, why I'd be showing my hole card afore it ever came my turn to bet."

A lone Circle K man trotted by, seeming to smirk as he passed, as if knowing exactly who Festus was and what he was doing. Festus ran a hand slowly across his dark shirt to see if the letter was still in his pocket. He felt its folded bulk there, hidden well below the pocket top. No one had discovered and read

the letter. Well, he wouldn't let them go on looking so all-fired sure of themselves. Festus turned his horse to the right and headed for the rocky elevation northwest of Dodge, where several years ago Boot Hill had been founded.

As Festus spotted the first of the silent wooden markers flushed orange by the sinking sun, he wished he had chosen another direction for his diversion. But now that he was there, he knew that he must make a pretense of having deliberately headed that way to some purpose. He dismounted beside the road and picked wild flowers until he had gathered a little bouquet. Slowly Festus walked up the rocky incline of the small, overgrown cemetery. Despite his well-known inability to read, he carefully studied the startling names on the grave markers in front of him: HORSE THIEF PETE, PECOS KID, FOOTLOOSE NELL.

The light wind that played among the soapweed and prickly pear, creating a slight movement, sent Festus' eyes darting from side to side as if looking for some moaning wraith to swirl into sight. His eyes passed over the markers on which some astounding causes of death had been recorded carefully to avoid any hint of wrongdoing: DIED OF LEAD POISONING, TOO MANY IRONS IN THE FIRE. The latter epitaph referred to the passing of a rustler caught changing cattle brands with a running iron.

Choosing a grave at random, Festus nervously dropped the flowers on it. Then he turned. From this high spot above the city, one could see for miles. Beyond town he saw the sprawling Circle K herd resting

and grazing, but now no one seemed to be paying any particular attention to him. He had covered his purpose well, he concluded as he hurried back to his horse, his boots clicking on the rocky slope in his anxiety to be away.

"Figured none of 'em would have the guts to follow me clean up to this spooky spot," he said half aloud to reassure himself. He mounted, then spurred his horse hard, his whole body shaking involuntarily as, with a final glance, he raced from the quiet hillside with its dead. Hidden from sight at the bottom of the hill, he turned his horse sharply and headed for Haysville to carry out Matt's puzzling orders.

At nine that evening, in response to the marshal's call, Travis, Ready Claw, and two other volunteer deputies appeared in Matt Dillon's office.

"Evening," he greeted them, rising from his desk. "It all seems peaceful out here, but pin on your badges, pair off, and we'll patrol the streets, just so they know the law is keeping its hand in."

With a flicker of pride, the men stuck on their deputy badges. With a bit of show, they each checked their six-guns, testing their draw to be sure that, if needed, the weapons would slide easily from their holsters. Matt started out, and they followed.

Once on Front Street, Ready Claw and Travis paired off and went down a back street. The other two men headed for the far end of town and left Matt to patrol Front Street alone.

He pushed into the bustle of the street, brushing

past milling clusters of laughing cowhands. Every restaurant was jammed, with lines of men waiting outside, shouting at their companions inside to wolf down their food and make room for them. Matt pushed open the swinging doors of the Long Branch. Kitty's auburn head turned toward him. Her bangs were not as immaculately in place as usual, and she had a harried look as she vainly tried to keep pace with endless demands for food. Throngs of cowboys crowded around the tables and leaned against the long counter. Matt could hear shouts of excitement or groans of disappointment from the faro tables in back as the payday money began its endless passage from hand to hand.

Everything was under control in the Long Branch, Matt had to agree. He worked his way on down the street, looking into the hotel lobby. Cattle buyers were busily comparing notes on the Circle K beef; all was peaceful there. The stores that had stayed open were crowded with eager cowhands, who shucked their dirt-stained shirts and felt the luxury of new cotton against their bodies, and tried out the latest in London's fashionable footwear.

A piano thumped, and voices could be heard singing at the dance hall, but even there Matt found no cause for concern. His eyes automatically went to each passing man's waist. Either the man wore no gun belt, or the dangling holsters on his hips were obediently empty.

Matt drifted to the bridge in the light of a nearly full moon. The man at the town end of the bridge—in the fingertip coat and slouch hat—was immediately

recognizable. King Kincaid stood there, silently drawing on his cigar as he watched his men ride up, check their guns at the rack, and cross the deadline into Dodge unarmed.

"Thanks," Matt acknowledged as he came alongside.

"First night sets it for the rest of the time," Kincaid replied. "And like I said, I'm here to find good cattle prices—not trouble."

"The cattle buyers at the hotel are pricing your beef already," Matt offered.

"About five percent lower than they'll have to pay for it. My beef is prime beef. I've been upgrading my herd, mixing Herefords with the longhorns, and now those whitefaces of mine are due to pay me back."

Matt realized that King Kincaid had worked long and hard to reach his position as the top cattleman in Texas. For years he had laboriously pushed his herds north to Dodge to market them. All winter he gathered, fed, and watched the new herd. Adding new stock, expanding his home range, making the long trek north slowly and wisely so that instead of losing weight his steers might even arrive a few pounds heavier—all this had been the concern of the Texan. His wealth ran on four legs and could be wiped out by a sudden storm, an Indian raid, disease, or a decline in the Eastern beef market. But this year his biggest herd yet had reached Dodge's rail line, and the East's demand for meat was high. It would be a good year for King Kincaid. Hard work and planning would pay off. Yet, as Matt eyed him, he sensed that the rancher was a driven

man, still unsatisfied, and tormented by a relentless desire for more power, more money.

"The railroad cars are due in tomorrow, King."

"I'm in no hurry. Your grass is good," the rancher replied. "The longer my stock stays here grazing, the heavier they get, and the more I collect. No hurry at all. That's why I want to be sure my men understand I want things going nice and orderly."

Matt touched a finger to the broad brim of his sombrero and headed back for town, slightly amused that the man whose arrival he had so dreaded had seemingly turned into an additional volunteer deputy.

"Spoke too soon!" Matt muttered suddenly.

He could hear the shouting as he entered Front Street, and it had the sound of a fight. He increased his pace, making for the Long Branch, from which the rising voice erupted.

"Get him! Get the cheat!"

"Pull that crazy, steer-smelling cowpoke off me!"

The shouts explained the cause of the fight, even before Matt could see it. Some cowpoke had lost at faro and was now accusing the gambler of cheating him. He pushed his way through the watching mob. A card table lay on its side, with two fallen chairs flanking it. A tall, thin cowpoke had grabbed the silk shirt-front of a small, dapper gambler and was shaking the man vigorously as he lifted him high off the floor.

Before Matt could reach the combatants, a long mass of brown hair moved in blurring swiftness, and Harry jabbed the cowpoke's ribs.

"Let him go, Lou!"

Lou uttered a few angry curses, and, as he turned to Harry, a fist caught him in the stomach. He fell, with a gasp. The gambler, released from the loser's grip, staggered back a step or two.

"You don't do that to my pal!" screamed a short, tubby cowhand at the bar. As if to emphasize his words, he held a bottle by its neck and smashed off the bottom. The jagged glass now made a threatening weapon as he turned for Harry. Matt's eye caught a flash of motion to his left. Les's hand swept the bowie knife from his chest sheath, and, with just a second's careful aim, he flung it hard.

*Thud!* The bottle wielder's sleeve was pinned to the bar by the knife point!

Before the chunky cowpoke could yank out the knife to free his untouched arm, Matt was upon him.

"That'll be all!"

His words had a finality about them that barred any hope of contradiction.

"Shucks," the paunchy man drawled, grinning, "you don't think I'd really have used that, do you?"

"That'll be four dollars, fifty," Kitty said matter-of-factly, her palm extended.

The trail hands rocked with laughter. The danger had passed. Matt turned toward Harry, who was smoothing his hair down on both sides of his head.

"Thanks," he stated flatly.

"King wants no trouble," Harry replied, and Les nodded in agreement as he returned the sharp, glinting knife to the holster dangling on his ample chest.

Matt watched the gambler pick up the cards and

begin to deal to some new players.

"Looks like you got this crowd figured all wrong, Marshal," a voice commented.

Matt turned to face one of the town councilmen.

"Lucky we didn't waste our money on that emergency appropriation you requested," the man continued, with an ironic smile. "We don't need any extra officers to deal with these good fellows."

Matt didn't reply. He elbowed his way out into the cool evening. Maybe he had figured the Texans all wrong, at that.

It was early evening when Festus spotted the first lights of Haysville. Orange flames flickered beckoningly in lanterns hung from the eight-foot-high signboards above the tiny town's dugouts. The signs were suspended from two tall poles flanking the earthen entrances to the startling dwellings dug into the plains. In the wavering flame, one could read the nature of the half-hidden dugouts beneath: GENERAL STORE, LOADED DICE CAFE, HIDES, SADDLER.

In the moonlight, Festus could see a single railroad track running past the dugouts, a spur from the main line that led into Dodge City and its waiting cattle pens. A few knots of men stood on the surface above the dugouts, whose sod-stepped entrances, covered with boards, led into the wood-sided, buried buildings below. Only the slight slope of roof slats rising a foot or so above the grass-covered ground told that a town was there. Smoke curled from the chimneys that poked up like periscopes out of the plains.

Festus dismounted silently, not seeking anyone's help and thus minimizing the chances of his mission's purpose being known. He sauntered past a group of men who eyed him from the entrance of the general store dugout. As his eyes scanned a few more of the dugouts, Festus realized he'd soon have to ask for directions, being unable to read the words painted on the signs towering over the dugouts. But he hoped, by some lucky chance, to find the official town hall and the official whose help he needed.

Festus poked his head into one dugout. It was thick with smoke, and five men sat grimly at a table, not bothering to glance up from their faro cards at the stranger. The next dugout whose door he opened was a private house, Festus quickly realized. But before he could start out, mumbling his apologies, his eyes focused on a man lying on a bed in a corner. The white bandages over his right shoulder caught Festus' attention, and then the handlebar moustache confirmed his suspicion. Festus was positive he was looking at Pierce, the arrow-wounded man who had mysteriously vanished from the murdered farmer's cabin. Two men were in chairs beside Pierce, and their hostile glances kept Festus from pushing the inquiry.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Looking for your town hall—if you got one."

"Try Jeb Holt—he's two dugouts down," one man suggested.

Festus backed out quickly, and as the dugout door closed behind him, Pierce exchanged uneasy glances with the man nearest to him. He had seen the glint of

the deputy's star on Festus' shirt.

Festus mounted the sod steps topped by wooden planks, thinking hard with each step. If the man in the dugout behind him were the missing Pierce, shouldn't he start questioning him about the knife murder? But then, Festus realized, he had another mission there in Haysville—perhaps even more important than rounding up a suspect and possible witness to a murder.

"This," Festus told himself, "requires the judgment of a preacher. Now, I allow I don't have that. I'd better find me that Jeb Holt and deliver up Matthew's letter to him."

As Festus came up onto ground level, he felt the eyes of the lounging men watching him. Without showing any concern, he headed for the second dugout down the row that paralleled the spur tracks. No one stood near the sign that rose above the dugout and read: HAYSVILLE TOWN HALL.

But Festus couldn't read the sign, anyway, and he hurried down the steps to the stout wooden door below. He knocked hard, and a gruff voice shouted, "It's open!"

As Festus swung the heavy door inward, a cloud of smoke drifted into his face. It came from three cigars glowing over a card table in the back of a room that obviously served as the chief and only town office. Behind the table was a barred cell door, which gave the town hall an air of serious purpose.

"What can we do for you?" a heavysset man asked, his flabby jowls shivering with each move of his mouth.

"I'm Festus Higgins, deputy from Dodge." Festus

smiled engagingly. "Got me a letter from Marshal Dillon for whoever's in charge of your town records."

"That'd be me," the man replied, using two powerful arms to raise his bulk from the chair. "I'm Jeb Holt, mayor of this fine little community."

He walked to Festus with surprising speed, a hand out in greeting. Festus tried to conceal a wince of pain as the fleshy hand enveloped his own in a crushing, friendly squeeze.

"Then," Festus said, offering the letter, "this'd be for you."

Holt opened the letter and walked closer to the lantern suspended above the table on which three hands of cards rested, face down. The other two players, wiry and hard-looking men, eyed Festus as if taking the measure of possible trouble.

"This letter says I'm to hand you some land sales records—"

"Then I'm sure you'll cooperate with the law," Festus cut in.

"Always—but I'm not certain you are the law!"

Festus' mouth opened in genuine surprise. His hand reached up and tapped his badge. "What do you figure this stands for?"

"Could be you met the real deputy, buffaloed him, and took the letter and that star."

"You loco, mister?" Festus demanded, his eyes glaring angrily.

Holt nodded to his cardplayers. Each rose quickly.

"Don't you insult our beloved mayor!" blurted one man, rushing for Festus.

"Now, hold on—"

But Festus' plea was futile. Before he could complete his sentence, both men were upon him. In the close confines of the room, the two steps he took backward put Festus against the wall. He ducked the first jab and lashed out with a left. There was a grunt of pain as one attacker staggered back, cradling his stomach. Festus tried to reach for his gun, but Holt was on top of him before his fingers could close around the handle. The man's bear hug tightened like a vise, pressing the very breath out of the thin deputy. Festus managed to bring back his right boot hard against Holt's shin. That released the grip long enough for Festus to brace his back against the wall and push the offending belly with his foot. Holt went sprawling backward, struck the table, and landed on the floor among the splintered debris. But Festus' triumph was short-lived. The other cardplayer came at him from the left side, and his fist struck Festus square on the jaw. The lantern became a swirling, blurring brightness, and then all faded into a warm blackness.

Festus was aware of his jaw aching. His hand began to rub it as his eyes blinked open. He was staring up at some unfamiliar roof boards. He sat up, feeling sickeningly dizzy, then slowly rose. He was looking through the cell bars to the cardplayers outside in the main office. Festus let his hand reach for his holster. His gun belt was missing. His star was no longer on his shirt. The letter lay crumpled on the floor beside the hulking mayor, whose ample brown trousers showed

a slight rip along one thigh.

"Hey!" Festus shouted. "What's the idea? I'm a lawman, a deputy from Dodge City."

"I'll raise you ten," Holt quietly informed the other players, without turning.

Festus angrily shook the bars and shouted. "I'm a legally appointed deputy!"

Holt slid his cards across the table and swept in a small pile of greenbacks. "Heard you, mister. But I don't think you're who you claim to be. Don't worry. We're investigating."

"How long'll that nonsense take?" Festus asked.

"Well, we don't like to push these things," the mayor replied, shuffling the cards. "Got to handle it official-like—maybe a week."

"A week!" Festus exclaimed. He shook the bars furiously but in vain. He flung himself back onto the blanket-covered cot. He knew that he wasn't going to be released that night, and he also realized that the cardplayers out there were deliberately keeping him from completing the mission Matthew had assigned him. He was certain that it was very important, and, for once, he was letting Matthew down—and he couldn't do a thing about it.

## 8

*Jailbreak*

ORDINARILY Matt Dillon was a heavy sleeper. After a day's work, once he hit his bed and closed his eyes, he was asleep in minutes. But this night Matt found himself striking a match to study the clock on his bureau. Ten after two. He had bedded down a little after midnight, convinced that the town was going to be peaceful after all. He hadn't slept a wink yet. Matt pulled on his trousers and padded barefooted out his front door.

There was a slight chill in the air that drove away his last slight hope for sleep. He was alert now, fully awake as he gazed out on the moonlit plain. Far off he heard a coyote's plaintive howl. A whoosh of wings passed overhead, and a moment later he saw, silhouetted against the big moon, a flock of wild geese. He looked off to the south, as if he hoped he could see Haysville and learn if Festus had succeeded. The mission he had sent him on was relatively simple—unless his hunch was correct and the opposition sensed that he was onto them. If Festus didn't show up by morning, Matt would know that his suspicions were correct,



and his hopes might be blighted. The evidence he needed would come only with Festus' return. He cursed himself for not having gone to Haysville himself. Perhaps the job was too important to have assigned even to Festus. He shook his head. No, he had made the correct decision. His presence was needed in Dodge, in case things came to a sudden boil. But he wished he knew how Festus was faring. He lay down on his bed again and closed his eyes, but some premonition of trouble delayed sleep another hour.

Festus stirred off his cot. He knew it must be around three in the morning. The mayor and his cronies had wished him a taunting good-night some two hours ago. They had turned down the lantern so it glowed only dimly above the card table. Then Festus heard the outside door being locked, and the laughing men vanished into the night.

"Got to get out," he muttered half aloud.

He went to the pail in the corner, scooped up some water, and dashed it over his face. His eyes blinked, and droplets lay beaded on his beard and moustache; the coldness revitalized him. Festus pulled on his boots, buttoned his shirt, and went to the cell door. His hand checked the lock. He didn't feel he could pick it, even if he had some pointed and curved tools. Nor could he unbolt the door from its hinges. They were sunken deep into the room's walls. The only way out was with the key, and he saw it glinting mockingly on the big key ring that dangled from a wall peg some twenty feet away.

Festus sat down on the cot, defeated. His hand ran over the blanket, smoothing it absentmindedly. Then he grinned. He yanked the blanket off the bed. It was threadbare and fortunately thin. Festus began ripping one-inch strips from one end to the other. Fifteen minutes later he looked with amusement at the pile of blanket strips. Then he began laboriously to knot the ends together. When he finished, he played out his blanket rope and found it was easily forty feet long—more than enough if his plan were correct. He grabbed his hat from under the bed, and around its stained, conical crown, he secured one end of the blanket rope in a tight noose.

Festus moved to the cell door. In his left hand he held the loops of the blanket rope, while his right hand squeezed the hat through the bars. One of Festus' favorite pastimes was fishing. He and Doc Adams often fished together, each trying to outcatch the other. But Festus usually hooked more fish, for he excelled at casting. His wrist knew just how much of a snap to give the line and how high to hold it as the fly sped out. And now Festus was going to cast and fish for a real prize.

Carefully Festus gauged the distance and the weight of the hat. Thumb and forefinger on its brim, he spun it out from the cell door with a sharp flick of his wrist. The hat started sailing for the key ring as Festus eased out more "line." Then the hat began to fall, a foot short of its target, but he had sent it spinning at the right height.

Festus slowly tugged his hat back across the office

floor to his cell door. He looped in the extra line and prepared to throw again. Once more the hat sailed, tipped the end of the peg, and spun aside.

Back he pulled it. Four more times Festus made his cast. Twice the hat caught the edge of the peg, but both times spun off and dropped uselessly to the floor.

On the fifth try, the hat slid over the peg!

"Easy," he murmured to himself.

Gently Festus tugged on the line. The hat was over the key ring. The peg was angled up only slightly, so as he pulled the hat from the peg, the key ring caught under it and began to slide to the end of the peg. Festus held his breath as he maneuvered the hat to the peg's blunt end. Suddenly there was no tension on the line; the hat and key ring dropped to the floor.

A smile of triumph filled Festus' face. With his shirt sleeve he wiped away the beads of perspiration that concentration had brought to his forehead. He pulled the hat back and picked it up.

Now it was an easy cast, he thought. His very first toss sent the hat just beyond the key ring. He tugged, squatting low to keep the line almost at floor level. As the hat moved over the key ring, the ring began to slide along with it toward the cell door. Then the key ring caught on a splinter, and the hat came back to Festus without its prize.

Festus leaned as far out as he could between the bars, but his stretching fingers were still far short of the key ring. Again he cast the hat and began pulling it back. As it came over the key ring, he jerked the line hard. The key ring snapped off the splinter, but

the hat slid over it again without catching.

Patiently Festus judged the distance and tossed the hat. It squarely covered the key ring, and this time, as he hauled it in, the "fish" came with it!

Festus slapped his hat on, then fitted the key into the lock. He turned it and, hearing the click that signified freedom, he beamed.

Letting himself out, Festus hurried to the desk and found his gun belt in the deep drawer. With his gun and badge on, he no longer felt so undressed and was quite prepared to meet any future challenges from Haysville's hostile citizenry.

Festus was almost to the front door; then he stopped. He had been sent to find some land records. He wasn't going to let Matthew down—not after all the trouble he had gone to just now to free himself.

Unfortunately, Festus could not read. Through most of his life that fact had been an annoyance rather than a handicap, and certainly it had never marked him off from a great many other men. But now, for the first time, his disadvantage dismayed him. He was supposed to find land records, and he had no way of knowing what was on any sheet of paper he might be looking at!

"Well," he slowly concluded, his philosophical nature coming to the fore, "there's only one solution to this here predicament: I'll take all the papers I can find."

Festus was thorough. He slowly went through every desk drawer, piling the papers into a neat stack. Then he went to a file cabinet against a side wall. It held a few large envelopes of papers. In fact, the total height

of the assorted papers he collected in the Town Hall of Haysville did not reach more than ten inches. He stuffed them under his left arm, drew his gun, and started out the door. It was locked!

Festus aimed at the lock and fired. The explosion rebounded off the walls of the dugout. The door swung open of its own accord, and Festus hurried up the dugout steps. He was certain that the shot had been heard down the line, and, in moments, he'd have an awakened town on his trail.

He found his horse at a hitching post and stuffed the papers into the saddlebag. He was buckling it up when he heard the first shouted inquiry.

"Hey! Who fired a shot?"

"Holt! I think your prisoner's skinning out of town!"

A gun blazed from a dugout far down the line. Its bullet whined past, yards from Festus, but still he trembled involuntarily at its passing sound. He leaped onto his horse, and as he dug his heels in hard to urge his mount forward, he heard three riders, just a hundred yards behind, shouting for their horses to move.

"Got to fool 'em," Festus thought, galloping away from the town.

The moon was down, and the night was dark. A smile started across his face. They'd be following the sound of his horse, lucky to get an occasional glimpse of him at this moonless hour. His horse had already had a long ride, and their mounts were probably fresh. What he lacked in speed, he had to make up in cunning. He tugged back on the reins, and the horse began to slow. Festus leaned forward, clinging to the horse's

neck with both arms, and swung his right foot over the saddle. Then, as the horse slowed to a walk, he dropped to the ground.

"Giaa!" he shouted, slapping the passing rump. Obediently the horse spurred forward with pounding hooves.

Festus lay flat on the ground, his face turned to the right. He could hear the approaching riders before he could see them. A moment later they thundered by, and, in the first light of the false dawn, he could make out the hulking figure of Holt on his horse, urging the other two riders on.

"I don't want him getting back to Dodge!"

"Cut left, Holt! I heard his horse that way. Come on!"

Off into the darkness they raced. Festus slowly pushed himself up and rose, slapping the plains dust off his clothes. Two escapes in one night were more than enough to tire a man, he allowed. Now he started back for Haysville's dugouts. He needed a horse and was certain he could easily unhitch one there.

A lantern still glimmered midway down the line of signs over the dugouts. Festus held back a moment and studied the street along the tracks. No one was in sight. A bit farther down, he saw the hitching post and the lumpy outlines of twenty or more horses. He could get home now. But why go back alone? he asked himself. Wouldn't Matthew be surprised and pleased if he saw Festus riding in with the wounded Pierce, who could probably solve the mystery of Redmont's knifing?

Festus edged closer to the dugout where earlier he

had spotted Pierce. Easing his Colt from its holster, with his free hand he started to shove the door open.

"You boys catch him?" he heard a voice ask.

"Nope," he replied dully.

A match was struck; in its flare Festus saw two empty bunks and Pierce, sitting up, the light in his hand.

"Don't make a false move, Pierce," he directed coldly. "Light the lantern."

Pierce leaned forward, and the lantern soon cast its glow through the room.

"Dress. You're coming with me."

"You loco?"

"This says I ain't!" Festus replied, gesturing with his six-gun.

Pierce swung his legs off his cot. He rose slowly, shivered, and began to dress in the lantern's light.

"Where are you taking me?" he demanded, yanking on his second boot.

"To Dodge. Farmer whose home you were treated at got himself stuck on a knife. The marshal'd like to know how it happened."

"That farmer's been hurt?" Pierce's eyes widened.

Festus could almost believe the man's surprise, but years of working with the law and encountering protesting outlaws had taught Festus not to put too much faith in any show of innocence.

"Marshal Dillon will fill you in. Move out."

His gun jammed into Pierce's side, and the man started through the door into the first blush of dawn. They headed for the hitching rack. While Pierce col-

lected his horse, Festus took a sturdy stallion who looked eager to race across the plains.

"They don't cotton to horse stealing around these parts," Pierce commented.

"Borrowing it for official purposes," Festus replied, and they started out of town.

Festus figured Holt and his two riders would be heading for Dodge, certain his horse had made tracks that way. If they lost sight of his horse or finally saw that it was riderless, they'd be heading directly back to Haysville. Festus cut to his left.

"Thought we were heading for Dodge," grunted Pierce.

"We are, but in a big, wide arc so we don't run into some of your pals," Festus replied.

An hour later the plains were flushed with red as the sun began to show above the flat horizon. Festus looked north, where he might see the three riders. Only a distant antelope bounding over the flatland was visible. He would get away with his prisoner, he gloated.

"Hostiles!" There was panic in Pierce's voice.

Festus turned hard in his saddle to look south where Pierce pointed. Half a dozen Indian riders were moving slowly over the plain. Hunters? A raiding party out for horses? Scouts?

"Comanches—I'd swear it," moaned Pierce. "They put an arrow in me the other day."

"Left, and fast!" Festus commanded.

A low hill, not four hundred feet high, was to their left. If Festus remembered right, it was the site of an old silver mine that had petered out long ago, after a

few thousand dollars were taken from a thin vein.

They rounded the hill at a gallop. Twenty feet above ground level, they could make out the crosspieces where someone had covered the abandoned shaft.

"Up yonder," urged Festus.

As they reached the boarded entry, they dismounted. Festus tugged hard on two slats, and the rotted wood gave easily.

"Don't break it," he cautioned Pierce. "We want to get inside with our horses and then close the opening again."

Pierce already had calculated Festus' desperate plan. The stab of pain in his shoulder was a sharp reminder of the fate awaiting them if the Comanches spotted them. Carefully he led his horse past the boards, which Festus held aside. Then Festus pulled the stallion through the entry.

"Looks deep enough in here for us," Pierce commented as his eyes grew accustomed to the semidark mine.

Festus nodded, busily rearranging the boards so it would look as if no one had passed through the opening in the hillside.

Pierce hitched the horses to a support post forty feet back in the shaft. Even if they whinnied, the horses could not be heard outside. Then he walked back to Festus at the entry.

"They pass yet?"

"Look for yourself," sighed Festus.

Pierce put his head against the slats and peered between two boards. The five Comanches were dismount-

ing less than fifty yards away in a slight draw. One brave began gathering up tumbleweed and buffalo chips. They were going to prepare breakfast in front of the mine!

"And all we've got," groaned Pierce, "is one gun between us."

Then suddenly Festus realized what he no longer had with him: the papers he had taken from the Town Hall. Those papers which Matthew had sent him to bring back were in a saddlebag on a runaway horse somewhere out yonder on the plains. And with that band of war-painted Comanches camped in front of the shaft, Festus was in no position to go out and search for the missing papers. He had failed Matthew, after all.

All morning Matt was edgy. Doc noticed it about eleven when he walked past the office and saw Matt looking south from the doorway.

"No Festus?"

"Nope, Doc, and I'm getting concerned."

"Knowing him, he probably went fishing on the way back."

"He knew the letter I gave him was serious."

"He only had your word, Matt. He couldn't read what was in it. Just what were you after?"

"Playing a long shot, Doc," he replied. "But with Festus missing, I'm stacking the odds against myself—and Dodge."

Doc moved on silently. He realized that Matt Dillon was upset and worried, and it wasn't like him. He tried

to figure out what Matt could possibly be seeking in that community of dugouts called Haysville. Nothing came to mind, and he turned into the Long Branch for a morning cup of coffee.

Matt returned to his office. He started filing reports and papers. Half an hour later one of his volunteer deputies poked his head in.

"Any need for help? I see Festus hasn't come back yet, Marshal."

"Thanks. Things seem calm just now."

The man touched two fingers to his sombrero's brim and departed.

At noon Matt again stalked out of his office and looked toward the toll bridge. A rider was moving across it with confident authority. A moment later, Matt could identify the rider dressed completely in black and mounted on a pure white stallion. It was Clay.

"Quite a dude, isn't he, Matt?" Kitty observed with a laugh. Unseen by Matt, she had approached from the opposite direction.

"I don't think so, Kitty. Those outfits just may turn out to be signals of some kind."

Her blue eyes turned questioningly on him, trying to guess his meaning.

"I'm willing to bet there'll be trouble, and soon. When he wore the black outfit before, his boys started treeing the town. When he wore white, they bent over backwards to keep the peace."

Kitty shook her head in amusement, her auburn hair flashing in the sunlight and her pendant earrings

swinging above the ruffled collar of her long white dress. He watched her with admiration as she pushed her way along the street and through the Long Branch doors. Then Clay's white horse flashed by, and Matt turned his attention to the unsmiling Texan. Clay's holsters were empty. At least he wouldn't have to face him over a gun—for the moment. He turned back into the office, unconsciously testing his gun to make sure it slipped readily from the holster. Satisfied, he plunked himself down at his desk, wondering what had happened to Festus.

Trouble was not long in coming. Harry came hustling out of a pool parlor, shouting to the men behind him.

"I can beat any of you, even shooting from my saddle," he claimed, mounting his horse.

His shoulder-length hair bounced with each step of his horse as it forced its way up the rickety pool hall steps. Harry bent low, his hair hanging over the horse's mane, as he nudged it through the doorway of the pool hall.

"Hey!" screamed the pool hall owner, at the sight of a rider entering his game room. "Get that critter out of here!"

"Not till I beat my pals from this here saddle," Harry replied, sidestepping his mount to the stick rack and taking the longest cue from it.

"You break, Harry," a player called from the green-covered table.

Harry leaned down from his saddle, took aim, and shoved on his cue. The horse trembled slightly, and

the ball leaped off the table, slamming into some bottles, which it shattered, amid the laughter of the Texans.

"Stop it!" cried the owner.

But two Texans held him against a back wall and watched Harry's horse trot around the pool table, overturning some chairs. Harry studied a shot and made it. This time the white ball zigzagged slightly but ended up hitting the pile and sending another ball bounding into a side pocket. A cheer went up from the watching trail hands. Harry leaned over to take his next shot, but his horse moved, and his cue dug into the green felt cloth, plowing an expensive furrow across it.

The owner used this diversion to slip one leg out the side window. Then, seeing that the laughter-rocked cowpokes were busy watching one of their pals pretending to sew the two edges of the rip together, he jumped out the window into the alley.

"Marshal! Marshal Dillon!" The pool hall owner puffed as he came charging into the office.

"Ned, supposing you get back your breath and tell me what's got you all riled up."

A few gasps later Ned had completed his tale of woe. "If that horse isn't put out pronto, I'll be out of business."

With a sigh, Matt rose and left his office. He took another glance to the south. Still no Festus. Then he hurried to the pool hall. Harry was making a shot, leaning from the saddle. The table was crisscrossed with cue tip tears, and the balls rolled wildly as they hit the bumps. One ball managed to spin into a pocket,

and another cheer went up for Harry.

Matt grabbed Harry's left heel and yanked it out of the stirrup, lifting his foot at the same time.

With a startled yell, Harry plunged forward onto the table. The billiard balls spun crazily out from under him.

"I reckon he missed that shot," Matt stated calmly. "And losers here get a consolation prize—time in the cooler."

Before the amazed Texans could react, Matt grabbed Harry by the back of his shirt and yanked him off the table. Leading Harry with one hand and his horse with the other, Matt shoved them both out the door.

"Somebody stop him!" The voice came from behind Matt.

Matt turned and swung the horse around to the Texans now pouring from the pool hall. A slap on the horse's flank sent it rushing toward the oncoming trail hands.

"Hitch him for Harry!" shouted Matt.

The trick worked. The trail hands broke right and left, helter-skelter, to avoid the charging horse.

A minute later Matt slammed the cell door shut.

"What's the big idea?" roared the dismounted pool player.

"That's a pool hall, not a stable. Your smallest offense is on the grounds of health—introducing an animal into a place that serves food."

"You let me out of here, or you'll be sorry!"

"Harry, I was hoping for something more original

from you," Matt replied, then closed the door between the office and the cell room.

Matt was sitting at his desk filling out the charge sheet when a storekeeper darted in.

"Dillon," he shouted accusingly, "you got those hands swarming worse'n a bunch of hornets smoked out of their nest."

"The man was riding a horse indoors, damaging property, endangering life—"

"*You're* endangering life, Dillon, with your dang arrests. Listen!"

Matt stood up, listening to a noise that started as a ripple and grew into a wave of angry sound.

"Free Harry! Free Harry!"

Matt hurried to the doorway. At the north end of Front Street, a solid mass of some sixty trail hands was advancing, chanting in menacing unison, "Free Harry!"

"The court'll have to free him, and that won't be till tomorrow, at the earliest," Matt told the storekeeper.

"We'll see about that!" He hurried out to meet with his fellow merchants as the mob closed around the marshal's office.

"Free Harry!" The furious cry echoed down the street, bouncing off the wooden and brick buildings.

From the doorway, Matt calmly eyed the screaming crowd. His right hand opened the gun rack, and he tugged out a double-barreled shotgun. He kept it hidden inside the doorway. Then he raised his free hand to ask for silence.

"Listen!" he shouted. The voices died out. "Your friend will be freed—when the judge says he's to be freed. And there aren't any hearings scheduled before tomorrow."

"Free Harry—now!"

The new chant sounded even louder and angrier. One burly cowpoke started for the office door.

"I'll free Harry now!" he shouted.

Matt brought up his right hand, poking the double-barrel into the lumbering cowpoke's startled stomach. At the touch of the cold, deadly metal, he leaped back a step. Matt's eyes swept right and left, the shotgun waving across the mob's front ranks. No other daring leader decided this was the moment to challenge his lone confronter.

"Mount," one man urged. "Mount up!"

Suddenly the crowd dissolved, as every cowhand hurried off to the hitching posts to get astride his horse. Matt lowered the shotgun and let out a deep breath.

While the Texans were collecting their horses and climbing onto them, four shopkeepers rushed up. The general storeowner, his white apron flapping across his thighs as he ran, spoke. "Matt, give 'em their pal."

"Sorry, Burt," he replied. "If I give in to the mob now, we'll have mob rule from here on out."

"You aren't going to have much else, anyway," argued another owner. "You can't contain 'em all."

"Maybe not, but I'm going to make a try at it."

"You got company, Marshal," a man shouted. He was one of the volunteer deputies. He ran up, buckling on his gun belt, followed by two more deputies.



"Well," Matt mused, "the odds are getting better all the time."

"You're loco, Dillon. They'll pull the town down around your ears," Burt countered. "And instead of keeping law and order for us, you'll leave us with burned and smashed and ruined stores."

"I can only try to do what you're paying me to do," Matt insisted.

"Don't be stubborn, Dillon," Burt shot back. "Give 'em their man and let 'em simmer down."

"If we give in now, we'll just have to keep giving in. It won't work," Matt replied.

A whoop interrupted the debate. Down the street, some fifty Texans were riding, side by side in tight ranks, four across, and sending everyone before them scurrying out of the way.

"Run!" shouted one storekeeper, diving into his open doorway.

Other people darted for the alleys or climbed up onto the wooden walks. The riders raced past the marshal's office. As the last rider passed, he gave a shout.

"Free Harry—now!"

All the horses were reined in. With military precision they were reared and turned. Then they started back up the street, past the office. Dust began choking Front Street. Through it, the tide of horses and riders could be made out only vaguely. But above the drum-like tattoo of hooves came the threatening call: "Free Harry—now!"

Matt watched from his doorway, coughing from the drifting dust. He knew the riders were working them-

selves up to fever pitch. They wouldn't be satisfied for much longer with merely kicking up the dust and shouting. Then Dodge City would face a most dangerous test!

*Stampede!*

ABOUT TIME," muttered Festus.

His forehead was pressed against the mine shaft's boards while he gazed out at the Comanches some fifty yards away. The braves were stirring, rising, and mounting. They made a few tight turns, as if limbering up their war ponies, and then cut toward Dodge.

"Strays," Pierce guessed. "Bet they saw the herds starting for Dodge and are hoping to cut some strays."

"Long as they cut away from here, I'm happy," Festus replied.

They waited half an hour longer. Then Festus shoved out three slats, and they led their horses outside.

"Wait till I replace the slats," he commanded Pierce. "Some other unfortunate fellow could need a place to hole up. Let's leave it right for him."

Pierce watched Festus carefully rearrange the boards across the opening. For a moment he was tempted to leap onto his horse and break for Haysville. But even as he got one foot into the stirrup, Festus spoke, without turning.

"I wouldn't try tricks, mister, or you may be carrying a bullet wound, too."

Pierce lowered his foot. He studied the plains, desperately hoping that his roommates and Holt might be returning by this route. Pierce had no choice but to go on to Dodge and try to make his story stick. He had already contrived an alibi to cover the farmer's death, and he silently rehearsed it while he waited for Festus.

"We'll swing wide south," Festus announced, mounting. "I don't want to run into those hostiles again."

They started out at a fast trot, two lonely figures bobbing across the vast prairie, unaware of the tension building in the town at the end of their ride.

Tim Travis and Ready Claw saw the trouble from Boot Hill. They watched the town below with fascination as the tide of riders swept back and forth in front of the marshal's office. Dust rose in clouds, and they could hear the roar of the Texans chanting, jeering the marshal, and encouraging each other.

"Plenty trouble soon," Ready Claw noted.

"Look yonder," said Travis.

His hand pointed to a small knot of grazing buffalo, not more than twenty, out on the prairie. They were probably stragglers from the larger herd he had worked before. The sight of the buffalo gave him an idea.

"We're going to spook those bulls," he informed his skinner.

Ready Claw gave him a puzzled look, but fell in behind Travis as he started swiftly down the slope of

Boot Hill toward the beasts.

Five minutes later the two were riding into the wind behind the herd and firing pistols into the air. One bull snapped his shaggy head from the grass he was nibbling. The sound of gunfire alerted him. He pawed the ground—a signal heard by the others. Grazing ceased, and the herd turned toward the wind and started to run. Heading into the wind, they could scent danger before they could see it. This was just what Travis knew they would do. He kept the herd running, firing a few random shots as he and Ready Claw galloped on its left flank. Then, to the herd's right, he saw the grazing and resting Circle K steers spread out on their wild pasture for a good mile ahead.

"Now!" he shouted to the brave. "Turn them into the cattle!"

With war whoops and pistol shots, Ready Claw and Travis swung the herd to its right. On the buffalo raced, starting in among the longhorns and whitefaces. The half-tamed steers roared and milled in fear at the sudden appearance of the hulking, shaggy monsters in their peaceful midst. Like the waving motion of a long whip, the whole Circle K herd were now on their feet, bellowing, panicky, dashing blindly before the press of other terrified steers behind them. King Kincaid was at his desk, studying some buyers' offers, when he heard the surge of bellowing. A chill of apprehension ran through him. He shoved the wagon's front flap aside and saw tens of thousands of dollars running wildly toward him.

"Stampede!" he roared.

From the threatened wagon's front steps, he leaped into the saddle of his waiting mount. Only a handful of cowpokes remained in camp, but they were starting to mount, shouting and waving their hats in a desperate attempt to slow the onrushing mass of beef.

Kincaid roared to two of the men. "Save my wagon!"

They peeled off toward the wagon, riding low to catch its yoke, which was resting on the ground. Then, with startling speed, they tied their lariats to the yoke and began to haul the wagon from the path of the oncoming herd. The herd broke around the wagon, and a moment later the two cowhands reined in, their horses snorting in terror, as an endless body of cattle flesh and flashing horns swept by. Miraculously, as if out of respect for the man whose brand they bore, the steers parted around the wagon, leaving it unharmed.

By now Kincaid was racing for the toll bridge. He turned once, hoping to see a miracle, but the stampede had not stopped. The herd was swirling on in a fused mass of panic.

He clattered over the bridge, aware of the pearl-handled gun bouncing in his holster but not bothering to place it on the gun rack with his men's weapons that rested there, glinting in the sunlight. King swept ahead to the beginning of Front Street. Before him he heard the chant: "Free Harry—now!"

Dust concealed the mass of riders cutting back and forth in front of the marshal's office, but King knew his men were there. He reined in and rose in his stirrups. Then, in a voice of command, he shouted, "Every man here, follow me and round up the herd."

The last word struck like a magic spell. The chanting stopped. The riders halted. The dust began to settle. Every man in the street in front of Matt Dillon knew that his livelihood depended on that herd. If the herd stampeded, his pockets would be empty, his bunk in Texas would be gone, and a bitter winter would lie ahead of him. Like a military formation, the riders about-faced. Silently they headed for King Kincaid, who waved them toward the toll bridge. Their mission was forgotten. The black-garbed Clay brought up the rear, urging them on.

Matt leaned wearily against the office door, watching the last riders trot by. Then he turned and opened the door to the jail cells.

Harry hustled off of his cot, his face beaming. "Springing me, huh, Marshal?"

"Afraid not, Harry. Your pals abandoned you—for some cow flesh."

The mass of long hair shook in anger. Matt smiled as he left and closed the door.

The Circle K hands thundered over the bridge, whose ancient boards sagged under the weight of the horses that swept over it. At the gun rack, each rider leaned over from his saddle and made a one-handed grab for his gun. King led them, but they needed no leader now. The cloud of dust two miles beyond told them where to ride.

The cloud of dust also alerted five Comanches. They had slowly drifted toward Dodge, sullen and disappointed at their failure to find even one stray steer. The feast of beef by their campfire had become a rapidly

fading dream, when they saw the dust rising in the distance. They knew that, so close to Dodge, it could have only one meaning: A trail herd was stampeding. Now their pickings would be easy and plentiful. Riding low over the necks of their war ponies, they streaked for the stampede.

As the Texans slowly gained on the herd, they divided into two groups, cutting for each flank of the herd, hoping to pace it and slow it.

Two motionless riders watched the progress of their handiwork. Sitting on their horses, Travis and Ready Claw exchanged smiles.

"Seems we did our deputy work out here," Travis said with a sly grin. "I don't reckon there's a single Circle K hand left in town to stir up any trouble."

Ready Claw nodded his head in agreement. Then a movement to his left caught his eye. He turned slightly, watching a tiny blur grow into five Indian riders bearing down on the herd.

"More trouble for trail hands," he noted.

Travis studied the braves' approach. Once the Texans found they had Comanche cattle thieves to deal with, as well as stampeding stock, it would be a long hard day before all their troubles were sorted out.

On both flanks of the wildly rampaging herd, the riders shouted and spurred their horses on to greater efforts. Slowly, after an hour's racing, a few riders had reached the head of the stampede.

"Now!" yelled a foreman. "Turn 'em! Swing 'em left!"

Guns fired into the air and hats waved as the riders

desperately tried to force the senselessly scrambling lead steers into a turn. The gunfire and shouts only increased the panic among the bobbing horned heads, but, as from any new danger, the herd leaders turned away from them. Another mile was raced off before the movement became noticeable, but the herd *was* moving in a slight curve.

King Kincaid reined in and lit up a cigar. His boys knew their trade; it would take time, but the trick was working. From a slight rise, he watched the grim maneuver half a mile away, realizing that each missing steer meant many dollars out of his pocket. The slight curve now became the starting point of a great circle. Once the head of the circle could be led to the rear of the herd, the cattle would be milled around and around until they sank to the ground from exhaustion.

The five Comanches understood the cowhands' daring move, and, while the riders were working the front of the herd, the braves saw their chance to cut out steers from the slower tail of the dust-clouded mass. Silently they streaked in. Cutting out a dozen steers at the very rear, they forced them to the right.

Suddenly King's eyes noted the movement at the tail of his dust-raising herd. It was a motion counter to the pattern of the great circle his men were so laboriously forming.

"Indian raiders!" he shouted.

No one heard him above the thunder of hooves and the bellowing of bulls. King slid the carbine from his saddle boot. He aimed and fired. He pumped another shot into the chamber and blazed away. The raiders

were now moving from the herd, driving a dozen steers before them. But King wasn't aiming for the braves; there was too much chance of hitting one of the fast moving cowhands instead. He was firing at—and purposely missing—a knot of four riders who were working the flank of the herd nearest to the Indian raiders.

"Shooting!" gasped one cowpoke as a bullet whined by.

The riders turned sharply in their saddles. They saw King, far back, alone on the plain, wildly waving his carbine and pointing. Then they saw the braves and realized that Kincaid had been signaling. Scooping out their pistols, the trail hands swung toward the raiders.

King grinned. His signaling had worked. Those men were much closer to the raiders than he. It was all in their hands now. The Comanches had dogged their herd for three hundred miles; the boys would be glad to settle the score.

The braves saw the Texans coming. An old percussion cap rifle was armed, aimed, and fired. One rider felt a stab of pain as the ball skinned his leg. He blazed back with his Colt. The rifleman uttered a cry, and the rifle, a relic of wars long past, fell to the ground. Seeing that they were in range, the other Texans began peppering the raiders. They raced a mile before they scored another hit; then one brave swayed and started to fall from his mount. Another boldly rode alongside, grabbed him, and flung him across the neck of his own horse. Now the steers were forgotten by the braves, in their hasty bid to escape alive.

"Get the steers. Forget the hostiles," advised the lead cowhand.

They holstered their guns and began spinning lariats to turn the mavericks back to the main body of the herd.

The braves rode off, with two of their party injured and all their efforts brought to naught. Glumly they made their way toward their distant camp. While they rode they were watched by Travis and Ready Claw.

"They collected nothing but hard luck," the buffalo hunter scoffed.

"They get one horse, anyway," Ready Claw said.

He had been watching Festus' horse slowly picking its way home, reins trailing and saddlebag bouncing against its brown flank. Its white rump flashed in the sunlight. The Comanches spied the horse, and, with a triumphant whoop, two braves spurred forward to meet the oncoming horse. The horse heard their approach, but without a rider it was also without direction. Docilely it let the first brave to reach it grab the trailing reins and lead it along.

"Funny," Travis said. "It's saddled. If one of the Texans lost his mount, you'd figure his pals would come after it."

Ready Claw shrugged silently, and they turned for Dodge, knowing that they had bought Matt Dillon at least a few hours of peace and quiet.

King caught up to his men as they led the stolen steers back to the milling main herd.

"Good work, boys," he acknowledged. "Now help slow the steers, and we'll walk them back to camp, before they run off any more weight."

That was easier said than accomplished. When a several-hundred-pound steer is panicked, it takes considerable time to soothe him into slowing down. The trail hands milled the herd for an hour, decreasing the pace at each turn. It was four in the afternoon before the Circle K foreman thought they could risk starting back to the blanket camp.

"Git along! Git!"

Gentle, but forceful, the call went down the long line of steers that now headed back to the blanket camp outside of Dodge. The men were coughing, choked by dust. Stomachs grumbled for their missing meal, and parched tongues licked even drier lips as the men thought of a cup of coffee at the chuck wagon. The proud riders, who had started out ramrod straight in their saddles, now slumped from exhaustion, every muscle aching for rest. Still, they pushed on. Hellions in town, they were a disciplined, hardworking band on the trail. Their pay was right there, shuffling homeward on slow hooves, and the hands wouldn't rest until the herd was bedded down. The wild whooping and hollering in the town hours earlier, the chant to free Harry, and the plan to rip Dodge from end to end were all forgotten. No men as tired as they could enjoy the luxury of plotting revenge.

But for King Kincaid, weariness was replaced by anger. His carefully worked out plot was now off schedule. No matter, he decided at last. Another day

wouldn't really matter. In the end he would win, and winning was what really counted.

Matt Dillon had seen the dust clouds on the prairie and now was testing the coffeepot on the office stove. He calculated that, even with the best of luck, the Circle K couldn't turn, slow, and drive its herd back to its grazing ground in less than five hours. And Matt doubted that, by then, even the toughest, loudest, angriest cowhand would be in any mood to try taking over Dodge—that evening, at least.

While one problem seemed temporarily removed, Matt was still puzzled and concerned over Festus' absence. By any possible route to and from Haysville, he should have returned long before this. Just then he heard some horses being reined in at the hitching post outside. He pushed from his chair eagerly, hoping one rider would be his scraggly-faced deputy. But Matt's glance fell on only Travis and Ready Claw.

"Seems the Circle K has its hands full." Travis laughed.

"Nothing you'd know about?" Matt asked, with a playful look.

"Well, I always wondered how buffalo and cows would mix. You know, Marshal, we drove a small bunch of the critters into that herd. They don't mix. Cows took right off. Lit out like they were possessed."

"Thanks," Matt said, patting the hunter's shoulder. "Your timing couldn't have been better."

"Their friend?" asked Ready Claw, nodding toward the cells.

"Still in safekeeping, but for a while I did think I had reached the frayed end of my string. Again—thanks."

With a wink, Travis turned, and he and his skinner disappeared through the doors of the Long Branch. Matt returned to his desk.

When he looked up again, a familiar figure was standing in the doorway, motioning in a man with a handlebar moustache and a bandaged shoulder.

"Sorry if I was poky, Matthew," Festus remarked casually.

"Where have you been, and what have you brought with you?"

"Pierce—the gent with the arrow wound who's the witness to the farmer's murder—"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Pierce, his features freezing in a look of anger. "I was at the farmer's cabin, all right. After Doc Adams treated me, I was out for good. When I came to, I was inside a dugout somewhere else, and I haven't any notion how I got there or what happened to the farmer."

Matt stared at him silently for a moment, making his disbelief apparent. "Festus, open a cell for him."

"Cell?" shouted Pierce. "I've got a job. I'm no vagrant. I work for the Circle K!"

"Good; you can chat with Harry. He'll be in the cell next to yours," Matt continued, taking Pierce's good elbow and easing him toward the back room.

"Look here, Marshal, you can't jail a man without a charge—not in this country!"

"You're absolutely right," Matt agreed, "but I'm

keeping you in custody as a witness to the farmer's murder. Seems that, unless you're locked up, you're subject to strange disappearances." The cell door slammed shut on a protesting Pierce. "Of course," Matt hinted, "if being cooped up here should help your recollection. . . ."

The door into the office closed behind him, shutting out some unflattering remarks from the two prisoners. Festus was already pouring himself a cup of coffee. Travis poked his head in through the door.

"Don't you ride a brown mare with a white rump, Festus?" he inquired.

"That'd be right," Festus agreed between sips.

"I don't see him outside," Travis continued.

"Er—no, I allow he isn't out there. I was forced to abandon him. But he'll show."

"Don't wait," Travis concluded. "Some Comanches caught him."

Festus' eyes widened in consternation, and he slumped into Matt's desk chair. He was a crushed man. Matt gazed down at him inquiringly.

"Matthew," the defeated deputy half whispered, "I got beaten. You sent me to collect some papers. I got collected. I escaped. Got the papers. Put 'em in my saddlebag and, when I was chased, forgot they were there. I let the horse lead off my pursuers while I went back for Pierce."

Matt was trying to follow the rapid recital. It all added up to the shocking realization that the vital papers he had sent Festus for were now in the possession of some Comanche raiders.

Matt slumped down onto the desk in front of Festus. His long shot had failed. Stopping King Kincaid no longer seemed a happy possibility. A few illiterate Comanches had stolen his hole card, and they couldn't even appreciate what it held!



*The Raid*

BY DUSK the Circle K herd was drifting slowly back to its grazing ground south of Dodge. Men bumped in their saddles, too tired to care how they were making the last mile home. The Chinese cook stood at his chuck wagon, pails of coffee steaming and ready for the dust-choked riders' return. He realized that they wouldn't be interested in food until later, when the aches of the roundup had passed.

As the steers came back to the familiar grass and the water ditches, they drank and sank to the ground. A cowboy grabbed a guitar from the chuck wagon and, riding slowly in and out among the beeves, began strumming and singing softly. The rhythmic twang of the guitar, the low-pitched voice, and the soothing chant all served to calm and quiet the herd.

King Kincaid paused on the steps of his wagon and looked at the mass of steers about him. He had been lucky. If the herd had scattered for keeps, he would be a broken man. He entered the wagon, and his servant helped him off with his clothing. Steam rose from a short copper tub awaiting his exhausted body. King

sank into the luxury of the hot water and relaxed, lighting up a cigar. He had his herd, and his men were even more furious after their run of trouble in Dodge. He was a day behind schedule, but in the morning he could lead them again in the chant that would rock, and finally bring down, Dodge's walls: "Free Harry—now!"

One of the volunteers rode up to Matt's office. He ambled in, grinning. "You won't be needing the volunteers tonight. Every last hand is going to bunk down as soon as he can at the Circle K."

Matt nodded his thanks. Festus brooded in a corner, wishing he could find a way to make up for his catastrophic mistake. Ready Claw sat on the floor, his back to the wall, whittling, and Travis was cleaning his big buffalo gun.

"I need those papers," Matt said half aloud.

"Maybe know where Comanches camp," Ready Claw offered. "Not sure—"

"I'm willing to try anything," Matt said eagerly. "Where?"

"Two suns ago, while we look for buffalo tracks, see Indian pony tracks—no horseshoes. Ledge maybe twelve miles from Boot Hill—"

"I know the spot. Serves as a fine temporary camp for rovers like the Comanches."

"If braves wounded, not go far. Maybe they stay there now," the skinner concluded.

Matt thought for a moment. Dodge was secure for that evening. But without the papers, he'd never know

if there were any basis for his suspicions of King Kincaid's true purpose in sending his trail crew into Dodge loaded for bear. He might find the braves, only to discover that the papers had been used to feed their cooking fire or had been scattered to the winds. He might find the braves and have to fight them to get the saddlebag with the papers. It could be a wild-goose chase, and it might be dangerous, but he no longer doubted that he had to make the attempt.

"I'm going," he remarked, rising.

"Then I'd better go with you, Matthew," Festus offered. "After all, getting the papers back sure is my responsibility."

"I know way. Let Travis watch town." Ready Claw spoke and was out the office door before Matt could even try to object.

Travis moved behind the marshal's desk with a wink, sat down, and placed his boots on the desk top, as if it had always belonged to him.

"Just how you figure on handling those hostiles?" Festus asked as they mounted.

"Let's find them first," Matt replied, turning his horse down the street and galloping toward the toll bridge. Behind them the town seemed unusually and blessedly quiet.

The three riders moved in a tight line across the plain. The moon, moving at intervals from behind the clouds, lit their lonely way across the vast flatlands. Ready Claw's feather bobbed at the head of the line; some tribal instinct gave him a sense of unhesitating direction. He never varied his course, although in the

near darkness there were no visible landmarks to guide him. Matt tried, in those moments when the moon was out, to spot some familiar object on the prairie to confirm their direction. His searching eyes found none, but he felt secure in his belief that, despite the seeming absence of any way to check their route, Ready Claw would bring them to the ledge.

Much later Matt was shaken out of a near-hypnotic daze caused by the rhythmic riding, when Ready Claw hissed to alert them.

They reined in and looked ahead. Now Matt could discern it, too—a slight orange flickering—a fire.

"Ledge there," Ready Claw whispered. "Comanche there, too."

"Could be someone else," Matt suggested.

"Wind come from behind us. Get off here or horses scent." The brave slid silently to the ground.

The three horses were ground-hitched, and the men began a slow, wide circle to carry them downwind and closer to the ledge. As they moved silently over the soft ground, their eyes were focused on the wavering flame a few hundred yards away. No sound could be heard from around the fire, nor was there any sign of movement. They began to close in from the far side of the camp. Matt could pick out six horses bunched together, a few standing, the rest on the ground. Ready Claw sank to all fours. Obediently Matt and Festus imitated him. Crouched low, they slowly advanced. Fifty yards from the fire, they fell flat and lay motionless. The firelight reflected dully on the underside of a rocky ledge that jutted out some ten feet above the

ground. Matt counted five blanketed figures lying behind the fire and inside the twenty-foot hollow that formed under the projecting stone. Ready Claw held up a handful of extended fingers, as if to confirm Matt's count. Festus rolled onto one side and looked questioningly at Matt Dillon. His was the next move, and his deputy was wondering what that might be. The odds were five to three, but some of the braves were wounded, and surprise was on the law's side. Dillon disliked senseless bloodshed. Still, unless they rushed the braves, Festus could see no way to search for the missing papers.

First, Matt decided, he must determine if the papers were with the Comanches. He motioned to Ready Claw and Festus to stay where they were. Then he began inching his way closer to the sleeping braves. When he had covered half the distance, he paused and raised himself up on one arm.

To the left of the slowly dying fire he saw a pile of gear. He was still too far away to identify each object. He waited for a moment and then began his stealthy, laborious advance.

*Whee-uh-uh!*

The horse's whinny sounded like a bugle call of alarm in the still night.

Matt flung himself flat, turning his face into the ground so his light skin wouldn't give him away. He tucked his exposed hands under his chest and tried to breathe soundlessly.

Festus slid his six-gun from its holster. He and Ready Claw saw two braves fling back their blankets

and spring to their feet. One clutched an old percussion cap rifle, the other a bow and arrow. The same horse whinnied again and reared. The Comanches peered about, trying to see what was disturbing it. They moved out from under the ledge's overhanging protection, standing in front of the fire not twenty feet from the motionless marshal, who was praying that the plain would open up and swallow him.

Festus turned to see what Ready Claw thought of the situation. He was gone! Festus hadn't heard the Tonkawa move off, yet he was nowhere in sight. Had he slipped closer to Matt in case the Comanches spotted the marshal? The Comanches were now advancing—farther from their camp and nearer to Matt.

*Arroo-o-o-o-o!*

The plaintive wail came from Festus' right. He turned sharply but saw nothing.

*Aree-e-e-e-e!*

The wail sounded slightly more distant now. The braves looked in its direction and then turned back to their blankets. A passing coyote had spooked the horse, that was all. In a minute they were again wrapped in their blankets and sinking into sleep.

Matt slowly let out his breath. Using both elbows, he began to push backward, afraid to risk turning while he was so close to the restive horse. It was tiring, time-consuming work as, foot by foot, he drew away from the ledge and the braves beneath it. Several minutes later he found himself alongside Festus, and he relaxed.

"I'm lucky that coyote happened by," he whispered.

"Thank the coyote yourself, Matthew," his deputy suggested as he pointed to Ready Claw crawling up from the direction where the "coyote" had been heard!

"Find saddlebag?" asked the brave.

"No, but there's a pile of gear, and it could be sitting there among it."

"Maybe I could just go over and tell 'em I'm missing it," Festus suggested.

"They seem a bit belligerent," Matt advised. "Instead let's gather up all the tumbleweed we can find."

Both men eyed the marshal as if he had suddenly lost his mind. It was late at night; they were in the middle of the prairie, within gunshot range of hostile Comanches; and Matt Dillon requested that they gather tumbleweed!

Long experience with Matthew Dillon had inured Festus to some of his boss's wilder notions which on later reflection proved most reasonable. He started moving off at a crouch, his hands out to scoop any passing mass of the windblown weed that scurried over the plain with each breeze.

Half an hour later, the three men had a respectable pile of the light, dry brush.

"Dampen most of it," Matt whispered as they lay near a muddy wallow.

Puzzled but obedient, they wet down the brittle mass. Then dragging the tumbleweed with them, they circled wide to come out on top of the ledge. Matt signaled a halt. The moon was low now, and yellowed like a piece of ancient paper hanging over the prairie. He knew they were upwind of the horses, but they

didn't stir. Luck was finally on his side. He struck a match, and a smile crept across Ready Claw's usually expressionless face. He understood the plan and began to push the tangled weed pile into a tight ball. Festus scratched his beard in bewilderment. Matt touched the flame to a dry end of the pile. It hissed into a brilliant blaze, and he yanked his hand back hurriedly. Then the flame reached the wet weeds and sizzled, burning still but with a thickening cloud of acrid smoke. Now Festus knew!

Matt used a stick to shove the ball of smoking weed to the edge of the ledge. Now the horses whinnied, but it no longer mattered. Glancing down for a final sighting, Matt pushed the six-foot-high bundle of blaze and smoke over the ledge.

It landed a yard upwind of the sleeping Comanches. The smoke began to pour across them in a choking cloud. They rose, gasping, coughing, blinded by the smoke. They staggered forward, seeking the open air.

Matt Dillon yanked the kerchief tight around his nose and mouth, caught the edge of the rock ledge, and dropped the remaining few feet to the ground. The flames from the tumbleweed fire were hot and bright, and he saw his prize. There, amid the other gear, was Festus' saddlebag, and its bulky pocket looked promising. He scooped it up and turned back to the ledge.

Two tan arms stretched down for him as Ready Claw leaned over the ledge, and Festus sat on the Indian's legs to anchor him. Matt grabbed the skinner's wrists and felt the hands close around his wrists. Behind him the startled braves were still choking and

wiping their watery eyes, totally unaware of the tall figure being hauled up onto the ledge, the saddlebag slung over his right shoulder.

Without a word, they raced for their horses. Now they could hear angry voices near the campfire, but the Comanches did not know what had happened, who had struck, nor even where to look. The trio reached their waiting mounts and minutes later were racing off across the plains.

"Papers inside?" Festus finally asked, when he was certain they were well out of earshot.

"Feels full," Matt acknowledged.

"Just what's among those papers, Matthew?"

"Maybe a reason for all the trouble we've been having back in Dodge."

Festus didn't press him any further. He realized it would have to wait until Matt had a chance to examine the papers back in town. Meanwhile he eased back in his saddle, the chill of the late hour refreshing him and almost making him forget the long, exciting day that had passed.

In their sweep back to town, they passed near the Circle K blanket camp. The moon just peeked above the horizon now, but in its final, pale glimmer, they could make out the sprawling, sleeping herd. There'd be no trouble from there—not this night, anyway.

Matt entered the office first and tossed the saddlebag onto his desk. He sat down wearily and turned up the lantern. Travis stirred in a corner, where he had sat asleep in a chair.

"Hi," he said. "No problems here. Did you get

what you were looking for?"

"I'll soon know," Matt replied, opening the leather flap and spilling out the jammed papers and file folders. There, amid those papers, lay the key to King Kincaid's actions—or else his theory was wrong, and tomorrow he would be facing the raging mob of Circle K riders.

*Escape*

THE OTHERS watched Matt for a quarter of an hour. His big hands slowly put paper after paper aside, after he carefully read the scrawled words on each one. Festus poured him a cup of coffee and put it on the desk near his right hand, but Matt's concentration was too deep even to notice it. Festus suppressed a well-earned yawn and nodded to Travis and Ready Claw. They rose and silently followed him outside.

"As I see it," Festus commented, when they were out on the darkened, deserted street, "tomorrow's going to be a mighty busy day. No sense hanging around the calaboose now. I'm skinning for home and getting some rest."

"You're right," Travis agreed. "Tomorrow those trail hands will be coming back screaming for their pal's release."

"Free Harry—now!" mockingly muttered Ready Claw.

It brought a welcome laugh to the lips of the other two tired men. Festus moved off to his quarters, with an exhausted wave of his hand. Travis and the Indian

headed for their buffalo wagon and blanket rolls. As Festus shuffled on, the day's crowded events kept flashing through his mind. It seemed a miracle that he was still alive—and an even greater one that they had recovered the missing saddlebag with the papers Matt had so desperately sought. Somehow it all tied in with King Kincaid, the wounded Pierce, and Dodge, but Festus knew his poor, sleepy noggin wasn't up to solving the mystery, at least not at that late hour. Maybe Matt would find the answers. Anyway, Festus reasoned, as he flung himself down on his bed in his dusty clothes, he was only a deputy, and staying up studying a bunch of chicken scratches on paper was what happened when you were the boss and wore a marshal's star.

The star on Matt's shirt began to feel heavier when, an hour later, he was still carefully reviewing each paper and still not finding what he was seeking. His eyes began to blink and his head to droop. He shook his head hard, as if to clear it of tiredness. Then he slowly shoved himself from the chair. Taking the luke-warm cup of coffee, which he only now discovered on the desk, he walked to the doorway and stepped outside.

The night was chilly. It was almost three in the morning. Above Dodge he could make out a few stars in a slightly overcast sky. The sight of the stars depressed him this night, for they promised no rain for the next day. Rain might have been Dodge's salvation, for one more day, anyway. He gulped down the coffee and, feeling a trifle more awake, returned to the desk

to resume the vital search.

For a little town, Haysville seemed to have collected a multitude of papers. Festus, in gathering every last scrap of official paper, had condemned Matt to reading burial notices, purchase receipts for lumber for the town hall's leaking roof, a long file of correspondence between the mayor and a surveyor, a list of items found and still unclaimed—including a set of slightly yellowing uppers.

Suddenly Matt's hand struck the desk in triumph! There was the first of the papers his hunch had told him he might discover! He no longer felt sleepy. His eyes eagerly scanned the words, and he thumbed impatiently through the next papers in the pile.

Half an hour later, Matt Dillon knew he had unraveled the secret of the coming trouble in Dodge. Armed with this knowledge, he might be able to halt King Kincaid. Now the delirious threats Doc had heard the wounded Pierce mutter—"big deal . . . no wonder . . . all that . . . cash . . . a killing . . . once they . . . burn . . . what a killing . . . and no more Dodge . . . just . . . his place . . . but he always thought grand"—now those words made chilling sense. And now Matt might be able to prevent the threats from becoming disastrous reality.

He hadn't consciously heard the first groans; he had been too absorbed in his reading. But now he turned toward the closed door between his office and the cells. The groan sounded urgent. Matt sprang to his feet and started for the door, but, wise to the ways of the men who ended up in his jail, he drew his gun and held it

waist high as he opened the door.

Harry was lying on his bed, snoring, his long hair a tangled halo around his head. But in the next cell, Pierce lay face down on the floor, moaning, with his hands on his cell door. A trickle of blood was visible at the side of his wounded shoulder. Matt rushed back into the office, holstering his gun. Somehow the wound must have opened. He reached for the cell keys.

"Hey!" Harry shouted. "Dillon! This guy's dying in here!"

"Coming," Matt replied, on the run.

Harry looked ghostly pale as he tossed his head back to keep his long locks out of his eyes. He stared at the motionless man in the next cell.

"Didn't you hear him groan?" Matt demanded, inserting the key.

"I'm a heavy sleeper," Harry replied. "You sleep in the middle of a bellowing herd of beeves, and you get used to hearing nothing."

Matt swung the door open. Instinctively, with the door open behind him, his hand dropped to his gun butt, but there was no movement from the bleeding prisoner. Matt entered the cell, slamming the door shut behind himself and turning the key to lock it. He left the key in the lock, but if Pierce miraculously revived and bolted for the door, he wouldn't find it accommodatingly open for his escape.

Matt knelt beside Pierce and started gently to turn him over with a hand under his wounded shoulder. As Pierce rolled over, his good arm swung up. Clenched in his hand was the two-inch-thick bar of soap from

the washbowl which had been left in the cell. Matt saw it coming, but too late. The flat, hard edge of the bar caught the marshal squarely on the jaw. His head snapped back, and, still clutching Pierce's shoulder, he fell forward. He fought to stagger to his feet, but the man beneath him viciously brought up a knee. Matt's breath exploded out of him, and he rolled onto the floor, sinking into unfeeling blackness.

His aching jaw bothered him. A weak, vague hand searched for and finally found his jaw and touched it delicately. At the deep pain of even that soft contact, his eyes opened. He was staring up at the cell ceiling. Matt rolled to one side. Next to him was the villainous bar of soap, one end flattened and widened from the powerful impact.

"You came around fast, Marshal. Not more'n two minutes."

The voice seemed to come from another dimension. Matt pushed himself to a sitting position and turned to the speaker. Harry was sitting on his cot in the next cell, smiling at him.

Matt got to his feet and peered around. The cell door was open, and Pierce was gone. Matt yanked the key ring out of the door.

"Thought you rode in the same outfit," Matt commented, looking questioningly at Harry.

"I asked him to spring me, but he was in a heap of a hurry," Harry replied, with a sad shrug.

"One less charge against him," Matt retorted and slammed the cell door shut behind himself. He glanced

at the gun cabinet. A pistol was missing, so now Pierce was armed. He had probably deliberately and painfully opened his wound just enough to add the convincing touch of realism to the act that had fooled Matt. Well, he mused, he'd track him down, and the temporary loss of one pistol from his official arsenal didn't hurt that much.

Matt started for the door and then stopped with a sickening sense of apprehension. He turned and stared at his desk. It was empty! The top, where moments ago a pile of strewn papers lay, was now bare. Festus' saddlebag was missing, too. The cunning man with the handlebar moustache knew how valuable those papers were to his boss, King Kincaid. True, Matt knew now that his wild guess was the truth, but without the physical proof—those stolen papers—few would believe him. It would be his word against Kincaid's, and the accusation was so startling that not many would believe it without seeing the truth in black and white.

"Two minutes," he muttered to himself. That was how long Harry said Matt had been unconscious. That didn't give Pierce much of a lead. Gun drawn, he ran from his office. His head swiveled from side to side, his gun sweeping the street along with his searching eyes. Front Street was lit by a lone lantern, and not a soul was stirring at this hour of the morning. Matt listened. No sound of hoofbeats. He rushed to the hitch-rack. His horse was still there, and so were the other two that had been tied up earlier.

His deputies! The volunteers were his best hope. Just a block from Front Street, he pounded on a door.



"Luke! Sam! I need you, and fast. It's the marshal!"

Two sleepy men, tightening belt buckles, stared from their doorway.

"What's wrong, Dillon?" one managed to say, between yawns.

"Jailbreak," Matt replied and filled them in quickly.

As they donned their gun belts, Matt Dillon gave them their directions. He was certain Pierce had not left town yet—certainly not by horse—and with that wound he wouldn't be able to make any time on foot. He sent the men to watch the two practical ways out of Dodge.

"He can shave his moustache," Matt warned as they set off, one to the south and the other to the north, "but he can't hide the bandages on that wounded shoulder too easily. And make sure no one leaves town with a fat saddlebag. Check it for papers from Haysville."

The volunteer deputies hurried away, their boots tapping out lonely, fading sounds in the sleeping town. Yet Matt Dillon was positive that somewhere in that town one man wasn't sleeping. That was Pierce, probably chuckling triumphantly but wondering if he could remain hidden from the angered marshal, who, he must know, would even now be searching for him.

Matt headed for his office. Guarding the two ways out of town was all he could do at the moment. Pierce could try to slip away by not taking the regular roads, but Matt doubted that he would. The ground was rough, and he must be weak from loss of blood. He also must be betting everything on his hiding place. At first light, Matt decided, he would rout out the rest

of his men and make a house-to-house search.

He entered the office, where the barren desk top greeted him mockingly. As if no longer certain of his own efficiency, Matt opened the cell room door. Harry was sleeping, snoring rhythmically. Matt stared at the long-haired troublemaker. Strange that Pierce, another Circle K rider, hadn't freed him.

He swung his feet up onto the desk, shoved his hat down over his eyes, and hoped to grab a few hours' sleep before morning. But he couldn't sleep; Harry's presence disturbed him. It was against all logic—or was it? No, it made perfect sense! Harry was the alleged cause of the Circle K riders' threatening mood yesterday. If Pierce had freed him, their cause would have ended. Harry had been left there as an excuse for their returning to tear Dodge to ribbons. Positive that his deductions were right, and despite the menace of his conclusion, Matt Dillon was soon in a deep sleep.

The creaking of a wagon woke Matt. In the first light of dawn, a farm wagon was starting down Front Street with vegetables and fruits for the general store.

Matt tilted his white hat back into place and swung his feet off the desk. He pulled his gun belt a few notches tighter, removed his hat, and went over to a basin. Emptying a water pitcher into it, he washed, then began to shave.

The face that stared back at him from the mirror looked tired and troubled. The shave refreshed him slightly, but Matt knew that, exhausting as yesterday

had been, today might prove even more trying. He took a clean shirt out of a bottom drawer and slipped it on. The clock on the file cabinet indicated six thirty. As if to confirm this, Festus strode through the doorway carrying a food pail for the prisoner.

"Morning, Matthew," he remarked. "Saw Luke patrolling to the south of town. Understand we've one less mouth to feed."

Matt sadly acknowledged the fact and told Festus of Pierce's escape.

"Well, you must've been right somewhat about those papers being valuable, Matthew. Ever find out if you were right?"

"I did, and later I'll tell you and Doc, among others, just what I learned. No one's going to take my statement seriously without those papers in my hand."

"Well, maybe Pierce'll turn up again. Luke says he sure won't sneak by *hiri*."

Festus opened the door to the cell room and gruffly informed Harry that breakfast was waiting for him.

"How come his pal didn't free him?" Festus asked, when he returned to the office.

"If he did, would the Circle K have any cause for running loco on the streets of Dodge?"

"You mean he was left deliberately? Those sly buzzards!" Festus muttered.

"We're going to be clever, too. Take this order for Harry's release to Judge Wells and have him sign it. I want it back before eight."

"His Honor kind of enjoys his sleep, Matthew."

"Festus, tell him if he doesn't wake up and sign it

before eight, he may have no place to sleep tonight, except in some charred ruins."

Festus whistled to acknowledge the seriousness of the matter, hurried out, mounted, and made for the judge's cabin a mile and a half from town. He could picture the bewhiskered man opening his door, his face furious under his nightcap. It wasn't going to be an agreeable encounter.

When Travis and Ready Claw stopped by shortly after Festus had left, Matt told them of the prisoner's escape and asked them to round up the remaining deputies.

"But leave the two men watching the ends of town," Matt cautioned.

"You really want to get Pierce back, don't you?" Travis asked.

"Not especially," Matt informed him. "I just want those papers."

Travis raised one eyebrow in puzzlement. Matt had sharpened his curiosity even further. He must find out what Matt had discovered. But that had to wait. Right now, he realized, the other deputies had to be prepared for when the Circle K hands returned and began their chant to free Harry.

Half an hour later, Matt looked at the five armed and badge-decorated deputies.

"There's a big plan to buffalo this town," he quietly informed them. "Kincaid is behind it. But we're going to call his hand for now. That'll gain us some time to get the cards we need to win with."

"How you calling him?" one of the volunteers asked,

a bit uneasy at the dire prospects that Matt had sketched for them.

"We're freeing Harry!"

There was a mumble of surprise and dissent among the gathered deputies.

"Festus should be back with a release signed by Judge Wells. After all, Harry was jailed for only minor charges. His one night in the cooler establishes our authority, and letting him out before the Circle K hands scream for his freedom undercuts their excuse for raising Cain around here."

Five heads nodded in silent agreement. A rider pulled up outside, then stomped in. It was Festus.

"Should have seen His Honor, Matthew. He doesn't cotton to waking up this early. No, sirree!" Festus placed the signed release on Matt's desk. "Why, his face was as red as his nightshirt. But when I said I'd be honored to wait for him to dress so he could come on down here and argue with you, that threw him. He signed."

Matt studied the paper. "Festus, please release the prisoner."

Striding as officially as possible to impress the other deputies, Festus marched to the wall, collected the key ring, and opened the door to the cell room.

"Harry whatever-your-last-name-is, I have here a court order signed by Judge Wells to release you from the jail of Dodge City forthwith." He drew out that final word; it seemed to give his statement a certain refined style. Then, with a flourish, he inserted the key and opened the cell door.

Harry swept his hair back with both hands and hurried out. He walked into the office under the watchful gaze of Matt and the deputies. Matt showed him the court order. From his desk he took a large sealed envelope which contained Harry's personal possessions, such as they were. The trail hand counted his three dollars and two I.O.U. gambling notes and checked a few other papers as if they were of weighty importance. Then, with a firm X, he signed the receipt and shoved his valuables into his pockets.

"Your horse is outside," Matt informed him. "Just keep him out of pool halls. Could be a bad influence on a nice, clean-cut mount like that."

The deputies chuckled, but Harry's face remained grim. "Your grub's not fit for human bein's."

"Then," Festus suggested, "you sure should have enjoyed it."

Matt stepped between them before the angry trail hand could make a move. "The Long Branch serves a good breakfast about now."

Harry moved out and headed for the swinging doors of the Long Branch. Kitty had not yet arrived, but a bartender came over to the lone, long-haired customer and took his breakfast order of eggs, a small steak, potatoes, bacon, coffee, and cake. Harry had decided to eat like a cattle owner, not a cattle pusher.

Half an hour later Ready Claw raced his pony down Front Street and leaped off in front of Matt's office.

"Trouble! Kincaid and all his men come fast!"

Matt smiled. He had anticipated this moment. He

rose and practiced a draw, just to be certain his gun was still sliding easily from its holster. It was, and he moved confidently to the street. Turning toward the toll bridge, he heard the oncoming clomp of the horsemen. King Kincaid, on a handsome palomino, rode at their head. He wore a wide-brimmed tan sombrero that flashed an expensive Mexican silver hatband. The cut of his short jacket showed that it had been tailored back East, just for riding. He had all the look of some medieval lord leading a column of his marauding knights. Matt didn't glance at King's face but at his holster. It was still empty. That meant his men, too, were unarmed. They were seemingly obeying the law. Matt smiled to himself. King was building a nice case to justify the action that would soon erupt—if things went according to plan.

King reined in a foot short of Matt, who leaned against one side of the doorway. "I want my man Harry."

"You know why he was jailed—" Matt started.

"Free Harry—now!"

The chant started low, but shortly, with repetition, it boomed down the street, filling it with menace. Shopkeepers poked their heads out of their doorways, but seeing the fifty tightly packed riders confronting Dillon and chanting their war cry, they edged back into their stores with a sick sense of hopelessness.

Matt waited until the men had shouted for a minute, then raised his hand for silence.

King's hand, too, shot up. Like an orchestra, obedient to its conductor's slightest motion, the mob's voice

died abruptly. There was silence over Front Street.

"I'm not freeing Harry now," Matt began. He was looking at the sea of faces growing angrier as he spoke. "He served his time and was freed half an hour ago. Check the Long Branch."

At his words, all the drive and power seemed to drain from the dismayed faces of the men before Matt.

"Harry!" bellowed Kincaid. "You in the Long Branch?"

A moment later a long mop of hair poked between the swinging doors. A napkin tucked beneath his chin, Harry emerged.

"You got your man," Matt said quietly. "Take him."

In that moment, he turned the crisis into a laughing triumph. Two riders swept down on the startled trail hand, and one yanked him up double behind himself.

"Put me down!" shouted Harry. "I haven't finished eating."

But, to the cheers of his fellow cowpokes, Harry was ridden down their ranks. They had the man they had come for! With whoops of victory, they raced for the toll bridge and out of town. Matt watched with relief. He had gauged the situation correctly and had taken the right action.

"They figure they freed him, don't they, Matthew?" Festus observed, watching the riders diminish into a small, blurry mass.

"Let them," Matt responded. "We've got peace and order here, and that's our job."

King Kincaid hadn't moved. His horse still rested in the middle of the street just in front of Matt Dillon. He

realized that he had been outsmarted. He respected Dillon for that, but he was more determined than ever to hasten the final victory, which he swore would be his. He stood up in his stirrups and looked south. Matt followed the direction of his gaze. He saw a small puff on the flat, distant horizon—dust.

"The other outfits are moving up," King pointed out. "They'll be in their blanket camps by afternoon. And I'll be making the rounds, Dillon, telling them how vilely Dodge treats all visiting cowhands!"

He didn't wait for a reply. Feeling his sure tug on the reins, the responsive palomino reared and turned smartly on its hind legs. In an instant, with easy grace, King Kincaid was on his way out of town to rally the other cow outfits.

"Matthew," murmured Festus, watching King's departure, "if he gets the other trail crews to join his boys, you can bet your big foot that you, me, and those few volunteers aren't going to be enough to keep 'em from pulling this town down around our ears!"

## 12

*The Plot*

KING KINCAID thundered across the toll bridge, smarting from his defeat. But King had not achieved his success by sulking over past events. Long ago he realized that, in reaching the top, he would suffer setbacks along the way. He had trained himself not to brood when these happened, or to think of what might have been, but rather to see realistically what could be done next to keep improving his position. Dillon had won a round, but not the fight. King grabbed his gun from the rack and slipped it into its holster.

Reining in at his wagon, he forced himself to smile at some of his hands standing nearby.

"We got Harry back, boys," he said with a wide grin.

"No one keeps our pals in the cooler long, King," a man shouted back.

"That's the Circle K!" yelled another. Four guns exploded into the air in a chorus of loud approval.

"Let's save our lead, boys," their boss cautioned. "We don't want to spook the stock—not after yesterday's run. One more trip like that, and there won't be

any meat on the poor critters."

The guns were holstered. King threw a glance at the nearest steers. They were bent over a water-filled wallow, slurping contentedly. He entered his wagon. Just the feel of the deep, exotic carpet beneath him gave King a reassuring sense of his power and importance. He gazed at the impressive collection of antique furniture before him, his hand appreciatively running across the leather spines of books over two hundred years old. His was a world of culture and aristocratic tastes. No grubby-looking marshal, no matter how tall he sat in the saddle or how swift his draw, was going to give him trouble for long. The ever hovering servant eased the London-made boots from his master's feet.

"Get me Clay," King ordered as the man put on his slippers. Placing a bowl of fresh fruit within reach of his master, the servant hurried from the wagon.

King was slicing an apple with a small silver knife when Clay came in, a blaze of glorious white.

"Dillon wet your powder," Clay said coolly. "He released Harry."

"Don't get cocky—"

"I figure you need me. That allows for a touch of familiarity between us, King."

King studied the cold, unblinking eyes of the rangy gunslinger opposite him. "Clay, a couple of outfits are moving in. I want their owners here for lunch."

"They may not cotton to fancy food—"

"Lunch! Here! Get them!"

"King, they don't all love you like I do. But maybe that's because they aren't on the payroll like I am. And

speaking of payrolls, I think we'd better raise me another hundred this week, especially if I've got to act like a messenger, too."

King drew a slim Cordova leather wallet from his pocket. He tugged out a hundred-dollar bill and flipped it toward the gunman. It twirled to the floor between them.

"If that was meant for me," Clay said softly, "I'm sure you'd have handed it to me like a gentleman."

King bent down, picked up the bill, and offered it to the gunslinger. "Keep it, Clay. If things go the way I figure, I'll never miss that paltry amount. If they don't, we'll apply it to your funeral expenses."

There was a hostile silence as Clay shoved the bill into his pocket. He turned sharply and strode out of the wagon. King lit and puffed on his cigar. The gunfighter was getting too big for his boots, but he needed him. After things worked out, he'd find a way to cut Clay down to size.

Clay mounted his black stallion and zigzagged his way through the grazing or resting steers that spread out in every direction around King's wagon. He saw that a mile away the point of another outfit was halting. He had won his little battle with King, but he was after more than a measly hundred dollars. King was in trouble or he wouldn't be calling in the other outfits for support. Sooner or later, Dillon would have to be faced down, and that, he knew, was his job. But he wasn't charging against a gunfighter of Dillon's reputation just for his monthly pay. He wanted a cut of the bigger pot, a part of the profits that all King's

maneuvering would lead to. He didn't know exactly what King was after, because the man's mind was far too sophisticated and cunning for him. He wasn't used to high finance with its attendant high jinks. But he sensed that his boss was in a game for a big pot, and if he were going to be King's winning ace, he'd make certain he got his cut. Right now he felt that the way to do it was to make King uneasy about his own power. That—he smiled—wouldn't be too hard on this particular little mission.

Clay reined in beside a group of cowpokes drinking coffee around their chuck wagon.

"Anyone in charge of this outfit?" he demanded with a touch of arrogance.

The tired men turned and eyed him. The clean white outfit, the expensive matching guns—all spelled "professional gunslinger." After a month on the trail, they were too elated to have reached Dodge to be eager for trouble.

"Ferd Knowles runs the Double M," one cowpoke answered, jerking a thumb toward a paunchy middle-aged man, who was sitting on a bedroll checking some papers.

Clay rode up so close to the rancher that his horse was practically salivating on him. "Knowles? Kincaid wants you for a lunch meeting. Twelve sharp. You be there."

He started slowly to turn his black mount.

"Who in blazes do you figure you're talking to?" demanded the cattleman, rising with a puff of exertion.

"To a beef peddler. Be there. King wants you

to be there. Remember—twelve sharp."

"You tell him to go find a gopher hole and bury himself in it!" roared the rancher.

"I said, King Kincaid wants you—"

"Kincaid doesn't own me, mister. You tell him that."

Clay nodded solemnly. "I will, but you'll regret it."

Clay spurred his horse and rode down on the coffee drinkers. They backed up a few steps to let him trot by. Once they were behind him, his stern face broke into a self-congratulating smile. He had accomplished his purpose with the Double M.

Clay saw that another outfit had already set up camp two miles west of the Circle K. He galloped toward the trail crew. This was a good-sized herd, he realized—several thousand head, at least, easily more than half the size of King's herd. But King still had the most cattle. He had the most men working for him. He had the most land in Texas, the most money in the bank, the most of everything. And Clay was going to get some of that "most."

"These the mavericks?" Clay asked, surveying the resting steers as he reined in beside a dozen cowhands setting up a tent. "Where's the main herd? I want your boss."

"This is my herd," a bleary-eyed, tired-looking man of forty retorted, turning from the tent. "It's my main herd. I'm Jeff Cooper of the Running C. By your horse's brand, I see you work for Kincaid."

"I like to be part of a real outfit," Clay replied with a smile. "King wants you for lunch at his wagon.

Twelve sharp. Be on time. And better wash up a bit; King's kind of formal."

"He can eat by himself, for all I care," the man shouted with surprising fury.

"Maybe you didn't hear just who invited—"

"I've got a couple of hungry cows. I'll send 'em to take my place."

Cooper's men roared with approving laughter. Clay frowned darkly and turned his horse. The men snickered at his show of angry surprise. But Clay, again, was quietly gloating. Half a mile from the Running C, he spotted a smaller encampment and made for it.

It was a minor trail outfit, and the men, having gathered their steers in a tight group, were getting ready to burst into Dodge.

"Anyone claim these steers?" Clay demanded.

The surprised hands looked up at him. "I do," a young man in his mid-twenties answered. He looked like one of his hired men, a blend of dust and rumpled clothes.

"If you're really the boss, King Kincaid is favoring you with an invitation to lunch at twelve sharp."

"That's very kind of him, I'm sure," the young rancher replied. "I'll let it pass. Just tell him Winfred Day may not be up to his elegant standards."

"He's very democratic," Clay allowed.

"Look, mister; I don't owe your boss anything, and he doesn't owe me a lunch. Let's keep it that way."

Clay admired his spunk and silently swung his horse to ride off. Three invitations, three refusals. Perhaps now King would get a better idea of his standing in

the community of ranchers. And the smaller King felt himself to be, the bigger Clay would appear to him, and the easier it would be to hit King for a real cut of the big pot he was secretly playing for.

As Clay hurried up the steps of the wagon, his face assumed a slightly hurt and surprised look. King, checking some cattle buyers' offers at his desk, glanced up. His gunfighter's face disturbed him.

"Which one isn't coming?" he asked, certain that he had divined the cause of Clay's displeasure.

"Not which one, King. *Nobody's* coming."

"Nobody?" he repeated incredulously. "Just what did you say to them?"

"You'd like them here for lunch at twelve."

"That's all?"

"After they refused, I tried to coax 'em. But, King, I'm right sorry to inform you that you just don't carry much weight with other cattlemen up here."

King snuffed out a cigar angrily. He wanted a solid front of trail hands that day. He didn't want anyone pinning all the blame for what would happen on just the Circle K.

"Yoke the team," he ordered. "I'll go calling on *them*—and I'll *bring* the lunch!"

Clay didn't reply. He gazed at his boss, stunned. It wasn't like King to go hat in hand to anyone, particularly not to lesser men, and, since no herd equaled his, in King's view of the world, they were all lesser men. Whatever King was after, Clay concluded, it must be even higher stakes than he had imagined, or he wouldn't deliberately humiliate himself.



Clay went out and beckoned the wrangler. "The boss wants to get hitched up."

The wrangler's weather-beaten face showed surprise. Once the outfit made camp, King rarely ever moved his wagon. The man shrugged and started for the corral, where the remuda and the wagon team were kept.

Half an hour later the six powerful black horses reacted to the flick of the wagon driver's whip. King and Clay rocked inside the moving wagon while the servant prepared luncheon for five in the tiny galley. The table was set elegantly, glistening with silver and crystal, and Clay was certain that somehow his boss would fill the other three chairs.

Festus reported to Matt around eleven. "No luck. Pierce hasn't been seen at either end of town—not in the middle, either."

"Who checked the middle?"

"Matthew, I got my sources," Festus said with a wink. "That's what makes me so downright valuable to you. Got maybe twenty people skinning their eyeballs for Pierce, but so far not a sign."

"And I've got one deputy checking the trail crews that just pulled in, to try to learn something. We just bought us some time this morning, that's all."

"You're pretty blamed pessimistic, Matt!" The speaker was Doc Adams, and he came through the door with Kitty in tow. "We figure lack of sleep's depressing you."

"Matt," Kitty suggested, "how about taking a few

hours off and getting some rest?"

"We may all be getting lots of time off very shortly."

"Matt!" scolded Doc. "Just what makes you so blamed gloomy?"

"Some papers I read last night—papers that Pierce reclaimed, so I can't show you the proof of King Kincaid's little project."

Three pairs of eyes focused on Matt. They were all his close friends and knew that Matt Dillon didn't talk lightly. He walked to the front door and closed it. Then he sat down on his desk top and looked at the others.

"I had a hunch the other night and sent Festus to Haysville with a note asking for certain papers. He was arrested but escaped, and instead of getting just those specific papers, he got every last piece of paper in their town hall."

"Aw, Matthew, it was poor light, so I couldn't read what I was rounding up for you."

"The papers held the proof. I first got suspicious when I learned that the wounded man, Pierce, had a stuffed money belt around his waist. Then his delirious words got me to thinking. 'Big deal . . . killing . . . burn . . . Dodge.' Well, Festus fetched the missing pieces of the puzzle—"

"Matt!" an exasperated Kitty cut in. "Stop playing cat and mouse with us, and tell us what you learned!"

"That a man named Norton had been systematically buying up land in Haysville, especially along the spur rail line. And the man who supplied him with the money is King Kincaid!"

"But why—" Doc started to ask.

"Doc, what makes Dodge queen of the cow towns? Why have we taken over from the other towns? Because," he answered himself, "we can supply a rail line, stock pens, grass, water, and a town to serve the trail crews. What happens if there's real trouble here—if rampaging cowhands put Dodge to the torch? We become just charred ruins alongside some rusting rails—"

"And then," Doc concluded, "Haysville would rise like a miracle from the plains."

"Th-that pile of dugouts?" stammered Festus.

"Sure," Kitty assured him. "If King owned the land, with Dodge gone, he could have it serving as a shipping center this season, and by next year a new town would be there—all with his brand on it."

"He's ambitious," Doc agreed, nodding.

"He didn't raise the largest herd of all by being shy and unassuming, Doc," Matt said. "I don't mind ambition. It's a nice healthy trait—except when your town and all its folks may have to pay for it."

"How are you going to convince the folks?" Kitty wondered.

"It was easy when I had the papers. Now I've got to keep hoping I can get them back. If not—well, you can't play your hand until it's dealt."

The blue-covered wagon halted near the Double M chuck wagon, whose grubby exterior was dwarfed and humbled beside it. King Kincaid walked down the wagon's steps, his wavy silver hair gleaming in the

sunlight. His face beamed warmly, and his hand was extended.

"Knowles, I understand it's a mite inconvenient for you to come to lunch with me. So I've brought lunch to you, and I hope you'll join me."

Knowles accepted the offered hand and the invitation. It wasn't every day that King came calling, and Knowles was beginning to wonder what motivated his host's unusual behavior.

Once inside, Knowles gazed slightly bug-eyed at the luxurious surroundings. The servant, in his white house jacket, held an open box of cigars toward the marveling rancher. Knowles grabbed a handful as the wagon lurched forward.

"We've two more calls to make," King informed him, and Knowles eased himself gingerly onto an antique chair. "I hope it won't inconvenience you."

"Not at all; not at all!"

Shortly after, the wagon came to a gentle halt beside the Running C's main tent. King climbed down, smile fixed and hand out, and approached the cattle owner.

"Cooper, I won't take no for an answer. Knowles is inside, but it wouldn't be a good luncheon without you."

Cooper blinked as they pumped hands. "Well, I allow maybe I was a bit curt with your man. You know how you feel when you hit the end of the trail."

"Completely understandable," King said agreeably, ushering the tired man up the carpeted steps.

Inside, Knowles and Cooper exchanged greetings,

and the wagon rolled forward once again. This time it had only a short way to travel.

Winfred Day was a young man and not a proud fool. When he saw the wagon collecting the other two ranchers, he realized that he might be missing something vital to his interests. He swung off his horse and was greeted by King as he climbed aboard the wagon.

The five men sat at the beautifully laid table. The silent servant unobtrusively slipped an appetizer of sliced melon and ham before each of them.

"I guess we've all had a tough, tiring drive," King commented. The men nodded. "But don't expect any welcome mat waiting for you in Dodge."

"I've always found a friendly hand there," Knowles countered, putting down his knife and fork.

"So have I," King said, "until this trip. Dillon's trying to put the lid on our boys—tight."

A scallopini of veal, served with squash, replaced the appetizer.

"Maybe your boys provoked him," Cooper hinted. "Dillon's usually been fair."

"True," snapped King, "until now. Why, my advance party hadn't even pulled in when he had a sign up about the deadline."

For the next five minutes the men listened to an angry harangue from King Kincaid, in which he even blamed Matt Dillon for stampeding his herd to tire out his men, who were rightly demanding the freedom of one of their pals.

"He sure seems eager to fill up his calaboose," Day noted. "What do you advise? Our hands will want to

let off some steam when they hit town."

"A solid front," King quickly replied. "We all have to ride into Dodge like the town was meant to serve us and not vice versa." He watched them nod in agreement. "Without us the place would wither up and blow off the plains, not a 'dobe dollar to weight it down. I say, send all the hands you figure on letting off into town at three thirty today. And I say we can trust them with guns beyond Dillon's deadline."

"I'm not looking for trouble, King—" Knowles started.

"Nor am I. I'll test the mood earlier. But if you see a rider of mine who's all in black and riding a white horse around three o'clock, that means send your men in armed. If he's all in white and on a black horse, that means call off our ride into town."

There was silence as they sipped their coffee and thought about the proposal.

"Okay," Knowles agreed. "But make sure, before your man comes around signaling the word, that you read the signs in town right."

"I'm here to sell cattle, too," King mentioned. "Last thing I want is a wild take-over in Dodge. But the next to last thing I want is my boys being dumped in jail for no cause, chased off the streets, and set upon."

With Knowles agreeing, the smaller ranchers fell into line. Depending on the signal, at three thirty their men would ride into Dodge—armed.

It was an hour later, under an overcast sky, that one of the volunteer deputies raced back to Matt's office.

He jumped from his horse and hurried inside. Matt was already looking toward him expectantly.

"Got the word on the plain, Dillon," he said, breathing hard. "Seems every last hand from the four outfits out yonder may be riding into town around three thirty, and they'll be toting guns—if that's the signal they get."

"What *is* the signal?" Festus asked before Matt could speak.

"That's what I'm not sure about. I think only the bosses know that. But from what I gather, it's got something to do with a single rider giving it."

"You're sure they'll ride in armed?" Matt persisted.

"If that's the signal. Kincaid went calling on the other cattle owners. Got 'em all stirred up, from what I hear tell."

"Thanks," Matt replied. "Tell the other deputies to be handy around three."

The man saluted with a touch of two fingers to his black sombrero and, spurs jingling, he departed.

"What's the signal, Matthew?"

"Something obvious, I think," Matt answered. "That Circle K trail hand who dresses in either all black or all white. . . ."

Dodge was a small town, and with the rider who passed the word to the other deputies went the rumor, spreading along Front Street like a prairie fire. In minutes the more cautious of Dodge's merchants began taking protective measures. They would not wait for any "signal" that might send four trail crews spilling into town, armed and bent on trouble.

Half an hour later Matt heard the steady pounding of hammers. He guessed the source and worriedly stepped out the office door to check his conclusion. Unfortunately he was correct. Wherever he looked along Front Street, shopkeepers' assistants were busily hammering boards across their windows. Signs were going up on doors: CLOSED.

Matt's first impulse was to gather the merchants, café owners, and others to warn them that closing up shop and boarding windows was almost an open invitation to trouble. The arriving cowhands, seeing the town sewn up tight, would either resent it or sense that they were supposed to start raising a ruckus.

Matt glanced above the store roofs and saw a glimmer of hope in the lowering early afternoon sky. He was about to comment on the promising darkness to some of the busily hammering men near him, when there was sudden series of sharp, rapid-fire explosions.

"They're coming!" shouted one man, dropping his hammer.

"Find cover!" screamed another. He left a trail of nails behind him as he ran.

"Run!" squeaked a waddling shopkeeper, hurrying for shelter and too terrified to let go of the two-by-four board he clutched. The crackling reports were still echoing down Front Street as the men swept past Matt. The panic was on!

*Shoot-out*

STOP!" MATT SHOUTED above another explosive crack. "You're making fools of yourselves!"

Matt was pointing to the distant sky. Lightning was crisscrossing it, and soon after, the thunderclap rumbled into Dodge. The panic-stricken men halted, then slowly made their way back to their shops and continued their work. The town was one big case of frazzled nerves, and they would have been the first to admit it.

"How much time you figure we still have, Marshal?" one man asked, tapping in the last nail of a board that crossed his big storefront window.

"All the time we're willing to pay for," Matt replied. He turned back into his office.

"Very striking," King said, watching Clay check his dark-handled pistols and shove them into their black leather holsters. "Such a dramatic costume can't fail to give you an advantage."

"Don't worry about my winning against Dillon. Just worry about whether I'll even go up against him."

King was peeling an orange with a small fruit knife. He looked up from his chair at the black-garbed gunslinger. So at last it had come, he mused. He had expected Clay finally to assert himself, and Clay had cleverly chosen the moment when he was needed most.

"You're paid to go up against—"

"Not enough, King. You're not out just to drop some measly marshal. You're after bigger game. I want part of that action—now."

"I don't take a shine to having partners."

Clay sat down. "And I don't take a shine to making myself a target for someone like Dillon for wages."

"You were hired—"

"Want to fire me? Go ahead, King."

The older man held back his anger. He was too practical to give in to fury at the expense of his true goal. "I'll double your wages."

"Like I said, wages don't interest me. I want a cut of whatever you're after, King."

"All right, a bonus."

Clay started unbuckling his gun belt. "I said a cut!"

King looked at the gunfighter, who had defiantly dropped his belt and guns onto the carpeting, a sign of resignation. But he thought he had taken the measure of the man before. He strode to the painting on the wall, moved it aside, and deftly opened the wall safe. He took some bills from an envelope and counted them. He replaced the envelope, closed the safe door, and twirled the lock. Carefully he adjusted the painting, then walked to his desk. He took up an envelope and scribbled Clay's name on it. Then he waved the bills

before Clay. "Five thousand."

Clay gaped. He had never seen so much money at one time in all his life, let alone money earmarked for his pocket.

King slid the bills into the envelope, then licked and sealed it. As he had calculated, there were no more protests from Clay. The sight of that much money as an assured payment outweighed the prospect of any greater amount a cut in King's final take might come to. To Clay a cut could be only a vague percentage, a concept he was unused to and one which lacked the concrete attraction of cash in his pocket. King had judged his man correctly. Clay was settling for a bonus, just when King might have been forced to take on an unwanted partner. He rang the small silver bell on his desk. His valet materialized from the galley.

"When Clay returns from his errand in Dodge," he said, offering the envelope to the valet, "this is for him."

"Should he not return, it will be passed on to whomever he now designates."

Both men turned to Clay. In a roving career and with a reputation for carrying death on each hip, a man like Clay made few friends—certainly none to whom he'd eagerly leave five thousand dollars! Relatives? He had been orphaned at four. No, Clay was always number one to Clay, and no other number came after that.

"If I don't come back," Clay said wryly, "you just return it to your boss."

King smiled at the cocky gesture, and the valet de-

parted. Clay buckled his belt back on and tested the draw of both guns. They yielded readily to his sudden tug. He felt confident as he started from the wagon. He had won a major victory already that day, and surely it augured a second one against Dillon.

King watched Clay mount his white horse and apply the spurs. If Dillon were slain in the coming gun duel, it would be worth the bonus. If, instead, Dillon killed or wounded Clay, another rider would be dressed to give the signal for the trail crews to advance. The tempo of action had been speeded too much for King to turn back now. Dillon's elimination would make the burning of Dodge easier. But even a victorious Dillon should find his triumph short-lived, when the trail crews, properly stirred up, began tearing the town apart. King had paid five men to start Dodge's burning by sunset. They, too, had bonuses awaiting their successful return. True, he felt a slight sting of annoyance at having been forced to pay Clay an additional five thousand dollars, but that sum would hardly be missed in the long run, considering the stakes he was playing for.

"Win or lose, Clay," he whispered, with a slight smile at the departing figure, "I come out on top!"

Clay approached the toll bridge a few minutes later, trailed now by Harry, his long hair sweeping back in the wind under the overcast sky, and Les, whose sheathed bowie knife thumped jauntily against his chest. When Clay came to the gun rack, he shoved out a black-booted foot and kicked hard. The board rocked on its supports, then toppled.

"That takes care of that," Clay chortled. "Next—Dillon!"

The three armed riders trotted single file over the bridge. The river was flowing wider and deeper now, the result of a runoff cascading down from the north.

Coming to the start of Front Street, they saw that it was deserted and that the stores, instead of displaying welcome signs in the windows, were boarded up.

"They're expecting trouble," Harry muttered.

"Let's not disappoint 'em," Clay retorted.

"How you figure on getting Dillon to show?" Les asked as they reined in and dismounted.

Clay didn't bother to reply. He moved to the center of the street, drew one black-handled pistol, and squeezed the trigger.

The shot echoed from storefront to silent storefront. There was a tinkle of broken glass as a corner of the marshal's front office window was hit.

Inside, Matt saw the shards of glass fall to the floor. Festus watched the slug spin to a halt, then kicked it aside. Ready Claw, Travis, and three other deputies exchanged glances. The time had come for the showdown.

A second sharp, echoing crack sent a bullet to splinter the remaining glass in the window.

"It was getting stuffy in here, anyway," Matt observed, rising.

Along Front Street, behind the protection of slanting boards, troubled faces pressed close to the store, café, and shop windows. The street was deserted, except for three men, but a town was watching—a town

which had built itself from a few buffalo hunters' sod cabins into the biggest cow town of the West. The watching men weren't cowards. They had risked countless dangers, journeyed hundreds of miles west to settle in Dodge. Theirs was the memory of bitter winters, Indian raids, cattle diseases that stopped the herds halfway to Dodge and nearly bankrupted the waiting merchants. No, these were not cowards, but they knew that the man in black, who ranged their street with explosive arrogance, was a professional. To face him, they had their hired man—Matt Dillon.

Dillon had become an indispensable fixture in Dodge. His tall presence meant reassurance. His unexcited approach to trouble averted panic, because panic simply didn't develop. He was tough but fair. His gun was quick and accurate. They had seen it at work against pistol artists out to win an instant reputation with one lucky shot that might bring him down. They had seen him, all alone, face the irrational violence of a mob and force them to back off.

The tall, black-clad Texan with the smoking six-gun had arrived in town with a reputation of his own. In Texas he had faced a sheriff and a deputy, and coolly, in "self-defense," had slain them both. Those law officers had been considered the fast guns in their huge state! Clay's name also recalled the story of a double ambush, when he was attacked from the right and the left as he walked out into a street where two angry brothers hoped to avenge the death of the third. But, swiveling right and then left, Clay had ended the double threat with two clean shots.

Now Clay was gunning for Matt Dillon. And what if the lithe Texan won? No one would pick up the marshal's badge that day in Dodge. No one was qualified to replace Matt Dillon. The citizens of Dodge knew that, with Dillon gone, law and order would be gone as well. They were used to the cowhands' horseplay and exuberance at the end of the trail. Dodge had known moments when mass mayhem seemed about to grow out of seemingly innocent fun, but this season Dodge residents sensed something different.

From the moment the two Circle K riders had driven in their herd to block the street and nearly trample Dillon, Dodge had felt some grim purpose behind the moves. At first they had tried to ignore their feeling. They had pretended it would be "business as usual." But, bit by bit, the facade of normalcy had eroded away, finally revealing the undeniable fact of planned viciousness. Now all of the suppressed fears surfaced as the people watched from their windows. A professional gunfighter stalked their street, and his summoning shots were taunting their marshal into a shoot-out.

"We can all go," Festus pleaded, barring Matt's way with a shotgun he had yanked from the now open gun rack.

"That'd solve nothing. If I show any hesitation, those trail crews will come riding all over us."

"He has two men backing him," Travis noted.

"They won't make a play against me if I'm out there alone," Matt replied, moving to the door.

"Matthew, what's the point—"

"Festus, the way I see it, the big moment's at hand for Kincaid. Clay's his hole card. If he can eliminate me, putting the rest of his plan to work is easy. If I jail Clay, that gives his boys a new rallying cry, and he puts his plan into operation anyway."

"Then, like I said, Matthew, what's the point?"

"I think I know their signal, Festus," Matt replied. "I think I can confuse them. While I go out there, can you round up a completely black outfit like Clay's and put it on? If I win, I'll need you garbed that way."

"And if you lose, Matthew?"

"You'll be the first to be dressed properly for mourning," Matt answered lightly.

Matt pulled his hat down to shadow his eyes; he didn't intend to let Clay find any clue to his actions there. Then he moved into the street. Harry and Les were lounging against store buildings on opposite sides of the deserted street, a dozen yards behind Clay. Forty feet from Clay, Matt halted, his hands dangling loosely at his sides.

"Mister," he called in a flat voice, "I guess you forgot about the deadline."

"Nope, tin-badge, I simply passed it."

"Then I'll have to ask you for your guns—if you want to stay north of the toll bridge."

Clay rocked back slightly on his heels, his hands playing near his twin holsters. "You want 'em. You take 'em."

Matt shrugged and started forward, his left hand extended to accept the guns.

"Halt right where you are!" bellowed Clay, when



Matt was thirty feet away from him.

"Not till I get those guns."

Clay could tell the voice was that of an unruffled and determined man. If Matt took a half a dozen more steps, it would be too late to draw. He hadn't rattled Dillon. He hadn't forced him into making the first move. He could never claim self-defense—not with the dozens of witnesses whose curious eyes, he knew, were following every move from behind the boarded shop windows.

Matt Dillon's hope lay solely in the speed of his reaction. Long ago he had vowed never to be the first to draw in a gunfight. He was there to uphold the law. Until someone made an illegal move, no law had been violated, and yanking out his gun would be a blatant dare to the other man—an invitation to violence. He saw his job as anything *but* the encouragement of gunfighting. But should another man swing a rifle at him, grab for a knife, or start to unholster a pistol, his split-second reaction was automatic. He was a counter-puncher with a gun, but often just the threat of his reputation had been enough to face down a would-be assailant, an angry gunman, or a dangerous drunk.

Clay let his breath out slowly, and his right hand raised an inch, the fingers curling. Still Dillon did nothing more than to take another distance-narrowing step. Clay could feel beads of sweat just beneath the brim of his black sombrero. He'd never experienced that symptom of nervousness before, and blamed it if he'd let some grubby lawman make him feel it now. His hand began moving with practiced speed. His palm

closed around the cold pistol handle, then started to raise the gun from its holster as his finger found and circled the trigger. From here on, it was all an exercise of habit, an exercise he performed, like some religious ritual, a hundred or more times a day to speed and sharpen the deadly precision of his draw. He had seen that his hand was the first to move, and that knowledge gave him confidence, for with that advantage he could come up shooting faster than anybody!

Matt knew where to watch for the delicate play of muscles that telegraphed his opponent's move for his pistol. He had been concentrating his gaze on Clay's upper arm, and when he saw the slight, tense twitch of his shoulder, he knew Clay was starting to reach. Matt Dillon hadn't moved first, and he was determined not to shoot first.

At thirty feet they realized that they were easy targets, and both instinctively turned sideways to offer only the slimmest mark. To those watching, both guns seemed to clear their holsters simultaneously. But Matt's arm swung up an instant sooner. Still, he did not get off the first shot! Clay blazed at the marshal as his gun came level with his waist, not bothering to sight over its barrel, hoping for a lucky hit or that the explosive roar would shake Matt Dillon's poise before he could fire. The bullet went wide of Dillon by inches, screaming down the long street before dropping harmlessly into the dirt. Clay's shot did not disturb the steady sweep of Matt's gun to eye level. Then he aimed and squeezed the trigger.

There was the angry sound of metal slamming metal

as Matt's bullet struck Clay's gun. The impact was sharp and strong, sending the shattered pistol flying from the startled gunfighter's grip. With desperation born of panic, Clay began streaking for the pistol riding in his matching left holster.

"I wouldn't," Matt said quietly, sighting over his smoking Colt at the trembling, defeated Texan.

Clay's left arm went slack, sliding to his side. Matt moved in quickly and jerked the remaining gun from the holster. "Now, march to the cooler."

Clay remained rooted in place, stunned by this turn of events. Defeat, unknown to him until now, flooded his consciousness. He sensed the absence of his gun's familiar weight; his right hand still smarted from the gun's being torn from his grip; when the voice of the man in front of him commanded, he was ready to obey.

Matt put a hand on Clay's shoulder, easing him toward the jail.

"Let him go!"

Matt turned to face the angry speaker. It was Les, racing toward him, his right hand snapping his bowie knife from its sheath. But before Matt could move to defend himself against this new threat, another figure flashed into view. Ready Claw, his braids flying behind him, was darting toward the marshal. The Indian waved his curved skinning knife and, with a sudden leap, landed ten feet in front of Matt, facing Les and standing between him and the marshal.

Matt grasped Clay's arm tightly to hold him next to him as they turned toward the two knife fighters. Les was holding the big bowie knife with its blade pointed

up, and his left arm was curved out as if to give him balance.

"Come on, try me! I'll teach you your trade," he taunted, flashing the blade with quick snaps of his wrist.

Ready Claw crouched opposite him, his curved skinning knife's blade angled up, his left hand held behind his back. His broad face was impassive, revealing no emotion as his moccasined feet slowly danced to the right and left and then feinted forward.

Both men made sudden, sweeping lunges, the knife blades swishing within inches of their targets as each man nimbly ducked to one side. Then, knives poised, they circled again.

"I'll fix you for meddling," Les snarled.

Ready Claw heard the threat but didn't reply. His knife hand swept upward, and, with matching speed, Les's left arm blocked it. Then Les stabbed, but Ready Claw sprang back, and the point of the bowie halted ten inches from his chest.

Again they circled. Les made a few slashing motions, trying to lead the brave to attack so he could counter his movement. Ready Claw ignored the invitation and circled in the opposite direction. Then he leaned far to the left and sprang to the right. His curved blade sliced hard, and Les twisted to one side, his thick belt fortunately catching the knife's edge. He glanced down at the slashed leather belt, and hate burned fiercely in his eyes. He jiggled the knife distractingly, tossing it from his right to his left hand, but the Indian didn't rise to the bait. Suddenly Les

charged, seizing the Indian's upraised right wrist. Ready Claw's other hand gripped Les's right wrist and held the cowhand's menacing blade a foot from his chest. Each man leaned hard toward the other, trying to break his opponent's grip and free his knife hand for one vital moment. Perspiration poured down Les's contorted face, but the Indian's hand remained locked around his wrist. Neither could Ready Claw bring his blade any closer to Les.

"I'll get you," Les spat at him, "same as I got that sodbuster!"

Matt, as he heard Les's words, showed surprise, then, in rapid succession, gratification and anxiety. Often truth was spoken in rage, and he suddenly realized that he had his murderer. Now his biggest concern was that Les might kill a second time.

"Back off, Dillon!" Harry shouted. He was behind a rain barrel, pointing his pistol in Matt's general direction although not actually aiming at him. There was an unwritten law in the West: Let two men settle their own affairs, man to man. That was all Harry was demanding. Matt became just another spectator on Front Street.

Now, unexpectedly, Les shoved Ready Claw's knife hand hard and jumped back, breaking the brave's grip. Once more the two men circled. Les swayed back and forth and then darted in, his knife low. It grazed the brave's wrist. His skinning knife fell, and Matt had a feeling of sick revulsion, anticipating what was to come.

Les grinned in triumph, but his satisfaction was

short-lived. The brave, instead of retreating, bounded forward and, with both hands, grasped the stabbing wrist. Ready Claw twisted hard; with Les's gasp of pain, the bowie spun to the street. The Indian shoved Les back hard and, with a swift scooping motion, came up with the knife. The disarmed Texan, now panicky, began backing off, talking rapidly, urgently to Ready Claw, in a voice hoarse with fright.

"It's over now! You won, so let's call it quits. I wouldn't have killed you, anyway!"

His back hit the wall of a store; he could retreat no farther.

"I'll take him, Ready Claw!" Matt exclaimed. "I'm booking him for murder."

"Murder?" the knife fighter gasped.

"You confessed it a few minutes ago, Les, but it won't be hard coming up with the proof, anyway. Get over there with Clay."

Les shuffled up next to the sullen Texan in black. Matt turned for a moment to study Harry, but he was racing for the bridge, his gun safely holstered.

"We'll be back!" he threatened, his voice carrying above the tattoo of his horse's galloping hooves.

"How's your wound?" Matt asked Ready Claw, seeing him slip his skinning knife back into his belt.

"A scratch. No more," the Indian answered with finality.

Travis was already at the brave's side, wrapping a clean handkerchief around the cut wrist. It was only a superficial wound, but the shock of it had been enough to loosen the skinner's grip on his knife.

"Great work, Dillon!"

"Knew you'd come through, Matt!"

The shouts of congratulation came from men who now hurried from the open doors of shops and cafés. Their beaming faces showed their relief as they watched their tall marshal ushering the defeated gun-fighter and the knife fighter toward the jail.

"You did us proud!"

"We were rooting for you, Matt!"

Matt wondered to himself what his rooting section would have done if he had needed more than vocal support. But then, he realized, they had pinned that badge on him so he could do the fighting for them. It wasn't fair for him to expect a band of puffing, middle-aged merchants to come out spoiling for a fight. They were peaceful men, and they were ready to pay some fool like him to risk his hide to keep peace in their town.

Less than gently, Matt shoved his two prisoners into the office.

"Mind if I borrow the sombrero?" Festus asked, yanking Clay's hat off his head.

The Texan turned angrily and saw Festus, now dressed in black from head to toe, slapping the hat down on his head.

"Hey! That's my—" Clay started to protest.

"I'll give you a receipt for it." Matt spoke calmly and pushed them toward the cellblock door. The fight had gone out of Clay. He offered no resistance, and the watching Festus angled the dark hat more comfortably onto his head.

"You can share this cell," Matt ordered as they stepped into the nearest one. "I've a feeling we'll be filled up pretty soon." He slammed and locked the cell door.

"Don't congratulate yourself too soon, Dillon," drawled Clay. "You're going to lose—for keeps. It's too late to stop things. The boys'll be riding in to free us, and before they're through, this town'll be brighter than Fourth of July."

Matt recalled that chilling prophesy made earlier by a delirious Pierce. There was no question in his mind now that Kincaid was out to burn down Dodge. But no one would believe that wild-sounding accusation—not without the Haysville papers. And time for finding them was running out.

*Double Trouble*

Now, WHAT am I supposed to signal?" Festus demanded, strutting about the office in his black outfit.

"The way I figure it, when Clay wears white and rides a black horse, that means there'll be no trouble. The signal *for* trouble must be his riding a white horse and dressing in black, like you."

Festus thought this over for a moment. "I'll allow you just might be right. But tell me, Matthew—if I go waltzing around in this outfit, won't I be signaling the boys to start trouble?"

Matt stared sharply at Festus for a moment. Then, as if infuriated at himself, he answered, "Of course, Festus! I want you to signal for *no* trouble. Get into a white outfit—and fast!"

As Festus hurried to the clothing store across the street, Dillon mentally kicked himself for coming so close to ruining his own plan. He'd always thought of himself as a cool customer, able to handle every emergency as it arose. But obviously his concern about his coming gunfight with Clay and its consequences to Dodge had shaken him enough to make him order

Festus into the wrong outfit. If anyone ever again called Festus slow or dim-witted. . . .

At that moment the storm broke. This time the flash and the thunder came almost simultaneously. A sheet of rain began pounding into the dry dirt street, turning it into brown mud almost immediately. Lightning flashed again, and thunder exploded above Dodge, shaking wooden walls and rattling windows. Through the downpour, Matt saw a white blur rushing toward him. It was Festus, dripping wet, from his white sombrero to his white boots.

"Perfect!" Matt exclaimed. "Now get on top of a black horse and ride past the blanket camps of those other three outfits!"

"Matthew, you gone loco? Look outside. You expect a man to go riding in that deluge? Why, even Noah didn't have to go through such a thing!"

"That's exactly why it should work. In this rain, no one can see you well enough to recognize you, and nobody would expect Kincaid to order the other outfits into town."

"But, Matthew—" Festus started to protest.

"The word was that this trouble was supposed to start around three," Matt stated, pointing to the office clock, "and it will unless you move fast!"

Travis, Ready Claw, and the other volunteers were in the office listening. They all tried to choke off their laughter, as a pure white Festus marched out into the torrential rain, muttering furiously.

"You reckon they won't be on the move already?" Travis asked.

"Clay was the signal man, if I'm right. He hasn't been able to signal. Things slow up in the rain, and no one'll be itching to ride out in this downpour."

The men eyed the clock. There wasn't much time left. But even if the ruse worked, they wondered if Harry's report wouldn't at least bring the Circle K hands storming into town to release their two pals.

Matt was braced against the brick wall of his office, looking at the men who had risked putting on their deputy stars. "Yes, and there's only one way to prevent the Circle K from riding in. That's by finding Pierce and the saddlebag of papers he took from here."

The two deputies who had just come in from watching either end of the town were ready to swear that no moustached man with a wounded shoulder had gotten by them.

"I don't doubt it," Matt replied. "I'm sure he's holed up in town. Must be paying someone to hide him. Well, I'll outbid him. I'll offer five hundred dollars for information leading to his apprehension!"

"Five hundred," Travis repeated. "Where'll you dig that sum up? Your council sounds busted."

"When they learn what's in those papers," Matt answered, "they'll ante up pronto. Now, all of you get out; spread the word and work fast!"

The deputies were already bustling out into the rain. Matt was playing his last card, but human greed had paid off for him before.

"King," gasped Harry, bursting into the wagon without bothering to knock, "that buzzard Dillon outdrew

Clay. Shot the gun clean from Clay's hand. Jailed him. And Les along with him."

King was seated behind his antique desk reading, with a cigar smoking idly in his right hand. A lesser man might have sprung up in a fit of rage or bellowed an oath of vengeance. King Kincaid didn't permit himself the luxury of emotional displays. It took too long to regain one's composure and determine a wise new course of action. He stared silently at the rain-soaked man, whose long hair fell like a wet tangle of snakes.

"Get Newton," he ordered softly.

Harry took a breath and plunged back into the rain.

A few minutes later, a thin, lithe cowhand announced himself and entered. He doffed his black sombrero, shaking it outside the wagon flaps as a stream of water poured out of its upturned brim. He stood in a corner of the wagon-office, as if self-conscious about the wet stain his dripping black boots and black pants were making on the thick, expensive carpeting.

"Newton, I want you to take a little ride," King said casually, looking at a gold pocket watch on a thin gold chain. "We're running a touch late."

The silent cowhand stared reverently and puzzledly at his distinguished boss behind the desk.

"You're already wearing a black hat and black pants and boots. Find a black shirt, and then tell the wrangler to put you on an all white horse. You're supposed to be Clay, so when you ride by the other three outfits out yonder, don't trot up too close."

"I'm to ride by them, all in black and on a white horse, Mr. Kincaid?" he asked unbelievably.

"I know it sounds a mite peculiar, Newton. But Clay was going to do just that, as a signal for their hands to follow us into Dodge—armed."

The Adam's apple in Newton's thin neck bobbed as he swallowed hard. He was used to the foreman telling him to cut out a few steers, hold a calf down for branding, track some mavericks that had hit off into the bush, but here was his boss giving him a really important job; Newton felt overwhelmed and worried.

"You can do it, Newton." King smiled reassuringly, having taken the measure of the man and realized his apprehension. "Just ride out in front of the outfits. No one'll approach you. The bosses will be on the lookout for a rider in black or in white. You are giving the signal to pull Dodge down on Dillon's head!"

Newton nodded, slapped his hat on, and ducked out into the rain. He splashed through the puddles to his tent. One of his pals had a fine black shirt. Ordinarily he wouldn't lend it, but Newton got around that by telling him that Kincaid himself wanted him to wear it.

King continued to work at his desk, then reached for the summoning bell. It tinkled lightly, and his white-coated valet appeared.

"Hartly, we're running a trifle late. But that'll give the rain time to thin out. I'll be leading our boys in fifteen minutes."

"You'll want your rain slicker, sir."

King nodded, and Hartly faded from his presence.

Festus was grumbling. He was riding through the curtain of rain, and Matt's orders clearly forbade any pro-

tective covering over his white outfit. The hat brim, once curling proudly, began to sag slightly under the wet battering and its own soggy weight. His shirt clung to his chest like a wet rag. His white pants were soaked through, and as he rode there was the squishing sound of water between him and his saddle. The black stallion didn't seem too bothered by the storm, only occasionally breaking stride as a lightning bolt carved its fiery course across the sky. Festus patted the mount reassuringly when thunder rumbled miles away. The worst of the storm was passing, but to the drenched man in the saddle that was small consolation.

Festus started on a wide detour around the Circle K, heading for the nearest other outfit, the Double M. As he rode, a flash of white coming from the direction of King Kincaid's blanket camp caught his eye. Then Festus saw him—a black-garbed rider on a pure white horse. Their lines of travel appeared destined to meet. Festus rode on for another minute, getting closer to the Double M, when a jarring thought hit him. Matthew had said that the signal for war might be Clay in black, on a white horse. That's why he himself was now riding in white, on a black horse, as the sign of peace. Festus realized that Kincaid must know that Clay was in the calaboose. And there was a rider streaking from Kincaid's camp, dressed in black and riding a white mount! Coincidence? Festus decided too much was at stake to risk that assumption. He cut sharply to his left.

"You there!" he bellowed above the storm. "Hey!"  
Newton turned. He raised his head slightly; the

angling rain cut under his black hat brim and washed the lower part of his face. He saw someone in white hurrying toward him on a black stallion. He slowed his pace slightly but still headed toward the Double M, acutely aware of his mission.

"Wait up!" shouted Festus, drawing closer.

Newton tugged slightly on his reins, further slowing his horse. The rain hid the face of the approaching rider. Whoever it was, he didn't want to be troubled for long. His boss had given him a job to do!

"What do you want?" Newton shouted as Festus trotted alongside.

"You come from Kincaid?" Festus asked, playing his hunch to the fullest.

"Yes, why—"

Newton never finished his sentence. It ended in a gasp as he saw Festus draw and cover him.

"Climb down," Festus ordered, dismounting and keeping the gun on the startled cowhand. But Newton didn't protest. He swung off of his white horse.

"Now shuck your boots, shirt, and pants."

"You crazy?" stammered Newton.

But the gun barrel poking into his ribs gave an urgency to Festus' strange command. There, in the rain, the bewildered trail hand yanked off his boots. Then, standing in his stocking feet on the oozing plain, he peeled off his sopping wet shirt, revealing an equally saturated set of red longjohns beneath it.

"Okay?" he muttered.

"Now slip out of the pants, and don't be shy," Festus commanded, taking the shirt and boots from him. A

moment later, he collected the pants. Then Festus did something he didn't really want to do but felt he had to do for the sake of Dodge City. As the shivering cowhand stood there in his red longjohns, Festus suddenly bunched up his left fist and slugged Newton with a staggering blow to the jaw. With a gasp of surprise, the cowhand fell unconscious to the ground.

Festus shoved the clothes and boots under the white horse's saddle. Then he slapped it on its rump and watched it trot off aimlessly, away from the Circle K camp. Festus remounted, certain that when the man came to, without his horse and his outer clothing, the only thing he would signal in his red underwear would be an immediate outburst of laughter.

Festus swung his horse to the right and began to skirt the Double M so that he would surely be seen. As he trotted some hundred yards from a row of tents, he saw heads poking out, watching him. Matt's plan was working. He spurred on toward the next outfit.

The volunteers had spread out quickly through Dodge. Each man had loudly told his mission, repeating over and over the tempting offer of five hundred dollars for information. Guns in hand, the deputies had checked back rooms, basements, storerooms, stables, and toolsheds. But nothing had turned up. Having divided the town up evenly, they had completed their search at about the same time, just after three o'clock, when they had begun filtering back dejectedly to the marshal's office.

"Mister!" a woman shouted, holding a heavy coat



over her head like a tent to protect her pile of yellow hair. She was running up an alley after Travis.

The buffalo hunter turned inquiringly.

"I'm Joan Whitley," she panted. "Own the Twinkle Toes Dance Hall. Well, I heard about your reward—"

"Didn't I check out your place personally?" Travis replied with a grin. "And looking in on your pretty girls was a pleasant official chore, I'll admit."

"Didn't check the second attic, did you?"

"You didn't tell me about it."

"Some gent paid me fifty dollars not to," Mrs. Whitley admitted, lowering her blue saucer eyes. "But I don't want to get into any trouble with the law. I run a fine place and—"

"Five hundred dollars is ten times the rent someone's paying for your attic. Thanks."

Travis jogged through the rain to the office and, just short of the doorway, beckoned to the returning Ready Claw. The two men were used to working as a team. As they headed for the dance hall, Travis repeated what he had learned.

"Dillon said he steal gun, too."

"That's where you come in," Travis told him. Then, with the same planning he used to mill a herd, he informed his skinner of his plan.

Minutes later, while a covey of twittering, excited girls in their twenties watched from the dance floor, along with the portly, well-corseted Mrs. Whitley, Travis mounted the stairs.

He entered the first attic and made his way to a second, narrow door hidden behind a steamer trunk.

Travis yanked the trunk away and stood to one side of the door, gun in hand.

"Pierce, this is the law. Come out."

There was no reply. He fired through the door. The wood splintered around a small hole.

"Pierce, I'll pepper the whole attic in there. I may not hit you, but then again, I may. Come out!" There was still no response. A second shot neatly drilled a hole a foot below the first one. Then an angry reply of gunfire sounded from inside, and Travis ducked behind the steamer trunk. The bullets sailed wide of him, while a small smile of anticipation played across his face.

Outside the building, Ready Claw had climbed a trellis to reach the small window which Travis had figured should look in on the second attic. The Indian heard the shots and knew they would turn the whole attention of anyone inside toward the door opposite the window. Cautiously he inched toward the window. He saw a man with a bandaged shoulder lying on a mattress on the floor. He was pointing a pistol at the door, and, as the Indian watched, he snapped off two shots. As the man prepared to fire again, Ready Claw brought up his left hand, which was sheathed in his moccasin, and smashed the windowpane. The man turned in angry surprise, and Ready Claw saw Pierce's trademark—the handlebar moustache. Pierce was swinging his gun hand around, but it was an awkward movement because of his nearly prone position. Before he could bring his pistol to bear on the brave, Ready Claw's knife was spinning through the air. The

point sliced into the trail hand's sleeve and pinned it to the floor. Ready Claw swung himself into the attic, and seconds later he was on top of Pierce.

Matt broke into a smile when he saw Travis push Pierce into the office. Ready Claw was carrying the saddlebag, and it was obviously still stuffed with the official files of Haysville.

"Good!" Matt exclaimed.

But before he could add any comment, another deputy burst into the office, dripping rain. "Matt! Matt, they're coming! A whole crowd of riders are making for the toll bridge. Trouble's as good as here!"

## 15

*Final Reckoning*

KING ROSE in his stirrups and looked back over the men following him. Beyond them, through the thinning rain, he still saw no sign of the other outfits. He was puzzled but not annoyed. They'd take time to move out, he realized, and if they arrived behind him, it might work out even better. He was certain that his advance had been noted and reported to the marshal. There was sure to be a delaying confrontation at the bridge; that was Dillon's best hope for blocking their march into town. How ideal it would be, he thought, if, while he faced down Dillon, the crews of the other three outfits would start pouring in behind his men. That they would come King never doubted. He had sent out his man to signal them and had given the owners their orders. The lesser breed of men would always obey!

*Clannng! Clannng!*

Matt stood slamming the firehouse bell. Its angry summons reverberated through Dodge. In just moments men were massing inside the building.

"Where's the fire?" a dozen voices demanded, surprised that any blaze could start after the heavy torrent that only now was tapering off.

"All of Dodge will be on fire," Matt shouted in reply, "unless you all stand behind me on this side of the bridge."

The men exchanged bewildered glances. They knew Matt Dillon didn't speak lightly, nor was he given to idle statements.

"King Kincaid is out to provoke trouble. During that trouble, some of his men will start blazes, and no fire hose team is going to be able to make any headway on these streets."

"But, why?" demanded a storekeeper. "He needs our town to peddle his steers."

"He *did* need it. But now he's bought himself his own town, and he means to put you out of business."

A hush fell in the large meeting room. Matt quickly extracted the important papers from the Haysville files and read about Kincaid's land purchases. Then he told them of Pierce's delirious threats.

"There's no time left to argue, debate, or discuss. I want all men who believe me to back me on this side of the bridge—with guns. I don't think Kincaid's hands will cross over if it looks as if it won't be a cheap crossing—and when they hear what their boss is really risking their hides for."

"Count me in!"

"Let's go!"

The shouts were from men rushing off in all directions through the drizzle. Matt moved outside, feeling

a sense of hope now, as he headed for the toll bridge.

Only Matt, Travis, and Ready Claw crossed the bridge. Beyond, they could make out Kincaid in a yellow slicker, trotting at the head of a tight mass of bobbing riders. As Matt walked over the planking, he noted that the river now had again earned its title. It was deep and flowing fast.

"Set up the gun rack," he told his deputies.

The hunter and the skinner hurriedly righted the board, just as King came abreast of it.

"Don't forget to check your guns." Matt greeted him calmly.

"I'm not checking anything—except my two men out of your jail," King replied.

"If you want to post bail—"

"No! You're freeing them, or my boys'll free them!" He gestured toward the tight pack of grim riders who were reined in behind him.

"Free Clay and Les—now!"

As if on cue, they began chanting their new war cry. Matt listened with a patient smile, standing in the middle of the bridge, with Travis and Ready Claw flanking him and the saddlebag hanging over his shoulder. For two minutes the men roared, then their voices faltered and stopped.

Behind Matt, at the other end of the bridge, over a hundred townsmen were massing. They were a silent, determined, growing group, each man bearing a rifle, shotgun, carbine, or pistol.

"Now, listen to me before you risk your lives for King Kincaid's personal gain," Matt shouted when the

chanting had ceased. "King's using you like pawns in a chess game, to be sacrificed so he can win the game."

"What're you talking about, bigmouth?"

"What game are *you* trying to play?"

"Don't listen to him, men," King roared. "Ride over this bridge and free—"

"Start across the bridge," Matt cut in, "and every gun on the other side, with legal sanction, will open fire on you."

"What were you saying against our boss?" a voice demanded from the closely grouped trail hands.

"He's out to smoke Dodge, to burn it down for his own profit." Matt waited for the scoffing laughs to simmer down. "He's using your bodies for his profit, because he knows Dodge won't go down without a fight. Those men behind me are proof of that. But you still don't believe me, do you? All right, I'll read you some papers that came from Haysville—"

"That's enough palavering for now, Dillon!" King interrupted.

"Let him speak!"

"Hear him out!"

The calls came from behind King, and he dared not try silencing his own men. The solid rank of townsfolk opposite had given them pause in their action, and now Dillon was giving them reason to think.

"A man named Norton, a land agent. . . ." Matt continued to read from the papers. In two quick minutes he had read them enough to prove that King Kincaid had been buying up land in Haysville and having dealings with railroads. The evidence added up to his

reason for bringing down Dodge: He would replace it with his own town!

There was grumble of discontent among the Circle K riders. Rescuing their wrongly jailed buddies was one thing. Starting a fight that would lead to a heap of deaths—all for King's benefit—was another matter.

"Fools!" Kincaid shouted at his disturbed men. "Don't you realize that what's good for me is good for my hands?"

"That won't wash, King," a rider replied. "Not unless you figure on cutting us in on that new town of yours."

"That's not likely!" jeered another man.

"Okay, boys. If you don't back me in freeing Clay and Les," King taunted, "the Double M, Running C, and Day's outfits will."

"Don't count on it," said Matt. He was watching the white-outfitted Festus trot up on his black horse. "That deputy of mine sort of mixed up the signals for you."

King's face contorted with rage. Now he realized why no other riders had been advancing behind his men.

"It's all a fake!" he roared to his men. "I never bought any such land! Dillon, let me see that forgery!"

He swung off his horse and stomped toward Matt. Matt held the papers in his hand. "I'll show 'em to you, King, but I'll hold 'em."

King glared down on the papers, and then, with a loud shout and a sudden grab, he yanked the files from Matt's grip. "I'll show you what I do with forgeries!"

He started for the bridge railing. Matt's empty hand knotted into a fist and shot up. He caught King on the jaw. The files fell onto the bridge boards, and Ready Claw pounced on the vital papers, quickly gathering them up before they fluttered into the swift-moving river below.

King staggered for a second, then lunged at Matt. Both men were the same height and weight, but anger gave Kincaid a sudden spurt of power. His hands shot forward, grabbing Matt around the throat. Matt felt the air choked off as he tried to pull the powerful, tightening fingers from his neck.

The boards were slippery from the thin drizzle, and the two swaying men suddenly struck the railing with their full weight. There was a splintering sound as the old rail snapped. With King's fingers still circling Matt's neck, the two men hurtled off the bridge and splashed into the rapid water of the river below.

There was a gasp of surprise from Festus as he gazed at the river. What yesterday had been a slow trickle, today was a tumbling torrent. He saw the two bodies sink under the churning surface.

Matt felt the cold shock of the water. King's grip momentarily loosened, but underwater there was no air for Matt to gulp. He stretched his arms between King's and flailed outward. King's grip broke and his nails scratched Matt's throat as his hands were ripped away. Matt's head bobbed to the surface. He breathed deeply, but his lungs seemed to be desperate for more air. There was no time for a second breath. King's gray head broke the surface behind him, and,

grasping Matt by the hair, he shoved him under the water for a second time.

In the murky depths the two men struggled. King was trying to keep his mouth above the surface while holding Matt's head under the water. Matt reached back and locked his fingers on King's gun belt. Then he kicked hard and pulled his antagonist under the water.

The two men churned and spun. For a second Matt's face broke above the water, and he inhaled convulsively before being hauled down again. Now the advantage was his. King's grip weakened. He floated off, and Matt saw that he was losing consciousness. He shoved King to the surface.

"Catch!" shouted Festus as his lariat splashed next to Matt in the river.

Matt grabbed the noose and slipped it under King's arms. The rancher's face almost matched his gray hair, and all the fight was gone from it. His eyes stared at Matt in dull defeat. Matt trod water while Festus and Travis hoisted King onto the bank. A moment later the line returned, and he used it to climb out of the water.

King was trembling on shaky legs. He turned to his men for support, but all he saw were the backs of riders as the Circle K hands trotted slowly to their blanket camp under a dismal sky.

"No charges, King. I won't hold you. You can go," Matt said flatly.

The rancher didn't reply. His horse trotted up to him. He mounted and rode off, a quarter of a mile

behind his men—a solitary figure with a shattered dream of power.

“Nineteen fifty a head, take it or leave it,” the cattle buyer grunted, a fat cigar bobbing in his mouth with each word and scattering ashes on the fine pearl gray vest that wrapped around his very ample chest.

King Kincaid was standing beside the cow pens next to the rail siding in Dodge. He nodded in agreement. The steers had cost him about six dollars back in Texas. Feed had cost him nothing. It cost less than a dollar to drive a steer from Texas to Kansas. The men’s salaries, *and* grub, he knew down to the last penny. He’d be clearing over four dollars a steer, and when you multiplied that by the fifteen thousand bearing his brand, it was a tidy profit. He nodded again and signed the agreement.

Once the Circle K had fallen into line, the other outfits had a price to shoot against. They always figured King Kincaid could get the top price for his beef, and they let him do the bargaining for them. It all hinged on the market out East and how long the Texans wanted to camp and fatten their herds around Dodge. Luckily, this year, steak seemed in growing demand in the East, and the steers were selling at close to record prices.

Kitty looked around the Long Branch. Trail hands were busy at the faro tables, gambling for wild stakes now that they had been paid off. Others were stuffing themselves full of food, thinking of the long trip home which wouldn’t offer anything but pie, flapjacks, and

son-of-a-gun stew. Kitty scooped up a pile of change from the counter. Even after paying to replace the damaged mirror, smashed tables, and shattered chairs, it was going to be a fine, fat season for the Long Branch.

In the stores, the merchants seemed to be having trouble replenishing their stock. The Texans had taken a fancy to heavy, blue, double-breasted, lumbermen’s shirts, and every store in town was rapidly running out of them. Anywhere one looked on Front Street, he could see men walking as if hobbled as they broke in their new calfskin boots with the mule ears flapping on their outer sides at each step. Not a board remained across a storefront. The volunteer deputy stars had all been turned in.

Doc Adams came down his office steps, and an old-timer greeted him. “See? The town’s still standing, Doc.”

“Seems to be, Nate.”

“No one could ever pull it down. It took too dang long for folks like me to build it up from when it was just gopher holes on the prairie.”

“It could have been pulled down, shot down, or burned down, Nate. Any city is as good as a pile of ruins unless it has someone with the guts to face the violent men who would destroy it—whatever their reputed purpose. Luckily, we pinned a marshal’s star on that kind of a man.”

Nate didn’t reply. He was watching Matt Dillon swing down off his horse in front of his office. The tall lawman moved with confident ease. But Matt knew he

was tired. In the past few days he had been nearly trampled by steers, dragged at a lariat's end, shot at, and half drowned. But that was all part of the job. He had been hired to keep law and order, and today, as he glanced about, he was proud to see that Dodge was at peace!

