

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."