

JAYHAWKERS

The first big herd to come up the trail to Dodge in the spring of '77 was bossed by a big burly Texan named Dolph Quince. He had brought a herd up the year before, so Matt knew him, liked him in a way. He'd had to buffalo a couple of Quince's riders who were bent on taking the town apart but although the big Texan didn't like seeing his men manhandled he'd had sense enough to realize Matt was only doing his job and hadn't tried to interfere.

This year Quince was bringing a larger herd than the year before, three thousand head. Most of them were destined for the Dodge City shipping pens, but five hundred selected stockers had to be trailed through clear to Ogallala for one of the new ranches being set up on the northern range.

Matt knew none of these things the day he and Chester were taking it easy in front of the marshal's office. It was a soft spring day and, keenly aware of the fact that their slack season was about over, they were making the most of it.

"Man," Chester breathed, "have I got spring fever . . ."

"Well, get it out of your system," Matt said; "first trail herd'll hit us before long."

"I wish you hadn't brought that up, Marshal," Chester said. "Them Texas cowboys, they're a trial."

"Oh, they're not so bad, Chester," Matt said tolerantly.

"They're just born troublemakers!" the deputy said sternly. "At home, they're bad enough. They're worse, away from it."

Matt grinned. "Where's it you hail from, now?"

"Well, Waco," Chester said. "But that don't make no never-mind! Just shows I know what I'm talkin' about."

"I see your point, Chester, I see your point," Matt said soothingly. He turned his head to look down the street. A rider was coming toward them. His horse looked nearly played out, but the man wasn't letting him ease along. Matt straightened up.

"Looks like one of your Texans coming now," he said to Chester. "Rim-fire hull," he noted, meaning the double-rigged saddle which the trail drivers favored.

Chester looked. "Yeah," he said; "sure is. What you suppose he's doin' here?"

"Looking for someone to shoot up, according to you," Matt said drily. He watched as the rider slowed his mount and reined up, looking toward them. "Don't know the fella, do you, Chester?"

"Well, no," the deputy said; "but I suppose practically everybody I used to know in Texas has been hung by now," he added, poker-faced.

Matt grinned. The newcomer stepped down from his saddle and bowlegged over to them. He looked weary and worried.

"I'm lookin' for the marshal, and you're wearin' a star," he said to Matt. He was a towheaded youngster with a good, square-jawed face.

"You've come to the right place, stranger," Matt told him.

He seemed to need more confirmation than that. "You Matt Dillon?"

"That's my name."

"Good." He relaxed. "Mine's Phil Jacks. I'm with a herd 'bout five days' drive down the line yet. Dolph Quince sent me up ahead, he's my boss."

"Dolph was here last year," Matt said. "We got along fine. Give him my regards when you see him."

"You give 'em to him, Marshal," Jacks said, heel-squatting and pulling out his sack of Durham.

Matt glanced at him, puzzled. Was the man quitting his outfit, before the herd was even delivered? "All right," he said noncommittally. "He'll be here in about five days, you say?"

"Yeah," said Jacks, twisting up his smoke, "if he don't run into no more trouble." He lighted up and took a deep drag. "He told me to ask you to ride back to the herd with me, Marshal."

Matt was silent for a moment. He looked at Chester. The deputy was watching the Texan, his eyes wide.

"Can you tell me what this is all about?" Matt finally asked.

"Well, Dolph didn't spell it out none," was the Texan's rejoinder. "But I reckon it's about Kansas."

"Kansas?" Matt echoed. "What d'you mean?"

"Well sir, we just don't like it."

Matt smiled but to his surprise Chester burst out: "Then

why don't you fellas stay in Texas instead of comin' up here, raisin' the devil, drinkin' and shootin' and . . ."

"Whoa up there, boy!" Matt halted him. "What's got into you?"

Before the deputy could respond, Jacks said, grinning at Chester, "I know what's the matter of him, he's from Texas hisself and he's all riled up 'cause he don't like Kansas any better'n nobody else does."

To Matt's relief, Chester grinned back at the trailsman. "How'd you know I was from Texas?"

"Know a Texan when I see one, I should hope," Jacks said easily. He turned to Matt. "Can you go, Marshal?"

"Well," Matt replied, "Dolph Quince is all right; I don't suppose he'd've sent you for me without a pretty good reason."

"He'll sure appreciate it, Marshal," Jacks said.

Matt looked at Chester. "You better take Jacks over to the Dodge House for a good feed, he looks like he could use it. I'll get ready and meet you over there in an hour."

"Don't you want me to go?" Chester asked.

"Well, it'll likely be quiet till those uncombed Texans of yours hit town, but maybe you better stay anyway," Matt said.

"All right." Chester turned to the Texan. "Come on with me, Phil, it's just down the street."

"I'll see that your horse gets put away, Phil," Matt said as the pair started off. "We'll rustle you up a fresh one to ride back."

"Thanks, Marshal," Jacks said over his shoulder.

"Now don't shoot him, Chester," Matt called to his deputy; "I'll need him to guide me to Dolph's herd."

Phil Jacks laughed. "I aim to buy him a drink first, and calm him down."

"Well that ain't a bad idea," Matt heard Chester saying, and they were gone.

Matt Dillon had not been out on the prairie for several weeks. He found himself enjoying the ride. Its customary monotony was broken by the great patches of fresh green growth which stood out in contrast to the dun of last year's grass. The sun was bright, the air was caressingly velvet on the skin; it was good to be alive. He let his mind reach back to the carefree days of his boyhood, when to ride a bronc

somewhere meant heading for fun rather than going to face some unknown trouble.

He questioned Phil Jacks. It seemed that Quince's herd had encountered little but trouble since they had crossed the Washita. Man-made trouble, most of it. They had expected some, and were ready for it, but it kept getting worse, especially when they were nearly across the Indian Territory and nearing the Kansas line. Finally Quince had sent Phil Jacks larruping north to get Matt's help if he could. He was a close-mouthed cuss and didn't spill everything he thought but he'd seemed awful edgy about things. Phil thought he must have a lot of his own money tied up in the herd.

They kept a good pace and covered plenty of distance. They could have stopped at a stream with good water late in the afternoon but Matt preferred to keep going as long as they had light. At dark they made dry camp, ate quickly, and rolled into their blankets. They were in the saddle again at dawn. Phil Jacks thought they might run into his outfit by nightfall. Matt ventured to doubt it but Phil asserted that Quince was really "pushin' 'em."

His optimism proved well founded. They spotted trail dust ahead of them late in the afternoon. By the time they rode up to the chuck wagon most of the men had already eaten and the coozie was dishing up some chow for himself.

"Drop your saddle anywheres, Marshal," the tired tow-head said; "I'll turn your horse in with the remuda."

Matt thanked him and looked around for Dolph Quince. He saw the tall Texan squatting near the fire with a tin plate of grub. He ambled over, acknowledging a couple of howdies from riders too beat out with fatigue to register more than scant curiosity.

Dolph Quince noticed him approaching, took a last hurried mouthful, put down his plate and stood up.

"Hello, Dolph," Matt greeted.

"Glad to see you, Marshal," the Texan responded.

They shook hands. Quince looked older than Matt recalled him, his face lined with worry and care.

"Fresh meat in camp," Quince said. "Have the cook give you a plate."

"Sounds fine," Matt said and started to head back for the wagon.

"I'll go along with you," the drover said; "need some more coffee. You like buffalo veal?"

"Sure do," Matt said. "Don't get it too often any more."

"One of the boys shot a calf this mornin' . . . maybe it was buffs that scared our hosses last night. Whole remuda busted loose."

"You don't make it sound like you really believed that, Dolph," Matt offered.

"Well, I don't." They were at the wagon. "Give this fella a plate o' that stuff, Coozie," Quince said to the cook.

The oldster with the tobacco-stained mustache ladled out a plateful and handed it to the marshal. Matt took it with a murmured thanks.

"Don't worry, Marshal," Quince told him; "he takes out his quid when's he's cookin'."

"Take it out, nothin'," the old man scoffed. "I swaller it. Ain't enough juice left t' say after I've worked on 'er all day, anyhow."

"I used to know a man that dried it out and smoked it after he got through chewing it," Matt said, winking at Dolph.

"Prob'ly one of them chinchy durn Yankees," the cook shot back. "I ain't that hard up, by Godfreys!"

Matt laughed and Dolph Quince joined in. They sat down and Matt pitched into his food while Quince sipped at his hot coffee.

"This is mighty good, Dolph," Matt said. "First eats I've had since morning."

"Lot of hungry folks around here," Quince remarked. "Nester woman come around early this mornin'. Boy along with her, drivin' a wagon. She was lookin' to pick up any calves we wanted to get rid of."

"She probably works all the herds that come up the trail this way," Matt said between bites.

"We let her have a couple that was just dropped. Have to get rid of 'em anyway. But if it'd been a man that asked for 'em, I mightn't've been so generous."

"Oh?" Matt said.

"That's the way it is, Marshal."

"Dolph, why beat around the bush? What's been your trouble?"

Dolph Quince curled his lip. "Jayhawkers!" he spat out, making a dirty word of it.

Matt swallowed a mouthful and chased it with a gulp of coffee. "They used to be a nuisance back on the Shawnee

and the Chisholm," Matt said. "Haven't heard much about 'em this far west." The Western, or Dodge City, Trail was pretty well past so-called granger country, being mostly unfit for farming. It didn't give the Jayhawkers much excuse for operating, since they were, or claimed to be, farmers.

"Some of 'em must have decided to give it a whirl out here, whatever," Dolph said. "Whoever it is, they been givin' us an awful lot of grief."

Phil Jacks came over with a full plate. "Room for me here?" he asked.

"Sure, Phil," Dolph said; "find yourself a corner and squat. I been complainin' to the marshal here about the welcome Kansas's been givin' us."

"I've heard you can pay off them Jayhawkers to let you drive through," Phil Jacks observed. "Couple dollars a head, it takes."

"That'd only crease us for about six thousand dollars which we haven't got," Dolph growled. "Anyways, I wouldn't agree to pay 'em one nickel—a head or *in toto*, like they say."

"Well, they ain't asked us yet," Phil conceded. "First one that does, I'll shoot him, boss."

"Marshal," Dolph Quince said earnestly, "every last dollar I got's sunk in these cows. My relatives' and friends', too. We've come a long way, from the San Saba, and I'm aiming to reach Dodge and sell the most of 'em there. Then I'm supposed to take five hundred of 'em on to Major North in Ogallala. Him and Bill Cody're startin' a new spread up on the Dismal River and they're countin' on gettin' some good stockers from me."

"Sounds promising, Dolph."

"Well, you can see why I don't want to lose out on the deal now."

"Dolph, I don't quite see what I can do to help you."

"Couldn't you raise a posse?"

Matt threw up his hands. "For this kind of work? There'll be dozens of herds coming up the trail, from now to September. Talk sense, man."

Dolph Quince was silent for a minute. Then: "Well, will you ride with us a few days, get to know the boys some? We been harassed so much the last few days they're steamin' mad. I'm afraid that when we hit Dodge they're goin' to try for some Kansas scalps."