

Matt Dillon eased out his Colt's and took a step forward. Pilcher, reaching for the latch to swing the door closed, caught Matt's movement in the darkness. He straightened and reached for his own gun.

"Hold it!" Matt said.

Pilcher froze. He peered at the figure before the door, still partly in the dark. Matt took another step and stood full in the beam of light from the doorway. He let Pilcher get a good look at the gun he was holding.

"Well, Marshal, I *wanted* to see you again before I left," Pilcher said.

"Daggett told me that," Matt said.

"That murderin' sidewinder!" Pilcher's voice rose. "He killed the best friend I ever had!"

Matt saw that Pilcher was working himself up to the point where he might make a desperate try for his gun. "Don't make a fool play!" he warned.

Pilcher's hand flashed to his gun and up. He was fast, terribly fast. . . .

—One brief, pungent scene from the scores in this adaptation of CBS' great TV show:

G U N S M O K E

Don Ward

10 Short Stories Based on the CBS TV Program

GUNSMOKE

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INTRODUCTION

"The Wickedest Little City in America"

Whether Dodge City actually rated that appellation or not, it very probably was the most colorfully uproarious of all the famous frontier towns. The little community on the north bank of the Arkansas River, situated on the Old Santa Fe Trail, saw its share or more of bullwhackers and mule-skinners. Five miles from Fort Dodge, it provided a place for soldiers on pass to spend their pay and have themselves a time. As "Buffalo City," it was the capital of the hide hunters who worked the plenty-buffalo area where the grazing grounds of the great Arkansas and Texas herds overlapped. The hide hunters liked their fun on the rough side, too, and they found it in the town that was renamed Dodge City, after the near-by fort, when the railroad came in, in 1872.

It was in that year that the first big herd of longhorns—two thousand head—was driven to Dodge. There were as yet no loading pens, so that herd kept going until it got to Great Bend. 1875 was the first year to see cattle shipped regularly from Dodge; from then until 1885 Dodge City was, veritably, the Cowboy Capital. In that period, this town of about one thousand permanent inhabitants saw its population swell during the April-September shipping season every year with the addition of one to two thousand cowboys, many of whom hung around for several weeks, getting rid of six months', or even perhaps a year's, pay.

They had no trouble getting rid of it. They spent some of it on clothing and equipment; the saloonkeepers, the gamblers, and the girls were ready, willing and able to relieve them of the rest. After a fall and winter in Texas, and then months on the trail, during which they might average sixteen

or more hours in the saddle daily, they were bent on excitement. They got it. Sometimes they created it, by their own riotous behavior. "It was their dream," Stanley Vestal has said, "to hurrah the town, to kill the Marshal or run him out of town, to 'tree' the camp, and then, with DODGE painted on the canvas cover of their chuckwagon, to ride home to Texas and declare, 'We taken Dodge.' "

Well, there had to be someone to handle such young men as these, problem children the like of which America will never see again. To do this job, a succession of peace officers served Dodge City whose names include the illustrious ones of Bat Masterson and his brothers, Wyatt Earp, and Bill Tilghman; and lesser known ones like Billy Rivers, Jack Allen, Luke Short, and Neal Brown. Taken together, they made up a formidable company. In spite of all the lore, though, the number of killings recorded by these Dodge City lawmen was not high. Earp and Bat Masterson, for example, hung up only one each during their terms of service. They were more likely to disarm and arrest a man, or subdue him with a pistol-whipping, or, often, establish order out of turbulence by the sheer force of their arrival and presence on the scene. They were ready to sling lead if they had to. Generally, they didn't have to.

Of such man-stuff, largely, is television's Marshal Matt Dillon. More on the thoughtful side, maybe. More concerned with the why's of men's actions, more aware of the limitations that beset human beings. More keenly alive to moral as well as legal responsibilities, perhaps.

And perhaps that is why he is so popular.

REUNION '78

Dodge City's Long Branch saloon was enjoying an unaccustomed quiet night. The bar was lightly patronized and the two aprons moved back and forth behind it with a leisurely air, setting out a bottle, taking a coin, making desultory talk. The gaming tables in the rear were getting a fair play but the customers there were being surprisingly unvocal.

Seated at a table with Kitty Russell, Marshal Matt Dillon noted the relative silence prevailing in this normally tumultuous place and remarked on it to his pretty table companion.

"Kind of unusual for the Long Branch." He made wet circles on the table top with the bottom of his half-empty glass. "Unusual for Dodge City, come to that," he added.

"Thank heaven a time like this does come along once in a while," Kitty responded. "Believe me, Matt, we can use an easy hour when we get it. Both of us."

Matt smiled. "My work comes in fits and starts," he told her. "But you're going it hot and heavy most of the time. In fact, the reason I came in," he confided, "was to get you to sit down for a minute—didn't know then what a soft touch you were having tonight."

She gave him a mock salute. "Good Samaritan Dillon," she said, quirking her lips at him. "I don't know if I can stand you so saintly."

"Won't have to, long," He made some more circles. "Got to finish the street, get back to the office for a while."

Her eyes held his face for a moment. "Make it in again later," she said. "I might need you to slow me down then; I don't think this will last."

He sighed. "You're right. There's two trail outfits still camped a ways out. They'll be showing, sooner or later, and then there'll be no rest for the wicked."

"Meaning me, I suppose?" She tilted her head, eyebrows arched.

"Meaning all of us." Matt Dillon said it lightly, but his lips showed no smile. "Show me a man and I'll show you a sinner. We all tote a share of it—some of us more than others, that's all."

Kitty Russell looked at this lawman, her eyes warm and gentle. "I know how you feel, Matt. You—bear a heavier load than most of us, maybe because you let your conscience take on what a lot of other people shoulder aside . . . Oh, Matt, why don't you get away from this town?" she burst out.

"A lot of good people in Dodge City," he reminded her. "Not angels, maybe—but good people. I work for them. My job is to make this place tolerable. Later on, it'll be somebody's else's job to keep it a proud place to live. You know how I feel, Kitty . . . there are worse places than Dodge City."

"It's a better place because you're here, Matt," she said quietly. She looked up as a middle-aged, erect man approached their table. "Well, Pete, I didn't expect to see you back here so soon? Where's Belle?"

Captain Peter Wynn, breveted Lieutenant Colonel in the Civil War, was a retired U. S. Army officer with a little money who had been living in Dodge for several months, and spending a large part of his time hanging around the Long Branch. It was no secret that the place's attraction for him lay in the charms of Belle Archer, one of its prettiest girls.

"Outside," Pete Wynn answered briefly. He picked up the woman's garment draped over the back of the vacant chair at the table. "She asked me to get her cape and take her home."

Kitty frowned and started to rise. "Is there something wrong, Pete? Anything I can do to help?"

"No, thanks, Kitty," Wynn said. "She just said to tell you she's going to her room, that she doesn't feel so well." He looked uncertain. "Headache, I guess."

"That's tough," Kitty said. "Tell her not to worry about us, Pete. Have her take an aspirin and go to bed and get a good sleep for a change. Wait, I'll tell her myself."

Wynn nodded briefly to Matt and headed for the door, Kitty hurrying along with him.

Matt raised one finger to Wynn in a vague farewell gesture. He was engrossed in watching two men at the bar.

One of them was wearing "store" clothes. His appearance

was that of a town man, but Matt, who had talked to him a couple of times, felt that the designation somehow didn't quite fit the fellow. His name was Andy Culley and he was a hardware and farm-equipment salesman. He had recently added a new item—something he called barbed wire—to his line, and he was tiresomely voluble about it. Matt had been subjected to a rapid-fire talk on the new product's virtues earlier in the day and he suspected that the bartender, who had been serving Culley with a blank face and half-raised eyebrows, was being treated to the same dose.

A few minutes earlier a newcomer had sided Culley at the bar. He was in his middle or late twenties, Matt judged, lean and tanned, his face an interesting combination of strength and sensitivity. He wore the garb of a trail driver, and Matt, who had never seen the man before, assumed he was a rider for one of the two outfits that had just crossed the Arkansas with their herds and were waiting to get their stuff into the shipping pens.

The trail driver was obviously alone, but upon coming in he had unhesitatingly taken a position at the bar right next to Culley, ignoring the empty spaces extending on each side of the salesman. He had ordered a whisky and stood there, ignoring it after one quick sip, shooting glances at Culley, listening to his gab, seeming to size the man up.

As Matt observed the tableau, Culley appeared to be getting ready to pay his tab and leave. He wiped his mouth, straightened the hat on his head, spoke to Mike, the bartender, and reached into his pants pocket. The good-looking young trailman interposed, throwing a coin on the bar, waving a hand at Mike, and looking expectantly and—Matt thought—challengingly at Culley. Culley said something and grinned at the younger man, but there was a tension about his face that made Matt Dillon, who had an eye for such things, sit straight in his chair, and bring all his attention on the two.

Kitty, who had followed Pete Wynn out to have her word with Belle, slipped back into her seat.

"She's a strange one," Kitty remarked.

"What's that?" Matt said, not turning his head.

"Belle Archer, I mean." Kitty lifted her drink and sipped it. "Not coming back. Headache, my eye. She acts like she's plain scared, to me. Of what, I don't know."

"Yeah?" Matt said, still looking toward the two at the bar.

"I can't help wondering about her," Kitty said. "Where she came from . . . what brought her here. She never talks about herself . . . she's kind of a puzzle to me."

Matt said, "I got another one for you—why's the cowboy picking the fight with the hardware drummer?"

Kitty's attention went to the scene at the bar. Culley, red-faced and sweating, was half-turned toward the door, as though anxious to get away. The trailsman was in the act of pouring another drink into the glass that Culley had already emptied, quickly once, at the other's insistence. The bartender was watching them worriedly.

Matt got to his feet and moved unobtrusively toward them. He got close enough to hear Culley say: "Sorry, mister, I've got to get back to the hotel."

He started away but the cowboy grabbed his arm. "Let's not get insulting, now," he said harshly.

The bartender leaned forward. "The man says no, he means no," he told the trailsman. He reached to pick up the bottle that sat on the bar.

The rider quickly put his own hand on it. "Leave it there." He pushed the shotglass full of whisky at Culley. "Drink it."

Culley looked at it, looked at the other's set face, looked away. "I said I'm going," he announced weakly.

"And I said drink it," the cowboy persisted. "Better bring another bottle, bartender. Andy here's goin' to drink to the old home town till he drops."

With a sudden movement of his left arm Culley knocked the shotglass out of the trail man's proffering hand and then swept the bottle off the bar top. Glass and bottle crashed on the floor. Men rose quickly from tables, faced about at the bar, staring.

With a muttered oath, the trail driver grabbed Culley's left arm, twisted it in a hammerlock, spun the man around and pinned him against the bar.

The drummer was sweating profusely now; from his pain-twisted mouth came a whining "Let go, let go!"

Matt Dillon stepped forward to break it up, then paused as the tense-faced young man, holding Culley tight with the hammerlock grip, shoved the drummer's right sleeve up to the elbow. Matt peered forward as the trailsman bent over the

exposed forearm. On the man's pale skin he saw tattooed a letter Q boxed by a diamond.

The rider's voice was harsh and strained: "I was right." Loosing his grip on the other's left arm he yanked him around. Culley's face was a study in fear. The trail man balled his fists. "I ought to kill you," he grunted. He punched the drummer in the face. Culley sagged and the other hit him again, a swinging smash to the jaw. Culley staggered back against the bar. The rider crowded after him and landed another punch to the drummer's face. Culley fell sideways to the floor and lay still.

The whole sequence of violent action had taken no more than ten or twelve seconds. Once it started, Matt Dillon had no chance to stop it. He'd been momentarily thrown off by the exposure of the tattoo mark on the drummer's arm. Now he had to act. He stepped toward the trail driver again, being careful to stay more than arm's length from him. It was always a mistake to get too close to a man who was quick with his fists.

Mike, the bartender, was leaning over to take a look at the half-conscious Culley. "Holy smoke," he muttered, and looked up at the defiant trail driver. Kitty's voice came to Matt above the murmuring of the other onlookers: "Get him out of here!" she was saying.

The trailsman had swung to face the spectators crowding about. "Stay back," he warned. "I'm not finished with him." His hand hovered over his holstered gun.

"Yes, you are." Matt's voice brought the other's head around to look at the lawman. "You're finished here, friend."

"Keep out of this, Marshal," the trailsman said in a level voice. "I said I'm not finished with him. I got a ways to go yet."

"That you do," Matt said. "About two hundred feet. From here to the jail."

The trailsman's hand moved almost imperceptibly nearer the butt of his holstered gun. Matt stood still, ready himself, not wanting to use his gun if he could help it, watching the other's eyes, keeping his own face calm, thinking that this shouldn't have been allowed to develop, that he should have moved in sooner, when he first saw the conflict brewing in the tension, in the attitudes of this man and the drummer, pleading silently that the other's gun hand be stayed.

"Don't do it," he said quietly.

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 hard-core 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 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?"

"That's right, Doc."

"You sure it was this Jerry Shand, right here?"

The witness pointed at Shand. "It was him, all right."

"Did you see or hear anything this court should know?"

"Y'bet I did! Somebody this feller knew was waitin' fer him. 'Is he in there?' he says, I mean Shand, and the other feller says 'Yes,' and then he says, 'Whatcha gonna do to him, Jerry?' an' this feller here says, 'I dunno, kill him, mebbe.' I recall them exact words, Doc."

"Pretty incriminatin'," Adams commented sonorously. "Remember you're under oath, Charley."

"Ed Mabry'll back me up on it!" the witness retorted with spirit. "He was right there with me, heard every dang' word!"

Jerry Shand jumped to his feet. He was trembling. "I said it, all right—but I didn't mean it! I was mad enough to do 'most anything to him, but—"

Adams pounded the top of his desk. "You'll get your chance to talk later, young man. Sit down."

Ed Mabry was called. His testimony substantiated that of the first witness. Other witnesses told of the fight in the Long Branch, started by Shand; some of them had heard him say to Culley then, "I ought to kill you!" and so testified.

Then Jerry Shand took the chair. Adams looked at him sternly. "You've heard the testimony that you threatened to kill the victim. A barful of people saw you pick a fight with him. What you got to say?"

"I don't deny any of that," Shand said tensely, "except that when I said it, I said it in anger and I didn't actually intend to kill him. I shot him, all right, but I shot him in self-defense. He pulled a gun on me."

"Marshal Matt Dillon ain't here right now," Adams said, "but he's told me no gun was found—I mean no gun that Culley had, or is claimed to have had. That's that. The next point is—why would Andy Culley want to shoot you?"

"He wanted to shut me up. He didn't want me telling how he'd been a bushwhacker with Quantrill. You saw the tattoo on his arm!"

"Tattoo don't make a man a bushwhacker," snapped Adams.

"This one does!" Shand retorted. "I saw it on his arm, when they came for my father and mother. That was in Lawrence. That's why I'm sure. They—killed both of them . . . and then they went across the street to where my girl

lived, and they took her away. I never saw her again . . ." His voice trailed off, his face hard.

There was a commotion at the front door. Heads turned; Adams bent a fierce gaze at the two people there. Jerry Shand stared.

Belle Archer was a step in front of Matt Dillon. The marshal's right hand cupped her elbow. Belle wore a pretty, bright-colored gown, but her face was drawn and miserable.

Jerry Shand stood up, his mouth slightly open, his eyes wide. Belle Archer took a halting step forward.

"Hello—Jerry," she said huskily.

"Lord!" Jerry Shand breathed. Then: "Ellie . . . ?"

"Belle Archer, now . . ." She paused, fumbled for words. "Matt says either I—talk, or they take you away. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't do this to you, Jerry. You've had it bad enough already. I—didn't want you to see me now . . . see what happened to Ellie Clark after that day in Lawrence."

"Just a minute, now!" Doc Adams interjected. "What's this all about, Matt?"

"I believe Miss Archer's got some testimony to give, Doc. What she has to say ought to be controlling in this case."

"All right, then!" Adams said with asperity. "Put her on the stand—no need to make a show out of these proceedings!"

Shand was excused from the stand and Belle was sworn in. Adams asked a couple of preliminary questions and then told her to go ahead with any pertinent information.

"I can tell you all about last night, Doc," she said simply. Her eyes swung to Jerry Shand, who was watching her unblinkingly, his face masking whatever emotion he was feeling. "I left the Long Branch early last night—left because I saw Jerry coming in. I didn't want him to see me. I went home—to my room, I mean. And I saw everything that happened from my window—between Jerry and Andy Culley. I saw Andy pull a gun out of his pocket and point it at Jerry. Then Jerry drew his gun and fired—but he *had* to do it, Doc, or he would've been killed!"

She stopped. Doc Adams took his eyes from her and looked at the accused man. Jerry Shand's eyes were brimming with tears.

"What Jerry told Matt was true, Doc," she ended. "I saw it all . . . And I saw that fool Busby kid pick up Andy's

gun and run away with it." Amid silence, she left the witness chair. Gently, Matt took her arm and led her to the door.

Marshal Matt Dillon stood in front of his office, patting the neck of Jerry Shand's saddled horse. Jerry toed the stirrup and swung aboard. He looked down at the lawman.

"I—I don't know how I . . ." he began.

"It's over and done with," Matt said quietly. "Forget it now."

"Yeah," Jerry said.

"Better get going, Jerry," Matt said gravely.

"I wish I could see Ellie first . . ."

"It's like I said before—she refuses to see you, Jerry."

"I don't figure why Ellie—it don't seem right she won't!"

"Listen. She said to tell you Ellie's gone . . ."

"Gone?" Jerry stared at him.

"Yes, gone. She means she isn't Ellie Clark any more—at least, the Ellie Clark you knew. Remember, she's been through a lot, Jerry—maybe more than you have, even. It's a rough life she leads—but she likes it, now. She couldn't share a different kind of one with you. She might pretend, but she couldn't fool you long, and she's smart enough to know it. And big enough to want to spare you.

"It's true, kid. Ellie's gone. There's only Belle Archer." Matt looked up at Jerry Shand for a long moment. Then he lifted a hand.

"So long, Jerry."

Jerry Shand raised his own hand and let it drop. "So long, Marshal." His voice was almost inaudible. He reined his horse around and touched spurs.

sistance. Pete Wynn came up. Matt handed Shand's gun to Pete and told him to keep Shand covered. Then he went over and knelt by the huddled body on the boardwalk. It was Andy Culley. He made a swift examination and rose. He glanced at Jerry Shand. The cowboy looked at him wordlessly, his face frozen.

"Somebody go get Doc Adams," Matt said. "It's a coroner case."

Several men went close enough to see that the dead man was Culley. They turned on Shand.

"Culley wasn't heeled!" one of them snarled. "Let's get this bird!"

"Yeh, string 'im up!" someone else said shrilly. The phrase was chorused by several others, over the crowd's angry muttering.

Shand was sweating and pale. "Now listen," he pleaded. "Wait a minute . . ."

"Shut up!" a redbearded man shouted at him. "Come on, boys!"

Matt drew his gun quickly. He held it waist-high. His eyes were cold. He did not raise his voice but his words lashed at them.

"That's enough of that! This is my party, boys. Nobody's going to get riled up without reason."

"Come on, Matt," a man objected huskily, "this skunk shot Culley dead in cold blood!"

"If he did he'll hang for it," Matt said. "After he has a trial."

"Trial nothin'!" Redbeard shouted. "There's a limit, Matt!"

Angry yells backed him up. The crowd began to press in. Matt thumbed back the hammer of his gun. It made a startlingly loud click. Jerry Shand stood by, his face white, drawn up to his full height, his eyes on Matt.

"Stay back!" Matt whipped at them. "I mean it."

The ones in the van stopped, hesitated. Matt grasped the moment's opportunity. "Now scatter," he said quickly. "Go about your business." He paused; then: "*Fast!*"

There were a few muffled curses, but the crowd started to disperse. Matt watched them go. He let out a long breath and looked at Shand. His mouth twitching, the cowboy wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead.

After Doc Adams had come, examined Culley and pronounced him dead, and ordered the corpse carried to the tiny

county morgue, Matt made his way to his office. Shand was there, manacled and under guard, not yet in a cell. Matt sent Pete Wynn, who had brought Shand to the jail, away. He proceeded to question Shand.

"You don't have to talk if you don't want to," he said in preliminary, "but I hope you will. I'd like some answers."

"I'll talk," Shand said huskily.

"Why'd you shoot him?"

"He drew a gun on me and threatened to shoot me, that's why. I pulled my own gun and got in the first shot."

Matt looked at him. "He had a gun? We didn't find any gun on him, or around anywhere."

"He had a gun," Shand insisted. "It was a silver-mounted derringer. I got a good look at it."

"Where did it go to?"

"I don't know, darn it. Any one of that crowd could've picked it up and carried it away. All I know's he pulled it on me and I beat him to the shot."

"Well, why'd he draw on you? Why'd he want to kill you?"

"I told you, Marshal," Shand said. "It's personal."

"I think I know anyhow," Matt told him. "He was a Quantrill man—wasn't he?"

Shand looked at him for a long minute without speaking. Then he opened his mouth and the words came fast. "He was with Quantrill when they hit Lawrence in 'Sixty-three. His name isn't Culley—it's Bloody Bill Ashley—or that's what he was called then. I was just a kid but I remember it like it was yesterday. Ma made me get up and hide in the woodshed. I saw him kill my father in cold blood, and I saw that Quantrill tattoo on his arm. I—saw him drag off Ma. . . . When they rode away there wasn't anything left but smoking ruins of buildings, and dead bodies. Men and women and children. . . ."

Matt was silent as he looked at Shand. He knew the man was telling the truth. He felt a stab of compassion. But he had to go on questioning Shand, had to get the whole story: if he could.

"What happened on the street?" he asked. "I thought Culley was trying to keep clear of you."

"After I left here, I got my horse," Shand said. "I was heading out of town, goin' west. Culley popped out from beside a building all of a sudden and flagged me down. I asked him what he wanted, and he said he wanted to talk to

ROAD RANCH

Matt Dillon and his deputy, Chester Proudfoot, were pleasantly engaged in digesting their supper. Sprawled on tilted-back chairs in front of the marshal's office, they saw a man hurrying toward them in the dusk. They sat erect.

"Ain't that the stage driver?" Chester said.

"It's Jim Buck, all right," Matt affirmed. "Howdy, Jim," he greeted as the man came near.

"Howdy, Marshal . . . Chester." He seemed excited.

"Trouble, Jim?" Matt asked.

"Worser'n trouble, Marshal—got held up, one passenger shot down in cold blood—as mean a thing's I ever did see."

"Where did it happen?"

"Other side of Wagon Bed Springs—between there and Daggett's."

"Daggett's . . . ?" Matt couldn't place the name.

"Jesse Daggett—he runs the stage station out near the Colaradder line. Don't trust that man, I don't."

"What do you mean, Jim?"

"I suspicion he's in on this—Jesse Daggett, I mean. He knew I was carryin' a little gold. We lay over there, ye know; and whilst we was doin' so I seen Daggett talkin' private to a gent who'd just rode in, a hard-lookin' cuss."

"Then what, Jim?"

"Feller rode off, left afore we did. Looks to me like he changed his hoss and outfit somewheres near by and waited for us."

"You mean the man who held you up was riding a different horse and wearing different clothes, but you think it was the same man you saw talking to Daggett earlier?"

"That's just what I mean! He was all alone. Had his face covered with a mask. Never said a word. Took the box, robbed the passengers. Then he mounted up, ready to ride off, but before he did he shot one of the passengers—Ryerson, that drummer from St. Louis—right in the head!"

Matt looked at the shaken driver. "Ryerson had made no move—wasn't going for a hide-out gun or anything?"

"No sir, by Godfreys! Now why'd a man do a thing like

that, Marshal? It don't make sense; didn't say a word, didn't cuss him or nothin', like he might've had somethin' agin the man. Just shot him down like a dog."

"He just likes to kill, maybe—one of that breed. I'll ride back to Daggett's with you tomorrow, Jim. Talk to him."

"Didn't have nobody ridin' gun," Jim Buck said regretfully. "Figgered it'd give it away I was carryin' gold if I did . . ."

"Don't let it weigh on your mind, Jim," Matt said. "See you in the morning."

The next day Matt and Chester rode Jim Buck's stage on the return trip to Daggett's station. It was a full day's trip, with a stop at Wagon Bed Springs, and Matt, who had ridden topside with Jim Buck all the way, was glad to see Daggett's. It was a typical road-ranch stage stop with a big dining room and a row of cubicles for travelers.

Matt got his first chance to talk to Daggett in the yard after supper had been eaten. Jesse Daggett was a tall, angular man with a gaunt, lined face. He seemed quiet and contained but Matt thought he sensed an inner tension in him.

"Cold weather'll be coming soon," he said, making talk. "Have to lay in some more whisky."

Matt asked him how long he had been running the station.

"Three years, come spring. Put it up myself," he said, with a touch of pride. "Pawnees've made a couple tries to burn her down, but I'm still here."

"And you're planning on staying here, aren't you, Daggett?"

"A man's plans are his own, Marshal," Daggett responded with some asperity.

So the man was touchy, Matt thought. He'd have to handle him carefully if he was going to get anywhere.

"No offense," he said quietly. Daggett looked mollified, and he added, "Think I'd like it here myself—no neighbors to bother you but lots of company passing through."

"Company." Daggett sniffed, as though he didn't exactly savor the thought.

"All kinds of people on the road," Matt offered. Then, tentatively: "Some good and some bad."

"True," the station keeper said, glancing quickly at Matt.

"That fellow who held up Jim Buck and shot the passenger . . ."

Daggett said quietly, "One of the bad ones, all right—killin' in cold blood that way."

"You don't figure it could have been a mistake, Daggett? That his gun might have gone off accidentally?"

"Sure," Daggett said sardonically; "anything's possible."

"I take it from your tone of voice that you don't think it did," Matt said politely.

"What I think about it ain't likely to bring back the dead," Daggett said sourly.

"No, it won't," Matt said. He laid a direct gaze on the man. "But it might keep other people from dying."

The man said nothing while he pulled out a pipe and stuffed it full of rough-cut. "Figgered that's what you come down for, Marshal—lookin' for that fellow." He struck a match and held it over the pipe bowl.

"No secret about that," Matt told him.

He finished lighting, tossed the match away, took a couple of long puffs. "All right, Marshal. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"It could take quite a while."

"What you're paid for," Daggett admitted.

Matt decided the man was settling into a calmer mood. He said, "Buck thinks maybe it was the man he saw talking to you here that day."

Daggett thought a minute. "Nat Pilcher, that was." He took a breath and added slowly, "Marshal, I don't care what Jim Buck thinks."

Matt probed the statement for meaning but its implication eluded him. He'd have to try another tack.

"It hurts the stage company's business when passengers get shot," he said. "If any more get shot near here, it will hurt yours."

"It will for a fact, Marshal."

Matt felt that he was getting somewhere. "Stage holdups happen, everybody expects it. The stage company discounts it; the law handles them on a matter-of-course enforcement basis. But shooting someone down for no reason . . . you figure this man's a born killer?"

"I ain't saying it was Pilcher, Marshal. But whoever it was, he could've had a lot of reasons, maybe."

Matt said, "Sure," and waited expectantly. The station keeper seemed to be opening up.

"Men are all different," Daggett went on. "They got dif-

ferent reasons for doin' what they do, for livin' the way they live. I reckon it's what happened to 'em in the past that makes it so."

Matt rolled a cigarette. "Yeah. That's why I'm a lawman. Why you run a stage station. Why this man—whoever it was—holds up a stage . . . and kills in cold blood."

Daggett said nothing while Matt lit up and drew in the smoke. The silence ran on long enough for him to finish half his cigarette. Finally the other seemed to come to a decision. He straightened and knocked the dottle from his pipe.

"Marshal, I've got just one thing to tell you. It's this: I believe in letting every man kill his own snakes."

Matt snubbed out his cigarette. "I take it you mean that this killing is mine to solve without your help, is that it?"

"That's the size of it, Marshal. I won't interfere with you—but I won't help you."

"Well, Daggett, I think that you know something you could tell me if you would. I don't have to tell you this is serious business—an innocent man has been killed. It's my job to apprehend the killer. It's every good citizen's job to help me as much as he can. In the circumstances, your philosophy doesn't impress me much, mister."

"It's got to be that way," was the stubborn response. "Let dog eat dog, I say."

"All right, Daggett," Matt said calmly. "I hope you're not going to regret this . . ."

"I've had a lot of regrets in my life, Marshal. One more ain't going to break me."

In spite of the disappointing interview with Jesse Daggett, Matt shied away from sharing Jim Buck's continued suspicion of the man. Buck was sure that he was partners with the road agent. The station keeper's refusal to confirm or deny the charge that Pilcher was the holdup-killer puzzled Matt. It could be that he simply didn't know . . . but if that was the case why didn't the man come right out and say so? But if he did know, and was Pilcher's accomplice, why had he admitted knowing the man at all? Somehow, Daggett didn't seem to fit the role of criminal. Matt knew that mere appearances could not be trusted in his business, but he was relying on a deep intuitive sense that had in the past rarely betrayed him.

But right now the only lead he had to work on was Jim

Buck's suspicion of Daggett. If it was well founded, Pilcher ought to be hanging around in the vicinity and might show up again at the station. He had Chester keep vigil there while he borrowed a horse from Daggett and covered the region around in a saddleback search. By the afternoon of the second day he had given up the effort to spot Pilcher's supposed hide-out nearby. He and Chester were listlessly playing two-handed stud in the station when, toward dusk, Jim Buck's stage pulled in from the west. His passengers headed for their rooms to clean up. Buck came in while Daggett was still in the yard, seeing that his halfbreed hostler got the horses taken care of. The driver came over to Matt and Chester.

"Howdy, boys. Wish I had an easy job like yours."

"Howdy, Jim," Matt responded with a smile.

"What you mean, easy?" Chester demanded. "Don't you be fooled because we sit around like this. We do a lot of thinkin', an' that makes up for it."

"You do, eh?" Buck snorted. "Well, ye done any 'bout locatin' old man Daggett's sidekick?"

"You mean Nat Pilcher, I guess," Matt said. "I'm not sure we want to find him, Jim—he could've been just a cowboy riding through."

"Yeah," Buck said and spat at a cuspidor. "Anyways, I got no gold this trip, so I ain't got anythin' to worry about."

"That's good, Jim." Matt turned his head at the sound of a horse approaching. The clop of hoofs slowed and stopped. "Pilgrim for supper, sounds like."

"Man's gotta be danged hungry to ride in here to eat," Buck said. "Daggett's food's mighty shy on quality." He started for the rear. "Got to check on that hostler. Don't trust him—ner Daggett neither."

"Hard work, drivin' stage," Chester said to Matt after Buck had disappeared. "Wouldn't want to do that for a livin'."

The front door opened and a dust-covered man entered. He was of middle height and stocky build. Gold blue eyes crowded a too-big nose. A week-old stubble covered his jaw. He stood there indolently, regarding the pair at the table, and an unpleasant grin cracked his face.

"Heard they was a marshal here," he grunted.

"That's me," Matt said, "Matt Dillon, out of Dodge City. What can I do for you?"

The grin stayed there. "You can't do nothin' for me, Marshal. I just wanted to see what a marshal looks like—a live one, I mean."

Matt stood up. He was watching the newcomer, but he was aware that Chester had pushed back from the table enough so that his right arm was free. Chester was a little dumb in some ways but he was a good gun. Matt was confidently aware of what he himself could do. There was probably no real cause for concern here anyway. The man might be a fool but more likely he was just a big-mouth.

"You see me," Matt said. "Satisfied?"

"Sure," he said; "sure, I'm satisfied."

"Then get out of here," Matt said.

The grin was wiped off. "Now you sound touchy," he said complainingly. "You sound real touchy, Marshal. I ain't tryin' to start no trouble. I just come in here to say howdy, friendly-like."

Scorn shone for a moment in the marshal's eyes. "What's your go-by, mister?"

"Name's Pilcher," came the answer. "Nat Pilcher."

Matt flicked a glance at Chester. The deputy pushed back farther from the table. "I've heard about you," Matt said.

"Sure," Pilcher said. "Jesse Daggett's an old friend of mine."

"Where've you been hanging your hat, Pilcher? Got a job around here?"

"I'm ridin' the grub line right now, Marshal. Know anybody 'round here that needs a good hand?"

Matt pretended to consider this. "Do you do anything besides ride, Pilcher?" he asked.

Pilcher's grin came back. "Now it's funny you ask that."

"Tell me why," Matt said.

"You bein' a lawman, I mean . . . you ever heard o' Charlie Haw, over in New Mex?"

Matt looked at him. "I've heard of Charlie, yes."

"Well, old Charlie got hisself shot recent. They're sayin' Clay Allison shot him." The grin widened. "I know for a fact, though, it wasn't Clay . . ." He stepped back, felt behind him for the latch, and swung the door open. "See you later, Marshal—if you're gonna hang around." He went out.

Chester looked at Matt. "Doggone," he said, "what'd the poison pup mean by all that?"

"He means that he isn't afraid of me, Chester," Matt

said. "And he also means that if I had any sense I'd be afraid of him."

Chester chuckled. "You got any sense, Mr. Dillon?"

"Sense enough to be wary of a mad dog, Chester. And I'm just as happy that my back wasn't turned when he came in."

"I wouldn't let him shoot you in the back, Mr. Dillon!"

"Thank you, Chester," Matt said.

Despite Nat Pilcher's farewell comment, Matt and Chester saw no more of the man that night. The next morning early Jim Buck loaded his passengers back on the stage for Dodge, and climbed to the driver's seat and popped his long whip over the lead team's heads. The coach rolled away. Matt stood in the yard with Jesse Daggett and watched the moving cloud of dust.

"Well, he'll make Dodge tonight," Daggett remarked, "and be back here tomorrow night."

"Yeah," Matt said; "if he don't get shot up."

"No reason he should," Daggett responded. "No gold in the express box this trip."

Matt glanced at him. "Met your friend Pilcher last night."

"Funny thing," the station keeper said. "He come in near supper time and I figgered he wanted a meal but he rode off again without eatin'."

"Looks like he came in just to tell me what a hard case he is," Matt offered. "Sort of a warning."

"I notice you're still here," Daggett said drily.

"I don't scare quite that easy."

"You're all right, Marshal"—he said it grudgingly—"but you ought to go back to Dodge."

"Why should I, Daggett?"

"Things'll work out here," he said doggedly; "without you, I mean."

"Go ahead, man—say what's on your mind!"

The answer came in a growl. "Nope, that's all; there's nothin' more to say."

"Listen, Daggett. I'm not meddling in your affairs. There's been a holdup. And a murder."

"You accusin' me, Dillon?"

"No, I'm not. I've got no evidence for doing that. And frankly I don't even share Jim Buck's suspicions about you; I believe you're an honest man."

Daggett's strained expression relaxed. "Thanks, Marshal—thanks for that."

"All right," Matt said. "But I still don't propose to go back to Dodge till I've got the guilty man. It might be Nat Pilcher—and I think it will be. If you could help me prove it is him, and you don't . . . well, I hope your reasons are mighty good ones, Daggett."

"I've said it before," Daggett responded in a low voice; "every man's got his reasons for what he does."

"I won't press it any more, Daggett." Matt looked around the yard. "You ought to plant some trees here. Improve the place."

"Not enough water," Daggett said shortly.

"Dig for it," Matt told him. "It looks barren and cheerless here. A few trees would smarten it up."

"It doesn't bother me. Passengers don't mind it—except a woman going through once in a while . . ."

"Speaking of women, were you ever married, Daggett?"

"I come close once. That was back in New Mexico . . . a long time ago. A fine woman, Dillon, but I—lost her. I been lonely ever since."

Matt was touched by the sadness in the man's voice. "I'm sorry."

"Funny how a man goes on livin'—when it don't seem there's anything left to him to live for . . . Come on in, I'll get you some breakfast."

Chester was restive the next day so Matt sent him out to scout around the country while the marshal himself stayed at the station. "I don't reckon there's much chance you'll stumble onto anything," he told the deputy, "but if there's anybody besides Pilcher hanging around the Trail between here and Wagon Bed I want to know it." Matt spent the day in the company of Daggett, who proved amiably willing to discuss such topics as the buffalo slaughter and how to outsmart the Indians but took refuge in generalities every time Matt tried to bring the subject around to stage holdups.

Chester rode back in to the station, tired and dusty, well before sunset. One look at his face told Matt his deputy had drawn a zero. Chester went to wash up and take a nap. Daggett, who was currently without kitchen help, started to make preparations for supper, and Matt settled down to await the stage's arrival.

Chester showed up, rubbing his eyes, just as Matt heard the wheel-rumble and hoof-pound from the east. They went out front together. The 'breed hostler, showing up from the corral as the big vehicle pulled to a halt, grabbed the off leader's bridle. Matt saw that something was wrong and legged it the last few yards to the stage as Jim Buck slid awkwardly down from the seat.

"More trouble, Jim?" he asked.

The driver glared at him from reddened eyes, swaying on his feet as he stood there. His left shoulder showed blood-stain.

"He done it agin, Marshal! And cripes, if you don't take out after him now *I'm* goin' to! Just you look in the coach!"

"In a minute . . . you hit bad, Jim?"

"Naw, just a nick. Knocked me plumb off the box, though. I wasn't goin' to stop—but that stopped me. The hosses would've bolted, but I managed to hold onto the ribbons. . . . Now look into that coach, I say!"

Matt did as he was told. He stared at the crumpled body for a long moment; then he touched the cooling, lifeless wrist. He swung back and looked at Jim Buck. The driver glared back at him.

"A woman, Jim . . ."

"You saw her, Marshal . . . *he* killed her! That's all he done, after the stage stopped. Rode up, with me there on the ground, hangin' onto them ribbons an' yellin' at the hosses, and put a bullet in her and rode off . . ."

Chester peered into the coach. He turned away quickly, face white and lips clamped, to stare at Matt.

"Where's the rest of your passengers, Jim?" Matt asked.

"Wa'n't none—she was the lone one this trip. Look at her, Marshal!"

"Do you think it was Pilcher, Jim?"

"I know it was the same one as the other day—and who else could it 'a' been but Pilcher? The lowdown, murderin' skunk!" He raised his voice: "Where's Daggett? *Hey, Daggett!*"

Slow footsteps approached, and Matt knew without looking that Daggett had emerged from the station.

"Ask Jesse Daggett who it was," Buck said bitterly to Matt. Then to the station keeper: "Take a look inside the coach, damn you—a good look . . ."

When Daggett turned back to them, having taken his look his face was haggard and brittle.

"What d'you think of that, Daggett—murderin' a woman?" Jim Buck challenged.

Daggett looked like a man dazed and unhearing. Without a word, he headed for the station, walking slowly, his shoulders slumped.

"Look at him," Jim Buck said scathingly. "Look at the durn buzzard . . . ever see a guiltier-lookin' man in yore life?"

"Jim, you're wrong," Matt said. "It can't be . . ."

"He didn't do it, I know that!" Jim Buck snapped. "But he's in on it . . . somehow."

"Chester," Matt said, "help me carry the body inside. Then we'll see what we can do about that shoulder of yours, Jim."

He and the deputy toted the woman into the stage station. Then Matt dressed and bandaged Jim Buck's shoulder. The wound was not a bad one but Matt, fearing a possible infection, did it with care and it took time. Chester helped him, Daggett having disappeared. Matt wondered where he had gone but assumed he was helping the hostler care for the team.

Then they had to see about the woman. Jim Buck wasn't sure who she was. She hadn't started from Dodge, he said; she was a through passenger from Kansas City, bound for Santa Fe. It was possible that she was going out there to meet a prospective husband but from her appearance Matt judged it was more likely that she was a honkytonk girl heading for a new job. They could find out the details later. The weather was warm and they couldn't take chances; he and Chester dug a shallow grave and buried her under a rude cross.

By that time it was nearing dark. Daggett still had not shown up. Matt questioned the hostler, who said that his employer had saddled a horse and ridden away while they were taking care of Jim Buck. Matt, hurrying back inside, ascertained that the station keeper had taken his gun. He broke the news to Chester.

"We'll have to hit saddle and try to pick up his tracks before it's full dark."

"You figger he's gone to find Pilcher?" the deputy asked.

"That's what I think, Chester."

He questioned the hostler further while the horses were being made ready. The man had not bothered to notice which way Daggett had lined out. However, Chester spotted fresh hoofprints within a few minutes. They followed them long enough for Matt to determine that the station keeper was making a beeline for a low mesa to the northwest. He and Chester headed that way as the darkness deepened around them.

"I circled that mesa the other day," Matt remarked, "but I didn't see any hoof sign around there."

"I wasn't far away from it myself, today," Chester admitted. "I didn't spot nothing either, but the ground's mighty hard over there and I didn't do no close lookin'."

"Could be we haven't been very smart, Chester—it's the one high spot around here where he could watch the trail and keep tabs on our movements too."

"How long a start you think Daggett had on us?"

"Long enough," Matt said sourly. "More than an hour—hour and a half, anyway."

Talk languished. They kept their ponies at a trot. Time and distance passed while Matt worried. He recalled Daggett's declaration that a man should kill his own snakes. He judged it probable that the station keeper, who somehow felt forced to tolerate other crimes, had been incensed by the wanton killing of the woman. If he was now going out after Pilcher on his own, he was courting danger, Matt thought, as he was unable to consider Daggett as being handy with a gun.

They finally got close enough to the mesa to discern it looming above them. They stopped the horses long enough to check their guns, then proceeded slowly.

They found Daggett twenty minutes later, in a narrow *rincon* that fissured the west side of the mesa, its entrance concealed by brush. They were guided to it by intermittent moaning and by the lingering glow of what had been Nat Pilcher's cookfire. Daggett was lying fifteen feet away from it, in a slowly widening pool of his life blood. They found the station keeper's horse stamping nervously some yards away. There was no sign of Pilcher, though, or of his horse.

After a quick examination of the man, Matt tried to make him comfortable for his final minutes. It was all he could do. Daggett was mortally hurt. His low moaning stopped, and he seemed to become aware of their presence.

"Marshal—?" he said in a husky whisper. At Matt's murmured assent, he said, "You followed me . . . ?"

"Where's Pilcher?" Matt asked. "What happened?"

"I could have killed him," Daggett said. "I had my gun on him before he heard me—but I couldn't shoot him in the back, low as he was . . ."

"You let him draw on you, man?" Matt asked fiercely.

"Let him see me," Daggett admitted. "Knew—he was a fast gun, but I let him—see me before I pulled trigger. I was a fool . . . got off one shot before he could—but I hurried it . . . missed . . . he didn't . . . no luck left at all . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Any idea where he went?"

"Said he was going back to station . . . get you . . ."

"I'd have come with you, Daggett."

"Not your business, Marshal . . . this between him and me . . . you know?"

"Tell me, Daggett."

"Back in New Mexico, it started," Daggett said, and groaned. Matt waited. The man went on, in a whisper punctuated by gasps. "Three, four years . . . ago. I shot and killed a man . . . it was self-defense, him or me, but I couldn't prove that. He was . . . pal of Pilcher's, and Pilcher swore he'd gun me down. I heard, and pulled stakes . . . I wasn't no gunman, didn't want trouble . . ."

He groaned. Matt and Chester waited. "He found me . . . last week. I thought he'd kill me. But he'd cooled off. Just threatened to expose me. I'm still under indictment . . . back in New Mexico. He's been holdin' up stages for years, makes his livin' doing that . . . But he's kill-crazy too; that man a few days back I could stand for—but not a woman, Marshal . . . the woman I lost was killed by a drunken fool shootin' wild on the street. I saw red then . . ."

"I could have stopped this if you'd told me sooner, Daggett," Matt said.

"I was . . . afraid. And every man . . . kill own snakes . . . but you can have him now . . . I ain't going to . . ."

"I'm going after him." Matt stood up. "I'm sorry, Daggett. Chester can stay here with you."

"Both of you . . . go," he said weakly. "I ain't afraid . . . die alone."

"So long, Daggett," Matt said.

"Good-by, Marshal . . ."

Matt led Chester a few steps away. "Stay here with him. Do what you can for him. It won't be much."

"Okay," Chester said. "The poor feller."

"I'll send that hostler out to help you bring him in later," Matt said, and mounted. "Better hobble that horse of his so it don't stray. You'll need it." He swung his own animal's head. "So long, Chester."

"So long, Marshal," Chester said. "You watch it, now."

There was a light in the main room of the stage station but Matt could hear no sound, discern no movement in or around the place. Fifty yards out he left saddle and approached on foot, slowly. He reached a spot from where he could look into the lighted window. He could see no one. He circled the main building. When he was a few yards from the small barn a low whistle halted him. He keened the darkness, waiting. The whistle came again.

"Jim . . . ?" he said in a low voice.

Jim Buck came out of the barn. "Over here, Matt."

Matt went to his side. "Pilcher here somewhere?"

"In the station."

"I couldn't spot him," Matt said.

"Back in the kitchen, lookin' fer Daggett's whisky. You find Daggett?"

"Yes—with Pilcher's bullet in him. He's dying, may be dead by now. Chester stayed with him. What happened here?"

"Pilcher sneaked up, got the drop on me. Took my gun, told me to stay put inside but I skinned out when he went prowlin' fer whisky."

"Where's the 'breed?"

"Dunno. Thought he'd be out here but I couldn't find him. Skeered off, I reckon. What you aim to do, Matt?"

"Go in and arrest Pilcher for murder," Matt Dillon said, and started for the main building.

He peered into the lighted window again, closer to it this time. As he did so the door to the kitchen swung open. Pilcher strode into the room, a jug in one hand and a satisfied look on his face. He looked around the room and saw that Jim Buck had gone. He dropped the jug with a curse, eased the gun in his holster, and headed for the front door.

Matt, catfooting swiftly, was ten feet away from the door when it swung open. Light spilled out, but Matt was safely

to one side of it. Pilcher hung back, refusing to show himself in the illuminated doorway. He was a killer but he knew the uses of caution.

"Hey, driver!" he called. "Show yourself!"

Matt gestured to Jim Buck, behind him. "Out here I'm safe," Jim called back. "I aim to stay here."

"Come on back in here!" Pilcher ordered. "Heck, I won't hurt you; I just want to keep an eye on you."

"You want me in there, you better come get me!" Jim Buck said.

Pilcher was silent for a moment. Matt could picture his face as he examined this problem, pale eyes narrowed.

"You see any sign of that lawman or his pet rabbit?" Pilcher asked guilelessly.

"If I had I'd be gittin' ready to dance on yore grave," Jim Buck said. "No such luck . . ."

Matt heard Pilcher give a little chuckle. "Well, c'mon back in," he wheedled. "I found us a jug."

Jim Buck hesitated, until Matt nodded his head vigorously. "Wal, all right," the driver said; "I could use a snort."

Slowly he walked around the marshal, toward the door. When he was two steps from it, the killer appeared in the opening. His gun was in his hand. Jim Buck paused. Pilcher, seeing that the driver's unbandaged arm was carrying no weapon possibly picked up in the barn, let the muzzle of his own gun sag. He moved his head in a curt signal for Buck to enter as he stood aside. Buck entered the building.

"Lead me to that jug!" he said hoarsely. The strain was beginning to tell on him, Matt realized.

"Dang it, I ought to lay your scalp open!" Pilcher complained, but to Matt's relief he let his gun drop back into its holster.

Matt eased out his own Colt's and took a step forward.

Pilcher, reaching for the latch to swing the door closed, caught Matt's movement. He straightened, reached for his gun again.

"Hold it!" Matt said.

Pilcher froze. He peered at the figure before the door, still partly in the dark. Matt took another step and stood full in the beam of light. He let Pilcher get a good look at the gun he was holding. The muzzle was pointed at the killer's middle.

Pilcher's voice was steady. "Been out ridin', Marshal?"

"Yes, I have," Matt said. "So have you."

"Man like me rides a lot, Marshal."

"This time you should have kept riding," Matt told him.

"Well, now, Marshal, I wanted to see you agin before I left," Pilcher said.

There was no change in the man's voice. Matt Dillon felt an instant's small wonder at his aplomb, then lost it: he'd seen a dozen like this man, callous killers who knew no fear or, if they did, had schooled themselves well in hiding it.

"Daggett told me that," he said.

"Yeah?" Pilcher grated. "Did the skunk tell you I was goin' to shoot you, too?"

"Jesse Daggett was a good man, Pilcher," Matt said.

"He was a murderin' sidewinder!" Pilcher's voice rose. "He killed the best friend I ever had!"

Matt saw that Pilcher was working himself up to the point where he might make a desperate try for his gun. "That's enough palaver," he told the man quietly. "I'm arresting you for murder, Pilcher."

"The devil," Pilcher said. "Ain't you going to give me a fightin' chance, now?"

"I'm not paid to engage in duels. I'm paid to enforce the law," Matt said. "I've got the drop on you, so just unbuckle that gunbelt and let it fall. You can take your chances in court."

"I figger my chances are better right here, Dillon." His right arm tensed. "You ain't shootin' no settin' duck!"

Matt felt sweat break out on his brow. "Don't make a fool play!" he warned.

Pilcher's hand flashed to his gun and up. He was fast, terribly fast, but Matt's bullet hit him before he pulled trigger. He kept his feet long enough to get off one wide shot. Matt fired again. Pilcher sagged against the doorframe and slid to the floor.

Matt holstered his gun. He was trembling. Nat Pilcher had been a rotten specimen of manhood but still he had been a human being, presumably with some spark of decency hidden deep within him. Now no one would ever find it. . . .

Jim Buck stepped across the dead man and saw that Matt was unharmed. "Gosh," he said, "I never thought he'd try it."

"It was a fool play," Matt Dillon said.

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."

"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 somewhere 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 questioningly 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."

HICKOK

When Chester brought the telegram to Matt he said he didn't know what was in it. He was excited, though, so Matt guessed the deputy must have been told who the sender was when he'd gotten it from the telegrapher.

Matt glanced at it, then up at Chester. "From Bill Hickok," he said.

"Yeah," Chester said, confirmatively.

"I didn't know you knew, Chester," Matt commented innocently.

"What's he want?" Chester said, unembarrassed.

Matt grinned and read it aloud: "*Jack Teeters Tom Gridler reported heading for Dodge. They committed two murders here and were tried for one but we could not produce witnesses so they got off. Witness to other murder has now turned up and we want him to make identification before arrest. Hold them in Dodge till I get there with witness.*"

"Hickok's comin' here from Abilene?" Chester asked when Matt had finished.

"Looks that way," Matt said, tossing the telegram on his desk.

"How you goin' to recognize them two?"

"I think I'll be able to recognize them, all right," Matt said, rubbing his chin.

"Sounds like you know the gents," Chester remarked.

"We have met," Matt admitted. "Briefly—and unofficially. The pair of them have been partners in sin for quite some time. They're not very bright—but that may make them all the more dangerous. They hold human life cheaply not because they're calculating and callous, but because they are unthinking and brutal."

"You mean they don't know no better, Marshal?"

"Thank you, Chester," Matt said; "you've put my thought clearly and simply." He leaned back in his chair. "I suppose we'd better start meeting the trains. Teeters and Gridler will be coming in."

"One gets in at noon," Chester said. "You goin' to clap 'em into the *juzgado*, Marshal?"

"I'm afraid we can't do anything as bold and direct as that," Matt told him. "Bill said he wants his witness to identify them before the arrest, remember?"

"Oh yeah—'hold' 'em, he said. How you goin' to hold 'em without arrestin' 'em?" Chester looked vaguely worried.

"I'm not sure, Chester. Maybe I'm supposed to do it by the sheer force of my personality," Matt said sourly.

The westbound was running a little late. Matt and Chester lounged near the depot, as inconspicuously as possible. The marshal exhaled smoke from his cigarette and studied it as it drifted slowly away on the still air. He didn't have much of a plan for handling this. If the two wanted men got off at Dodge he could keep them under surveillance, that was about all. Teeters and Gridler were dangerous, but they weren't likely to give him any trouble as long as they didn't get the idea that he was especially interested in them. They knew that he knew them, though, so if he ignored them that in itself might make them spooky. Men of their stripe weren't used to being ignored—didn't like being ignored, probably. . . .

He hadn't seen Hickok for quite a while. He'd always gotten along well enough with Bill, even if he didn't admire him as much as a good many people did, or pretended they did. Hickok mixed gambling with his law work. That wasn't an important thing in itself; but Bill was a quick trigger, up to the point of being nervous. Matt knew that once, in a tight situation, the Abilene marshal had made a quick-turning snap shot—and put a bullet in his own deputy. . . .

Well, every lawman had his own methods. His own strengths and his own weaknesses. You didn't go around criticizing a fellow officer who was on top of his job. Matt took a last drag on his smoke and snuffed it out.

The train was coming in. Matt and Chester watched as it hissed and clanked to a stop. Passengers alighted. Matt spotted the ones they were looking for.

"Getting off the end car, Chester," he said conversationally. "The tall one in the black hat is Jack Teeters. The other is Tom Gridler. Let's ease around the corner here and see where they head for."

They did so. In a moment Teeters and Gridler appeared and set off purposefully, Gridler taking quick steps to keep pace with the long-striding man in the black hat.

"Goin' to the Dodge House, looks like," Chester said.

"Yeah. Wait a minute, then we'll follow along."

Matt and the deputy were some fifty yards back when the two men entered the hotel. The marshal halted.

"Let's wait here a minute. I'll give them time to get a room and then I'll go in and talk to them."

"Now why should you do that?" Chester asked plaintively.

"If you don't mean to arrest 'em. . . ?"

"I kind of think they expect it, Chester. So I might as well do it now as later. But I want you to go back to the depot and ask George Bishop to let me know if Teeters and Gridler come down there to take a train any time. You can describe them for him."

"All right," Chester said.

"And then go to the stage office and do the same. Cover the stables, too. If they rent any horses, or buy any, I want to know about it right off."

Chester started away. "Tell them to keep quiet about it, though," Matt called after him. "See you later, at the office."

He walked to the Dodge House and entered the lobby. Giff Orchard was at the desk. Matt greeted him, and Orchard responded warmly. He was a young man and seemed eager to co-operate with the law whenever he had a chance. Matt told him he'd seen the two men, one wearing a black hat, come in a few minutes earlier.

Orchard nodded. "They took a room here, Marshal."

"I know them," Matt said. "Their names are Teeters and Gridler. Did they register that way?"

Orchard said they had. "The tall one signed for both of them," he commented. "They look like hardcases to me."

"You have a good eye," Matt told him. "What's their room number?"

"Twenty-five," Orchard responded. He hesitated, then: "Uh, Marshal, if you want to arrest them, couldn't you wait till they go out?"

"I know your walls are thin," Matt said, grinning, "but there's likely to be more people who might get hit by a stray bullet out on the street than there is in here." He held up a hand as the clerk opened his mouth. "Don't worry, though, I'm just aiming to talk to 'em."

Orchard relaxed visibly. "All right, Marshal. Up the stairs and turn left."

Matt thanked him and climbed the stairs. He walked down the hall, located Number 25, and knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" someone called from within.

Matt knocked again.

"I said who's there?" the voice said, more loudly. After a short, silent wait, it said: "Open it up, Tom."

Matt heard the bolt being drawn back. The door opened. Tom Gridler stood there, a gun in his hand, a scowl on his heavy, square face.

"Put it away, Gridler," Matt said. "I just came up for a little talk."

Gridler squinted at him. Matt couldn't be sure whether the man recognized him or not. "Make your talk, then," Gridler said.

Jack Teeters towered into view behind him, his black hat still riding on his rusty-colored hair. "You ain't bein' polite, Tom," he said. "Let Marshal Dillon in." He grinned crookedly. "We can watch him better inside anyways."

Gridler stood there for a moment, then grunted, holstered his gun, and stepped aside. Matt went in and closed the door behind him.

"Howdy, Teeters," he said.

The tall man slouched down on the double bed while Gridler moved over near the window, keeping his gaze on Matt.

"What's on your mind, Dillon?"

"Haven't seen you boys for quite a while," Matt said easily. "Where was it, now—Tascosa?"

"What's this all about?" Gridler growled.

"I know you're a friendly cuss, Marshal," Teeters said, "but I doubt if you come up here to pass the time o' day."

"No cause for you to be edgy," Matt said. "Heard you boys were in town so I thought I better say hello."

Gridler spat on the floor. "News gits around purty fast in Dodge."

"Mebbe he was expectin' us, Tom," Jack Teeters said.

"Well, I happened to see you get off the train," Matt said, "and when I dropped in here I found out you were registered."

"Nothin' wrong with that, is there?" Teeters said coolly. "Nobody's lookin' for us, I can tell you that." He narrowed his eyes at Matt. "We had a little trouble in Abilene but the judge up there done turned us loose."

"That danged Hickok tried to frame us," Gridler said venomously.

"And it didn't work," Teeters finished, with a little smile. "So what d'you want, now?"

"Just this, boys," Matt said gravely. "You know me. You know I'm still the law here in Dodge. I want you both to get this—that there's to be no trouble from you while you're here."

"Heck, we're not lookin' for trouble," Teeters answered.

Matt managed a small sigh and let his body relax. "That's fine, then. Boys, you're welcome to stay as long as you like, on those terms."

Teeters looked at him, not quite satisfied. "That's a kinda funny thing for you to tell us," he said.

"You know this is an open town," Matt told him.

"Well, sure," Teeters said. "Sure, we know it's that, Marshal." He sounded a bit friendlier.

"Anybody starts any trouble, it won't be us," Gridler rumbled.

"As long as you keep it that way, the town's yours," Matt said.

"I figgered you'd spot us quick enough," Teeters remarked, "but darn if I thought you'd be around to give us the keys to the city." He glanced at Gridler. "Let's git a clean shirt on and make the rounds, Tom. This ain't likely to last forever."

Matt grinned and opened the door to leave. "Some pretty sharp gamblers around here," he said lightly; "watch out they don't relieve you of all your money."

"Don't let it worry you none, Marshal," Teeters said.

Matt went out and down the stairs. He guessed he'd put it over all right. If the two of them decided to do some gambling, and if their money held out, they might hang around Dodge for a week. If Teeters' apparent assurance was only simulated, however, they might pull stakes and leave town within the hour.

He kept close tabs on them. They dropped into several saloons and had at least one drink in each. Then they got something to eat and afterward settled down in the Alafraganza, bucking faro. Matt decided they meant to stay on for some time. All he could do now was hope they didn't get into a fight over the cards and leave in a hurry.

At ten o'clock that evening he was at his office desk when Chester hurried in. Matt asked him what was up.

"They're fixin' to leave, Marshal, early in the mornin'!"

Matt fixed a questioning eye on his deputy.

"Jim Bunch, over at the stage office, just told me they come in and bought tickets to Sharon Springs and asked him what time the stage left in the mornin'."

"Sharon Springs . . ." Matt echoed. "Guess they're heading for Denver." He pulled at his under lip. "Go tell Jim Bunch that I'll be on the stage in the morning, too. I'll ride shotgun for him if he wants me to. His regular man can take the day off."

"All right," Chester said dubiously. "You goin' all the way up to Denver?"

"If I have to, I'll follow them to San Francisco. Tell Hickok when he shows up."

"Too bad he won't get here before they leave," Chester said.

"Another day before he could make it. But that won't leave him too far behind. The stage leaves at eight, doesn't it?"

The stage for Sharon Springs and Denver did leave at eight the following morning, but it left without Marshal Matt Dillon. He stayed in Dodge City because Jack Teeters and Tom Gridler failed to show up at the stage depot and it pulled out with just one passenger aboard, a gaunt Lutheran minister who seemed glad to be saying farewell to Dodge. The regular shotgun guard had already started to enjoy an unexpected holiday but Jim Bunch came up with a replacement quickly and there was no delay.

Disgusted, Matt had watched the stage pull out of sight. Now he turned to head for the Dodge House. He wanted to check on Teeters and Gridler and see what they were up to. He had taken not more than a dozen steps when he sighted them riding down the street.

Chester, beside him, touched his arm and said, "Look."

"I see 'em," Matt said grimly. "I wonder what their game is."

"That stage-ticket thing was a pure fraud," Chester said bitterly.

"Well, they might have aimed to go on it and then changed

their minds," Matt said, "though I doubt it. They can always use those tickets later—or turn them in."

The pair of hardcases drew near them. Teeters reined his horse down to a slow walk and raised a hand. He grinned slyly at Matt.

"Up early, ain't you, Marshal?" he asked.

"Yeah," Matt said, a trifle sourly. "So are you, for that matter."

"It's cooler in the mornin', and I like that," Teeters said. "Specially to travel by."

"What happened, did you boys lose all your money last night?" Matt was trying hard to keep his composure.

"That was good advice you give us," the tall man said. "We'll follow it, next time. There's nothin' left for us in Dodge now, though." He touched his horse with the spurs and flipped a hand at Matt and Chester. Tom Gridler followed suit, without as much as looking at them.

"We goin' after 'em?" Chester demanded.

"I am," Matt said. "You stay here and give Hickok the low-down when he pulls in. I'll saddle up and get on their trail as soon as they're well out of sight. I'll leave as clear a trail as I can for Bill."

He put in a long and, as it turned out, profitless day's ride. He tried to stay out of the two men's sight, although there was no doubt that if they suspected they might be followed they could have confirmed their suspicions without any trouble. They traversed long stretches of powder-dry ground that marked their horses' passage, and his too, with persistent dust clouds.

What they did was to pass the day by riding in a great half-circle, coming back into Dodge shortly after sundown from the direction opposite to that in which they had ridden out in the morning. Matt was sure that was what they were doing within two hours after the long, leisurely chase began, but he did not dare take the chance of returning directly to Dodge ahead of them, for fear that they would see the tell-tale cloud of dust he'd raise and, assuming that they knew it was he, then might head off in another direction in an effort to shake him.

As it was, the laugh was on him. He waited outside of town a couple of miles and then rode in after full dark. He put up his horse and gave him a feed of grain. No one was at the office. He walked to Delmonico's and found Doc

Adams having a late supper there. Doc waved him over, and Matt sat down glumly.

"You do look hungry, son," Doc said, inspecting him curiously. "Shall I order you *two* steaks?"

"Don't think I couldn't eat 'em," Matt said wearily. "It's been a mighty long time since breakfast."

"Sounds like you had a hard day," Doc observed.

"Yeah," Matt said. "Riding all day. In circles, at that."

"What happened?" Doc asked casually. "You lose 'em?"

Matt raised his eyes. "I have sources of information, my boy," Doc told him.

"Does the source walk upright like a human being and answer to the name of Chester?" Matt asked drily.

Doc nodded, then said hastily, "Don't get mad, now; there was no harm in it."

The glint went out of Matt's eyes. "No, I didn't lose 'em," he said. His gaze swung to the doorway. "As a matter of fact, here they come right now."

Doc followed his glance. "Hard-looking pair," he murmured.

Matt watched the two, still dust-covered, as they tramped over to the table where he and Doc sat. The shorter man's habitual glower darkened Gridler's features, but Teeters was maintaining a poker face as they halted a few feet away.

"Evenin', Marshal," he said.

"Well, boys," Matt returned. "This is Doc Adams. Teeters . . . Gridler."

Teeters said howdy and the heavy man grunted.

"What's on your mind?" Matt asked after a moment's silence.

"I reckon you are, Marshal," Teeters said softly.

"Yeah?" Matt said, sitting up straighter.

"That was you trailin' us all day, wasn't it." The way Teeters said it, it was not a question.

There wouldn't be much point in denying it, Matt knew. "Yes, it was," he said. He was watching both of them now.

"Mind tellin' us why?" Teeters prodded.

"Maybe I didn't want you to get lost," Matt said, with some measure of truth. They did not respond to that, so he added, "Remember, I told you I didn't want you to get into any trouble."

Teeters shoved his hat back with his thumb. "That sounds like a lot of bull to me, Marshal."

"Look," Matt said, "you boys' reputations aren't of the best. My job is to preserve the peace in this neck of the woods. I decided I'd keep an eye on you, that's all."

"Man, you sure been doin' that," Teeters retorted.

"Well, I hope we understand each other now," Matt said. "But it's as I told you—keep out of trouble and stay as long as you want."

Gridler spoke for the first time. "Remember one thing," he said hoarsely. "There's two of us."

"Yeah." Teeters' face was cold and hard. "Hound-dog us agin, and might be you won't come back."

"I get paid for taking chances," Matt said calmly.

Gridler looked at his partner. "Come on," he growled, "let's git outa here."

"Sure," Teeters said, and without any more talk they went out.

"Talk a little rough, don't they?" Doc said soberly.

Matt was looking after them musingly. "I guess they're a little smarter than I figured," he said. "Or Teeters is anyway. I thought I had him fooled yesterday, but he must sense that something is wrong, even if he doesn't know what."

"Think they might bolt?"

"Depends on how smart they really are. I don't think they will, though. More likely, they'll be so curious now that they'll stick around just to find out what it's all about."

After he had eaten, Matt dropped in at the Dodge House. He found out that Teeters and Gridler were still in Number 25. In fact, the clerk told him, they had never checked out. Matt felt like kicking himself. He had spent the day tipping his hand to them. Fortunately, they still hadn't gotten a peek at his hole card. To men of their stamp, that would be pretty much of a challenge. He had to count on that.

The pair did no gambling that night, but apparently they still had money in their jeans; they visited two or three places, spending all their time at the bar. When they went back to the Dodge House and, ostensibly, to bed, Matt was ready for some rest himself.

They were still in town the next morning. Having ascertained that, Matt went to the railroad station to meet the train from Abilene. Hickok did not get off. Matt located the conductor, who told him that Hickok had ridden the whole way in the baggage car and that the Abilene lawman

had someone with him. As soon as the crowd left the depot, Matt went to the other side of the baggage car and pounded on the door.

"Who is it?" a voice called.

"It's Dillon," Matt answered. "Open up, Bill."

The door slid part way open and a hand was thrust forth. "Jump up, Matt." Hickok gave him a pull-up as he climbed into the car. "How are you?"

"Fine, Bill. And you?"

"Couldn't be better," Hickok said. "This is my witness, Sam Trimble."

Matt peered in the dusk of the car at the disheveled, worried-looking man who had accompanied Hickok. He extended his hand and Trimble touched it and mumbled an acknowledgment.

"They still here, Matt?" Hickok wanted to know.

"Yes, but we may have to move fast; they're spooky."

"Matt, I'll swear that judge back there's got it in for me." Hickok shook his head, and the long hair that Matt had always noted as an affectation swung back and forth. "But he's still the judge, and he says he wants an identification of Teeters and Gridler on this second murder charge before they're arrested. Trimble here was an eye witness and that's why I brought him with me."

"We ought to be able to manage it, then, Bill."

"I'd say the devil with it and let's just go out and kill the pair of them but I believe I'd get even more pleasure in seeing them hang."

"You will, if we're lucky." Matt turned to Trimble. "Do these men know you on sight?"

"Well, I tell you how it was," Trimble replied. "I was in this stable where I work, over in Abilene I mean, and a feller come in fer his horse and I went to git it fer him. Then I heard some shootin' an' two men run right past me but I got a good look at 'em, all right, they'd jest killed that feller, the one come in fer his horse."

"You mean you don't know the two men here, Teeters and Gridler?"

"He never heard of them, Matt," Hickok explained. "And there's no pictures of them that I know of. He can identify them when he sees them, though."

"All right," Matt said. "But what about them? Will they recognize you, Trimble?"

The man swung his head, looking at Hickok, then back at Matt. "Gosh, I dunno. I hope not . . . they'd kill me on sight if'n they did, wouldn't they?" He began to stammer. "I—I hadn't th-thought o' that."

"Now you just do what we tell you and you'll come to no harm, Sam," Hickok told him soothingly. "Matt here and I are a pretty good match for those two. I don't reckon they'll start any trouble with us but if they do they'll die on their feet."

It was the kind of bragging talk that one had to expect from Hickok, Matt knew. Not but what it was probably justified: Matt had confidence in himself and he judged that Bill was if anything better than himself. Still, it made him uneasy. And Hickok had apparently not given this simple fellow the slightest hint that the task of identifying the two gunmen might put him in danger of his own life.

"I'm afraid I'm takin' a awful chance, Mr. Hickok." He turned on the Abilene lawman. "I don't know if I oughta . . ."

"Easy now, Sam!" Hickok cut him off sharply. "There's no need for you to worry, I tell you. Why, in an hour we'll have them in jail, with their teeth pulled."

"I sure hope so," Trimble said in a small voice. "How you goin' to do it, Mr. Hickok?"

"We'll have to locate them first," Matt said. "I told Chester—he's my deputy—to meet us at the Long Branch, and slip us the word where they are. I didn't want the two of you to be seen around my office ahead of time."

"Good!" Hickok put his hand on Trimble's shoulder. "As soon as we get them locked up, I'll buy you the biggest steak you ever ate, Sam." He poked his head out the baggage car door and looked around. "Come on, boys, let's go."

They kept to the alleys and went into the Long Branch by the back door. It was still early in the afternoon and the place was almost deserted, but even so Matt got out in front and had Hickok stand nearest to the back wall of the place. The bartender came to them but before he took their order he recognized Hickok and opened his mouth in surprise. Matt made a quick silencing gesture and he closed it again.

"Bring us a bottle," Hickok said to him.

The idea was to bolster up Trimble, who seemed to be getting close to a funk. He grabbed the first drink that Hickok

poured for him, his hand trembling, and tossed it down. Bill calmly refilled his glass.

"Take it easy, friend," he said. "Everything's going to be all right."

"Mr. Hickok," Trimble said in a low voice, "I wouldn't 'a' come if'n I'd thought about it, I jest wouldn't 'a'."

"Listen, Sam," Hickok told him solemnly, "it isn't often a man has my guns and Matt Dillon's both behind him. Why, you're as safe as if you was in church."

Trimble's eyes were round. "I—I don't go to church," he said self-accusingly. "I wish I did . . ." He downed his second drink, the sweat breaking out on his brow.

Hickok filled his glass again. He looked grimly at Matt, over the trembling man's lowered head. "A couple more ought to do it," he whispered. Trimble, immersed in his worries, did not hear him.

Chester came in, by the front door. He saw them and hurried back. Teeters and Gridler, he reported, had left the hotel, eaten dinner in a restaurant, dropped into a saloon for a while, and then gone back to the Dodge House, where they were now.

"They didn't stay in the lobby, did they, Chester?" Matt asked.

"No, they went right upstairs."

"Good," Hickok said. "We can sit in the lobby and wait for them to come down. Then Sam here can identify them."

"If he can still see," Matt answered. "Better take that stuff away from him, Bill. And you better keep out of sight yourself—if they spot you first they'll light a shuck before Trimble can get a good look at them." He turned to Chester. "You get back there quick as you can. I'll come over with Trimble while Bill goes around and sneaks in the back way. If they've come back down to the lobby, you come to the door and give me the high sign so we don't walk in on anything unprepared."

Chester set out. Trimble, however, put up an argument. He wasn't going to go *anywhere* without Matt and Hickok both alongside. Hickok tried to talk him out of it but he stubbornly refused to leave the Long Branch unless both the lawmen accompanied him.

Finally Hickok threw up his hands. "There's no help for it," he said to Matt. "We'll have to risk it and both go with

him. Maybe he's right, anyway—if they remember him they may go for their guns and no mistake."

There was nothing else to do. Matt didn't like it, though. There wasn't much of a chance, it seemed to him, that the two would have got a good look at the stable helper in their hurry to clear out after the shooting. But they would certainly recognize Hickok as soon as they saw him, and then the fat would be in the fire for sure . . .

He managed to swallow his doubts. The two lawmen escorted Trimble out of the Long Branch and, ranged on either side of him, partly supporting him, they walked him toward the Dodge House.

As they approached the hotel, Matt scanned it anxiously. There was no sign of Chester. They got to the door. Matt opened it while Hickok held Trimble upright, his big left hand clutched around the stable helper's arm. Chester was in the lobby, alone except for the man behind the desk. The deputy shook his head in a negative. The two men had not showed up.

Matt held the door open and motioned to Hickok to bring Trimble in. Through the door they came, Hickok continuing to support the frightened man. He guided Trimble to one of the lobby chairs and eased him down into it. In a low voice he told Trimble to keep his eyes on the stairway. The stable helper didn't seem to hear him. Hickok repeated his words, sharply this time. The man nodded and focused his wide-eyed gaze on the stairs.

Hickok glanced at Matt in relief and Matt motioned him to take up a position in the corridor that led to the back entrance. Hickok turned to comply with the signal.

As he did so the sound of a footstep came from the head of the stairs and Matt saw Trimble's hands grip the arms of his chair. He swung his head and looked up. Jack Teeters had paused on the top step, from where he commanded a full view of the lobby, including the frightened Trimble, Matt standing near by, and Hickok, with his long, flowing hair conspicuous, about to turn into the corridor.

Matt saw Gridler crowding behind Teeters even as the tall gunman's right hand dipped and came up. He went for his own gun, calling a warning to Hickok as he did so. Teeters' gun flashed and boomed and Trimble lurched out of his chair with a strangled cry and fell into Matt. Hickok had whirled around and, his gun incredibly clear of leather already, flung

a shot up the stairway. It chipped plaster from the wall a foot from Teeters. The tall gunman turned in a panic, pushed Gridler back, and they both disappeared from view.

Hickok started up the stairs. "No, Bill!" Matt shouted. "They'll go down the back stairs, try to make it out the back door!"

Hickok reversed and took off down the corridor to the rear, pulling out his second gun as he went, his long hair flying. Chester, his own gun out, started after him. Matt called him back.

"Watch the stairs here, they may turn around if they see Bill!" He ran for the corridor to follow Hickok. "Have the clerk take care of Trimble!"

He pounded down the corridor. Hickok was out the back door before he was halfway to it. Matt saw him raise his guns and begin firing, alternating them, the sound almost blending into one continuing explosion. Answering shots came from higher up.

He reached the door. As he did so, Hickok fired his last shot. He lowered his guns. A man was lying at the top of the open rear stairway. It was Teeters. Gridler was not in sight.

Hickok turned on him grimly. "Other one went back inside—I think I hit him." He was thumbing fresh cartridges into one gun. "I'll go up this way. You go back and up the front stairs. We've got him cornered."

Matt did so, but there was no more gun work to do. Gridler made it back to his room but he had dropped his gun before he got there. He was breathing out his last when they broke in on him.

Doc Adams got there a few minutes later, but by that time it was too late to do anything for Trimble, even. Before he died he told Hickok that he didn't know the men, that they weren't the ones he had seen in the stable back in Abilene.

"I shouldn't 'a' come," he whispered before the end. "I got . . . killed . . . for nothin' . . ."

Hickok looked at Matt. "He's right too," he said somberly. "I wonder . . ." he mused. "Teeters must have figured he was witness to that murder they did commit."

"The fools," Matt said; "they couldn't have been tried again for that one." He looked at Hickok. "If they'd held their fire, there wouldn't have been any grounds for arresting them."

You couldn't have enjoyed seeing them hang. We couldn't have 'just gone out and killed the pair of them'."

Hickok put his cold regard on Matt. "They downed Trimble," he said simply. "They had it coming." Then he seemed to forget it all. "I'd like to go somewhere and clean up," he said. "I could stand a good meal, and then I want to find a quiet game with a man-size limit and have some fun."

That was Hickok. Matt thought that if he didn't see the man again for a long time he could stand it. Three men had died, and all he could think of was food and cards. Teeters and Gridler and poor Trimble . . . they lay heavy on Matt Dillon's mind, and he hadn't fired a shot.