

"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.