

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, Marshall! 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 darn 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. Skeeered 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.