

"I'm here now, and I've got to get back to Dodge," Matt said simply. "I'll ride along with you."

"Good." The trail boss yawned and stretched. "Man, am I beat! Soon's I get to Dodge I'm goin' to hire me a bed and sleep for forty-eight hours."

One of the men came up. "Dolph, there's a feller over here come ridin' in from the west a few minutes ago. Said he was lookin' fer a job. I told him to eat first, then he could ask you."

"He must be crazy," Dolph snorted. "Where is he, Joe?"

"Yonder," Joe said. "I'll fetch him."

"Dolph," Matt said, "I'd like to stand a guard tonight."

"No need for that," the trail boss answered, surprised.

"If you want me to ride with you you'll have to let me do my share of the work."

"All right then," Dolph said tolerantly. "Go out with the second watch if you want. Wrangler'll give you a hoss."

Joe approached them again. "Here he is, Dolph." Then addressing the man he had in tow: "This is Mr. Quince."

A thin, angular man with a long face stepped up. "Mr. Quince . . ."

"Quince is enough," the trail boss said gruffly.

"My name's Studer," the man said. "Carl Studer."

"Joe said you wanted a job; well, I can't help you there."

"Thought mebbe you could use a hand," Studer whined.

"Not much," Dolph said. "We've only got about four days' drive to Dodge."

"That much'd help."

"You must be mighty hungry."

"Well, I am. I'm jest about at the end o' my rope."

"Guess you can go along with us to Dodge," Dolph gave in. "Give the wrangler a hand. I can't pay you anything but you can have all the food you can hold."

"Thanks, Mr. Quince!"

"Come to think of it, we might need a hand to help drive some head on to Ogallala. I ain't sure how many of the boys'll want to go on past Dodge. Let's see how you do the next few days and then I'll let you know in Dodge."

"Gosh, all right, Mr. Quince; glad to."

"Where you from, Studer?"

"Colorado."

"Glad you ain't a Kansan; boys might have it in for you

if you was. Roll your soogan close by the wagon somewhere, and be ready to go out on third watch."

"All right," Studer said. "G'night." He walked off.

"Kind of a man that spends his whole life lookin' for salt pork and sundown," Dolph Quince remarked, looking after him.

"Let's hope that's all he's looking for," Matt rejoined.

"What you mean, Marshal?" Dolph swung his big head.

"Nothing special, Dolph; just a habit I have of not trusting everybody on sight."

"You don't trust this fella? Seen him before?"

"He's purely a stranger to me, Dolph. But if you've been having a lot of trouble, I just think it'd be smart to be cautious."

"Straight thinkin', Marshal. Anyhow, if there's anything wrong with him, we've got him where we can watch him."

"Not if you put him on night guard, Dolph. If I was you I'd keep him in camp except in daylight."

"All right, all right. I didn't figger you'd be runnin' the outfit but I'll do what you say, Marshal." He laughed a little, taking the string from it. "But you better stretch out somewheres and grab yourself some shut-eye. You'll be out singin' to them cow brutes in a couple hours."

"Right you are," Matt rose. "See you later."

"Breakfast's at four," Dolph said. "Won't take you long to stay all night at this ranch."

Matt had little chance that night to "get to know the boys some," as Dolph Quince had put it. He rolled out of his blanket in pitch dark to gulp a quick cup of strong black coffee and ride out to the herd. There he and another guard rode slowly around the bedded down animals, humming and singing to keep them from getting restless, and doing his best to keep all his senses alert and ready. Nothing untoward happened, and a couple of hours later they were relieved by the third watch. Matt satisfied himself that the new man, Studer, had been allowed to sleep, then turned in again himself.

At breakfast the men all seemed to know that Matt had stood one of the guard periods and they opened up accordingly. A wiry redhead offered to return the favor by helping him hold the lid down in Dodge when they got there.

"God help Kansas when ole Brick gits to policin' her,"

another rider quipped. "He'll have the gov'nor in jail and the gamblers runnin' the courthouse."

"Yeah but only the honest gamblers—meanin' the ones from Texas," Brick retorted quickly. "We'll give the rest up to ten to git an' then we'll start shootin'." He grinned at Matt. "I kin count to ten real fast."

"Ride into town with them boots off 'n' you kin be generous enough to count to twenty fer 'em," his critic came back.

Studer, the newcomer, looked glum. He complained that he hadn't been allowed to do his part by standing guard. Matt assured him that Dolph Quince thought he looked beat out the night before and had decided they could handle things all right without him. It didn't seem to convince him; probably he'd never heard of a considerate trail boss before, Matt thought.

After the cattle had been allowed to graze awhile, the men got them strung out and started on the trail. Riding swing with Phil Jacks, Matt began to forget he was a lawman. He hadn't done this sort of thing for years. Saddle work in the open air was the life for a man. Maybe he'd made a mistake going into law work. . . .

Dolph Quince rode up. "How d'you like bein' a trail hand, Marshal?"

"Fine as frog hair, Dolph."

"You like it so much, I'll trade jobs with you, Marshal," Phil Jacks said. "Know what I found him doin' in Dodge, boss?"

"Hangin' a rustler, I hope."

"Not a chance. He was settin' idle in a chair, soakin' in the sun."

"Well, I was in Dodge last year," Dolph commented; "I know he can move when he needs to. Marshal"—he turned to Matt—"you two crossed Crooked Crick on the way down. How was the sand?"

"Bottom's good where we crossed, Dolph."

"We'll cross there, then. Phil, you ride point and lead us to it. Take that Studer along with you."

"Don't need him along," Phil said.

"Well, I want him up front where we can see him," Dolph said. "He's with the hosses now; pick him up."

Phil Jacks waved his hand and rode away. The trail boss wanted to know about beef prices and conditions in Dodge

City. Matt told him all he could. Dolph looked relieved. The first big herd to hit Dodge would benefit from the present high prices being quoted. It looked as if his troubles were about over and he could forget the pinpricks of the Jayhawkers, if such they had been. Actually, Dolph seemed far from sure that it had been Jayhawkers stampeding his stuff and nibbling at the stragglers. A few renegade Indians from the Nations regularly got their hands on some trail beeves and sold them to railroad construction commissaries. Matt had never heard of any sizable gang of Jayhawkers operating this far west. He was inclined to think that Dolph had been magnifying his troubles. He'd been grasping at the easy explanation, no doubt, disregarding the probabilities.

Matt himself was more concerned with the new man, Studer. He got to thinking about Studer's reactions that morning. The more he thought about it the less he liked it. He spoke to the trail boss.

"The way Studer acted at breakfast," he said; "do you think it was natural?"

"Fella just wanted to do his part, I guess," Dolph responded. "Or anyway make us think he felt that way."

"It wasn't disappointment, though," Matt said; "it was more like he was uneasy about something."

Dolph looked at him without speaking.

"If he'd been sent in to look over the layout, maybe he was counting on clearing out during the night," Matt went on. "You spoiled it by asking him to stand watch. So he relied on us to wake him up, and we didn't."

"But he asked for a job, kept right on after I said no," Dolph objected.

"He had to have some reason for riding in on you," Matt said. "He must have figured you'd turn him down, but he wanted to hang around long enough to spot whatever he needed to know. By this morning he knew you had a lawman with you but he was stuck there and couldn't ride to warn his pals. No wonder he looked sour."

"Got 'er all worked out, eh?" Dolph said, but he looked serious. "Supposin' you're right on all this, what do we do now?"

"Keep our eye on him, like you told Phil," Matt said, giggling his horse. "I'll ride point, along with those two!"

"Send that cuss Studer back here," Dolph called after him. "I can use some help, and watch him too."

## Jayhawkers

It didn't take Matt long to reach the van of the northward-plodding herd. Coming up to Phil Jacks and the new man, he gave Studer the trail boss's message. The man looked worried. He said he didn't think he could stand the dust back there. Matt told him he'd be on the windward side of the herd. He looked sullen but said nothing more. He reined his horse around and began riding toward the swing position, slowly. Matt watched him.

"What's the matter?" Phil Jacks asked.

"I don't know," Matt said, "but I think we may be riding into something. Keep a sharp watch ahead. I'm going to drift back toward the swing myself. I don't trust that fellow."

He let his horse laze along, then stop to nip at some bunch grass. Looking back as the longhorns moved past him, he saw Studer slowly approaching Dolph Quince. The trail boss raised a hand and called something to him that Matt could not catch.

Suddenly Studer pulled out a gun and leveled it. Matt saw the puff of smoke and saw Dolph's horse flinch, then heard the report of the gunshot. He urged his own horse ahead, pulling out his saddle carbine. Dolph's horse was going down and the trail boss was trying to get clear of him. Studer whipped a blanket from his saddle and, waving it, rode at the flank of the moving herd. Matt heard him yelling at the top of his voice.

The plodding longhorns threw up their heads, then broke wildly away from Studer. It appeared to Matt to be a fool maneuver but he could only assume that the man had confederates near by who were in a position to drive a part of the herd quickly to a place where they could hold them.

He drove his horse toward Studer but the man was cleverly riding in behind the stampeding animals as they swung to the east. He flung a look at Quince. The trail boss was standing beside his downed animal with his sixshooter drawn. He was trying to get a bead on the dust-obscured, moving figure of Studer.

Men were galloping up from the drag. Matt heard shots from ahead, and leaving Studer to them, he swung his horse and hurried in that direction. He saw three mounted men tearing in from the northeast. They had emerged from a brush-bordered draw. Bearing down on the van of the herd, they were trying to turn the running animals more directly to the east. One of them was shooting at Phil Jacks, who coolly

dismounted and returned the fire with his pistol steadied across the cantle of his saddle. The raider pitched off his horse and Phil turned his fire on the other two.

Matt got within carbine range and started banging away from his mounted position. The two jerked around and looked at him, then swung their mounts and headed for the cover of the draw. Matt pursued, continuing his fire. A horse went down and his rider hit the ground and lay still. The other made it up the slight rise fronting the draw and went over its edge, out of sight.

Matt jumped off his horse and ran up the incline on foot. Nearing the top, he dropped to all fours and crawled. He poked his head above the edge for a cautious look. Instead of dismounting to fort up, the man was running his horse for the east end of the draw. Matt took careful aim with his carbine and put a bullet in the horse. He wanted to take this man alive, if possible.

When the animal went down its rider hit the dirt, rolled over, and then scrambled frantically back to a position behind the still animal. It offered him poor cover from the marshal's higher location. Taking a chance, Matt stood up and started angling slowly down the slope in his direction.

He hadn't gone far when the call came: "Far enough, mister! Git on back now—you're in pistol range."

Matt judged it bluff, at the distance. He took a couple more steps.

"Stand there, I say!"

Matt took a few more steps, and stopped. "All right," he called, "put down and come forward!"

"Let me on a horse and I'll git outa here," came the reply. "We won't bother you no more!"

"I'm a U. S. Marshal," Matt called. "Give up—you'll get a fair trial."

"Nothing doing!"

Matt started walking again, carbine leveled. "Give up," he repeated; "you haven't a chance."

"I'm warnin' you!" the man shouted hoarsely.

Matt kept on. "I'm coming after you," he said grimly.

The man's head and shoulders popped up from behind the carcass. He snapped a shot from his gun. Matt's carbine spoke and he slumped back.

Matt approached with care. He got close. Nothing happened. The man was dead.

"You poor fool," Matt murmured.

Horses came over the edge of the draw, pounded down to him. Dolph Quince was on one of them; it looked to Matt like the animal Studer had been riding.

"You leave a bloody trail, man," Dolph said.

"Yeah," Matt said dourly. "Studer?" He looked questioning at the trail boss.

"I downed him," Dolph said gruffly. "Looks like you walked right down on this fella."

"I tried to take him alive," Matt explained.

"There's nobody left to tell us what the deal was now," Dolph complained. "It don't add up to much."

"It was botched," Matt guessed. "They might've done better if they hadn't sent Studer into camp to reconnoiter."

"He might have made out, at that, if you hadn't been around," Dolph Quince rejoined. "See why I wanted you to come meet us now?" he asked, grinning.

Matt couldn't return the warmth. It was his job, and sometimes he had to take life to carry it out, but he never relished it. He looked up at the silent Phil Jacks.

"Phil," he said, "I smuggled a quart of wagonyard whisky out of Dodge when we started. The cook's got it hid in the chuck wagon. When the boys get those stampeded critters rounded up, you better get it and break it out. They'll need it."

"Thanks, Marshal. I know the boys'll take it easy when we hit Dodge, after what you done."

"All right," Matt said. "There's plenty of fun to be had, and you won't have to shoot anybody."