

8. Chess Club Drifter

William Harston

If there's one thing above all a vulture can't stand, it's a glass eye.

Frank McKinney Hubbard

He never said where he came from, and few even dared ask. The tall man rode into Dodge City with only the clothes on his back and a chess set in his hand. All eyes were on the stranger as he strode into the saloon. Conversation came to a sudden stop and an ominous tension seized the smoky air as he pushed a dollar bill towards the barman.

'Gimme a drink,' said the stranger. 'Tea, no milk, one sugar.' The barman stood motionless, his hands pushing down on the bar, his eyes fixed menacingly on the face of the newcomer. After a few seconds which felt like minutes, the stranger spoke again. 'Please', he added defiantly. The barman's knees shook; he poured the drink, steaming from its pot, and pushed it towards the stranger. He pointed at the chess set.

'We don't hold with no chess playin' in this bar.' The stranger ignored him and threw the tea down his parched throat. His journey had been long and the warm drink was a welcome refreshment.

'Where's the chess club?' he asked, banging the cup back in place on its elegant Minton saucer.

'Are you lookin' for a game?' asked the barman. 'We don't want no trouble here. We're decent peace lovin' folk here in Dodge.'

'I asked where's the chess club?' repeated the stranger threateningly, fingering the sliding lid of his chess set.

'I'll take you there.' A voice from a corner table broke the

silence. The old man who had spoken the words rose slowly and ponderously from his stool and began to make his way towards the stranger. 'Pleased to meetya, stranger.' He extended his hand in greeting. 'These young 'uns don't know no more how to treat a real chessplayer.'

The stranger's grey eyes narrowed to slits. His fingers grew more taut round the box of chessmen as he ignored the offered handshake.

'Used to push a pretty fair pawn m'self when I was shorter in the tooth,' went on the old man, unperturbed, 'but the old eyes ain't what they wuz. Where did you say you wuz from?'

'I didn't,' replied the stranger. 'Let's go.' And he led the way out of the saloon.

'You sure are mighty eager for a chess game,' continued the old man, urging his limbs to keep up with his new companion's brisk pace. 'Used to be eager m'self. Eager young Jess, they used to call me. Now they just call me old Jess, now that I'm not so eager and me legs don't seem up to it no longer. What did ya say ya name wuz?'

'Didn't say,' replied the stranger. 'They call me Grandmaster.'

Old Jess and the man they called Grandmaster strode on together in silence. Old Jess led the way to the chess club with unwavering steps. He had made the journey many times before, long ago. They came over the ridge at sundown.

'Well, we gone as far as I can accompany ya,' said Jess, with a touch of sadness in his voice. 'The chess club's that shack down yonder.' His hand gestured towards an isolated cabin at the end of a long track. 'I'd come all the way with ya, but an old man like me ain't welcome down there no more. I don't stand no chance with them young 'uns. Not since the arthritics got at my moving finger. Used to be the fastest mover in Dodge before . . .'

His voice tailed off as he realized that he was talking to the dust and the flies. The man they called Grandmaster was already standing tall at the entrance to the chess club. With one quick movement he kicked open the door. Inside the room pieces froze in mid-move as all heads turned towards the

doorway. They gazed in surprise at this fearless figure silhouetted there, a bishop in each hand, ready for action. The tense silence was punctuated by a dark unshaven man, with a star proudly pinned to his chest.

'If you're lookin' for a game, stranger, you've gotta pay the membership fee,' he said, with thinly disguised avarice.

The man they called Grandmaster looked at the badge. He made out the words 'Club Secretary' etched on its tin face.

'Don't hold with no membership fees.' He pointed his bishops menacingly. 'But I gotta little idea that might interest ya. Waddya say to a fair game, just me against you? If I win, you enrol me in the club. If I lose, you can have your membership fee.'

'Okay, stranger,' said the man they called The Club Secretary, as the other club members gave way to nervous talk and giggles. 'Just the two of us and no funny business. And I've got White.' He emptied a box of pieces onto a spare board. All others present shrank to the walls of the clubroom, knowing that wood was about to fly and afraid that they might get hurt. They knew that the secretary was the best player in Dodge City. He was never beaten, except in occasional away matches or when he wasn't feeling none too good or sometimes when the lighting was bad or the pieces too small. All eyes were on the chessboard as the game began.

Almost before the stranger had seated himself on his chair, a white pawn shot out and lodged itself in the wooden square known in Dodge as e4. The stranger did not even blink. More pawns were spat forward in rapid succession, then pieces followed. And suddenly it was all over. The Secretary lay slumped across the board, defeated.

A lone figure detached himself from the crowd to come forward and congratulate the stranger. His badge bore the legend 'Deputy Secretary'.

'Welcome to Dodge City Chess Club. We'll need your name for the records.'

'Just put down "Grandmaster",' said the stranger, putting the pieces slowly back in their box. 'That's what folks call me.' A hushed silence reigned throughout the room.

'Well, Mister Grandmaster,' continued the Deputy Secretary, 'now you're a member, I'd like to invite you to play for us next Saturday in the away match against Deadwood Gulch.'

You could hear the hiss of indrawn breath as the other club members winced in anticipation. No one had ever returned alive from an away match at Deadwood Gulch. They had No-socks McGuirk on top board, the man they called 'The fastest pawn in the West'.

'Sure, I'll play,' said the Grandmaster, 'for my usual fee.'

'And what might that be?' inquired the Deputy Secretary, suspiciously.

'A bottle of whisky, a woman, and a Clint Eastwood lapel badge. Double if I win.'

'Will the same woman twice do, or does it have to be two different women?' asked the deputy, thinking fast. It was his quick mind at times such as this which had got him the job. He had studied law.

'I'm not fussy,' said the Grandmaster.

'Okay, it's a deal,' agreed the Deputy, and he prepared a contract.

News of the Secretary's downfall spread like wildfire through the town. Wherever the grandmaster went they treated him with fear and respect. He was given the best room in the saloon, courtesy of the man they called the Manager. He took everything he wanted: whisky, women, morning papers, all charged to his room number. Some called him profligate. Others did not know what it meant. But none dared complain. In any case, they knew that after Saturday he would be gone.

They rode together into Deadwood. The Dodge City team come for the big match. The streets were deserted as they got out of the coach. It was clear they had been expected. All the local inhabitants were either at the chess club or cowering behind locked doors. The grandmaster led his team into the premises of the Deadwood Gulch Chess Club. Six boards lay sprawled across the middle of the room, each one set with its own chessmen. At the very far end sat No-socks McGuirk, glowering over the pieces. Slowly and cautiously the Grandmaster advanced, his shadow sliding across the board. He



drew back the seat opposite McGuirk. Never taking his eyes off his opponent, the Grandmaster sank into the chair.

'Ain't seen you around before,' said McGuirk.

'Ain't been here before,' replied the Grandmaster, uninformatively.

'Say, No-socks!' rang out a voice from the crowd, 'Who's the fancy dude with the Clint Eastwood lapel badge? Are you sure he's eligible for a Cowboys' Club Championship match?'

'That's true, mister,' said a small figure hiding behind a badge bearing the emblem 'Controller'. 'You've gotta play two or more games in serious competition for Dodge City in the Deadwood and District League before youse qualified for their Cowboys' Club Championship team. What's yer name? I'll go check the records.'

'Ain't got no name. They call me Grandmaster,' said the man they called Grandmaster.

'Youse gotta have a name. There ain't nothing in the rules 'bout players with no names,' protested the Controller.

'If I ain't got no name and there ain't nothin' in the rules then I cain't be ineligible,' said the Grandmaster in what was to be easily his longest sentence in the whole story. 'Let's get on with it.'

'Well I'll be horn-swoggled if that don't fail to make no sense,' said the Controller nodding his head. Then, totally bemused by his own negative-ridden construction, and unsure anyway what was meant by horn-swoggled, he decided to let them get on with it. 'Okay, No-socks; draw for colour.'

At the word 'draw', No-socks shot forward his right arm in a smooth almost reflex action, landing on the Controller's left wrist. He slowly prised open the fingers and a black pawn crashed to the floor. A faint smile crossed the lips of the Grandmaster. With the black pieces No-socks was as good as dead.

The match was a foregone conclusion. McGuirk thought long and fought hard, trying all he knew, but the Grandmaster was too quick for him. As No-socks became progressively more desperate, his lined and dusty face grew more streaked with rivulets of sweat. The bandana he used to mop his brow

grew damper and dirtier. When his flag finally fell, No-socks McGuirk had in any case, run out of ammunition. The final score-line read 'Deadwood Gulch 5 Dodge City 1'. It was the best ever result for Dodge against their bitter rivals.

The Grandmaster collected his fee from the citizens of Dodge, and at dawn, began his long ride out of town. The rest of the city lay silent and mostly sleeping. The cable from the US Chess Federation waited unopened on the desk of the President of the Dodge City Chess Club.

'FOLLOWING PROTEST DEADWOOD CHESS CLUB REGRET INFORM YOU DODGE CONVICTED PLAYING INELIGIBLE MAN STOP DISCIPLINARY COMMITTEE HEREBY IMPOSE LIFETIME BAN ALL ACTIVITIES DODGE CITY CHESS CLUB STOP EQUIPMENT AND PREMISES CONFISCATED ALSO TWO POINT PENALTY DEADWOOD WIN FIVE TO MINUS ONE NO APPEAL STOP REGARDS USCF.'

It was the worst ever result for Dodge against their bitter rivals. No chess was ever played in the City again.

By the time the President opened the cable the Grandmaster was already passing the city limits. Old Jess was leaning on the memorial stone at the tomb of the unknown chessplayer which marked the boundary.

'Say, stranger, I been doin' some thinkin' an' I reckon we met someplace before, when I wuz a young 'un, and me knees wuz still bendin'.'

The man they called the Grandmaster rode past in silence and vanished into the mist. His voice filtered back to old Jess, still waiting and scratching his head: 'Mebbe we did, old man. Anything's possible.'