

Culley made a diversion by stirring, shaking his head, groping uncertainly to his feet. The trailsman turned his head slightly to glance at the man he had attacked. Then he looked back at Matt and let his right hand drop quietly to his side.

Matt Dillon sighed inwardly and let himself relax. "Come on, mister," he said. "Let's go." He headed the trailsman toward the door. First warning the other that he was going to do so, he pulled the man's gun from its holster and walked along behind him, holding the weapon in his left hand.

Someone was saying in a hushed voice, "Can you beat that?" and another man asked querulously, "Who the devil started it, anyhow? Does anybody know?"

Matt took a backward glimpse as he followed his prisoner out the door. Mike, the bartender, was looking concernedly at Culley, his lips moving in some kind of comment or question, as the drummer lifted a glass of whisky to his lips, a little unsteadily.

In the marshal's office, Matt tossed the prisoner's gun on his desk, had the man shuck his cartridge belt and add it to the pile. Matt sat down behind the desk and pulled out a report blank.

"What's your name?"

"Jerry Shand."

"Well, sit down over there. . . . They must grow 'em real tough where you come from, Shand. Roughing up a hardware drummer with a pot belly. Real two-fisted, he-man stuff."

"You're a real talky kind of marshal, too," Shand said sourly.

"Well, I've got more patience than some. Maybe you might give a little thought to the advantages of getting talked at instead of pistol-whipped. You've been around long enough to know what sort of treatment you'd be getting from some lawmen."

"Yeah, I'm real grateful," the other said, but Matt thought he detected a note of genuine contrition under the sarcastic words.

"What's your outfit?" he said shortly.

"Lazy K," was the response. "From the Pecos."

Matt scribbled. "When'd you pull in?"

"This afternoon."

"Where's the rest of your crew?"

"Out at the holdin' ground. Couple of us got leave to come in ahead of the rest."

"A couple? Where's your partner?"

"Lost him outside. He's not much of a drinkin' man. Look-in' for faster action down the street somewheres."

"What call did you have to pick on Andy Culley, there in the Long Branch? Got something against him?"

Shand did not reply.

"You don't even know him, do you? Just hit town at the end of the trail, feeling ringy, and look for a fight? Why didn't you choose somebody who could give you a run for your money?"

"Listen, Marshal," Shand said tightly, "you don't know what this is all about."

Matt looked at him. "All right; you tell me, then."

"It's—personal between him and me," Shand said stubbornly.

"Well," Matt said evenly, "have you got twenty-five dollars bail money to put up?"

"No, I haven't. Boss pays off tomorrow."

"Then you can spend a peaceful night here on a jailhouse bunk. I wish it would teach you and your Texas saddlemates to keep your hands folded when you get north of the Deadline—but I don't reckon it will," Matt ended with a sigh.

He and Shand looked around as the door opened. It was Andy Culley. He had a cut lip and a mouse under one eye. He glanced once at Shand, who was staring malevolently at him, and then turned his gaze to Matt.

"Evening, Marshal," said the drummer.

"What is it, Culley?"

"I—don't want to butt in, Marshal," Culley said hesitantly, taking a couple of slow steps toward the desk.

"You already have," Matt said drily; "but go ahead—what's on your mind?"

Culley licked his lips and flicked a glance at Shand, who had risen quickly from his chair. "I, uh, just wanted to tell him—I'm sorry. . . ." the drummer said.

Matt stared at him. "You're sorry?"

"Yeah—for starting the fracas over there. I maybe said something I shouldn't."

There was a silence. The marshal and his prisoner thought about this strange statement, each in his own way, trying to

fit it into the framework of his own knowledge. It was Culley who broke the silence.

"You aren't bringing assault charges against him, Marshal—because I won't sign a complaint."

"You don't need to," Matt said shortly. "I was there and I saw what happened. Shand here picked a fight."

"Well, I won't have no part in it," Culley said; "I don't want no trouble."

"Disturbing the peace happens to be a misdemeanor—even in Dodge City." Matt wondered where this was all leading to.

"Well, then, what's the bail?" Culley demanded.

"Twenty-five dollars," Matt said wearily.

Culley thrust a hand into his trousers pocket and brought it out filled with gold coins. He counted out five and dropped them on Matt's desk. "There you are." He looked at Jerry Shand. "It's the least I can do, boy," he said to the trailsman, and went out.

Matt was watching Jerry Shand. The young rider's face was bleak, his mouth a grim, uncompromising line, as he kept his eyes on the retreating drummer's back.

The marshal pushed his hat back with an exasperated grunt. He did not offer a word as Jerry Shand lifted his gun and rig from the desk and buckled the belt around his middle. Shand's eyes were blank, his expression cold and noncommittal, as he met Matt's stare. He turned, strode to the door, and went out into the night.

Slowly, Matt Dillon tore the partially filled-out blank from the pad in front of him. Eyes troubled, he crumpled it in a wad, ending with a vicious twist, and threw it into a corner.

There was something wrong here, something that had its roots in the past. A past that the drummer wanted to forget . . . that young Shand wouldn't forget, and wasn't going to let Culley forget. . . .

Matt remembered the tattooing on Culley's arm. A Q in a diamond. It identified Culley as a former follower of William Clark Quantrill, colonel in the Confederate Army and notorious guerrilla chieftain in the no-quarter border fighting in Missouri and Kansas. Any man who had fought with Quantrill's raiders was sure to have made enemies—lasting ones. Jerry Shand looked too young to have been involved in the border fighting, though; this was 1878, thirteen

years after the end of hostilities. Shand must be carrying on some kind of blood feud that dated back to the war years. . . .

Matt Dillon thought somberly of the bitter differences that all too often still set one American against another. The War was long over, and bygones, no matter how vividly experienced and recalled, should be no more than bygones. But the scars that had been inflicted were long-lasting and slow to heal, and occasionally something like this came along, a result of the fanaticism of a John Brown or the brutality of a Quantrill, an open, running sore. Making an Andy Culley cringe and crawl. Making a Jerry Shand strike out, eager to hurt and maim. Corrupting both, making them more animals than men. . . .

War was hell, yes. And for some men the aftermath of war was a special kind of hell.

Half an hour later Matt Dillon was patrolling Front Street, getting a line on the crowds that were now beginning to collect in this place and that, spotting a couple of potential troublemakers, making mental notes to look over the dodgers in his desk to check them against this or that seen face, seeing a swarthy man with his gun rigged for a cross-draw and guessing that he was maybe more proficient with the knife tucked in the back of one boot. He had just turned toward his office, meaning to spend a few minutes with those dodgers, when he heard the shot.

It came from the west end of Front Street. Looking that way, Matt saw a horse rearing, a man snatching at the bridle reins, running after the animal as it shied away. A huddled shape lay on the boardwalk near by. Drawing his gun, Matt ran toward them. As he passed the Long Branch, a crowd began pouring out through its swinging doors. Most of them legged it right after him, a few shouting hoarsely.

Matt was no more than fifteen yards away when the man caught the plunging horse. It was Jerry Shand. Matt shouted at him to halt. If the trailsman heard the command he ignored it, trying to mount, but he could not hold the shying horse still long enough to be able to toe the stirrup.

Matt stopped ten feet away from him. "Hold it, Shand," he said sharply. "My gun's on you."

Shand ceased his efforts to mount and faced the marshal, but kept his hold on the restive horse's reins. Men crowded around. Matt took Shand's gun, the cowboy offering no re-

me a minute. I lit and walked over to him. I thought I'd worked off most of my hate back there in the saloon but I was about ready to slug him again.

"Then he begun to say how sorry he was, how he'd be sorry all his life, that everybody was crazy back in the war, sort of out of their heads. Wanted to make things right with me, he said, wanted to pay me.

"I said, 'Buy it back, huh? Think you can wash it all away with money?' He said what else could he do, and I said he could at least get out of Kansas. He said he couldn't do that, and then he offered me five hundred dollars. I said he must be getting rich off of Kansas now, and he said he'd make it six hundred, but he couldn't leave Kansas, he'd been in business here nearly ten years.

"I told him not many Kansans would buy his stinkin' barb' wire if they knew they was doing business with a bush-whacker. Right then he pulled that derringer and told me to shut up, and he said, 'We'll see who's through in Kansas.' Well, while he was talkin' I drew my gun—I was standing a little sideways to him and I guess maybe he didn't see what I was doing. But he was going to pull that trigger, all right, I just beat him to it. That's the God's truth, Marshal."

"Jerry," Matt said softly, "are you sure he pulled a gun?"

"Yeah, he pulled a gun." Jerry Shand put his elbows on the desk, covered his eyes with his manacled hands, and let his head sag wearily. "He pulled a gun all right," he repeated in a dull voice.

Matt Dillon was prowling around the corner where the shooting had occurred, searching in the shadows, peering down between the cracks of the boardwalk. He got down on his knees in the dust of the street to look beneath the planks of the walk. He thought he saw something glimmer but when he reached in he found only an empty tin can.

He stood up, brushing his hands together, just as Kitty Russell came up behind him.

"Matt," she said in a worried voice, "there's a bunch in the Long Branch still talking up a lynching."

"Shand claims Culley had a gun. Could be one of the lynch-law boys has it in his pocket."

"Why'd he do it, Matt? Shand, I mean."

"He seems to have had reasons. That wouldn't make any difference to the law, though. But he insists Culley had a gun

and drew on him first. That'd make a difference—but no gun has showed up, and he made some threats after that fight in the bar. That'll count against him."

Kitty was looking past Matt's shoulder, up at a lighted window in the second story of a good-sized building fronting on the street.

"Looks like the only thing that could save him would be a witness, but—" Matt broke off to follow Kitty's glance. As he did so, a woman's figure appeared in the window, reaching to close the lace curtains. "That's Belle Archer, isn't it?" he asked Kitty.

"Yes—this is where she rooms."

"And she left the Long Branch early tonight, before all this happened . . . if she's been there right along . . ." He moved quickly to the base of the building and called up, "Belle!"

The woman in the window took her hand away from the curtains, leaving them partly opened, but she took a half step back into the room. She did not answer immediately.

"Belle," Matt called again, "are you up there?"

Her voice came down in faint answer: "What do you want?"

"How long have you been up there?"

Again Belle Archer did not reply, and Kitty called to her. "It's important, Belle!"

"Not—long." It sounded hesitant, uncertain.

"You see what happened down here?" Matt demanded.

There was a pause before a half-strangled "No" and a sound of sobbing came down to them. Matt and Kitty exchanged glances. "She must have seen it," he said. "She got here in plenty of time to see it all—and something's got her upset. . . . Kitty, we're going up there and talk to her."

Doc Adams, the coroner of Ford County, was presiding at the inquest held the morning after the shooting. The scene was the lobby of the Dodge House. Adams sat at a table below the balcony. To one side was the witness chair, to the other sat the half dozen members of the coroner's jury. Jerry Shand, under guard, was next to the witness chair and Kitty sat near by. A lank man with sad eyes was testifying.

"Let's proceed," Adams was saying. "You were sitting outside the Long Branch at nine last night when the accused rode up. That right?"