

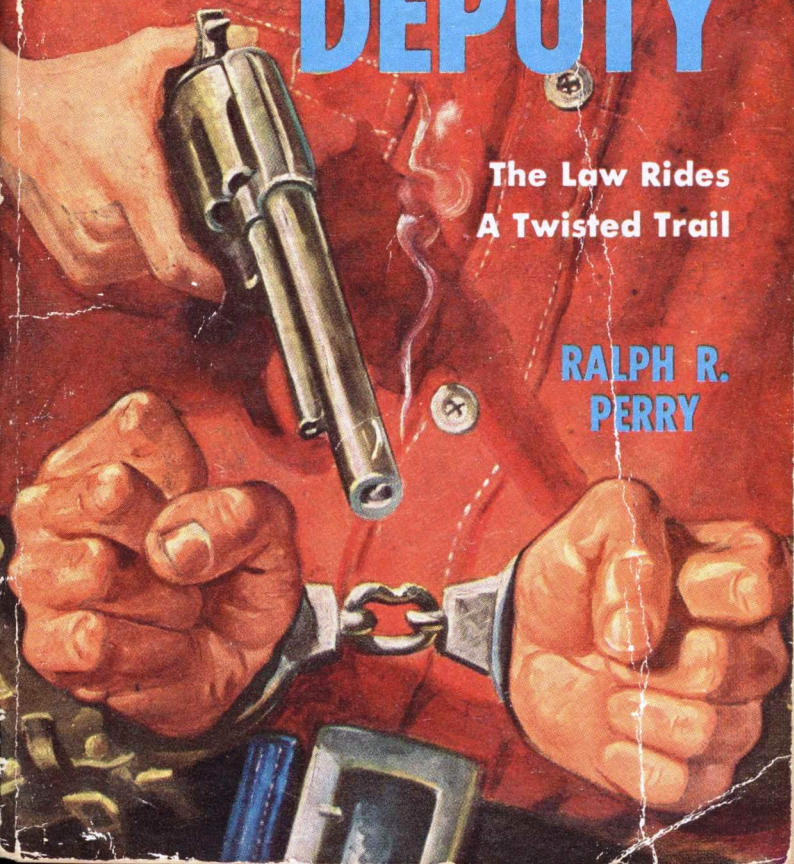
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NIGHTRIDER DEPUTY

The Law Rides
A Twisted Trail

RALPH R.
PERRY



NO APPEAL FROM VIGILANTE LAW!

Mat Karney knew the score in Toltec Valley. A man needed enough land and water for his cattle or he was through. When Mat's neighbor, Big Tom Parks, began sneaking in nesters, a showdown was inevitable. Especially when it seemed that Parks had the Law in his vest pocket.

But Mat never figured that the blow-off would have the savage ferocity of a maddened herd on a rampage. Nor did he expect to find himself hunted by hardcases and deputies alike.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

MAT KARNEY—He knew that the only language understood in Toltec Valley was gun talk.

BIG TOM PARKS—He could get around the law because he'd helped drill its loopholes.

TEX SMITH—This sheriff's gunhand was tied by an unseen thong.

SALLY FLANDREAU—She took on a man's job even though hot lead would be the payoff.

JERRY HACKETT—He had a special talent for back-shooting.

JUANITA EVANS—This south-of-the-border fireball could give any man a burn.

Nightrider Deputy

BY
RALPH R. PERRY

ACE BOOKS, INC.
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THE DEVIL'S SADDLE

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Chapter I

ALREADY the gramma grass had green shoots sticking through the tightly curled leaves of last season's growth. Spring would be early in Arizona this year. The calves would relish the green forage, though for older stock nothing can beat gramma hay, self-cured on its own stem.

Mat Karney stretched long legs cramped by the railroad seat and grinned at a mental picture of his cows drifting up the long slopes of Toltec Valley toward the summer range among the yellow pine and cedars, black patches on the buff-colored shoulders of the hills. Cattle wintered on the flats, but in summer a cowboy rode high. He liked that. Summer was a good time, and now that the railroad had been built to Toltec, this summer would be a new time, too. The Indians were gone, but a railroad brings grangers, sure as warm sun brings out the green grass.

There was a Zulu coupled on behind the car he sat in — a granger with his family and his stock and his furniture and his plows all occupying the one freight car. "Zulu" was the right name; only no real Zulu could have stood the confusion. Took a granger to put up with that. Probably this car was going on the California, but soon there would be grangers in Toltec.

They would plod out from the lines of steel like an army. Their banner was a cloud of dust which didn't move, as did the dust-clouds raised by buffalo and Indians and cattlemen. Up in the hills a cowman could spot a granger's quarter-section from ten miles away, even if he were a stranger in the country, by the pillar of dust swirling into the bright blue sky. And once plowed up, the gramma grass took years to reseed itself.

Texans told a story of the first Indian who had ever seen a plow in action. He had pushed the overturned sod back into place with a mocassined foot.

"Heap wrong side up!" he had declared angrily. He was a wise old Indian; the trouble was that not all white men agreed with him. Yes, this would be a new year. Mat's father had built the first cattle corral in Toltec Valley in '78 and toughed through the Apaches and the dry years. He had died two years before, leaving Mat, at twenty-three, a ranch

with plenty of water, for that country, and 500 she-stock. The Bar-K wasn't the biggest outfit in the Valley, but it had pre-empted the best water.

The train was clanking to a stop at a tank. A man swung up the steps of the car. Mat, in the last seat nearest the door, saw the man was masked. He looked down a gun-barrel to see it. He put up his hands; not too quickly, but fast enough. The gun barrel never wavered. This bandit knew his business.

"Reach, you-all," he sung out, and to Mat: "Fork over!"

A second bandit swung aboard at the front end of the car and came down the aisle with a hat in his left hand and a gun in his right.

"Wallets, gents — or rolls with the rubber band on!" he warned. He pistol-slapped the first man who handed his loose bills. After that, he got the rolls, and he came too fast for anyone to hold out much. The bandit near Mat was covering him all the way. The whole holdup was an expert, nervy play. Mat had to admire it.

"Stick a head out and I'll shoot it off!" warned the man with the hat. He spoke in a croak, disguising his voice even more than the blue silk handkerchief across his lips muffled it. A careful gent; probably local, too, Mat decided as they backed out.

Uproar swirled in the aisle. Half a dozen men had guns out now, but they didn't exactly rush the exit. Mat stretched long legs. He didn't like being robbed, but he wasn't going to give a good gunman a free shot on the chance of getting back eighty-five dollars.

From the Zulu came a shot. A girl screamed. A second shot followed. But there was no second scream.

Mat snatched a nickel-plated .38 from the hand of a fat drummer. He rushed the door, vaulting over the rail to the tracks between the car and the blind end of the Zulu. Looking under the freightcar and seeing a pair of legs wearing cowboy boots, he fired.

The legs made a jump toward the rear wheels. From the shelter the bandit fired under the car, showering Mat's face with cinders.

"Let's git!" he shouted in the croaking, muffled voice. Another pair of cowboy boots jumped to the cinders and ran.

Mat emptied the .38, but he was without any real hope of hitting anything. These were smart hombres. They didn't fight uselessly. He heard the bandits' horses start and crawled forward, rolling from beneath the Zulu at the door.

"They're gone," he called; then cautiously he looked inside.

"Come on in, Mister. It's plumb safe," a girl answered. Her voice held a bitter fury that seemed to say that nothing any man did or could do now would make the slightest difference.

She sat cross-legged in the filthy litter on the floor with the head of a middle-aged man in her lap. Her right hand pressed a wad of clean white cloth against a wound low in the man's naked, dirty chest. Blood on the chest and on her fingers was already beginning to darken. The man's mouth and eyes were open; but there was no movement, either of the bearded jaw, nor of his chest. The man was already dead, yet the girl pressed the compress on the wound as though by sheer will she could push life back in to the body.

Seconds later Mat looked at her face. It was clean, except for one smear of blood from ear to jaw. The cheekbones were high and broad; the eyes gray. Her head looked red at first, then brown. The color seemed to depend on the light. The face was strong rather than pretty; somehow there was something foreign about it, though her speech was pure Missouri.

"You skunky cowboys let Paw shoot the onliest shot," she accused Mat without turning her head. "He wouldn't stand tame to be robbed of his few pore miserable dollars. They meant his crop. Now he won't even git to plow. 'I'm sick of side-hills, Sally,' Paw used to say to me. 'I'm a-goin' to turn the sod of bottom land that's flat and rich.'"

"Sorry, Ma'am," Mat muttered. He was aware now of two weedy-looking brothers standing behind her. Both were sandy-haired, tall, and somewhere between twenty and twenty-five. The girl, Sally, was the youngest, somewhere between seventeen and nineteen.

"Sorry? Yeah, I'll bet," Sally answered bitterly. One hostile, gray-eyed glance probed to the truth behind Mat's store clothes and the ineffectual short-barreled nickel-plated gun. "You kin bear it, I reckon, cowboy. The killer was a cowboy, too. The chain of his left spur has one spread link, about an

inch from the iron. That's all I can tell yuh. His eyes was brown, and his hair was the plumb usual mud color."

She lifted her father's head gently to the straw and stood up. Youth and softness vanished. A pioneer woman stood ready to bury her dead.

"Hen, you go talk with this hombre. Dick, you help me lay Paw out," she commanded. "He got us most to Toltec, and he saved us the crop cash. We-all will finish his beginnings, like he'd want us too."

"Toltec Valley, Ma'am? Whereabouts?" Mat said.

"We was advised to homestead near Cochise Seep. That good land?"

"I ain't one to advise you," Mat answered gravely. "That would make you the first nesters on my range."

The unavoidable hostility of that announcement, at such a time, was too much for Mat's natural decency. "I sure am sorry," he added uneasily. "If I could help you someway with the burial I'd feel easier in my mind."

"Well — well, thank yuh, Mr. —"

"Mat Karney. The Bar K."

"Meet Hen and Dick Flandreau, Mr. Karney. I'm Sally Flandreau. We hail from Pike County, Missouri . . . We're obliged to you, but I reckon us Flandreaus can do what's needful for our own."

Behind her manner she was all stubborn Missouri. Her two brothers were older. But she was the nester in his pasture, and they were only her two hands. From this first day Mat recognized the fact. The father who had died on the way toward fulfillment of his ambition had changed her purpose to a crusade, cemented by blood sacrifice.

Big Tom Parks was a bull of a man — tall and wide and red-faced; he was thick through the chest and thicker through the belly. The armpits of his shirt were liable to be dark with sweat when other men were dry. In that high country of keen, cool wind the man who sweats too easily can end with pneumonia, but the very idea of illness and Tom Parks didn't mix.

He was loud, and on the surface he was genial. He would buy anyone a drink on the slightest excuse; he would set up the third and the fifth round. He loved to slap people on the

back or punch them jovially in the ribs with the stiff fingers of a ham-like hand; he enjoyed roaring out his remarks and following them up with a bellowing laugh that shook his big belly. His big red face would screw up until the little bright blue eyes were like the points of two steel knives sticking through a roll of raw beef.

Later you realized that his back slaps hurt, that what he said wasn't funny, and that you had parted from him half drunk, though no amount of whiskey seemed to have any effect on Parks' huge bulk. Nevertheless, though you did not like Tom Parks, you argued yourself into the belief that he was a good fellow who meant well. He was just too big and too overflowing with strength and fat and animal spirits to get along with comfortably.

An elephant is huge, too. If an elephant were noisy as well, it would be even harder to realize that the beast had brains. Behind the red face and under the thatch of straw-colored hair was the real Tom Parks, to whom nothing was amusing except the simplicity and weakness of other men. This Tom Parks meant to eat up the whole of Toltec Valley.

He had nothing personal against the other cattlemen of the Valley. To him the Valley was a problem in the range arithmetic of grass, water, and cattle, to which he could see no solution except control by one brand — his own Flying T.

The arithmetic of the Western range is a grim study. To feed one cow adequately in the high, dry plateau country takes about thirty acres. The limit on which one man can legally file for a cattle claim is 640 acres, and a homestead claim is only 160 acres — enough feed for three cows and a calf. Therefore, from the very beginning of the modern cattle industry in the late 1860's, a cattleman had to maintain himself somehow in a position where he lacked the full backing of the law.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that the cattleman's position was entirely illegal. Some men did pre-empt government land and hold it with a Colt, but over the West as a whole the tenure of such men was hazardous, bloody, and short. For one thing, Col. Colt sold weapons to everyone; for another, the law did have a power which no ambitious cattleman, however lawless he might be at heart, dared to defy. Even in the worst outbreaks, such as the Lincoln

County Cattle War, both sides were careful to maintain some legal backing. The killings for which Billy the Kid is notorious, for example, were committed while he was a sworn deputy of the law. The men he killed were also deputies, sworn by another legal jurisdiction.

The actual struggle, as it affected the West and as Big Tom Parks saw it would affect Toltec Valley, was between the law on the one hand and on the other the custom of the range, which had the tacit force and sometimes more than the respect accorded to the law.

Already no open range was left unstocked. Grass was something for a cattleman to grab before his rival threw cows upon it. The result was that the land was overstocked, as everyone admitted. Toltec Valley was running about one cow to eleven acres, nearly three times as many as was ideal. A cattleman couldn't homestead land enough; to buy cost too much, and to lease, even for a few cents per acres per year, was both expensive and impractical.

Here the custom of the range stepped in: *Graze where you like, but water at home*. Though the law set no limit on the number of a man's cattle, his neighbors insisted that he must have, on land he controlled, water enough to supply them all. His cattle need not necessarily drink at his own springs or tanks, but in the district as a whole there must be water enough for all. Overgrazing might be tolerated, for a cow that is thin can still be sold; but a cow without water dies. The custom was realistic and practical, and it was enforced.

Under this rule, the early settlers like Mat Karney's father fared best, for naturally they filed on the best springs and seeps. Mat, with 500 she-stock, had water enough for 2,000. Big Tom, with a ranch three times as big, was up to his limit on water. To grow, he had to get water controlled by other cattleman. It was simple arithmetic: a sum in addition.

Furthermore, the coming of the railroad and the lines of barbed wire which were stretching across the range meant that cattlemen needed fewer cowboys. All the ranches were firing men who were good in the saddle and handy with a gun. Some of these cowboys drifted to the towns. Some were registering brands, burning it on twenty or thirty cows, and setting up as nesters.

Do a little frontier arithmetic, as Big Tom did. A four-year old steer was worth an average of thirty dollars at the railroad siding. Grant that a nester has perfect luck, that every cow calves and no calves die. The nester makes a gross of from \$600 to \$900 a year, after his calves grow to the shipping age of four-year-olds.

A cowboy could live on that sum. But if he were a good man, would he? Or would the same arithmetic lead him into a process of subtraction from the big herds in the Valley? Calves were going to disappear.

Whose — Mat's, or mine? Big Tom thought to himself. *Mat's pa toughed through the Apache days. This is a new kind of toughing through, and it's me that has the savvy, not Mat. Grass? To hell with grass! The grass will grow back. This is cattle country. You crowd the other cattlemen till they quit. You grab their water, and then you wait. The grangers will starve out, and the wild bunch will git run off. Who'll be left? You!*

And that was why Big Tom Parks bought drinks, and with roars of laughter, made remarks which were not very funny, and sent out the word which brought the Flandreaus to locate on Mat's seep, and farm in the midst of his best winter pasture.

Chapter II

News of the holdup had been telegraphed ahead. When the train stopped at Toltec, Mat started with Sally toward a knot of people who were waiting beside the tracks.

In a land where mountains look like flat walls lowered from the sky rather than rising from the ground, and where any stream that shows a trickle of water in midsummer is worthy of the name river, a town is a straggling, puny thing, only serving to emphasize the vast and eternal reality of the land.

One building had paint — the railroad station, garish in black, orange and red. The Nugget Saloon boasted a false front, but its unpainted siding, worn smooth by wind-driven grit, was weathered to a yellowish gray. The other buildings were adobes. The street, a stretch of yellow dust even in spring, began nowhere and led nowhere. The effect was

the reverse of homelike. Toltec looked as though it had been dropped haphazardly, to serve a temporary purpose.

"The fat hombre in the gray Stetson is Tom Parks," Mat instructed Sally. "Fellow you want right now is the deputy sheriff for this end of the county, Waco Stroude. That's him with the brown handle-bar mustache. See his star?"

Mat saw the look in Sally's eyes. "Yeah, the dude," he agreed. "Waco is plumb taken with what he figures is his own good looks, and that's a fact. The other hombre with a star is the town marshal, Tex Smith. He don't figure in this."

"Which," asked Sally coldly, "is the undertaker?"

"He ain't there, Ma'am. Ask for Moss Abbott in the general store."

They were about thirty feet from the group when Big Tom Parks spoke in a voice that would have carried clear to the Zulu.

"Trust Mat to rope himself a filly," Tom said, and followed with a bellow of laughter.

Mat took a dozen strides in silence.

"Gents, meet Miss Sally Flandreau. She aims to set about burying her Pa," he said. There was a murmur of acknowledgement. A few hats were touched. "I hear tell she aims to be a neighbor to some of us, too," Mat continued in the same cold tone. He was looking Parks in the eye. "We can auger that later . . . There were two bandits. They cleaned out the smoker for pocket cash, shot Flandreau, and loped off headin' east. One had a loose spur; otherwise they could be anybody who ain't got red or yellow hair."

"Anybody from the Valley — eh, Mat?" Marshal Tex Smith asked.

"What you hornin' in for, Marshal? This here is a county case. Ain't I got a posse picked already?" bristled Waco Stroude.

"Sho', Sheriff, sho'. Plumb out of my jurisdiction," the marshal purred. Even for a Texan his drawl was slow. His tone had the throaty rumble of a big tomcat that is half asleep and purrs while it flexes its claws.

Tex Smith was clean shaven, with a massive head of yellow hair. He was carelessly dressed in cheap clothing — there was even a crack in the leather of one boot. But in

contrast to the fastidiously dressed deputy, Tex Smith was a handsome man, whereas Waco Stroude tried to be.

"Who was the fellow, Mat?" Tex demanded, as though Waco were not there at all, and as if he had not apologized.

"Ain't sure enough to name him, Tex. It's just the set of his head on his shoulders was familiar. He croaked to disguise his voice, too."

"Reckon we could have a croakin' contest and smoke him out thataway? Iffen we could find us a bull frawg," Tex drawled.

At this Sally, with her shoulders stiff, marched away from the group toward the general store. The marshal followed her with his eyes.

"Let's have a drink," Mat suggested.

At the moment that seemed the simplest and most natural thing to do.

But Parks had to have time for a under-the-belt dig. "Mat aims to ride herd some on Jaunita," Big Tom insinuated. His red face had the look of a malicious hog. "Mat couldn't find no real pretty Mex gals in El Paso."

"Nita's father wasn't Mexican," said Mat shortly. There was just enough truth in the remark to make him angry. He had looked forward to a meeting with Juanita Evans.

"She dresses Mex and looks Mex. I never took interest in her family tree," Tom retorted, and bellowed laughter.

"That was all you overlooked, then," Tex drawled. "You paw and sniff around Nita like a range bull circlin' a cactus in flower."

"You done better?" Tom growled.

"Not to brag on, hombre." The leonine Texan hitched at his gun belts thoughtfully. "Real fact is, I'm just keeping cases on Nita, Tom. She and me both got stranded here when the vein at Los Verdos pinched out. I come to keep the peace when the town was roarin' full of miners every Saturday. Now with the mines closed down everything is so plumb peaceful the weight of my guns is chafin' me. Nita come to sing and dance at the dancehall, and she ain't got no more audience to sing to."

"Why doesn't she pull out?" Mat asked.

"Why don't I?" Tex retorted. "I figure Nita is half and half, and she ain't decided which half to bet her chips on."

Father was a Cornish miner, she told me once. Her ma was a Mex dancehall girl that Evans married. He was killed by a rock fall when she was about twelve. Okay. She's half Mex. Is she going to be Jaunita, or Miss Evans?"

Mat pushed open the swinging doors. The saloon was empty, but the bartender, watchful, had four glasses and a bottle set out. At a nod from Mat, he filled them.

"Here's how . . . Gents." Mat downed the drink, wiped his lips and continued, "We've seen our first granger and had our first holdup. I have a hunch we ought to make medicine. Tom and I are the big cattlemen, and you two are the law. To start off with, why does a real good gunslinger run a train holdup without even tryin' to crack the express car? Mind you, the granger shot first at him. The killin' wasn't planned at all."

"I've known gunslingers without brains," said Waco.

"Good ones?" demanded Parks. "I string with Mat. There was no whiskey or women in this play."

"If he'd robbed the express car, Wells Fargo would have sent in Pinkerton men," drawled Tex. "The Valley would have been crawlin' with law for a spell. Holdups are like whiskey, Waco. It ain't smart to take too much at once."

"What two Valley men could set themselves up with about a thousand in cash apiece?" Mat persisted.

"A dozen," Waco grunted.

"In the dozen, how many gunslingers?"

"Set 'em up," Big Tom Parks ordered the bartender. "Well, Mat, there's Tap Carter, and he's your own tophand. Wasn't he going to meet you here with a horse?"

"I'd have recognized Tap. I'm counting out a couple of Flying T boys for the same reason. Point is, Gents, I figure we're going to get a similar play again. An' we don't want Pinkertons or range detectives in the Valley, do we?"

"Right," Tom grunted. "Drink up, Gents . . . Well, lemme guess again. How about Jerry Hackett? Of course, he's known to swing a wide loop. Mat might be wantin' to git rid of him."

"He's nestin' in West Canyon, too, and you might be thinkin' of expandin' that way," Mat retorted. "It could be Jerry, but I told you all I couldn't place the hombre. Point

is, I want more local law. I'd like to see you deputize Tex, Waco. Permanent."

"Meanin' I can't handle the county?" Waco bristled.

"Meanin' Tex shouldn't be picketed in town when he's useful," Mat soothed.

"Nothing doing!" said Waco jealously. "I'm the only deputy you're going to git, and that's final."

"What you so hot about?"

"That's my business!"

"Gents," Big Tom reminded, "we're drinkin' together." He swung toward the door, which opened to admit the two Flandreau boys, Hen and Dick. They must have hurried to unload their stock, and now they headed toward the whiskey like men who welcome an excuse. Big Tom picked up the bottle and motioned toward a table in the back of the room. He poured the third drink as they sat down.

"I agree a wild bunch is making up, but I think Tex is more useful in town," he argued. "I vote to leave the setup as it is."

"You're plumb satisfied?" Mat asked with a sudden dart of suspicion.

"That's right. A wild bunch needs a town to hang out in. Tex chokes that off."

"Wouldn't change your mind to know someone is advising grangers to settle in the Valley?" Mat said.

Big Tom gripped the table in two ham-like hands and looked Mat in the eye.

"What do you — or anybody — figure to do about that?" Tom challenged.

It was showdown. Quick as the breath they all caught came realization that Tom meant to hurl the table against Mat's chest. He could do it quicker than Mat could draw and get off a shot. Yet Mat could not crawfish. He was keyed to start his play when a glass full of whiskey was thrown at the table from the side of the barroom.

Glass splinters and stinging liquor flew into the faces of Waco, Tom, and Mat. Tex had his back to the missile. All four jumped up and reached for guns, but Tex was quickest to clear barrel from holster. He alone started with his eyes open.

"Freezel!" he warned. "No gunplay in my town, Gents!"

They froze, pawing with left arms at their faces.

"Shucks, boys, I dropped my drink!" mourned a lilting contralto. "You, Mat, go get me another, like a good hombre."

Juanita Evans stood by the piano. Lips and eyes were alive with amusement at the four tense, rigid, awkward men. She was a slender curve, a figure with Latin roundness and softness and promise of surrender. But she was longer and slimmer from thigh to ankle than most Latin girls are.

Her hair was Mexican black, parted in the middle and caught in two dark clouds above the ears. A small flower of dark pink cactus nestled in the midst. She wore a dark red skirt the color of good wine. Her shirtwaist was white linen, embroidered and cut in the age-old pattern, displaying the curve of the shoulder and the swell of the bosom. A necklace of raw gold nuggets, barbaric chunks as big as her thumbnail, each drilled and strung like beads on a heavy silk thread, swayed with a slow caress whenever she moved.

"Ma'am," came a voice in awed admiration from the bar, "kin I bring you a drink?" It was Dick Flandreau, the taller and by a little the less ordinary looking of the brothers. As he moved toward Nita carrying the brimming glass, you forgot he was sandy-haired, unshaven, and dirty. All you noticed was the overpowering effect Nita had produced on him.

Mat holstered his gun, looked speculatively at the young granger, then picked up his chair and reseated himself. Big Tom, somewhat more slowly, followed his example. Nita accepted the drink from Dick, and placed it on the top of the piano. The series of events all took place within a couple of seconds, but nevertheless the sequence was definite.

"An' no gunplay in town goes for the future," said Tex. There might have been no interruption at all, from his tone. "Big Tom is telling the truth, Mat. You can't stop grangers, any more than you can rip up the railroad."

"Being as they're coming, I want the ones who come for friends," Tom boomed. "I'm a-doin' it open."

"Nesters here starve — after they ruin the range," said Mat clearly. He meant Dick and his brother to overhear, but Hen was crossing the room to join Nita and his brother, and Dick himself was oblivious.

"Ain't you going to drink with me?" the young granger asked Nita.

"I don't drink," Nita smiled. "I keep a full glass handy to head off invitations."

"You all come over here with us, Nita. Bring your friends," Big Tom hailed. "Reckon maybe you was the smartest of us all."

"Slow as you-all think, reckon maybe I am," Nita retorted. She touched the rim of her glass with her lips. "I like it better here with folks that ain't so high and mighty . . ." She turned to the Flandreau boys. "You're settlin' here, I take it, strangers?"

"Soon's we bury Pa," Dick blundered. He had done nothing but watch Nita.

The remark was worse than ill-chosen. Chance timed it badly, for at that moment Sally Flandreau, searching for her brothers, pushed through the swinging door. At a glance she took in what must have seemed to her to be the situation. Her face stiffened with anger and scorn, and she started angrily for her brothers.

"Waitin' for dark before you take the trail?" she sneered as she passed the four men; then she halted before Nita and her brothers, hands on her hips.

"You're wastin' my time and Pa's money. Git up!" she ordered.

"You're mistaken," said Nita gently. "Don't be hard on them, because they —"

"You! Shut up, you!" Sally flashed. "Why don't you paint your face!"

Silence followed. Nita went white. Once she glanced at the four quiet men who knew her. Then her teeth shut behind her lips. Sally turned on her heel. Her brothers shambled out after her.

"She called me a painted woman," said Nita, all but inaudibly. "And you sat there and let her!" She looked neither right nor left; to tell which man she was addressing was impossible.

"High and mighty!" she said, a little more clearly. "Think I'm just something to dance with when it suits you, don't you? *Madre di Christo!* You better pay more attention to me!"

She held four pairs of eyes with hers. Deliberately, signifi-

cantly, she rose, thrust both thumbs in the waistband of the wine-red skirt, and then slowly turned the top of the skirt inside out and down. Pinned to the inside of the waistband was a folded piece of paper.

It was cheap newsprint, the kind of paper that is used for reward notices or the public announcements that are tacked up in post offices. The outside was blank — all four men could see that much — and the edges were not torn. Whatever it was, Nita had all of it.

"Okay, you she-devill! Let's see it. Or are you putting it up for sale?" said Big Tom. He tried to sneer, but his face was brick-red, and his voice cracked.

"Sit still, Tom," Tex warned. The big marshal had turned white. Face and tone seemed to freeze. Mat, who was completely puzzled, glanced swiftly at Waco, and saw his own bewilderment mirrored in the deputy's face.

Nita smoothed the skirt back into place, hiding the paper.

"I've stood being stared at as long as I can," she burst out vehemently. "My father was a mine boss and a better man than any of you, but you stare at me and all you see is a pretty body." She was speaking to all the men, but to Mat's astonishment, she was looking at him.

"You all hope I'll paint my face some day. Now one of you has said so. Well — you're wrong. I ain't for sale. I got a lot more than a pretty face to offer, but *you* aren't going to buy it. Now I've woke you up — and you better stay awake and treat me like the girl I really am!"

Tex Smith cleared his throat. "Nita, that isn't fair," he protested. "Ever since you were stranded here I've kept the men from bothering you, and you know it."

"Oh, sure! You're the great big town marshal. And how about yourself?"

"When ain't I been decent?" Tex challenged.

"You'd have been more decent if you'd treated me like any other girl, and tried to kiss me!" Nita flared. "Not you. Oh, no! You stalk around and dare any other man to touch me. You — you — I wish I'd let you kill yourselves!"

She turned in a whirl of red skirt and ran out.

All four men caught a breath of relief.

"I think that was a reward notice," said Waco Stroude.

"What's the idea of saving a reward notice so careful? Ain't they posted everywhere?"

"Just some fool-girl notion," grumbled Big Tom. But he looked uneasy. Tex said nothing; he was thinking hard.

Galloping hoofs pounded the dusty street outside. There was a yell:

"Mat! Mat Karney!"

"Coming, Tap!" Mat shouted to his tophand, and ran for the door. He was glad to do something. Nita had surely been looking at him. He felt like a Judas, without knowing why.

Chapter III

RUSTLERS were at work on the Bar K. That was Tap's message, shouted a few words at a time as he loped with Mat across the green flatlands toward the Bar K ranch house. Contrary to everything Tap knew of the habits of cattle, the Bar K stock had been vanishing from their usual winter range. The trail he had stumbled on was the first hint at the cause.

In a foothill and mountain country such as Toltec Valley cattle do not range the same land the year round. Climate, and especially snow fall, vary too sharply with the altitude. A storm that merely dusts the floor of the valley with snow may dump a foot on slopes a thousand feet higher, though less than ten miles distant. The high land is for summer. In winter cattle will surely freeze in the hills; even if they did not, the snow there is too deep to paw through to feed.

A second difference between the mountain and the plains cattle range is the manner in which cattle drift in winter. During a storm on the plains, cattle turn their tails to the wind and move along slowly in the direction in which the wind blows. The result is that at the end of winter on open range, cattle may be as much as a hundred miles from their home ranch.

Toltec Valley was only about twenty miles long and five miles broad. A lines fence was a convenience rather than a necessity. No ranch was completely fenced as yet, for in storms the cattle would find shelter in the lee of hills; at worst they drifted until they were turned by the rising slopes of the valley.

Therefore, in the early spring the cattle in the Valley would be found on the flat land, close the ranch houses, but thoroughly mixed as to brand. What had gotten Tap jumpy was the observation that Bar K steers and cows with each bunch — especially the Bar K cows — seemed to vanish. The bunches seemed to have about the same number of head, but the proportion of Bar K to Flying T should have been about one to three. It wasn't. The long winter coats made the brands hard to read, but he had become surer and surer. That made the running off of a small bunch important out of all proportion.

At the Bar K, Mat changed to range clothes while Tap wrangled fresh horses. They were each going to lead a spare. At the gunrack Mat selected a Winchester .45-90 with a full-length barrel. Although it would be much more awkward to ride with than a carbine, it had greater range and stopping power.

There were still two hours of daylight. The train holdup was two hours past, now, and hardly more than fifteen miles away as the crow flew. From that spot the railroad tracks and the route to the Bar K made two sides of an isosceles triangle. If Mat guessed right, the holdup and the rustling were connected. In part, the holdup might have been done to get Waco out of the Valley. Both Waco and Tom Parks had rejected the idea of deputizing Tex. Of course, both were jealous of Tex. Nita —

He shook off that train of thought. Rustlers who drove off his stock had no market in which to sell it at this time of year. And therefore —

"It must be me they're after. Personal," Mat muttered. "They get Waco out of the Valley, and then start me shashaying up their back trail. Could be a dry-gulching. Could be to scare me out of the high country."

That was a game two could play. Coolly Mat set about it. He picked up the trail of the rustlers at the point where his cows had been boldly driven off. In the soft ground the hoof marks were fairly clear; he could have followed the trail at a trot. Instead, grinning at Tap's impatience, Mat poked along at a slow walk, casting about to cover an unnecessarily wide area, and dismounting frequently to scrutinize an unusually clear print.

"Where were you raised, Tap, if you don't mind sayin'?" he asked once. The straight black hair and coppery tan of the tophand hinted at Indian blood, although the impression was belied by the continual laughter in the flashing black eyes.

"East Texas. Why?"

"The scrub oak country, eh?" Mat reflected. "Now me, I can't ever remember country where most trees didn't have thorns on 'em. Why? I was just thinking that you and me and maybe Tex are the only ones who was really raised in this country. Waco's from Kansas. Big Tom, he's plumb a Northerner. Nita followed the mining camps down from Colorado. Most of the nesters are from east of the Pecos, and these Flandreaus are from Missouri. They've all moved in, and I'll bet they're willing to move on. Move, grab, and git. Never mind what's left behind."

"Your pa moved. And you'd git more rustlers if you moved faster."

"I aim to camp before I get within rifle-shot of those cedars," said Mat tranquilly, with a gesture toward the dark mass of the hills. "We're following four men. I can draw you a picture of the caulks on every horseshoe, but not one of them is distinctive enough to signify. One man uses corn husks to roll his cigarettes, and one chews. Other two use regular cigarette papers. One horse has a saddle sore, and his rider dismounted to fix the saddle blanket."

"What color are the horses?" Tap grinned.

"Bay and roan," Mat answered calmly. "I ain't found a white horse hair. That enough facts to stop you from fretting and eyeing that gulch in the hills where this trail seems to be heading?"

"I'm just a poor cowboy on wages," Tap grinned.

"You're a busted cowpoke because you think you can play poker, and you can't," Mat contradicted. "If you was a poor cowboy, you wouldn't be drawing my wages. Real fact is, Tap, that since this morning I've begun to feel lonely on my own home range. Pa always played a lone hand, and he raised me the same way. I see signs other hombres are gang-ing up. We're bucking organization. You and me and Johnny Regan and Doughbelly Bates."

Mat had named the four men who worked the Bar K. The

grin left Tap's swarthy face. He looked up at the black fold of the gulch, high among the cedars.

"We draw your pay, Mat," he said grimly. He said no more, but between cowboys that was enough. If you drew a man's pay, you fought for him; and there were no questions asked.

"If our she-stock has been worked high into the hills too early they will have the calves in the cedars," Tap said. "The four of us can't comb them out. But if the nesters are ganged up, they can get rid of our cows and put their brand on the calves. We won't know till roundup. Then we find our breeding stock shot to hell, and our neighbors with a 100% calf crop. We'll know what happened, all right — but what can we prove?"

"That's been done in Wyoming. Mostly against the big British cattle companies," Mat agreed. "Cattlemen grow poor, and the nesters get rich. Takes organization, though."

"Where does the Flying T stand?"

"All I know," said Mat, "is that Tom don't want any law in the Valley better than Waco Stroude. And I'm going to keep on playing a lone hand because it's all a Texan from the thorn country can do."

Finally, after some time of methodical trailing, Mat and Tap camped in the open. The horses were hobbled and a fire kindled. With the coming of darkness the yellow point of flame died to a red pinpoint of embers. But though the fire was burning itself out naturally, Mat and Tap were not sleeping in its warmth. Under cover of darkness, and at the fastest pace they could travel, they climbed to a hill which gave them a wide view of the country.

At dawn they could see their own false camp, where two blanket rolls simulated sleepers. Soon — about the time when it became suspicious that the sleepers did not rise — two men rode from the cedars and approached the camp with a wariness that was funny to the watchers above. Discovering the ruse, both rustlers whirled their mounts and raced back for the cedars much faster than they had approached. The sound of three quick shots drifted clearly to the men on the hill.

"Layin' in wait for us, all right," grunted Tap.

"Signalin' others," Mat commented, squirming closer to the ground and straining his eyes.

About half a mile below the crest of the hill and perhaps a mile from the Bar K men, a bunch of cattle broke into an open space, hazed along by four men swinging ropes. The cattle seemed to be headed for a notch in the crest. Once over, they would be more likely to drift down, away from the Valley, than work back.

"Come on," Mat ordered. "We'll rush them."

He spurred recklessly, following the open ground that wound through the trees, breaking through the brush when it barred his way. He met the cattle, making them bawl and turn, thereby warning the rustlers what was happening. They were four to two. But the rustlers were taken by surprise, and Mat and Tap had the advantage of galloping down hill. It was all snap shooting, with branches whipping Mat in the face and his horse pitching because of the rough ground.

He got off five shots and was the target of about as many, but only one counted. A rustler's horse shied as it was about to collide with Mat. The rustler's gun blazed beside his ear; his answering shot was fired when it seemed to him that his revolver barrel touched the man's belly. He heard the thud of a fall; then he was past them all and reining in. Tap was rushing at him, gun smoking.

"Back again!" Mat shouted.

"Fog out of here, you all! I'll cover for Jake!" a man shouted above them. Whoever it was started blazing away with a carbine as fast as he could jerk the lever, shooting at random down trail through the brush.

Mat rolled out of the saddle, snatching the long .45-90. Once men got afoot with rifles, to stay mounted was suicide. He plunged into the brush. He snapped off a quick shot at a rustler dragging the wounded man behind a heap of rocks.

The answering shot nearly got Mat. Jake's friend, whoever he was, could shoot. Mat rolled into thicker brush, and poked the rifle out for an aimed shot.

All he could see was a pile of rocks, about four feet high and ten long. Tap was working the pile over with his carbine. Chips flew at each shot; the ricocheting bullets screamed.

There was one answering shot from the rock pile, but the bullet didn't hit close to Mat.

"Go right — I'll circle left," he called to Tap.

The silence, the strain of moving without exposing himself, was numbing after the excitement and confusion of the rush. Mat circled, watching the rocks, seeing nothing, wondering if some other rustler was making a wider circle around him. He got even with the pile, got behind it, saw a man's foot. Then, still circling, he saw both the man's legs.

It was a tempting shot. A bullet through the thighs would cripple the man, if not kill him. But though he lined his sights, Mat held his fire. The legs did not move. The booted feet looked unnaturally limp.

Mat circled further to the rear. Now he could see the whole body and the head. A smear of blood ran on the rock against which the head rested. There was only one man there. Jake's friend must have retreated after getting Jake to cover, and firing one shot.

"Cover me! I'm getting up!" Mat called warning to Tap and then walked cautiously to the rock pile.

The man was dead, if you can call a thin, ragged sixteen-year-old boy a man. He had been shot through the body, but what killed him had been a bullet which ricocheted against the stones and tore through his brain. Among the stones close to the youth was a single spur with a broken chain. Not all men wore two spurs, but the dead boy did. And both of his were still on his boots.

"Come here, Tap. Be careful, but I reckon it's safe," Mat called.

He pointed to the spur when the tophand reached him. "The bandit had a spread link on his spur, Sally said," Mat remarked. "Don't move him yet, Tap. Look careful. Notice anything else?"

"No."

"You was born too far east in Texas, cowboy. His head is lower than the top of the stones, ain't it? Where did the bullet that killed him bounce from? Your shots went high."

"By damn!" Tap was horrified. "You mean — no! But there it is, all right!" He pointed to the glaze of lead that was left by a glancing bullet. The mark was on a stone a foot from the

dead boy's head, and well below the rim of the rockpile. "His own friend shot him?"

"That's a fact. He was dying, I reckon, but the belly wound wouldn't have killed him so quick. We'd have got that other hombre, if he'd stayed, in time for this fellow to talk. Know him?"

"Kinda. Name is Jake. Comes from the head of the Valley."

"Has he got folks?" Mat demanded.

"Not that I know of. Not here."

"Too bad. Close kin would call this murder," said Mat. "To strangers I reckon it would just be a case of damn quick thinking . . . Recognize the hombre's voice that *helped* Jake? I didn't. And I was lookin' for my rear sight, instead of at his face."

"It was Jerry Hackett," said Tap. "Hot dog, I ain't teetotal useless, after all! My gun was tangled with a cedar branch right then."

Mat picked up the broken spur and put it in his pocket. "This ain't worth nothing as evidence," he said. "An' we already knew Jerry was a tough hombre an' a bad actor. Don't say nothing about that bullet glaze, Tap. It'll keep. The rains won't wash the mark off the stone. All we've really done is serve a warning that a lone hand can play an ace."

Chapter IV

ABOUT NOON of this same day the Flandreaus located their homestead. They unloaded all they owned at the top of a rounded elevation in the prairie which lay where the three quarter-section lines met. They selected rising ground for drainage; they chose the location, in order that the development work around the home they must build would be distributed over the three homestead claims.

At once, what had been an inviting expanse of green range took on an appearance that was forlorn, lonely, and forbidding. The contrast between the squalid poverty of their human possessions and the immense unbroken sweep of the country was too great. There were two four-wheel wagons, two plows, a harrow, and a wheat drill. There were

four draught horses, not big, and showing their ribs already. There were two cows.

There was a barrel holding water, a barrel of flour, a cask of pork. Under a wagon cover, carefully protected from the very beginning, were the sacks of seed wheat. Nearby were the rolls of barbed wire which had absorbed most of their cash. Shovels, axes, three battered Winchester rifles, a frying pan, an iron pot and an iron dutch oven on legs, a pile of quilts, a small box of dishes and, the one luxury, a wooden double bed with bed-slats — these were also present. All their extra clothing, which wasn't much, was under the quilts. Add a nest of buckets, and this was the gear with which the Flandreaus expected to conquer the Valley.

"Hen, you start right at the plowing. Lay out forty acres like Pa planned," Sally directed. "Dick, you hitch up and git after fence posts. Bring back your trimmings on top of the load for firewood. The wood is handy, thanks be."

"Wish Pa were here," Dick grumbled.

"We sure miss him," Sally acknowledged bleakly. She picked up a shovel.

Indeed, they missed the father they had buried the evening before as much, perhaps more, as they mourned him. They had missed his hands when the wagons were unloaded. Without him, a man's work was unassigned now.

The boys eyed the shovel in Sally's hands. She did not speak or even look at them; she just punched the shovel point into the ground and bore down with all her weight. She was slender for the job. A man's weight and a man's heavy cowhide boot on the thin shovel blade were really needed. But the shovel came up loaded with earth. Gramma grass grows in clumps; it does not make sod.

"We can't make walls of this stuff," Sally said, obviously disappointed, and added defensively, "Pa must have been thinking of the Missouri grass."

She marked off nine feet and lifted another shovelful of earth; she made six long strides and marked two more corners. For the first year their house must be a dugout, nine by eighteen. She would have to go down at least three feet. The excavated earth could be piled into walls high enough to let her brothers stand if they stooped.

"Reckon you can last the job out?" Hen asked doubtfully.

"Reckon I got to. Ain't nobody to spare from getting our crop in and our fence up," Sally pointed out.

"Rub some bacon grease on your hands right now, then," Hen suggested. "Else you're going to get blisters."

In the middle of the afternoon Mat Karney and Tap Carter passed, heading toward town. A sinister-looking bundle was lashed across the saddle of one of their led horses.

By that time, Hen had outlined a huge rectangle, the plowed soil yellow-brown against the green. Sally had dug a trench the length of the house. Hen had been right about the blisters. Her hands hurt, and she knew they would hurt worse when the blisters broke. She kept on digging, though Hen, man-like, seized the excuse to rest his team. He walked to intercept the riders and find out who had been shot. Sally could hear the few words they exchanged, but nevertheless Hen walked all the way back to her with the news.

"Ain't even sure which of them shot the poor fellow," he ended heatedly. "I tell yuh, Sally, we ought to buy us a short gun. Rifle ain't quick enough for this country."

"We ain't got no forty dollars for a Colt, Hen. You git back to your plowing."

"Now lookahere! Who's driving that team?"

"Nobody," said Sally. "Go 'long now, Hen."

At sunset, Dick drove in. He arrived so exactly at sunset that it was evident he had kept a sharp eye on the length of the shadows. But he had the wagon three-quarters full of fence posts, which represented a good half day's work. Both things were characteristic of Dick, who was thinner than his older brother, redder of hair, and far more nervous and active of mind.

As he began to unload the posts Sally shook her head.

"Half of them is nothing but bean sticks," she protested.

"You notice what passes for fence posts in this country?" Dick protested belligerently. "I seen the fences we passed on the train. These is plenty good, and the little ones is cedar, anyhow."

"What you seen was cattlemen's fences, Dick," Sally retorted. "We all don't want nobody to claim our fence ain't built right. Big posts are needful, and I want 'em set close."

"You and your wants —" Dick began. He caught sight of

Sally's hands and checked himself. "A fellow was sayin' to me —"

"What fellow?" Sally interrupted sharply.

"Rider that was movin' stock toward summer range. Gave the name of Jerry Hackett. He says we shouldn't locate all our homesteads here. Locate one in the hills, he says, and register a brand. More money in cattle than wheat, he says, and less work. Could be he's right."

"Could be you've been turning that idea over in your mind a spell before you met this hombre, too," Sally answered evenly. "You always was more for stock than crops, brother. You — you ain't *decided*? You ain't pullin' out —"

"Aw, now, Sis, don't you git all upset," cried Dick. "I'm just thinking some. Course I ain't pulling out! It's just farmin' is so — so slow and so little cash. Now, Sis, forget it! Can't I even talk?"

"Wish you hadn't. You know what Pa would have said if you'd talked like that," Sally told him.

They camped that night under the wagon. At sunup the next morning the same work began again.

That afternoon a big bunch of cattle, numbering fully two hundred head and driven by all four of the Bar K crew, were set to grazing close to the forty-acre rectangle which was now well-outlined by Hen's plow. When the cattle had quieted down the four cowboys rode close together and conferred a moment.

Then Tap snatched off his hat, gave a yell of pure joy which carried clearly through the thin air, and set off at a lope for town, evidently holiday bound. Johnny Regan and Doughbelly Bates started back toward the Bar K, but Mat headed toward Sally. He walked his pony, and he respected the boundary formed by the plowed ground, riding around instead of across it.

Hen had kept on plowing during the whole maneuver. Sally continued to dig, even when Mat drew rein about a dozen yards away and waited, lounging gracefully in the saddle with both hands on the horn. Sally was now down about two feet over the whole area of the dugout. She tossed shovelfuls of dirt in silence. One . . . two . . . three . . .

"Ain't you going to invite me to light and rest my saddle?" Mat called quietly.

"Looks like you do what you please. Them cows are on my land."

"Maybe," Mat acknowledged. "I aim to get what good I can out of this grass. You can't use it."

Sally stuck the shovel into the earth. She was bone-weary from neck to toe and caked with dirt. Only her chestnut hair had life and gleam in the sunshine. She knew her shoulders drooped and her back sagged.

"Well, light," she conceded. "It's true. We can't use nothing outside our barbed wire."

He ground-reined the pony and walked to the edge of the excavation.

"A dugout ain't hardly fit for an Indian. You should hire you some Mexicans to put up an adobe shack."

"Ain't that my business, Mister?"

"Sorry," Mat said gravely. "The reason folks wait in the saddle till they are asked to dismount is to make it clear they come friendly."

"Oh!" The sound Sally made was extremely noncommittal.

"I don't like what you're doing," said Mat. "Far as I can see, you're turning good range to dust. You're letting the wind in to the land, and the dust blows away. Come time, and you'll follow the dust you've raised, settling nobody can find out where. That's the real facts."

"Come fall," said Sally doggedly, "you'll watch me harvest thirty bushels to the acre. And I'll get a dollar a bushel."

"If —" said Mat, and he let the word hang in the air. "You got a right to try. I admit it. Meanwhile, though, I stopped by to ask you to do me a favor. See if these will fit."

He drew a pair of rider's buckskin gloves from his gunbelt and held them out. Sally slipped them on her hands. They were only a little too large — she was surprised at how little, for she was unaware of the pride a good cowboy has in his small hands and feet. The gloves were worn, but from roping. The fingers and palms would protect her blistered hands.

"I saw you start this job yesterday," said Mat. "I've kept thinking about it. I want you to wear these."

"Ain't this . . . helping me, Mat?"

"Not to make a farm," he began gravely, and then grinned

at her. "Can't I help you from tearing yourself to pieces?"

Sally smiled. It was the first time Mat had seen her smiling. Good will flowed into her eyes, and their gray became blue, as a ripple widens in a deep pool.

"I'd like it if you ate supper with us tonight," she said.

"I'll come if you'll let me bring some beef. We butchered this morning."

"Me and the boys would sure like to taste beef," she said. "At sundown, then. And Mat — when you ride back, just light down from your saddle without hailing."

She stood and watched him as he loped away. Then she turned with a sudden decision, leaving her shovel stuck in the earth where it was, and struck off across the plowed ground to intercept Hen on his steady, laborious circuit.

"Unhitch and go fill the water barrel," she called to her brother.

He checked the team, but stared at her in amazement.

"Stop in the middle of the afternoon? What's got into you?" he protested. "I rocked that barrel at noon, and I could hear the water sloshin' when I shook it!"

"Long as there was a pailful to make a splash, you always did figure there was plenty of water," Sally jeered. "You go git water and never mind the plowin', Hen. Mat Karney is stopping by for supper, and I want him to see me with a clean face."

Chapter V

THUS a truce was made in Toltec Valley. There is an Indian phrase so truly descriptive of Western life that it has been written into many frontier treaties: peace is to endure "while grass grows and water runs." While plants grow and animals forage, the human struggle can be postponed. It is the hot sun of July which dries up good will as certainly as it parches the range.

Waco had lost the trail of the train bandits within ten miles of the railroad. In fact, he returned to town before Mat and Tap arrived with the body of Jake. That case was dismissed as justifiable homicide, since no one questioned Mat's testimony that he had caught the rustlers in the act of driving off his cattle. The dead boy proved to be a drifting

cowboy with no local kin. The nesters growled a little, and there was talk against Mat. But no one showed open enmity toward him.

The next event was the dance at Toltec, in May. Since that first dinner with the Flandreaus, at which he had met a different Sally with a clean face and a starched cotton dress, Mat had ridden over to the dugout whenever he could take a half-day off. He had spent an evening with Sally four times, and he had gone to Toltec only once. He had gone for no purpose except to ask Nita Evans to be his partner at the spring dance.

He had found her in the saloon sitting with a full glass of whiskey before her: the full glass which prevented a man from buying her a drink, but which she so rarely tasted. He blurted out the invitation.

"Will you go to the dance with me?" Just like that.

"It's more than a month off yet," she answered.

"I wanted to be the first to speak to you," Mat persisted.

"Why?"

"So you have to either turn me down or go with me. The first one, you can't put off with no excuse."

The dark eyes searched him through and through. He felt she was friendly, but she was grave, almost brooding.

"I'll dance with you at the *baille* next month," she promised. She smiled and touched the glass of whiskey with her lips. "Finish my drink for me, Mat. Then I guess you better go."

"You're not mad?"

"Of course not. Over what? Something I realized as clearly as you did? Of course I'm not mad because you started out by being a male, Mat. I was hoping —" Nita's tone mimicked Mat's — "a lot you'd end by being a man."

Now with Sally, on the other hand, when Mat sat with her outside the dugout after dinner, watching the purple twilight turn to black in the hollows of the hills, significance lay not in what they said, but in the occasional moments of silence. Either Hen or Dick was always present; the talk was of weather and cattle and growing wheat, and though Sally and Mat both tried to forget it, the realization that a farm and a ranch cannot both occupy the same ground lay around them like the chill of the gathering dark. Yet when

there was nothing to say Mat would look at Sally's profile against the sky.

Soon he found he could summon her face before him whenever he wished — even out on the range, in bright sunlight and wind. In the lonely evenings at his ranch, it would rise before him unsummoned.

Sally's face was drawn by work. There were hollows behind the temples; it was the bones of the cheek and chin which gave her features character and even beauty, despite the parched and wind-roughened skin. She wasn't pretty, like Nita. She wasn't as quick, but the vision of Sally brought Mat peace. She seemed to belong to the range, like the hills and the sky.

She learned fairly early that Mat was taking Nita to the dance. Gossip traveled on the wind in the cow country. She let it be known she would go with her brothers. Mat, silent whenever the subject was mentioned, found that she was calm, seemingly indifferent.

And at the dance itself, only two moments of the long evening had significance. One came in an early figure, the first time that Sally and Nita met. They joined hands and danced the length of the clapping lines. Mat was certain that as the hands of the two girls touched, Nita said about four words to Sally, and smiled in a way Mat did not like. He was just as sure that as they neared the end of the line, Sally spoke to Nita.

As the girls parted, Nita was not smiling. Sally's color was high, and so was her chin. She had met a challenge from Nita with a defiance, and she had gotten the better of the exchange. Mat was wise enough not to mention the incident to either girl. He knew he was the cause; he also realized he was far from being in control of the situation.

The second moment was his good-night to Nita. They stood at the door of her one-story adobe. A dozen people were watching them, and Mat did not care. She had lifted him to an emotion more intense than anything he had dreamed of months ago, but it was not as he had dreamed it. This longing for her was fierce, but it was clear-headed. He had held her in his arms, but the touch of her had been firm, not soft as in his dreams; it was the life of her, the grace of

her, the fluid, slender strength of her that made him ache at the thought he would not hold her tomorrow.

"I never knew a dance could be so wonderful," he said, and kissed her. She took his lips as sweetly as she had danced, held them a second, and then firmly turned her head aside. He knew they were watched. He let her go.

"Wonderful to me, too, *hombre*," she breathed. Her fingers were on his chin, preventing another kiss, but she did not turn away. She was waiting. In a flash Mat realized that she was waiting for another invitation. The next dance would be after spring roundup. That was many weeks away, but he'd been early enough asking her this time. That was what she wanted.

She was perfect. She was everything he wanted, but she wasn't going to tie him up this way so quick. It wouldn't be fair. Mat didn't ask himself to whom it wouldn't be fair. He did not think consciously of Sally; he simply knew that deep within himself there was a resolve to remain free.

"Then good-night," he said. "I'll see you next time I get to town."

He knew Nita understood the rebuff by a kind of intuition, not from any sound or movement of her. Her voice was controlled and even.

Hasta la revisita. Buenos noches, Señor.

Señor . . . Not hombre, at the end.

Out on the range, as the weather grew still warmer and the seeps began to turn to dust, Big Tom Parks settled two more families of grangers in the Valley, but he located neither one of them on range which Mat had used. In the issue raised when Dick Flandreau tried to register a Box X brand, Big Tom sided vigorously with Mat Karney. Finally, the Cattleman's Association refused to allow a Box X, on the ground that it was too similar to a Bar K. But Dick was permitted to register the Backed S's. Although Dick did not shift his homestead filing into the hills, he did concentrate on the work that took him away from the dugout. His aim was cattle, not crops.

The big change brought by the passing months was on the homestead itself. Sally's dugout was as solid as an infantryman's bunker and looked a good deal like one. The

fence was built, three strand, strung tight, on good posts. The wheat was up, and showed green in July; though all around the range, grass was already sun-cured on the stem to a light golden brown.

That green patch was a magnet for cattle. Even so, it was the custom of the Valley to hold the big gather of the spring roundup at Cochise Seep, where the steep rimrock made it easier to hold the cattle. And neither cattlemen nor nesters saw any reason to inconvenience themselves because of a few grangers and their wheat. As the number of cows in the gather increased, Hen and Dick and sometimes Sally began to patrol inside their fence with Winchesters. A few snips of a wire-cutter could easily result in the ruin of their crop.

The whole roundup operation was rigidly organized, and was based on cooperation among neighbors. A man who did not get help at roundup might as well leave the range, and range custom anticipated and provided for the high tempers and disputes which were inevitable at a roundup. The cowboys from the various outfits were scattered around the circle. Johnny Regan of the Bar K worked with a nester on his left and a Flying T cowhand on his right. This was in case any of the three should be tempted to overlook a cow carrying the brand of another outfit, and leave her behind with her unbranded calf as a "sleeper" which could be found and range-branded later in the year.

In New Mexico, the state law provided that only the boss of the roundup may wear a gun. The Valley was in Arizona, but it followed the New Mexican custom. All firearms were in the chuck wagons, except for the .45 on the hip of Big Tom Parks, who would direct the roundup and judge any dispute. The Winchesters of the Flandreaus did not count. They were not part of the roundup, and anyhow a fence-cutter was considered a species of coyote.

As the gather was completed, a herd of more than three thousand cows, with better than four out of five with a calf, milled loosely in the angle formed by the rimrock and the Flandreau's fence. The bawls of calves separated from their mothers, and the bellows of the cows were a continuing roar. Not even a shouting man could be heard. The day was hot, with brilliant sun, and the dust went straight up

and hung like fog. Despite neckerchiefs covering their noses, men choked and their eyes burned.

Looking north and west, one wondered, was that solid blue line the rim of the mountains? It looked too level; then suddenly it looked a bit too high. But a cowboy was too busy to stop, and he didn't really want to. If a line squall were making up — and the signs were that it was — he'd know it, all right, too soon.

The branding fires were built; the stamp irons were heated in each one and the handles out like spokes in a wheel.

"Start the cuttin' out!" bellowed Big Tom Parks. "And five dollars on Jerry Hackett!"

"Scaled down to the dinero a man's got in his jeans, Tom!" yelled a nester. "A dollar Tap Carter gits his calf branded first!"

"Yuh'll always be broke if yuh back a loser," Tom roared. "But I'll take yuh for a dollar if it's all yuh got, Jack!"

Rodeos began on the range long before promoters dreamed up silk shirts in rainbow colors. These two were the tophands of the Valley, but which was the better hadn't been thoroughly settled in three seasons. Both had changed saddles to their cutting ponies and had been spared through the roundup for this day's work. Now they rode abreast to the branding fire, both shaking out a loop. The ponies were as keyed up and excited as the men.

Mat Karney crowded closer to Jerry. The blue bandanna tied over the nose — it was just like the train bandit. The gray Stetson jammed over the eyes. Alike, too. The swing of the shoulder — it was harder to tell about that, with Jerry mounted. The nester was a cold killer, for sure. That boy Jake had been slaughtered, but nothing about Jerry, nothing, tipped off the lightning-fast mind and the itchy gunhand. He looked just an average-sized man, in a blue flannel shirt and batwing leather chaps —

"Twenty dollars Tap bests yuh, Jerry!" Mat sung out suddenly.

"Taken," snapped Jerry. It was a huge wager for a nester; he accepted without thinking, his mind on the start.

You got that dough from me, Mat thought. Tricked yuh that time, killer!

"Gol!" roared Big Tom Parks.

Jerry and Tap went into the milling herd on the dead run. Each threw the small loop of the expert roper; as the twine shot out the circle looked no bigger than a barrel head. The ponies spun as the rope tightened: together the men dragged a bawling calf toward the fires. They did not look to see what they had roped, as the calves were so many. The mother cows rushed the men but were driven off by the hazers.

Tap got his calf to the fire first, but Jerry went down the rope hand over hand and got to his calf at the same instant. Jerry bulldogged the calf on its side a split second ahead, but in the tie he fumbled. His brander, with iron posed, stepped back, jaw dropping. Tap's brander pushed the iron against the calf's hide first. His backers were yelling at the victory — but Jerry was untying his pigging string from around his calf's legs, and his brander was shoving the iron back into the fire.

"No play, Gents," he sung out disgustedly. "We'd a-won, all right, except this calf's done been branded already." He pointed with the toe of his boot. Jerry recovered his pigging string and climbed back into his saddle.

In that instant everyone was conscious of the bellowing of the herd. The ponies the cowboys rode stirred as each man involuntarily tightened his rein and glanced swiftly at his neighbor. Now that the calf was on its side they could all see it was branded — with a Flying T, clumsily traced with a running iron. The mother cow was a Bar K.

Mat kned his pony forward, but Big Tom Parks was quicker.

"No play? Sure it's a play," he roared. "I say Tap wins! Pay off." He glared red-faced at the circle of silent men; then aimed a kick in mock anger at Jerry's brander. "You cost me a dollar," he accused. "Yuh saw the cow was a Bar K —"

"Yeah."

"— and yuh stood with a Bar K iron in your hands. Why didn't yuh stamp it on the hide, and win my bet? Ain't it a Bar K calf?"

"Yeah, but —"

"Go on and brand it now," Big Tom roared. "Vent that Flying T, and brand the calf right!"

"Whoa, Tom," Mat cut in. "This is rustling."

"Sure it's rustling. Ain't I venting the brand so you'll git your calf?" bellowed the big cattleman. "Hell, the bets on it are worth ten times the onery little critter!"

"But just venting a brand don't gain anything," Mat snapped. "A good rustler gits him a calf, and a stupid one has to give a calf back, the way you're playin' it. I'm here to look for some *men* as well as my stock."

"Who?" Tom challenged.

"Well, I ain't sure yet, but —"

"Glad yuh admit it. Figured you might be on the prod already. Now you look here, Mat. Don't misbranded calves turn up at every roundup?"

"Sure, but —"

"But nothin'!" Big Tom yelled. "They turn up, and the roundup boss vents the brand. That's all I can do. Ain't that so, Gents?"

He appealed to the circle of men. Mat, glancing at the faces, saw them nod — and saw, here and there in the group, something else: the beginning of a grin on a face that went blank as his eye struck it. Looking swiftly at Tom, Mat caught a gleam of triumph in the narrow little pig eyes in the red face. A man knows when he is being laughed at. Mat felt the derision among his neighbors.

He shrugged, and kneed his pony alongside Jerry Hackett.

"Let that twenty ride till you try again. I wouldn't double-cross you," he said.

In the killer's glance was the faintest pinpoint of mockery. "Everybody sizes you up for a dead game sport, but Tom says to pay up," Jerry answered. He paid with a worn twenty-dollar bill, which was unusual in a country that used gold and silver on the home range. As Mat eyed the bill, Jerry smiled openly.

By now the bank of cloud in the north was an unmistakable sign of a norther or a line squall, and the whole crew began cutting out against time. As the calves ran bawling and kicking from the branding fires, with their mothers bawling and charging after them, they were guided into individual herds as each outfit collected its brand. By Big Tom's instructions, the Bar K holding ground was close to the fence. As the afternoon wore on, Mat saw Sally more than once, standing grimly on guard with a rifle over the crook of her arm.

There is something implacable about the coming of a Western storm. The cloud rolls up solid and blue-black, as if it were not born in the sky at all but pushed from the earth, like a wall. Almost indistinguishable from the mountains at first, it pushes up until the hard, straight leading edge is directly overhead.

That is the time of the greatest threat and the greatest foreboding, yet nothing happens. Soon the storm will strike, and man and beast know it; but the movement of the cloud is almost imperceptible. Now the whole sky is covered, but there is no thunder and no wind yet; only a grayness that seems less ominous than the blue-black bank that loomed while half the heavens were clear. And then — taking you by surprise after all that warning — a rush of wind out of nowhere, blinding lightning and breath-stopping rain.

The clouds were gray over all the Valley and some of the roundup crew were at the chuck wagons eating while others worked, when Jerry Hackett dragged a big calf into the clear. It bore his own brand. He paused, waiting for the cow, but none charged from the herd. He began to haze the calf toward the bunch where his brand was collected, and those watching had started to turn away, accepting the calf as a maverick, when a Bar K cow weaved out of the main herd and tottered after the calf.

The cow was sick, nearly dying. She had not strength enough to run, but this was her baby being led off. She tried to follow.

Like a flash, Tap had a rope on her. He bulldogged her down and tied her feet. Johnny Regan whirled his pony and galloped to find Mat. When Mat got there, Tap was going over the side of the cow inch by inch, parting the thick hair with his fingers. Mat joined the search. Big Tom rode up. For once he said nothing; he merely waited, scowling in the saddle.

"Turn her over," Mat ordered. "Wound may be on the other side."

Of all rustler tricks the most despicable is to brand a calf and then shoot the cow in the lungs with a .22 rifle. The tiny bullet does not kill the cow. It lodges in the lungs and sets up an infection. The wound in the hide is very small and

heals quickly, but the cow dies in two or three weeks of consumption or pneumonia.

The report of a .22 does not carry very far. The trick is fairly safe for the rustler, and the wounded and sick cow is still able to nurse her calf. Aside from the cold-blooded cruelty of the act, the loss to the cattleman is disproportionate. A cow is ten times as valuable as a calf. To replace her takes a minimum of two years.

"Here's the scar," Mat said. He parted the hair on the cow's ribs. Big Tom Parks dismounted and stooped over to look.

"Ain't round enough for a bullet," he objected. "Looks to me more like a tear from barbed wire."

"I'll skin the cow and settle that by a look at the inside of the hide."

"With a storm comin' up? You ain't wastin' all that time on my roundup!"

With a quick reach and an upward jerk, Mat snatched the .45 jutting from Tom's hip out of its holster. He spun the weapon expertly, butt into his hand, barrel toward the roundup boss.

"Don't shoot!" yelled Tom, leaping back.

Mat flipped the cylinder out, dumping the shells onto the ground. He tossed the empty gun to a man standing at the branding fire — a middle-aged rancher named Dusty Neale.

"It ain't your roundup no more, Tom. And I ain't wastin' my time none whatever," Mat said. Purposefully, he started for Jerry Hackett, who swung out of the saddle to meet the attack.

Mat was the taller, but the two were about the same weight. Jerry crouched and began to circle behind an extended left in the style Jim Corbett made famous. Mat bored in with both fists close to his face and the right cocked like John L. Sullivan. Jerry feinted a left; Mat swung the right like a club with all his weight behind it. He missed. Jerry left-hooked him twice to the jaw. The sound was like the smacks of a mallet. Mat rocked back on his heels, shook his head to clear it, and came on. This time he tried a left uppercut. Jerry side-stepped and cracked him in the face with a straight right; then danced out of range, grinning.

Mat bored in. He shuffled now, left foot first and right foot always planted, covering up more, trying to get inside the

jabs and hooks that pounded his jaw and ribs. Jerry weaved and side-stepped and circled. He cut Mat. He pounded him, but he could not stop him. For two panting minutes Mat did not throw a punch, but crowded the boxer and took the punches.

Jerry tried to break away, but the cowboys were crowded in a ten-foot circle. He measured Mat and risked a right swing. Mat blocked and countered with a straight left that brought blood from Jerry's nose. Hackett jumped back — and his spur caught in a tuft of bunch grass. For an instant his feet were crossed and he was off balance.

Mat rushed. He took a left to the face to get inside, but his counter doubled Jerry up. A left to the jaw and a right to the jaw, a left to the heart — and Jerry Hackett's guard was down. Again Mat swung the clubbed right to the exposed chin. Jerry went down stiff, rolled over, and lay still.

Men crowded around to slap Mat on the back and shake his hand. He took their hands, nodded, and then cleared a space with his elbows.

"That's plenty, Gents," he panted. "I ain't winnin' no bet for you. I'm fighting for facts and no more fancy guesswork."

That shut up the crowd. Mat wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve and winced at the scrape of the rough flannel.

"I say Jerry Hackett either branded my calf and shot my cow, or he knows who did. I'm going to skin the cow and show the hide to prove it. Is that okay with you, hombres?"

"We're with you, Mat," the old-timer spoke up. "What'll I do with this Colt you gave me?"

"Give it back to Big Tom, Dusty," Mat said. "I ain't out to boss nothing, not now or no other time. I just borrowed that Colt for a minute while I set a range matter straight. Now I figure this roundup is going to need a ramrod, and pronto."

He was right. At that moment the wind came. The cowboys rushed for their ponies to hold the herds.

Chapter VI

THE FIRST GUST raised dust in a blinding cloud that rasped like sandpaper on Mat's bruised face. He untied the hobbles from the cow and slapped her to her feet. Darkness and dust

made the air too thick for him to see Tap, and the wind tore his shout from his lips.

He hoped the tophand was picking up the calf that Jerry had had in his loop. But between stray cows running past and men on ponies, it was impossible to give attention to any one animal. Mat pushed the cow along toward his own bunch. The rain caught him before he had gone a hundred yards; after that he rode by instinct rather than sight.

The storm was blowing the length of the valley, which meant there would be no shelter near the rimrock and that the Flandreau fence was down wind. The Bar K bunch had been in the angle, about a quarter of a mile from the fence. That was too close.

The cow he drove was suddenly last among dozens of others, all already on their feet, tails to the wind, lowing and shifting uneasily. He had ridden into his own bunch before he saw it. He started to circle, heard a shout, and waited for Tap.

"Get the calf?"

"Yes. Where's Johnny and Doughbelly?"

"Don't know. Try to edge them up wind."

"Okay. Can try. Maybe can do."

Tap put his pony into a walk and started to circle, riding as near the herd as he could. Lightning split the heavens in one vast frenzy of light. The thunderclap drowned Mat's oath. The fence was not a hundred yards away. There was a black figure there with an upraised rifle.

Mat turned that way. If any damn fool granger started shooting — if the cattle already spooky with the lightning and the storm should stampede —

"Stop there, you!"

"It's Mat!" the cattleman yelled.

"I don't give a damn. Keep off!"

Mat swung from the saddle. He held the reins in his right hand and felt for the fence with his left. As he touched it, the Winchester poked him in the chest.

"Put that thing away, Hen," he snarled in exasperation. "You can't stop five hundred cattle with a rifle!"

"I'll plug anything that touches this fence and I got a right to!"

"Will you listen to me!" Mat swore at the thick-headed

stubbornness. It was just like a granger. Storm and frightened animals, and Hen blabbered about rights! "My cows are going to drift down on this fence and I or all hell can't stop them. Get it? But you've built a good fence. Cattle won't bust through tight wire. Understand? They'll hit it, but those that do will charge and horn back the others. You shoot, and they'll stampede and then maybe they'll get going too fast to stop and your fence will get busted. Don't excite them, man! We're all right, I tell yuh, as long as you keep your head!"

"Yuh sure?" Hen questioned. "Me and Dick built the fence good — but man! We can't buy more seed. We got to crop what's growing."

"I'm sure," Mat assured him and breathed easier.

There was a *ping* of cut wire. The sound came through the tightly stretched fence itself rather than the air. It was unmistakable, even through the roar of storm and the noise of cattle. *Ping . . . ping . . . ping.*

"Damn yuh! You talk to me while your pardner —" Hen grated.

By instinct Mat knocked up the barrel, as the Winchester exploded near his ear. He caught the wet, slippery steel and held it away from his body. Dropping the reins, he wrestled with both hands with Hen for the rifle. Hen was trying to lever in another cartridge. Desperately, Mat jerked with his left hand and punched with his right. He caught Hen in the face and jerked the gun from his grip.

"I'll kill yuh!" Hen panted. It was threat and intention, for he turned and ran away into the dark.

Mat lifted the Winchester and fired three shots into the air to bring the cowboys on the gallop, in case the single shot didn't. If Hen believed the shots were aimed at him, that couldn't be helped. Mat knew the direction in which the wire had been cut. He swung on the pony and galloped toward the spot. Lucky he had the rifle. It might be needed.

The cattle were crowding thicker and thicker. Flailing right and left with doubled lariat and yelling at the top of his lungs, Mat pushed the pony into them. A solid mass of cows checked him. They were pushing past at right angles. He must be at the break in the fence. He whipped with the lariat, but his best effort was as futile as beating at the

sides of a freight train with a whip; the cows had no room to turn aside. When he hit them, they charged forward, horning the beasts in front; if anything, the speed of the movement increased.

There was one other chance. His pony was trembling under him, trying to turn and back away from the herd. The horse was as aware of the danger of getting caught in that mass as the man. Mat pointed the rifle at the ground and fired just under the nose of the nearest cow.

That cow made a frantic, terrified lunge. For an instant there was an eddy in the stream. Mat spurred the pony into the gap. He was trusting his life to the ability of the horse to keep its feet. Instantly it was wedged among the cattle. Despite his chaps, the pressure against Mat's legs was crushing. But he was being carried through the gap, although he was as helpless for the moment as a man pinned in a crowd.

Once through the fence, the cattle spread out right and left across the wheat. Now there was a little space; Mat turned his pony to face the oncoming cows, and began again to flail with his rope. He could check the rush a little now. With help — and help couldn't be far away now — he might stop it.

The flashes of lightning, which were coming at thirty-second intervals, helped even though they maddened the cattle. By the light of one flash, Mat glimpsed Tap and Doughbelly. They were at the left of the gap, whipping at the cows as he had done at first. By a second, he caught at movement at the opposite side of the break. Something was there that was only a little higher than the backs of the cows. It looked like a man, but what man would be fool enough to get so close to maddened cattle on foot?

But someone was. From the flimsy shelter of the fence within yards of the cows someone opened fire with a Winchester. — Regular shots, at one-second intervals. Every shot knocked over a cow. *Wham! Wham! Wham! Wham!*

"You fool! Oh, you crazy fool!" Mat yelled into the storm. He swung his pony toward the spot. The blind, bulldog, thick-headed courage and block-headed stupidity of a granger was past belief. Despite the storm, Mat's shout must have been heard. They were hardly twenty feet apart. What followed took place while the lightning flashed twice. It was

begun and finished in forty seconds. It had the intense vividness, the sense of rapid action frozen into stillness.

By the first flash, a second or two after his shout, Mat saw that both Hen and Dick Flandreau were at the break in the fence. Three cows were down in front of them. Another, wounded by the last shot, had fallen and was being trampled by the push behind. Dick was kneeling with the gun at his shoulder — but he had swung around.

The rifle was pointed upward, aimed where he had heard Mat's voice. Luckily he had not aimed accurately or he would have fired. The intense blackness that follows lightning caught him in the act of shifting aim.

The Winchester that Mat had taken from Hen was in the boot under his knee. He had needed both hands to guide the pony and swing the rope. He had what time there was before the next flash of lightning. The doubled rope was in his hands. He spurred the pony and struck downward with all his strength. He swung in darkness, but he was guided by the view the lightning flash left before his eyes.

The rifle exploded — harmlessly. Mat jumped from the saddle at the flash. His boot heels were angled to cripple what he landed on, but his left hand clung to the reins. He would as soon be shot as left afoot.

His heels hit mud. Simultaneously came the second lightning flash.

Dick had caught the doubled lariat across the face. Two strands of hard-braided quarter-inch rope give a wicked blow. Dick's hands were pressed to his eyes; the Winchester was in the mud beside him. Hen was stooped, peering, lips drawn back on stained and broken teeth. Mat swung at that exposed chin. The rope around his hand was as good as brass knuckles. Hen went down. Mat, in dark now, stopped for the rifle and flung it far away under the hoofs of the cows.

That last gunflash — or perhaps it was the smell of blood — stampeded the cattle. Those nearest the gap broke through. The fence sang as a few hit the wire and recoiled with bawls of pain. Then the pound of their hoofs was louder than the rain.

"Mat!" Doughbelly shouted. Although he was almost at Mat's elbow, he was invisible against the sky. "Here's his horse and he ain't in the saddle! Sing out, Mat!"

"I'm okay," said Mat heavily. "These damn thick-headed grangers! I should have killed him!"

"If we'd a-just had a Colt —" moaned Dick.

"Shut up and grab the horn of my saddle. Doughbelly, lift that other hombre. We can't leave 'em here for the cows to trample."

"Going to take them — home?" Doughbelly gasped.

"Got to." Mat felt heavy, drained out. The glimmer of light from the dugout across the big field looked like a small, red, evil eye. He hated Dick, stumbling along in the mud beside him. He hated Hen. Fool grangers in a cattle country, and — when he reached that light — there would be Sally to face.

Rain and wind muffled the sounds of their arrival. As Mat pushed open the door he saw her. She sprang erect at sight of him.

She had been sitting on a cracker box before a blazing fire of small cedar branches. The only other illumination in the dugout was from a lantern set on another cracker box. She sat with her shoulders straight and her feet planted as though she held up a physical weight. In her left fist she gripped a pair of trousers. But the knuckles were white, and the needle in the right hand was more likely to be broken between her fingers than used to make a stitch. She had heard the shots. For long minutes she had had to face her fears.

"Dick?" she cried out. Mat knew then who was her favorite brother.

"No one's bad hurt," he said.

Hen shouldered past him and went straight to a bunk built against the earth wall. He crawled in, turned his face to the wall, and pulled the blanket over his head. Dick lurched toward the fire and sat on the cracker box Sally had left. The double welt across his face was purple and oozed blood.

Sally caught her breath and moved toward a kettle of hot water at the edge of the fire. Dick pushed her away.

"Get me the whiskey," he ordered roughly.

"Your face —"

"I know what'll cure my face," said Dick, with a glare at Mat. "Gimme the whiskey, I tell you."

Sally brought the bottle.

"He — " Dick pulled the cork and motioned at Mat — "cut our fence to let in his cows. We cracked down on him, but he bested us."

"That ain't the way it was," said Mat.

"I know the way it was!" said Dick. He took a second pull at the bottle, and laughed jeeringly. Sally's face was white and cold as the rain.

"You better go," Sally ordered. "Is — is the wheat plumb ruined?"

"No. Thirty or forty head got in before they stampeded. Get the break wired up tonight and drive them out tomorrow," said Mat curtly. "You'll find some of my cows your brother shot. Take meat if you want it, but save every mite of the hide."

"Why?" asked Sally.

"Because the hide of one of my cows carries a rope and a noose for Jerry Hackett," said Mat grimly. "Think that over and maybe you'll see reason — if it's in a granger. Sally, I —"

He was going to say he was sorry, but the firelight on her face might have been flickering over a block of ice.

"— I cut no fence of yours," was all Mat could bring himself to say.

Dick tilted the bottle.

"You git," he ordered. "You leave my gun when you go, too. And stay away from here."

Mat glanced toward Sally. Her mouth was set and her hands clasped and unclasped, but she said no word to contradict.

He turned on his heel. He had a herd to see to.

Chapter VII

AFTER THE first mad rush a stampeding herd will settle down to run, often for a good many miles, following the lay of the land. Then it will begin to mill in a big circle. Mat had a reasonably good idea that he would find his herd in the Valley, close to the rimrock, but not entirely scattered. In any event, he needed weapons before he went riding in the dark or combed any brush.

At the chuck wagon he picked up his belt guns and a .30-30 carbine. The word was that the main herd had begun to mill after a short run, and that cutting could proceed soon after sunrise. Therefore, Mat told Doughbelly to stay behind to represent the Bar K. Tap Carter and Johnny Regan went with him after his stampeded cows.

About three hours before dawn they overtook the herd. It was milling close to the rimrock, and they managed to ride around it to prevent more cows from drifting into the brush. Once that was accomplished, Mat sent Johnny to start a fire. And for the rest of the night, two men circled while the third hugged the fire in a futile attempt to get warm.

Dawn was gray and gloomy, but at last the rain stopped. The men shed their slickers and made coffee; then they started plodding up the sides of the valley to collect the stragglers. It was one of those mornings when a cowboy wondered why he had ever been such a fool as to choose a horse and a saddle to make his living on.

In such weather both horses and men unconsciously yearned to be close to their own kind. The three Bar K riders were bunched, with Mat half a length in the lead. The slope of the valley side was rocky and fairly steep, with occasional clumps of jack pines. It was rough country, even a little difficult to ride. But there was no pronounced draw or noticeable outcropping of rock to make a man suspicious, even though he was aware that his enemies had had the entire night to prowl.

Suddenly the unexpected became a reality. The rifle volley that hit the Bar K riders was fired by three Winchester from the pines about two hundred yards up the slope. Mat felt a burning slash across his left side; he heard the thud of another bullet into flesh, and the *boom* and double *crack* of the three rifles. He whirled his pony downhill, firing blindly backward with his Colt. Tap and Johnny plunged downward with him. The nearest jackpines were fifty yards away, and were at an angle to them; the shelter seemed a mile off with the lead singing and the rifles cracking.

Even as he hugged the back of his pony and prayed the horse would keep its feet, Mat noticed the difference in the

guns. Two were .30-30's; the third was the old, booming .45-90. They sounded different; the bullets sang different tunes.

"Keep goin'!" he shouted. Then he saw that Johnny was never going to get to the level ground where he would be out of range. The kid was gripping the saddle horn with both hands and weaving drunkenly. Mat caught the reins of Johnny's mount and pulled hard to check the flight of both horses. They were at the edge of the jack pines now; the shooting had stopped for a few seconds, but by the time Mat got control of the horses there was no cover near except a few scattered boulders, none bigger than a barrel.

Mat flung himself from the saddle. On the sloping ground his own pony got away from him, carrying off the carbine, still in the boot. Johnny tumbled into his arms and to the ground. The kid's face was blank from shock. Tap pulled up. His carbine was out.

"Keep goin' — stay mounted!" Mat snapped. "Cover me from the plain! We'll all be left afoot!"

"Like hell!" Tap rapped back. He picked a boulder and dropped behind it. "My Baldy horse won't run far. How's Johnny?"

"Hit bad." Mat dragged the helpless kid behind a rock and dropped beside him. Their legs were out in the breeze. Grimly Mat recalled another pile of rocks. He remembered the sight of an exposed leg over the sights of his rifle. The tables were turned too completely.

The jack pines they had passed wouldn't give the enemy too much cover, either. That was some comfort, though the higher ground still gave the drygulchers the edge. The range was about seventy-five yards; pointblank for carbines; long, but not impossible, for a Colt .45.

Mat said, "hold your fire, Tap. Get ready to sharp-shoot. Lemme blaze away with the Colt. If I can make 'em jump, you plug 'em."

He sent three rapid shots into a spot where he had seen branches move. Mat was a fine shot. All the bullets were in a circle a yard across, but his target didn't scare. The answer from the pines was one booming blast from the .45-90 which sent dirt flying within an inch of Mat's leg, and a second

that sung over his back as he jerked his knees up under his chest.

"Didn't show himself," Tap grunted.

The .45-90 boomed. Chips of rock cut Mat's back. The target must have been the curve of his spine above the rock. The marksman had undershot, but the third shot was so much more accurate than the second that Mat knew he was going to be hit. Nothing was left for him but a brave man's desperate gamble. He snatched Johnny's gun in his left hand and rushed.

He leaped the rock, firing with both hands. He dodged left, dived behind a stone, and rolled into the open: scrambling, twisting, firing, but always moving upward. Bullets cut around him. He could only last a few seconds in the open, but the excitement of firing at a man whom any shot should cut down makes a rifleman forget everything but his target.

Mat saw the head and shoulders in the pines as the rifleman lifted himself on both elbows for better aim. He blasted with his Colts, but it was Tap's shot that hit. The head and shoulders were gone. The pines shook, and Mat flung in lead until his guns clicked empty. Then, still charging until he reached the pines, he hurled himself at a prone figure that writhed and twisted but could not rise.

He got a knee in the small of the man's back and an arm under his chin. The lack of resistance as he jerked the head back saved Dick Flandreau — it was Dick — from a broken neck. Mat dropped him to snatch up the .45-90; then he flattened to the ground, rifle ready for the other two — the two with the .30-30's.

He heard Tap running up the slope. The tophand dove to the ground beside him, thrust his carbine forward, and covered the open ground beyond the thicket, the distant clumps of pine — where nothing moved, nothing at all.

"They left him to finish us off — and skeedaddled?" Tap cried.

"Keep watching," Mat warned. "One man should have been enough. Almost was." He turned to Dick.

Tap's bullet had struck at the point of the right shoulder and ranged upward. The collarbone was cracked and the

neck muscles were torn, but the stock of the rifle had turned the bullet before it entered the neck. It was a bloody, nasty, but not fatal wound. Mat bandaged it with Dick's neckerchief.

"Before I string you up," he threatened, "who was with you? What was the play?"

Dick could not stop writhing and twisting with pain, but he clenched his teeth and glared. No answer came.

"Go see to Johnny," Mat ordered.

As Tap left, he said ominously, "They ran out on yuh, hombre. Speak up."

"They never run out on me," Dick denied. "They left me to git yuh, so they could trust me. I was goin' to git a half share to pay up for what you done to me."

"Half share of what?"

"What's left of the Bar K," Dick snarled. "They'll git yuh! You string me up and you'll find I got friends!"

"Who?"

Dick locked his teeth. He made Mat think of a wounded boar — bloody, dirty, dangerous, but above all, savagely, sullenly, stupidly brave. Dick hated himself so much for his failure that at this moment he would swing with his mouth shut tight.

"Johnny's dead," Tap reported. "Hit plumb center, right under the breastbone. Reckon he was dying when you caught him."

"Never moved afterward," Mat agreed bleakly. "Hit with what?"

"Make any difference?" Tap questioned. "This hombre helped in the shooting, didn't he?"

"Makes a difference to me," said Mat.

"Well, wound looks like a .30-30. Pretty small hole," Tap said doubtfully. "The bullet didn't come out of his back. I ain't really sure."

"Go catch the horses," Mat decided. "We'll pack Johnny and this hombre to Toltec."

"And then?"

"I reckon the law will work, if we back it some," Mat promised grimly. "Johnny was a damn fine kid. I aim to git *all* the guilty ones."

He realized the size of the job. For the first time he sensed

that something bigger and more sinister than rustling, something more devious and dangerous than the outlawry of a wild bunch, was his enemy in Toltec Valley.

Chapter VIII

BACK IN TOLTEC, a little more than five hours later, Nita Evans looked out of her window. The effect of what she saw was immediate. Her slender figure did not straighten so much as become vibrant; without turning her head she reached for the field glasses that she kept near the window.

In the sinister cavalcade heading toward town the glasses made it possible for her to recognize faces. Mat Karney and Tap Carter rode in the lead. She could not distinguish whose body was tied across the fourth horse, but its identity hardly mattered. Mat Karney was coming to seek the aid of the local law. She knew that Waco Stroude was out of town. Therefore, Mat must get help from Tex Smith.

And unless she intervened right now, Mat was as liable to get a double cross from Tex as help. As for Tex, if she stayed where she was and kept her mouth shut like a prudent girl, Tex might easily sink to a level little better than that of a hired killer.

Prudent girl! That was another name for a selfish, weak-willed little coward who was afraid to risk her future and her life on her judgment of men. From Welsh father and Mexican mother alike Nita had inherited fearlessness. Her parents had played the dangerous way all their lives; and in her turn, so had she. Nothing was riskier than working in a dancehall, and insisting on being decent, too.

Mat and Tex were the two important men in her life. Both of them wanted her; she had permitted liberties from neither. For her part, Mat thrilled her. Tex she admired and respected; but still, his faithfulness, steadiness, and patience left her other than responsive.

Nita was clear-headed. She wanted to marry Mat if she could, but she had not won him yet. Perhaps she never would. He had hesitated after the dance when she thought she had him swept off his feet.

As for Tex, she had only to melt a little, and he would marry her within a week. Actually the difference was that

Mat was young, and Tex a few years over forty. Nita had planned to wait. But now —

Now she would have to show Tex the folded paper she had worn pinned to her skirt for months. Tex was certain to ask questions she did not want to answer. But she must either try, or fail Mat — calculatingly, cold-bloodedly, prudently. She was none of these things. Sooner than that, she'd fail . . . even die.

Late that winter Nita had wandered into the law office shared by Tex and Waco Stroude. Both men had been out, and while she waited she began to read the reward notices that had just come in the mail. She was bored. She barely followed the lines of fine print: "height, six feet, broad-shouldered, yellow hair . . ."

She started violently, swiftly thrust the notice into her dress, snatched up the envelope and hid that. This was dynamite. It put a man's life in her hands. Except for one impulsive outburst in the saloon the day Sally insulted her, she had never hinted at her secret. Even that mistake had taught her that Big Tom Parks was involved somehow. He had not been frightened, as Tex had. Her guess was that Big Tom also knew Tex's past.

Well, she'd find out in a minute or two. She reached for her best dressing of flaming red silk. She must look her best. Her heart began to pound and her breath to quicken. Rouge? She had never used it in the daytime. But rouge made a woman look better. Nita smeared it on. This was for love. This was honor and life. She couldn't boggle over trifles now.

Suppose Tex wasn't alone in the law office? Suppose he wasn't in the office at all? Anxiety goaded her during the short walk between her adobe and the combined law office and jail. The sight of Tex as she opened the door, sitting at his desk idly thumbing through a stack of reward notices, was a good omen. She was a gambler, and luck was with her so far.

"Tex, hell's broke loose and we got fifteen minutes, maybe less, to fix it," Nita burst out breathlessly. "Think fast! I've got to . . . trust you, Tex!"

"You gone loco, Nita? Say, look at the lip-paint! Here, lemme wipe that off —"

"Will you shut up and think?" Nita pointed at the reward

notices, and swiftly unpinned the folded paper from her skirt. "This is the one you've been waiting for," she said tensely. "I intercepted it months ago. It reads, 'Wanted for Murder in Pawnee, Wyoming. Steve Abercrombie, six feet, broad shouldered, yellow hair —'"

Terror choked off her voice. Tex was rising from his chair. His face was white, his lips twisted, his big hands curling to strangle. Thickly he said:

"So I got to kill you, after all —"

"Tex, *think!* I gave it to you! I'm here alone! Tex, I'm Nita —"

That stopped him. The huge hands uncurled; he leaned heavily on the desk, breathing hard, his eyes still showing a rim of white over the lower lid.

"I thought . . . you was bluffin' . . . that day," he said thickly. "Lots of men . . . this far West . . . got reason to worry over a reward notice. I figured you just picked one up to grandstand with."

Tex slumped heavily back into his chair and wiped the sweat off his face. "Well, what do you want?" he demanded wearily. "Just for the record, I was town marshal in Pawnee. I've been a lawman all my life. Somehow I like the job. That man I killed there had murdered a woman. I knew it, but I didn't have no legal proof. He was an onery cuss. One day when I'd been drinkin' he begun to crow over me. I saw red. I started for my gun first and he never shot at all. He had it coming, but legally it was murder. They'd hang me for it in Pawnee."

"No worse than that, Tex?" asked Nita softly.

Tex did not soften. Harshly he said, "I asked you what you wanted."

"Go look out the window. Mat Karney is riding in with a dead rustler."

"Okay, Mat's coming for help. So I fight for the young squirt, and do a killing or two for him, and save *his* neck, or you'll hang *me*. That it?"

"This isn't blackmail, Tex. And furthermore, what have I ever done to anyone that makes you think I'd double-cross you?"

"That's answering with a question," Tex grunted.

"And I'll ask another! Does anyone else in the Valley know

about that murder in Pawnee? For I looked at Big Tom Parks that day, and I suspect he does."

"You suspect right. And if you want to know why I don't get out of town or kill Big Tom, he got one of those notices, too. He's hid it — I wish I could find out where!" Tex interjected with deadly venom. "If I don't do as Big Tom says, that letter gets mailed. Big Tom can run the Valley like he pleases."

"That is blackmail!" Nita cried.

"And your proposition wasn't," Tex reminded her ironically. "Okay — what's your interest in Mat Karney?"

There it was — the question Nita had dreaded.

"I want Mat to get square, honest law from you," she answered steadily. "I want you to act just as you would if there had never been a man murdered in Pawnee. If Mat's guilty, lock him up. If he isn't, see that he gets a fair break. Putting it simply, Tex — your secret is known. I've learned it; others are bound to learn it."

"Sounds pretty. What you mean is, you're in love with Mat," said Tex grimly.

"You're jealous."

"Right again. I'm jealous. No, don't interrupt. You shut up now and think fast. Go to the window and see how much more time we have."

As Nita rose, Tex unfolded the wadded reward notice and touched a match to it. The last of the paper was burning on the floor as she turned from the window. Tex scattered the ashes with a booted foot. Nita shrugged.

"You didn't need to trick me into moving away. When I handed that to you, I knew you'd destroy it. Mat is getting close, by the way."

"I didn't trick you. You saw me reach," Tex retorted. "Nita, you can do anything you want to with me except treat me like a fool. That paper is burned, but the information is in your head. Big Tom still has his. For me, playing square is like walking a tightrope. There's two of you, pushing from each side, and either can hang me."

"I won't betray you!"

"You believe that now, but you don't know what you'll do later. Nita, I've loved you for months. I love you and I want to marry you. This is breaking it to you mighty sudden;

but you started this, not me. In the end you're going to marry the man that loves you the most, and that will be me."

"Tex, I —"

"I ain't finished. You were going to say, 'I like you a lot, but —' Don't I know that? Why else did I wait? In the end there won't be no *buts*. But right now — Nita, I've fought in more range wars and town feuds than you've ever read about! I tell you, for you and me there's only one wise move. That is to run out of that back door before Mat gets here with that body.

"We'll hire a rig and drive to the next town. I'll marry you there, and we'll keep right on going — to places where hick reward notices don't come, and people don't ask a pretty girl with black hair if her mother was a Mex. That's what we should do — and I love you, Nita."

She touched her fingers to the big hand that was stretched toward her.

"It's too soon," she said. "Tex, I'd feel I was selling myself. I just ain't ready."

She had never admired him more. He took the refusal like the man he was, with one deep breath that caught in his chest, and a forced half-grin.

"Why then, we'll do our best possible," he said. "I hate Tom Parks. That's some comfort. But the path is too narrow. I can't trust nobody."

"Not even me?" Nita demanded.

"You don't know your own mind yet, far's I'm concerned," Tex told her gently. "You've made an awful bad mistake today . . . Slip out that back door now. And remember, first of all I've got to think of my own neck!"

But it was too late. Horses were stamping outside the jail doors, and there were shouts and the thud of running feet from both sides as Toltec discovered what Mat was bringing from the prairie.

Big Tom Parks shouldered through the front door on the heels of Mat and Tap Carter. Moss Abbott, the storekeeper who doubled as doctor for the living and undertaker for the dead, cleaned and bandaged Dick's shoulder. But his mind was on the bullet in Johnny Regan's body, for which he must soon probe.

As the office filled up — mostly with townsmen and nest-

ers, for the cowboys were still out after the scattered herds — the crowd became half a mob and half a kangaroo court. By the time Dick was carried into a cell, the crowd had organized into two factions. One group, made up mostly of townsmen who saw more profit if the grangers increased, backed Tom Parks. The other, men from the open range, closed together behind Mat.

Abbott pushed to the center and dropped a blood-stained bullet into Tex's hand.

"It's a .30-30," the storekeeper announced. "That's what killed Johnny."

Tex made a note on a sheet of paper, wrapped up the bullet, and placed it in a pigeonhole of his desk. As the crowd pressed in he sat on the desk. With a lithe movement Nita vaulted to sit on the top of the rolltop. Her red dress, rising above the brown work clothes of the crowd, was like the spurt of flame that stands above a smoldering log. She could reach the pigeonhole; Tex twisted his big yellow head, grinned and leaned back.

"Don't be so curious, you-all," he drawled. "This is a county case. I'm just savin' the pieces for Waco . . . Okay, Mat. How'd it happen?"

Briefly Mat gave the facts of the ambush and the shooting. He did not include Dick's admission that he had been promised the Bar K for a successful murder.

"Okay. And what's the charge?" Tex asked.

"Rustling, drygulching, and murder!" Mat snapped.

"Gents, that sounds too broad to me," Tex objected. "What do you think, Tom?"

"Well, he was drygulched, Tex, and he shot Dick in self-defense." The ranchman's manner was as greasy as a cold steak left in the frying pan. "Only other fact I'm sure of is that Dick didn't shoot Johnny. The bullet's the wrong caliber."

"Who made you Dick's lawyer?" Mat challenged.

"Gents!" warned Tex. "You're in town an' I'm marshal!" In the quick silence he added, "An' if you stop kickin' me in the back, Nita, I can listen easier . . . You go ahead, Tom."

"I don't need your okay, Marshal . . . Mat says three rifles opened on him at the same time. Then two pull out,

though they had the best of the ground. Okay, Mat — didn't they?"

"Yes," Mat said.

"That ain't the way three sidekickers act," said Tom, turning to the crowd. "You got to prove to me Dick was in cahoots with anybody else. Charge him with shootin' to kill."

"That ain't a hanging matter," Mat said. "I aim to git justice for Johnny Regan. Tex, three hombres crack down on us at once. You figure it's possible for two different parties to open fire at the same second?"

"I'm making up my mind, son. You was riding into range, remember. Tom's notion ain't likely, but it might be true."

Nita slipped off the desk. "Mat, Dick's locked up. He'll keep," she said. "You've done your best possible for now. Take it easy and let me rustle you and Tap some breakfast."

Coldly angry as he was, Mat hesitated. He might have gone with her, but Big Tom Parks cut in with a voice rasping and low.

"Three hombres, you said. But I said three rifles! What makes you so damn sure it was three *men*, Mat? I was at the roundup ground longer than you and know something you don't. All three of the Flambeaus was out of their dugout before midnight, and they weren't back by dawn. If yuh like *that* notion better, maybe that's why Dick stayed behind while two others pulled out!"

"Why, yuh — " Mat raged. The packed crowd split for cover. "Yuh lie!" Mat ended.

Both went for guns. Neither ever cleared iron from leather. Tex kicked Tom viciously in the belly, dropping him doubled up and writhing, and gripped Mat in a bear hug that pinioned his gun hand. Mat struggled to draw. With a grunt, Tex drew with his right hand and brought the barrel down sharply on Mat's head. Mat slumped as a candle melts, spread out where he had stood. Tex swung the six-gun to cover the crowd.

"You-all git!" he commanded. Big, yellow-headed, red with rage, he was a mountain lion defying a pack of coyotes over a kill. "Drag Tom out of here with yuh!"

"Don't yuh want his guns, Tex?" Abbott quavered.

"No, I don't want your guns!" Tex raged directly at Big Tom, who was conscious but still squirming. "I'd like your

fool blabbin' tongue if I could cut it out legal! You try for a gun again in my town, Tom, and see what happens to yuh! Git goin', you-all! Carry him out!"

"How about Mat?" Tap Carter sung out defiantly. Tap had grabbed Nita at the threat of gunplay. He still held her tightly, shielding her with his body.

Tex's face cleared. He even grinned. "Quit wrestlin' with my girl, Tap," he said. "You go look after the Bar K stock, son. I'm lockin' Mat up for disturbin' the peace."

"And lettin' Tom go!" Nita cried out.

"Yes, Ma'am. Mat started the fight. If he'd shot Tom, reckon we'd have had to hang him . . . I'd take it kindly, Nita, if you'd stay to nurse Dick. Just until Sally can ride in."

Relatives or older women — old maids, widows, or married women do the nursing in cow towns. Surprise, disapproval, even suspicion hung in the air. Everyone remembered that Mat had taken Nita to the last dance. Tom, who had been helped to his feet — no one dared to drag him out — turned with a black scowl. But he thought better of saying anything. For Tex stood with his big head lowered, his eyes moving slowly, grimly, from man to man.

He was marshal, and the fastest gun in Toltec. They wondered what he was up to, but they shambled out. With an expression of distaste, Nita went to the water bucket to wet a cloth and bring Mat to. She did not want to meet Sally.

Chapter IX

THE JAIL was ominously and unnaturally silent. At the desk Tex brooded, like a statue of *The Thinker* which had risen to its feet and put on two guns.

"Well — are you still on top of the tightrope?" Nita asked him under her breath.

"Ain't sure," he told her, speaking from so deep in his chest she could barely hear. "I ain't falling, but I can't feel nothing solid under my feet, either."

"No *sabe*."

"*Como non* — why not?" Tex muttered. "Okay, maybe things look different from under a red silk dress than from behind a tin star. Even so, Big Tom's play ought to be plain enough."

"He was goading you and Mat, that's all."

"All?" Tex growled. "Nita, if your nerve is as good as you've showed and your brains as bad, grab that buckboard now and light out alone! Look — Johnny was killed by a .30-30. Dick Flandreau did not shoot him. Two hombres — one of whom did — can ride a lot faster than Mat and Tap Carter, who have a wounded man to herd."

"You mean they could have ridden to Big Tom and reported to him early this morning?"

"A couple of hours earlier than the news reached us," Tex nodded, unsmiling. "Right from the beginning, Tom was too damn interested in what happened to a granger. He figured he had me in his pocket. I ain't sure, Nita, that he might not have been right if you hadn't horned in. He's mean, and to get control of the Valley he'll spit in a wolf's eye. Don't you fool yourself about that, Nita — not ever! Big Tom ain't afraid of no one or nothing."

Nita's lips parted. She leaned forward, and her expression drove some of the somber grimness from the big peace officer's face.

"Tex, you are going to play it square," she exulted.

"I told you I loved you," the big man said simply. "That doesn't go for Mat, though."

"Then you are up to something!"

"Only trying to keep us both thinking a split second ahead." He reached into his pocket and separated one cell key from the bunch. "This will unlock Dick's cell," he instructed. "I'm responsible that Mat keeps the peace, and I don't know as I can trust you with him. I've got to keep an eye on the town. We'll all need food, anyhow."

"You won't be gone long?" Nita asked anxiously.

"Half an hour. Maybe three-quarters. Keep the jail door locked. Don't let anyone in — even Abbott — while I'm gone." He meant to speak casually, but he was just a little too emphatic. The implication was like a cold hand on Nita's heart.

"Tex! Who'd attack helpless, wounded men?" she gasped.

"A guilty man. Or a greedy man," said Tex as he left the jail.

Dick muttered, and the clock ticked, but the minute hand wouldn't move while Nita watched it. Mat sighed and stirred;

his eyes opened. She said she wished she could let him out, but Tex hadn't trusted her with that key. Could she get him anything? A drink of water?

That would be fine, he indicated.

He was standing close to the bars as she pushed the cup through, but her arm went through the iron rods as far as the elbow. Would he just take the cup, she wondered, her eyes on the floor. Just accept her as a nurse?

His fingers closed on her wrist, gently, yet some of the water spilled. Her eyes swept up, wide, black, soft with a light like that of late twilight in midsummer.

"I'll bring you another cup, Mat."

"I ain't thirsty, Nita."

"You don't need to hold me."

He reached to take the cup from her fingers, still holding her wrist. He drained the water to the last drop, and unexpectedly let the cup fall. The clatter made her start. For an instant her wrist was out of his fingers; the next, her fingers were clasped in the palm of his hand. She felt the cold iron bar against her temple; his breath on her cheek.

"Even when I first came in, with all on my mind, I kept wondering why you were here first, Nita. And when I saw you stayed —"

"Tex told me to."

"You don't take orders."

"Maybe not."

"I've held you in my arms dancing, but we were never as close as now."

"No," she admitted. She could feel his breath warmer on her cheek. She yearned for him, but — no kiss now. Not when bars lay between them.

Mat sensed her mood, for he let her fingers slip through his hand. They still stood as close, but both were conscious of the barrier.

"You came here to help me."

"That's right."

"But how, Nita?"

"I saw you comin' across the prairie and I was scared the upshot would be a bullet in your back." Nita glanced at the clock. To her consternation, the minute hand now stood well

past the half-hour mark. It had seemed to her that she and Mat had barely exchanged a few words.

"And you ain't clear yet, Mat! Tex is scared you'll be lynched — and he's late!"

They sprang apart.

"Tex can be double-crossin' me again," said Mat coldly. "I had Big Tom beat."

With a spasm of jealousy that wrenched her like something physical, Nita checked the retort that sprang to her lips. He'd fought over Sally — that dirty-faced, dowdy granger.

"Tex thinks different," she said. "Anyhow, it's spilled water."

There was a sharp rap at the door.

"Pass me a gun, quick!" Mat whispered. "There — those are mine on the desk!"

She obeyed. "Shall I answer?" she whispered.

"Why would Tex knock?" Mat whispered. "Careful, Nita! Stand clear, whatever you do!" He backed toward the bunk in the rear of the cell, cocking both guns. "Thank God this ain't an easy jail to rush!"

That it was built of three-foot-thick adobe she knew, and that the doors at front and back were of planks so heavy that they were hard to open she remembered. Now, wanting to look out, she noticed for the first time how high the windows were — higher than a man could reach standing on foot; they were too high for him to shoot over the sill even when in the saddle. Each window had a table under it. Now she saw why.

She sprang on the table. Now she could look out and down into the street. It was empty. Too empty, even for Toltec. No one was even lounging under the wooden awnings. At the jail door stood Tex, alone, in the act of knocking.

"Is it all right?" Nita called uncertainly.

"Sure it's all right!" Tex called back, loudly and angrily. "Throw me down my bunch of keys I left with you, like I told you to!"

Keys? Bunch of keys? But he only left her one key.

She could taste terror and hot excitement in her throat.

"Sure, Tex. In a second," she called back as steadily as she could.

She jumped to the floor. "Mat, Tex wants keys and he

didn't leave any! Something's wrong! Oh, if I could only think — Mat, what shall I do?"

"Did he have his guns?"

"I didn't notice! Keys, he said —"

"Steady, Nita! Steady, girl!" Mat whispered.

He's talking to me as if I'm a horse! But he's right! I'm all shaking. The taste of excitement was like hot copper, but the terror was gone. *He left you one key, Nita Evans. So somehow that must be it. Use it, Nita!*

She ran to Dick's cell and twisted the key in the lock. It stuck. It didn't fit! The terror washed over her. Wrong key! Wrong key for what?

With a sob of relief, she snatched the key from the lock and tried it in the door of Mat's cell. It clicked; the bars moved outward.

Mat pushed past her and scrambled onto the table under the window. The six-guns in his hands went *thump . . . thump* as he climbed.

"Tex! She got me out! It's Mat!" he whispered.

Tex, Tex, you didn't double-cross me A split second ahead all the time . . . Oh, I could love you, Tex, Nita thought.

At the window Mat, after an exchange of whispers with Tex, lifted his gun and fired three shots at random into the street. He wasn't aiming at anything, the object was to make a noise and raise some dust.

"Come out of your holes, Gents!" he shouted. "You're out-foxed, and I'm ready for you with buckshot." Turning toward Nita, Mat motioned with his gun toward the arms rack.

"What did Tex say?" Nita questioned.

"I'll give you his exact words. There weren't many," Mat answered, peering cautiously over the sill of the window. "Tex said, 'Jerry Hackett jumped me from behind. He and a dozen more are covering me right now. Don't try to open the door.'"

"But why didn't Jerry take Tex's keys? They were in his pocket when he went out."

"No *sabe*." Mat frowned with concentration. "Hey, get down!" he ordered, for Nita had vaulted lithely onto the table beneath the other window and was peering into the street. "There's liable to be bees buzzin' through that."

"My daddy was a miner, Mat. I cut my teeth on the dynamite he used to thaw out by the stove."

"Say you chewed the caps and I'll believe you," he grinned. "And didn't I claim you wouldn't take orders?"

"I might take Tex's, if I were a mind to," she teased. "Come to think, Mat, if Tex were far enough ahead of the play to give me the key to your cell and tell me it was Dick's, mightn't he have figured on being jumped when he started to patrol the town — and cached his keys somewhere? I — ah — think you can trust Tex."

"Why?" Mat snapped at her.

Nita made no answer. Her face was pertly beautiful and utterly blank.

"Suit yourself," Mat grumbled. "Say — Duck, Nita! Here comes company."

A dozen armed men had appeared suddenly in the street and were walking purposefully toward the jail door, bunched in a loose file, so that despite gun belts and the blue slant of carbines the group had the air of a delegation rather than a squad advancing to an attack.

Big Tom was not among them. Neither was Abbott, nor Jerry Hackett. In fact, as Mat looked them over, there was not one man who had any prominence in Toltec or the Valley. He recognized five as cowhands from the Flying T. That was a larger number than would have appeared in a group chosen entirely by accident. It looked as though Big Tom were packing the bunch with his own hired hands.

The others were nesters — mostly from the wild bunch, if Mat's suspicions were correct. Swiftly he memorized the faces. The spokesman of the group, however, was a nester named Dusty Neale. Dusty was famous chiefly for being the father of seven children, of whom the eldest was nine. He was not prosperous, naturally. But he was as honest as the Good Book, and as brave as a wild bull.

"Mat, we ain't wishin' no fuss," Dusty hailed in an Arkansas twang. "We-uns have plumb decided Dick is guilty. Leave us in so's we-all kin hang him."

Unconsciously Mat picked up both the accent and the manner. "Dusty, you personal I'll let in, an' welcome," he answered. "There's hombres behind you I don't cotton to."

Dusty Neale paused and stared grimly upward at the jail

windows. "I aim to git me *one* guilty man anyhow — while I can," he said. "If you don't know these men behind me — well, I do. They're neighbors."

Dusty so clearly believed in himself and them that Mat was shaken.

"Nital!" he whispered desperately. "Do you know any of these people? Even Tom's got to have some honest hands —"

"Just folks I've seen around," the girl whispered. "But Tex ain't slimy! He'd never —"

"Damn Tex!" Mat snapped.

Outside Dusty raised his voice. "Go git a log, some of you," he ordered. "We'll bust down this door, and see if Mat will blast his own friends!"

Some of the group ran to obey. Dusty Neale planted himself in front of the jail door. He stared upward as a bull lifts its head to defy an unseen enemy. He was ragged; he had never amounted to anything before, but the sure determination that spoke in every line of his face and figure turned Mat's resolution to water. After all, Dick did deserve hanging. After all, Dusty might be as good a judge of men as he.

A cottonwood log appeared quickly. A log longer than firewood length is not the easiest thing to lay hands on in a hurry, but this one had turned up in less than a minute. Two new Flying T cowhands were helping to carry it. Still the sawed-off shotgun was as heavy as a crowbar in Mat's hands. He couldn't seem to lift it

There was a pound of hoofs and the rattle of an old wagon driven at headlong speed. Into the square careened the Flandreau's work cart. Sally stood in the wagon body, swaying to the jerk and tilt, both hands on the reins as she made the turn, the whip clutched crosswise. The jolting had shaken her hair down her back. She wore the old dress in which she had been at work when the news reached her. Her sleeves were rolled to the elbows as if she had been at a wash tub. A nester ran out to catch the bit of the nigh horse. Otherwise Sally might not have been able to stop the mad gallop of the team, which she had been urging on to the verge of a runaway. She vaulted to the ground and ran for the jail.

Dusty stepped into her path.

"I belong with my brother!" she blazed at him, and dodged by.

He called, "Stop her!"

It was like stopping an elemental force. All Sally saw was the door; irresolute men who reached their hands to halt her saw the love and terror in her face and pawed blindly, a split second too late. Already she was halfway through the group.

"Don't stop her!" rang a shout — clear, unmistakable; the voice of Jerry Hackett from his post of concealment close by. "Follow her, men — *follow her in!*"

The nesters and the Flying T hands closed in behind Sally as dust gathers behind a twister. The beat of her fists on the locked jail door was followed by the jarring thud of the cottonwood battering ram.

Chapter X

FOR MAT the torture of indecision had ended with the recognition of Hackett's voice. That a man who was honest and brave should be stupid and easily deceived was too bad. But whoever had said hell was paved with good intentions must have known someone like Dusty Neale. There was a bitter decision to be made, but at least the shotgun no longer weighed a ton.

"Go to the back door and get ready to slip out," Mat told Nita.

"You're not going to let that she-devil in? She'd knife us both to get to her brother!"

"She'll sure make lynching him difficult," Mat retorted, grimly amused at the insult. "No, it's Jerry I want a shot at."

As Nita started toward the rear of the jail he thrust the shotgun over the sill of the front window. He had hopes that a bluff might be enough. It wasn't.

Both from the group in front of the door and from shelter at various points around the square, the sight of the shotgun barrel drew a storm of lead that showered him with splinters of the window frame and adobe dust. Many were shooting rifles. Otherwise the fire would not have been as accurate. That meant men were posted to get him. It wasn't just Dick they were after.

He looked back. Nita had slid the bolt of the rear door. There'd be someone to cover that exit too — someone the gang could rely on, such as one of the two who had been with Dick that morning. But in a one-street town the backs of the adobes were approximately in a line. In front, the houses on the other side of the street gave an angle of fire; in back the ambush would have to be laid either to right or left, at the corner of a building.

"Don't start out till I join you. When we run, we'll run to the right," Mat called to Nita.

"Only two houses to the prairie that way," she objected.

"That's why they'll be waiting for us the other way," Mat argued.

He saw by her face he had won his point. His next move would turn the Valley against him, but anything else was death.

He sprang erect, fired both barrels into the bunch battering at the door, and ducked.

He drew lead, plenty, but he was quick enough to escape a hit. He heard the wounded scream. He had fired at the edges of the crowd, and fired toward the legs, but buckshot scattered from sawed-off barrels cannot be accurately aimed. He had not shot Sally. Of that he was sure. But Dusty? He didn't know. In the split second of exposure there had been no chance to distinguish among a dozen men all in range clothes. It had been the desperate shot of a man determined to stay and fight it out where he stands, and his blast had dropped more than one victim. He could still hear screams, and the ram no longer battered at the door.

"Fill the wagon with hay! Burn him out!" shouted Hackett.

Mat snapped shells into the shotgun. If Jerry was carrying out his own orders —

But it was Neale who was running for the horses. Mat blasted with both barrels, shooting high. He drew fire, but not as much as before, nor as accurate. They hadn't really expected him to shoot it out. They were disorganized, each wondering what the man next to him would do now, each wanting new orders.

From the cell Dick was yelling, "Lemme out! Lemme out!" His face was crimson with fear and fever.

"Can't!" Mat flung at him. "Heard your 'friends,' did yuh?"

Ain't so sure of 'em now, huh?" This was the time to get information, whether or not he could ever use it. "It was Hackett, wasn't it?" he accused and learned by Dick's expression his guess was right. "When did Big Tom talk to yuh?"

That accusation wasn't true. Dick just yelled, "Lemme out!"

Mat jumped from the table and ran back to Nita.

"Next time I shoot, pull open the door and run to the right."

"Not without you! The door'll be left open —"

"No, latch it. Nita, I got to time this. I'm acting gun-crazy, but I ain't. If I was, I'd let you out. They'll be expecting you to break for it. Maybe they'll show themselves. I'll be just a little behind you."

"You'll never make it to the horses. Nor outside them if you do."

"Got to try."

Her face changed. An instant before her eyes had been enormous. Now they were brilliant and level. She seemed taller. "Sure, we got to try," she said. "I'll latch the door."

He ran to the window. They had found straw and filled the wagon high. They were about to back it toward the jail, sheltered by its bullet-proof mass. He fired, and the return shots were accurate again. He heard the back door of the jail close; he ran to it, stood listening for shots from that side while he counted to ten, to twenty. Then he slipped out into the brilliant sunlight of the dusty, can-littered border between town and prairie.

To the right was nothing. To the left, her bright red dress like fire in the sunshine, Nita heel-and-toed it as fast as she could walk. She was already twenty yards away and about five feet from the building line. So she had guessed he never meant to turn right. She was going, as she must, toward the part of town where horses were. Her head was rigid, eyes straight ahead. As she passed a gap between the adobes her stride did not falter, but when she was well past, she whirled and flung herself to the ground against the adobe wall.

No man ever walked straight toward a hidden gun, located the ambush and revealed it better. Her arm was

pointing backward, but Mat did not need that. He flattened against the wall, one six-gun leveled. She had done her part. The rest was up to him. Around the brown corner of that crumbling adobe, somewhere between two feet from the ground and five, a man was going to show his face as far as the eye. If Mat missed, there'd be plenty to come a-running.

He held his breath and lined his sights.

His concentration was so intense that his shot was by reflex. He was not aware he had fired until a man's body pitched from behind the corner and crumpled face down. Then Mat ran forward. As he passed Nita, she was on her feet, then running with him.

"Next building . . . My house," she panted.

She already had the key in her hand. His mind was on what he should do after she left him — which alley to duck into, when all were equally without cover? whether it would be quicker to cut a horse loose or untie one? When she suddenly seized his arm and pulled sidewise he was thrown off stride; he was swung against her door even as she was unlocking it. She held him to keep him from pulling away.

Her will rather than her push sent him across the threshold — and instantly she shut the door on him and locked it from the outside.

He was so thunderstruck that for what must have been thirty seconds he stood motionless, staring at the heavy planks which cut off his escape. The only thoughts he could summon simply did not make sense. She hadn't — she couldn't — have meant to imprison or betray him. More vivid in his mind than the picture of the falling body of the man he had shot was Nita's figure, tensed against the brown wall, waiting helplessly the outcome of a duel she could assist no further. After the successful shot she had been vibrant with purpose. Surely, she had meant well, but as far as he could see she had blundered. The lure of home is irresistible to the hunted. Her room was sure to be searched.

The reaction of the gunfight washed over him like a wave. He was in a bedroom. The sitting room would be in front, with another door which opened on the street. That might be the idea. If he made a sudden rush from the center of

the block he might be better off than if he came from around an alley corner, as he would be expected to.

He was about to reconnoiter when the key turned in the back door and Nita slipped into the room, instantly bolting the door behind her and leaning against it. Reaction had gripped her, too. Her shoulders sagged, but her eyes were happy. She smiled at the guns he gripped in his fists.

"You can put those away, Mat. There'll be plenty of warning now. Nobody saw me go out, either time."

"You mean someone saw you come in?"

"Big Tom . . . He'll be here in a few minutes, I guess."

"Then —"

"Forget him." Her eyes danced. "Oh, Mat, I'm so proud I'm part Mexican! It's wonderful when you have to trust someone, and you go to your own people and they don't ask questions! I had only seconds to do it all in for I knew they'd come running when they heard the shot, and she just said, 'But certainly, Nita mine, why not?' . . . *¿Sed suguramente, Nita mio, como no?*" The Spanish is sweeter."

Mat's face must have shown that he thought she'd gone out of her head.

"My neighbor next door, *querida mia*," she explained. "Listen, dear. There's an old Mexican couple who live next door. I know them well, of course. When you told me to turn to the right back there at the jail, I knew what you were up to. I'd be out of the shooting, wouldn't I? . . . But I didn't want out, Mat . . . I thought of bringing you here, but that wouldn't be enough by itself. It wasn't a plan. This room is just four walls to die inside. It's no better than the jail."

"Nita, you begin to make sense, but will you hurry up?"

"There's no need to hurry, as you'll see . . . I'm so proud of my Mexican neighbor next door I want to tell this as I thought it out . . . Mat, how many ways are there out of an adobe like this?"

"Two. Front and back doors," said Mat.

"Three," Nita contradicted.

"Well, if you count the windows, three," Mat conceded.

"If you count the windows — *four*," Nita insisted.

"You're wrong. Every one of these adobes is built on solid earth. There's no cellar exit."

"How about the ladder to the roof? Every 'dobe has one," demanded Nita.

"But that's no out! That leads to the roof and no further!" Mat exclaimed.

"It's an out when a neighbor opens her trap door, Mat. That's my plan. I'll bet every gunman in town thinks just the way you do . . . Mat, I thought it out before we ran, and if there was anybody to see us on the street we had no chance. You took care of that. I pushed you in here, and I had, I guessed, about a minute. I pushed open the *Señora* Madero's door.

"Will you hide my friend from the gringos?" I asked. Only I didn't say 'friend,' Mat. I said 'man.' Mexicans understand that better. And she just looked up and answered:

"*¿Suguramente, Nita mio, como no?*" Some people are brave."

"Oh, Nita, kid! Nita!" Mat exulted.

"You'll be careful? You'll trust me, Mat?"

"Forever," he promised.

"You won't snatch at a gun? You'll wait till I can get you out of town? I'll find some way."

"I'll wait."

"I'm so happy," she whispered . . . "You better go now, dear."

Voices sounded in the alley. As he looked down from the top of the ladder, Nita was washing the dirt off her face at a hand basin. He marvelled, as men have since the beginning of time, at the lightning speed with which women can change their expression under the pressure of need.

After reaching the roof and crossing from trap door to trap door, he got another lesson in the directness with which womankind drives to the realities of a situation. He had expected anxiety, if not fright; at least he thought he would find the *Señora* Madero waiting at the bottom of the ladder to see him enter. He climbed down into an empty room. There was a sack of beans in one corner, half empty, and a barrel for corn meal. The door to the rear room was ajar about three inches.

Peering through the gap, he saw the back of an enormously fat woman whose white hair was plaited in Indian braids. She was sitting on a stool placed close enough to an open

window to see everything that went on, and still far enough back to be well out of the way if there were more shooting. She was twisting tamales into their corn-husk coverings.

"But surely I heard the shot!" she cried out in Spanish in answer to a question from the street. "Right before that door — " she pointed — "the gringo parted from the *senorita*. Then he ran on, and she locked her door."

"'S what I told yuh, Jerry! We ought t' be watchin' the hosses — "

A door slammed open.

"He's looking for you, Jerry." That was Nita's voice, cutting as steel. "He'd have got you already, only you sent somebody else out after the wagon. You don't like to walk in front, do you, Jerry?"

The reply was foully obscene.

Señora Madero clicked her tongue. "It is bad luck for those close to hell to call on the Devil," she quoted in Spanish.

"I'm goin' in and pull him from behind your skirts!" Jerry blustered.

"Sure, come in," Nita invited in a tone that dripped contempt. "This is safe! Next place you head into, somebody else goes first — eh, Jerry?"

Jerry searched Nita's house. *Señora* Madero craned her head out to watch.

"The dogs are in no hurry to find the bear," she commented in an undertone to Nita, and her stout shoulders shook with amusement at the answering abuse.

Mobs cool off fast. The bravest man does not relish the prospect of walking through a doorway into the muzzles of two six-guns, and even the wild bunch was well aware that Mat had been protecting a prisoner from a mob.

"You would pay me a visit now, perhaps?" taunted *Señora* Madero. "My man is away until sundown. Here too it is safe to enter, *Señores!*"

She was consigned to a warmer climate than New Mexico, and urged to take various items of unmentionable baggage. In reply she blew them a kiss from the tips of fat fingers, and calmly closed the shutter of her windows.

Rising, she came toward Mat, carrying the pan of tamales.

Her face was a network of wrinkles, earth-colored and warm as earth.

"Sit. My house is yours," she said. "There are frijoles if you hunger, but they are cold. I will heat tamales soon. Rest, for now it is over. They will go to the saloon and drink up courage."

"Señora, I can't thank you enough —"

"It is *me* you would thank?" The pattern of wrinkles shifted into warm mockery; the small black eyes were like a bird's. "What foolishness! Even a gringo should know better." She found a jug and shook it. "Empty," she said. "My man is a good man, except that never yet has he left wine in the jug. There is water there, and if you roll me the cigarette we shall smoke together. Until dark there is nothing but to wait."

"I'd like to get word to Tap and my friends that I'm holed up," said Mat, restless.

"*Suguramente*," was the tranquil answer. "The little Nita is wise . . . Rest, *hombre*. Rest and eat, and if you can, take the siesta."

To sleep, however, was more than Mat could manage, badly as the hours dragged through the forenoon and the longer and more tedious afternoon. From time to time there were bits of news, picked up by *Señora* Madero from passers-by or gossiping neighbors, and relayed to Mat.

Sally was sitting in front of her brother's cell with a six-gun in her lap. Three men had been struck by buckshot. None had died, though on one Moss Abbott had been forced to use his longest probe. The storekeeper-doctor swore that the bullet was a good four inches in the flesh.

Dusty Neale had gotten roaring drunk. He was vowing to everyone that he would not help "that sidewinder Mat Karney on this or any other roundup." Hearing this, Mat reflected grimly that one result of the morning had been to make him "short" in his own Valley. The law might be on his side, but his popularity was gone, while Tom's was rising. Of course, Dusty was talking through whiskey. But nevertheless, any chance of organizing the law-abiding nesters would be very slim for a good many months to come.

That was bad news. So was the fact that no one made any attempt to prevent Jerry Hackett from prowling the

town. Despite the stampede, a good half of the Flying T riders were still in Toltec. The search for Mat, though desultory, had not been abandoned. They knew he was hiding somewhere. Little by little, the possibilities were being narrowed down.

On the other hand, Tap Carter and Doughbelly Bates rode in about three o'clock. That made two guns which would surely back Mat. Hen Flandreau joined Sally at the jail. That made three factions. Any trouble now would have to be quick and decisive, or end in a full-fledged war that nobody wanted. Best of all, Waco Stroude arrived about four. He put Dick under arrest as a material witness to homicide. That was smarter than Waco usually was, Mat reflected. It kept Waco from taking sides. The next news was that Waco had called for deputies to keep the peace. Both Tap and Big Tom had applied. Waco would have neither—which was being neutral again—but deputized Tex as a county officer as well as marshal.

When the second star was on his shirt, Tex promptly "found" his keys—under the boardwalk a few steps from the jail, where he had dropped them. Darkness was beginning to fall. Drinks would be adding up to reckless plans. Mat himself was too itchy to sit still.

"You climb back now," said *Señora* Madero suddenly.

"Nita ain't back yet. I want to get word to Tap. If he has horses ready I can make a break, come dark.

Señora Madero shrugged vast shoulders. "Even the village half-wit can count sheep," she quoted. "You are restless, *hombre*. That is bad for the head. He who saddles a spare horse expects to find a rider, is it not so? . . . But my man cuts wood for *Señor* Parks in the winter. If he finds you here, he might think a word might earn him many jugs of wine. I do not wish to be angry with my man. He is a drunkard; nothing worse."

"A friend leaves you who will never forget this day," said Mat earnestly. The words sounded stilted to him, but the graciousness was what the old mother wanted. The sharp black eyes misted over. She must have been beautiful, once, he thought. *She's aces up yet, and if this hadn't happened I'd just have gone along thinking of her as one more Mex.*

The thought went with him up and down the ladders and

stayed with him in the darkness of Nita's room. He started out of a brown study when he heard the girl unlocking the door. There was urgency in the action.

"Mat?"

"Yes!"

"Big Tom and Jerry and the Flying T are up to something. They began slipping out of the saloon one by one."

"Think they've guessed?"

"They've had hours to figure . . . Probably."

Faintly, from the far edge of town, men began shouting. In the dark Nita clutched Mat's left arm. "Don't move. Listen!"

"They're yelling, 'Fire!' I think. — Yeah, that was clear. They've set a fire. Our boys will go to put it out. It always works." Mat drew a gun. "Better pick a safe spot, Nita. Did you get word to Tap?"

"Didn't dare speak. I *looked* at Tex."

"Looked?"

"It's enough. He's smart."

With a crash the glass in both the rear windows was knocked in by two sweeps of revolver barrels. Simultaneously there was a crash of glass from the front.

"Reach high, Mat!" roared Big Tom Parks.

"Belly up to the window! We got yuh!" yelled Jerry Hackett.

But neither fired. With a spasm of despair, Mat sensed the play. Behind the window sills, they were in better cover than he. If he fired, they had only to shoot under the flash. If he didn't, one of them would. The other would get him by the light of the gun flash.

He shoved at Nita to push her away. She clung tight. One hand covered Mat's mouth.

"You skunks! You dirty, low-minded skunks!" she called out in cold fury.

"Shut up! You ain't alone!"

"No?" Nita cried. "I'll count to three. Then I walk to the window and blast anything I see. Shoot if you dare. One —"

Her arm was around Mat's waist, too tight to shake off. The thrust of her shoulders pushed him forward.

"— two — three!"

They were at the window, but no one waited there. For

Big Tom and Hackett the choice had lain between a quick bullet and the gallows. They had gone off.

"*Nina mio!*" cried *Señora* Madero.

"*Es nada* — it is nothing. Just men who are drunk," Nita called back. She reached out and closed the wooden shutter.

"*Suguramente. Es nada. ¿Como no?*" the old woman called back softly. "But I shall watch for a while. I too have a gun."

"No," Mat decided. He whispered, but with a firmness that silenced argument. "I'll do all the watchin' from here on. Nita, you go into the front room. Bolt the door behind you, and get some sleep. *Señora*, you said your man might be comin' home. Don't let him notice anything unusual."

"But I can't possibly sleep —" Nita began.

"You will, once you make yourself relax," Mat told her. "Listen, *querida*: I'm alive now because of you. Nothing's going to hurt you from now on because of me."

Chapter XI

WITHIN a few minutes Mat himself was struggling to stay awake — struggling, and losing. When he tore himself out of a deep slumber it was like a fly dragging itself from syrup — clogged and leaden. Again came the sound which must have roused him. A finger scraped the door. He cocked his six-gun.

"Nita?" whispered Tex. "It's me."

"This is Mat."

"Well, damn you, get Nita and come out pronto. Big Tom's been drinking and he's going to head this way. Hell won't stop him again."

"You arrestin' me?"

"No, damn you, I'm getting you out of town! For keeps. Get Nita out of here, too. What in hell did you have to drag her into your fight for?"

"That's my business," Mat retorted. He crossed the room and knocked softly at the bolted door. It was several minutes before Nita was awake and ready; when they emerged onto the street Tex was fuming with impatience.

Halfway to the jail, Mat made out the shadow of a man, kneeling beside the jail door with a rifle. Mat walked on, with knots in his stomach. It was Waco Stroude, who only

grunted as Mat passed him and continued to cover Tex, now walking swiftly toward the jail.

Inside the jail the only light was from one lantern, turned low and set in a box so as to throw a dim glow upward, and yet give almost no illumination by which anyone outside could see into the interior. In the office were Tap Carter, and Sally, and Hen. In the cell Dick breathed stertorously.

As Mat entered they were all tensed, which was comprehensible enough with a getaway to put through. What he did not understand was the reason why everyone was staring at him with bitter, narrow-eyed jealousy. Even Sally sat with clenched hands fisted in her lap. She looked through Mat, not at him.

"I thank you for guarding Dick," she said. "I see now that Jerry and the others would have hanged him."

The cold words seemed to stick in her throat.

Tex entered and holstered his gun. He refused to meet Mat's eyes.

"Okay, Tap. Signal to Doughbelly," he ordered. "Now this has got to be done just right. Mat, Doughbelly's at the hitchrack. When he gits the signal, he's going to mount and grab two lead horses, one for you and one for Tap. He's going to come by the back door of the jail on the dead lope, and he won't have much start. You and Tap swing into the saddle as the horses pass, and then you hightail it out into the prairie. Keep going, and don't come back to town until I send you the word. Get it?"

"I can catch a running horse," Mat said evenly. "But I don't like your tone."

"None of us like you, either," Tex answered. "Shut up, and save your ornery hide."

Tap stopped the quarrel from going further by lifting the lantern out of the box, and, holding it high above his head. He walked past the front window, throwing a beam of light into the street. Quickly he dropped the lantern back in the box and ran to the back door, motioning Mat to follow.

The getaway itself went like clockwork. The drum of hoofs was a long twenty seconds ahead of the first shout. A brief check at the jail door, a snatch at saddle horns, and two more men were in the saddle, loping into a darkness

that hid them securely within fifty yards. But it was a get-away without a cheerful yell, or a wish for good luck.

Even out on the open prairie, after the three Bar K riders were far enough from Toltec to stop and rest the horses, and roll cigarettes for themselves, Mat felt a barrier between himself and his sidekicks which was both new and incomprehensible. Tap wasn't depressed, and he didn't seem to be angry. He just answered every question Mat brought up in a monosyllable, and never asked a question of his own. He just wasn't the old Tap.

When the three reached the Bar K, Mat couldn't stand it any longer. He didn't even wait for the meal to cook. Tap had just lighted the lantern in the kitchen and Doughbelly was bent over the wood box to start the fire for the fry.

"Who'll have a drink with me?" Mat said. He meant to sound cheerful and casual, but the words came out flat. A man who drinks with another wipes out any ill-feeling that may be between them. Mat was in a mood to wonder whether Tap would drink with him, and the doubt was clear in his tone.

"Well — okay," Tap replied, slowly and as if he were doubtful too.

"Who-ow! Them's kind words," Doughbelly spoke up gratefully. "Gimme the big tumbler, Mat, and turn your head when I pour."

"Choke yourself and welcome, kid," Mat grinned, greatly relieved. He added earnestly, "Tap, something's mighty wrong between us. I've got to know what. We've got a wild bunch to fight."

Tap tossed his whiskey down. "I'm a cowhand on wages," he retorted bitterly. "I got no reason to fight except I like my boss." The Indian face lifted with one glance of pure hate. "What gripes me is that I ain't got one word to say. I just would like to kill yuh and can't find no damn excuse."

With a violent movement, Tap snatched the blanket from his bunk, strode to the door, and turned. "I'm sleeping out tonight," he announced. "You're damn right, Mat. Things ain't like they was."

"Do you savvy what he means?" Mat asked Doughbelly as the door shut.

The cowhand finished the rest of his whiskey. "Yeah," he explained. "Tap is in love with Nita. So is Tex. Now they both know she likes you the best, and that you and she are going to 'get married.'"

"That all?"

"All?" Doughbelly exploded. "No, it ain't all! Is Nita a girl a man can give up easily? Are you a half-wit, or ain't you ever been jealous?"

Mat sat silent.

"You can marry Nita by saying one word. Well — are you going to say it, or have you said it?" demanded Doughbelly accusingly.

"I've never said I loved her. Not yet," Mat answered.

"Then make up your mind before an ex-friend puts a bullet in your back," Doughbelly flared. "Good night! I'm sleepin' out, too!"

The ranch-house door slammed a second time.

Mat had never been a man to lie to himself. He hadn't been in love with Nita yesterday. She'd just been a very, very pretty girl.

And what was she now? There could be no pretending any more. Not by anyone; least of all, by him.

The shadow of the bottle on the table pointed at him like an accusing finger. The fact was that he could not say, "She's going to be my wife forever, thank God!"

The realization shocked him. Startlingly enough, his recollection of Nita's beauty was extraordinarily vivid. He wanted her; that was certain. What astounded him was that personal admiration still left part of his being negative and critical.

She was brave and she was proud. Her wits were faster than his. But that was all right. He was no two-bit tinhorn, to be ashamed to execute his wife's ideas, provided they were good. However, she certainly admired Tex, and stuck up for him. Maybe — maybe Nita really loved Tex.

"You wish you could believe that, but you don't," Mat told the empty room. "She's always met you more than halfway. She's happy, and you can't back out on her. You couldn't look yourself in the face if you did."

He pushed away the bottle. The accusing finger of shadow was too straight and direct to face any longer, but it had

goaded him into the truth. He was not proud of himself. But not being proud was a very different thing from being ashamed, and he knew now what he had to do.

From the shelf he brought the ruled tablet and the pencil, and sat down to write:

Nita dear,
You were wonderful

He stared at the words for a minute; then he tore off the sheet and burned it in the stove.

Wonderful, he thought to himself with a sneer. *Nita girl, I ain't slapping your face. Either I write you, "I love you," or I write nothing.* He began again.

Dear Nita,

There's no use hoping jealous folks will act sensible. I am not sorry, except that I made trouble for you.

I have got to talk to you, and so I am coming to Toltec tomorrow. Leave word at the saloon where you want to meet me, if you're willing to see me. I hope you will, Nita. I'm all mixed up, but I don't think I can stand it if you don't.

MAT

Mat folded that sheet and began on the next one:

Mr. Tex Smith

Town Marshal

Dear Sir:

I am going to ride into Toltec about ten o'clock tomorrow morning. You warned me to stay out of town, but I got important business.

You can take this any way you like.

Yours truly,

MATTHEW KARNEY

With the two letters Mat went out into the darkness and called for Doughbelly until the cowboy answered.

"Hate to ask you to ride, kid, but it's necessary," Mat said. "Deliver one of these to Nita and the other to Tex as early in the morning as you can. Don't wake them up tonight. I won't show up before ten. After they get the letters, you

might circle out and meet me. I want to know if Big Tom and Jerry are in Toltec before I start up the street."

Out of the night Tap Carter materialized behind Doughbelly.

"What you aiming to do, Mat?" he asked coldly.

"I don't care to say," Mat said.

Chapter XII

AT TEN O'CLOCK the next morning the town of Toltec seemed to be dozing in the sun. Yet Mat was still a long half-mile from the single street of straggling adobes when a lone horseman came loping out to intercept him. The town was a trap; the only question in Mat's mind was whether he was the trapper, or the prey.

He quickened his pace, selecting a hollow in the prairie a little more than halfway to town as the place of meeting. Even after he had identified the oncoming rider as Doughbelly, he kept off the skyline.

"Mat, you're shorter back yonder than a horned toad's tail!" Doughbelly hailed. "Ain't nobody pleased to hear you're comin' visitin'!"

"Not Nita?"

"Well, she did smile when I spoke to her. But the worry wrinkles wiped off her smile right quick. 'Oh, Mat!' she kinda whispered to herself. Then the worry came and she sat staring right through me like I wasn't there. 'Tell him I'm glad,' she said. Then she said, 'He shouldn't have done it. Tell him not to try to find me. It's too risky. Tell him *Señora* Madero will find him if it's safe, and to follow her to me.'"

Doughbelly cleared his throat. "Tex give me a note for you," he went on. "Here it is."

Mat took the slip of paper and read:

See me at the jail before you try to find Nita. You can take this any way you like too, but I mean it fair and square.

Remember that Waco and I sent you out of town to stop the fighting. We aren't on your side.

TEX SMITH
Town Marshal

"Whole town kinda suspected you'd be back," Doughbelly declared uneasily.

"Why? Did Tex talk?" Mat asked sharply.

"Not to me. Stood there looking like he'd swallowed a big chaw of tobacco — you know, mean and sick both at once. Then he scratched that note off. But plenty seen me go first to Nita and then to him."

"Okay, Doughbelly," Mat interrupted curtly, "you ride about ten yards to my left and as much behind me. When I go into a building, you stay outside, savvy? Cover me, but just keep in mind this ain't a Bar K matter, and you've got no call to mix into any shooting."

Mat led the way in a wide circle that kept out of rifle shot of the town until he was opposite the back door of Nita's house. Then he swung sharply to his right and rode straight for her door, in complete disregard of Tex's request. Mat hoped that Nita or the *señora* would give him a signal, but the doors and shutters of the twin adobe houses remained tightly closed. He began to have the feeling that he was riding at a wall of earth, at something tenantless and lifeless, like the husk of a nut with the kernel gone. The presentiment was strong enough to make him draw rein. Down the row of houses, at the same instant, the door of the jail swung open, revealing Tex.

"Come here, hombre," he commanded in his big rolling voice.

Mat took a last keen look at the motionless doors and shutters; then shrugged, made a sign to Doughbelly, and obeyed. He felt disappointed and sullenly angry. He ground-reined his pony close to the open door, and strode into the jail.

"If you hadn't come back I reckon I'd be out now helping to get you killed," Tex began abruptly. "As it is —" The marshal shrugged huge shoulders.

The inference was clear enough. Mat, however, wanted it unmistakable. "I never knew you were that much in love with Nita," he said.

"You know it now," Tex told him. "I guess I had to lose her to know how damn much in love with her I was. I've had a night to think it over. A man has got to stand being second-best. But I couldn't stand thinking you weren't serious

about Nita. When I got your note, I knew you were on the level with her."

"I always was, and am," Mat affirmed.

"So now I reckon you can sit down," said Tex with a sour smile. "I ain't going on the prod this morning anyway. That leaves three things. First off, what about Dick here? I recommend you withdraw your charge and let me turn him loose."

"After fighting to keep him?" Mat exclaimed.

"That was yesterday. You can hold him for trial, but you know you can't convict him. Not before a local jury."

"Probably you're right," Mat conceded. "But if I turn him loose I figure the gang he was working with will shoot him to shut his mouth."

"Not unless he's guilty. Not unless he really did help them drygulch Johnny Regan," Tex pointed out. "Admit it, Mat. If you're right, it would only be justice. If you're wrong — well, releasin' him would be a generous thing to do."

Mat looked up keenly. He had caught a flicker of self-interest and evasion in the pale blue eyes of the marshal.

"Nothing doing. That's too cold-blooded for me, and Dick is Sally's brother," he decided.

"Suit yourself. Second, you killed one of Tom's cowpokes yesterday."

"As he was trying to drygulch me from behind a corner!" Mat protested.

"You got no witness to that but Nita," Tex retorted. "I'm warning you, Mat — Tom Parks ain't above using perjury. He can get even with you by a false oath and a lawman's rope a lot safer than by facin' your gun. I figure he'll be back in town to swear out an indictment by tomorrow morning at latest."

Mat sat scowling. What Tex suggested was only too probable. If he allowed himself to be jailed, the Bar K would be stolen blind. If he took to the high country to avoid arrest, folks would consider him guilty. Either way, he would be cut off from Nita.

"It might suit you to get me off this range quick, Tex," he suggested.

Almost to Mat's surprise, there was no evasion in the marshal's eyes. Before he opened his mouth Mat was convinced that his rival was talking the straightest truth.

"It would. If you get shot or hanged it suits me fine," Tex admitted frankly. "But this is a fact, too, and it's one you can tie to between us. I'll take Nita away from you if I can, but if I do, I'm going to be able to look her in the eye and say, 'It was no double cross of mine that finished Mat Karney.' And that's the third thing I've got to tell you: Jerry Hackett is still in town, and I don't know where. He's out to get you. Probably will, but if he don't, you take to the owl-hoot, Mat. You've got no chance in court against Tom Parks!"

"I reckon you did look for Jerry. And thanks," said Mat quietly. "Well — here's wishing you lots of disappointment." He grinned and rose. Tex grinned back. Neither offered to shake hands.

"Go to Abbott's and pretend you want to buy a shirt," said Tex. "It won't be quite as you think, but that's where you'll find *Señora Madero* — just in case my using that name may ease your mind some. It's only a step, and I'll cover you from the jail door."

"Let's go," Mat agreed. Perhaps he should have been forewarned, but his mind was on the risk of moving between the two buildings.

He made the crossing to Abbott's store, ducked inside — and found himself facing Sally Flandreau.

Her gray eyes were as cold as the sky before dawn. Mat thought, *She's angry. She's* — He groped for another word, but there was none to fit.

"D — did you want to see me?" he stammered.

"I won't ever want to see you. I'm waiting for you because I have a debt to square up."

"You owe me nothing. The gloves were a free gift."

"My brothers done you mean. *I'm payin' for them.*"

She wore a shirtwaist of some thin white material faintly striped with brown. The long sleeves were buttoned tight to her wrists; the collar was high and tight to her throat. The chestnut hair was drawn back from her ears and piled on her head. Everything was tight, covered.

"You remember when you left the dugout in the storm?" she said. "Dick told you to git, and I stuck by my brother. Later on, it's known all three of us was out of the dugout

by midnight, and wasn't back by dawn. Big Tom Parks made a heap out of that. And you went for a gun."

"I ain't asking you to explain, Sally."

"I ain't asking you to explain, either, Mat. What's done is done. I ain't trying to excuse Dick. I — you were stand-offish and hard to me, Mat, but you were square! Or I thought so! I wanted to be square too. After you left, I made Hen go out with me to hunt a cow that was sick and weak and might get trampled in the stampede. Dick was drinkin' and wouldn't go. I never saw him again until he was in jail."

"You mean — did you find her?" Mat cried out. "The cow that Jerry shot with a .22? The one that will tie him to the rustling?"

"We found her and skinned her. Took us most of the night in the dark and rain. Here's the bullet that killed her."

Sally handed Mat the pellet of lead. On the base she had scratched her initials, S. F. It was an oddly shaped bullet. One side was scraped, as if the muzzle of the rifle from which it had been fired had been damaged by falling on a rock. The rifle that had fired this bullet could be identified.

"I marked it so I could swear to it," Sally said. "The hide is buried near the break in the fence where you had that ruckus with the boys."

"That hide may save the Bar K — and my neck, too, Sally," said Mat with fervent thanks.

"Hope so," Sally answered in a tone that made it coldly evident that she did not care. "The .22 rifle is hid in Tom Parks' ranch-house. I wormed that out of Dick this morning. Now am I paid up?"

"In full," Mat said.

"Then good-by."

"Not that way, Sally. I don't like a favor thrown in my face," said Mat firmly.

The gray eyes transfixed him. "You got nothing to say I care to hear. You like Nita better than me. You did take her to the dance, but afterward I thought maybe you were changing, and —" Sally stopped abruptly.

"From bein' what?" Mat demanded.

Sally started to speak, thought better of it, and said, "A right good cattleman. I hope you best the rustlers. This

morning, I'll own you were right that Dick is safer in jail. I hope he stays there a spell."

"I want to hear what you shut your mouth on just then," Mat insisted.

"Ain't for me to pass judgment on you."

"What did Nita say to you when you went down the line together at the *baillee*?"

It was a blunder, but the question pierced through Sally's icy surface to the fiery lava within.

"Don't name that woman to me, you — you baby whinin' for candy!" she flared. "What she said you can ask her, but what I answered was, 'A man brings home the fruit he has to climb to pick.'"

There was a flash of gray eyes, and Sally walked straight past Mat out into the sunlit street. Moss Abbott came fussing up.

"There's a Mexican woman who sweeps out here that's been asking for you," he began. "You know a *Señora Madero*? She's in the storeroom."

"Sure do," Mat nodded. "She's out back, huh? I'll find her."

He knew whom he would find. The *señora* waddled to meet him, nodded at a door and grinned, and then began to sweep the corridor. At the sound of Mat's step the door opened an inch. He pushed through and took Nita in his arms.

"So," she whispered. "So . . . you are not so mixed up, now? *Querida*, did you think I would change? Did you think I would care who is jealous of us? I love you. That is all I need to say. That is all I need."

"I ran out on you."

"Yes," she said. "But you see I am not angry. I have forgotten it, Mat. So should you. You had to leave me. You will again. But if you come back, I shall not care."

"Why weren't you at your house? I wanted to come straight to you."

"I know, Mat. But I . . . just couldn't face going to the saloon." Her tone and expression were apologetic. "Even though that would have been the safest place for you. But to go among all those men and sit down behind a glass of whiskey—" Nita faltered. "Do you savvy, Mat?" she pleaded.

"It would have cheapened you, and it would have made me look cheap, and I can't stand that. I've done nothing I'm ashamed of, ever."

"Take it easy, honey," Mat soothed. "I'm here to look after you."

"*Querida!*" she acknowledged proudly. Her former verve and flash seemed to return. For the first time he noticed that she was wearing a pure white cotton dress, of Mexican cut, but with the draw string at the shoulders pulled tight, so that the dress hugged her throat, almost hiding the necklace of raw gold nuggets. The slim fingers were bare of rings; naturally, there was no rouge.

"Actually, both of us are looking out for each other, and that's how it'll be from now on," she said. "Fact is, you're in a tight spot, and I've been worried loco since sunup. I know Tom left to bury his foreman —"

"His what? Was it Rod Baxter I shot?" exclaimed Mat.

"Didn't you know?"

"I saw nothing but my sights and a target," Mat replied grimly. "Rod Baxter, huh? Never dreamed he'd be in town with a stampede on."

"Tex figures that shows Tom wanted to get you more'n to save his cattle."

"You and Tex are right chummy," Mat growled jealously.

"Still, he's right. Tom's got to get me to even up for a dead foreman, or he won't be king-pin in the Valley."

"Also I can't find Jerry Hackett, either."

"Why should you, if Tex can't?" Mat grumbled.

"Because the *señora* and I sent out every Mexican kid in town to hunt for him," Nita replied. "I'm using a dozen pairs of eyes to Tex's one, with no better luck. All I've learned is where Jerry *isn't*. That's every occupied building in town. The *niños* have gone everywhere they weren't locked out."

"I'll handle Jerry." Mat's disapproval was so obvious that Nita shook her dark head and made a little face.

"I did not want to talk to Tex," she protested with a sincerity that even Mat had to recognize. "I have never wished to be a man, as so many girls do. *Querida*, believe me. I want to be the woman — the one to whom you come for joy and the gayer heart, the one who rests you and sends you out of her door again with nothing knotted or tangled within you."

But now there is too much for one to face alone. So do you mind if I fight too? You need me today worse than yesterday."

Mat nodded. "Fact is, I know Tex is in love with you, and I don't like to see the two of you working together," he acknowledged honestly. "He'd do anything for you. Fact is, he was close to letting me be drygulched to have you."

"He is too much man for that."

"Reckon so, but he's sure rootin' for Jerry today," Mat retorted drily. "You drive men crazy. Even Tap was ready to quit."

"Forget them, Mat."

"Okay." He drew both guns and examined the loads carefully. "No use to duck out on Jerry," he thought aloud. "I'd rather he'd try an ambush here than in the hills, where he has sidekicks. If I get out of town, Nita, I'll have to keep going. For months, maybe. Until Tom Parks and I stand even before the law."

She nodded, sitting quietly, the slim hands in her lap. With a sudden flash of insight he realized that this was another picture which would never be erased from his mind. There were three: a slender hand holding a tin cup of water; a tense, prone figure in red, pointing out an assassin; and last, this quiet girl in white who accepted the inevitable with dry eyes. Unbidden rose a fourth picture: Sally's profile against the evening sky, a gray-eyed girl with a wind-tanned skin and strong cheekbones.

Mat shook his head sharply to clear it.

"There is something . . . you ought to tell me?" asked Nita keenly.

"Nothing. Just thinking," he evaded. He reached for the notebook and pencil which every cattleman carries, and wrote rapidly on two leaves. He handed Nita both documents.

"Use them when and if you think best," he instructed.

She read. "This withdraws the charge against Dick Flan-dreau." She added. "That might be useful. Yes, that is wise. But this —" She waved the second paper — "deeds me the Bar K. Mat, I don't want this. I could sell you out tomorrow."

"I may need cash in a hurry."

"Not this much. A few hundred dollars would get you to Mexico, or even Canada."

"Then call it paying a debt," he told her almost roughly. "You saved my life. I want it this way. To even up."

Nita folded the deed slowly, creasing it with her thumb nail. She was thinking, *He's not afraid. This is no excuse to get himself out of the Valley. But this is the first time he has been weak. He wants me to decide for him . . . about me. All right. I will. I ought to tear this up, but I won't.*

Very quietly she answered. "Very well, Mat. If you want it this way, so do I. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. I'd like to know what you said to Sally at the *baille*."

Nita thought, *I knew it. Sally tried to get him back. I'd better not lie, because she probably told him.*

She answered, "I told Sally that men don't eat sour fruit. And she came back that I was a half-rotten apple, or something like that. She's always insulted me."

"She's not as ornery as you believe."

"Her brothers will always come first with her," said Nita coldly. "Mat, why did you have to spoil it? We only have a few minutes more together!"

"I did spoil it, didn't I," he said. "Nita, if you know where Jerry isn't, how many places were you locked out of?"

"Two, Mat. The jacale one house up from mine, and the livery barn the mine teams used to use."

"Barn's out of sight of the rear of your house," Mat commented. "Okay, honey. I've figured out what to do. Be thinking of me when I hit the owl-hoot."

Mat really did not know why he had given Nita the deed to the Bar K. It had been an impulse, but one for which he was deeply and subconsciously happy.

His idea for the duel with Jerry Hackett hinged on a shrewd appraisal of the character of his enemy. Jerry loved to work under cover. He also enjoyed being brazen about it. To have paid off his bet at the roundup in paper money was characteristic of him. It was like saying, "I robbed that train. I killed your Sally's old man, and I'm so smart I can let you know it."

The same reckless self-confidence and total disregard of what the range might think lay behind the choice of Toltec as the scene of the coming ambush. Success in a cattle war depends upon getting the Indian sign on the men who are wavering over which side to join. From the time of King

Fisher and the Fence Cutter's War in Texas, through the Lincoln County War and clear down to the Johnson Country War in 1892, which marked the end of gunman's rule, the principals in practically every feud fought to a finish. Victory went to the side which could gain recruits, either by maneuvering the law into fighting for them, as was done in Lincoln County, or by convincing the range that to resist was not merely to lose your life, but to throw it away — as Tom Horn all but accomplished in the Johnson County drygulchings.

Mat had not merely outfought the wild bunch on the previous day. He had out-maneuvered and out-lucked them. The answer to that was to shoot him down in broad daylight in the middle of Toltec's one street — to prove the wild bunch had gunmen willing to turn outlaw. And for Mat to escape the trap would not be enough. To increase his prestige he must make the wild bunch look like stupid fools who sacrificed their warriors uselessly.

He was gambling his life on the accuracy of Nita's information — plus a bit of psychology entirely his own.

When he reached the main room of the store he stopped at the hardware counter. Moss Abbott, swallowing and shaking with excitement at the thought he would be the last to talk to Mat before the fight, came trotting to wait on him. Moss reached to the shelf for revolver shells.

"You got me plumb wrong," said Mat gravely. "I want a parlor lamp, Moss. A great big glass one. I want it to hold about a gallon of coal oil. Don't care nothing about the cost."

"You funnin'?" gasped the storekeeper.

"None whatever. Fill her with oil, Moss, and light her. You know, sometimes a new wick don't burn good."

Abbott brought the lamp and fumbled with the oil can. "Mat, I kin send for your horse," he whispered. "I'll git him close to the door so you can jump into the saddle —"

Mat lifted the shade from the ornate lamp and nodded approvingly at the flaming wick.

"Burns nice," he said, and dropped two double eagles on the counter. "Keep the change, just in case you git other work to do . . . I don't need my pony."

"Don't need — looka here, you can't walk out of town! I never heard of a cowboy walking!"

"You know," said Mat in a mildly surprised tone, "neither

have I. Plumb interestin' fact, Moss. Cowboys ride in the open street, out in the sun. Townies walk under the wooden awnings, in the shade."

He picked up the flaming lamp and strode swiftly out the front door. The distance to the jacale was less than a hundred yards. Most of the buildings on the front side had awnings against the sun. The gaps were little more than alleys, and Mat crossed on the jump, his shoulder brushing the wall. He'd taught Jerry something about roofs yesterday. A man on the roof of a jacale could cover the street on both sides, but when he looked straight down, all he could see were the sun-warped boards of the sidewalk awnings.

Those men who were outside jumped for doorways. Possibly that warned Jerry, but there was no time now for him or Mat to change plans. If Jerry were on the ground floor — if his plan was to shoot through a crack in the shuttered windows —

Mat set his teeth and leaped for the nearest window of the jacale, thrust the barrel of his revolver through a crack in the sun-warped boards, and wrenched loose a plank. He hurled the lamp through the gap, shattering the glass bowl, drenching the shutter and the floor inside with flaming kerosene. Then he ran on, shoulder scraping the wall, tensed for the impact of a bullet plunging from above to the alley beyond the adjoining building. From the store to the jacale had taken perhaps sixty seconds; from smashing the shutter to the alley, five.

Mat moved back from the building corner and stood poised, both guns drawn. On his right hand, the door of the jacale was about thirty feet away. Smoke was beginning to curl lazily over the top of the shutters. To his left, the adjoining adobe extended backward about twenty-five feet. Jerry might come either way.

The townies were watching. He could feel their eyes. He felt the palms of his hands begin to sweat on the grips of his guns. His eyes jumped from the curl of smoke to the line of the roof, to the edge of the building at his left. Waiting was worse than moving; this was worse than moving forward, watching for the head that had been Rod Baxter's.

He saw Jerry's head and then his gun-hand snake over the edge of the roof. Mat ducked before the shot came. The

bullet missed by two feet. Mat did not fire. The sight of his enemy was an immense relief. He dared to wipe his hands swiftly, moved back a yard, and waited, like a cat watching a mouse hole. His stomach was knotted, but his heart had stopped pounding.

To his left, Doughbelly rode into sight, a hundred yards out on the prairie. At the same instant, a larger curl of smoke puffed out from the front of the jacale, then dwindled. Mat guessed that Jerry had flung open the front door.

Suddenly Jerry leaped into the street. He landed crouched, two guns flashing. Mat pulled trigger: right gun, left gun, right gun — cocking as his Colt jerked his arm up. He couldn't drop Jerry. His left Colt dropped from his fingers; he didn't know why. His right gun boomed. Jerry was folding at the waist. He seemed to bow, then pitch into the dust. His guns were under him; his hands, behind him and palm up in the dust, lay limp. Not a finger twitched. A gray hat, a faded blue flannel shirt, new blue Levis lay flat in the dust as discarded clothes.

Blood was trickling down Mat's left arm. He could feel no pain. He unbuttoned his sleeve and saw the burn of a bullet on the outside of his arm an inch above the elbow. It was trifling. There was a hole through his shirt on the left side. That shot had been three inches from killing him.

People were running toward him. He picked up his gun and walked down the middle of the street, toward Abbott's. There was no need to look at Jerry. Mat moved like a sleep-walker, his face twitching, blood dripping from his left hand, ignoring those who rushed to him, jabbering or shouting, then to fall back to let him pass.

He went on to Abbott's, to Moss Abbott himself, where Mat held out his arm.

"Fix it," he said. He gulped, wiped his right hand across his face. "That — that was a good lamp." He staggered and kept himself from falling by bracing both hands on the counter.

Nita pushed Moss out of the way. "Bring whiskey!" she snapped. She caught a chair and pushed Mat into it. As his breathing steadied she held the whiskey to his lips; then she wiped his face with a wet cloth and started to bandage his arm. The burn of the antiseptic as much as the liquor

dispelled the effects of shock. He managed to smile up into her face. It was as white as her gown.

"You've got to rest a spell!" she commanded.

He shook his head and motioned at the circle around them. There was Moss; there were townies; there was Sally, tight-lipped and self-controlled, but there was no big man with a leonine bush of yellow hair.

"Tex must be swearing in deputies," Mat said to remind Nita the marshal was permitting him to escape. "I've got to git, honey. I think, though, I'll walk my horse out of town. I'll square it for the burned jacale, Moss. Just see the story gets told straight, though — particularly that I *walked* out."

Nita glanced around the circle — first at Sally; then at the curious, the eavesdroppers, the gossips.

"Mind if I walked with you, Mat?" she asked.

He was silent an instant. He could sense the triumph in Nita's question. His eyes moved to notice Sally's tight-lipped endurance.

"You've earned the chance, Nita, since you ask," he decided.

Within an hour the story was told and retold fifty times in Toltec. From town it spread over the range.

"He smoked Jerry out with a parlor lamp and gunned him down in the open. Then he walked the length of the street with Nita Evans on his arm. Walked out, I tell yuh! And at the edge of town, he climbed into the saddle and lifted her clear off the ground to kiss her. She was wearing a white dress, and I saw her against the blue sky till Mat was out of sight over the rise of the baldies. Then she walked back, the full length of the street and right in the middle of it, and turned into her own house. I tell yuh, she was like a queen."

Chapter XIII

HONEST COWBOYS work in the valleys. The outlaw rides high, along the upland benches and tree-clad mountain slopes where cattlemen seldom have reason to come, and where the chance intruder can be seen far off, and easily eluded. But life on the owl-hoot is lonely, tedious, and, above all, futile. The outlaw can look down on the range he has left, and yet,

as far as taking any active part in any events, he is out of it, an outsider, a wanderer who has exchanged the chance of effective action for personal safety.

Such inactivity, Mat realized, would suit Tom Parks almost as well as having Mat in jail. He had the Indian sign on Tom at this moment, but he must use it quickly. What he needed was to build up a following of his own. The best man to begin with — none was really good — was Dusty Neale. Dusty was a slow thinker with a single-track mind, but he was honest and he did have a fanatical respect for law and order.

At the Bar K, Mat paused only long enough to collect a cavvy of three of his best horses. One would carry a pack. He took supplies for a long journey through dry country, tying on a canvas water bottle as well as three canteens. The implication was that he meant to head for Mexico.

Tap Carter was still in a black mood. He rounded up the horses and helped collect supplies like a wooden-faced Indian, and although Mat and Doughbelly talked a good deal, Tap made only two comments. One, early in the account, was:

"Didn't figure Tex would crawfish."

The second followed the story of the gunplay.

"Figured it was a wedding you wanted, not a killing."

Otherwise, when he got an order, Tap gave a nod — nothing more.

From the Bar K, Mat rode into the hills and worked north above five miles, but he made a rope corral for his horses as soon as his trail was concealed. At about four in the afternoon he rolled in his blankets and slept for thirteen hours, awaking refreshed at the first pale grayness of false dawn. Saddling swiftly, he worked downhill to Dusty Neale's pole corral and sprawling cabin with its three lean-tos. There was no smoke coming from the tin-pipe chimney yet.

Mat ground-reined his pony out of sight in a hollow and walked to an angle of the corral. He moved directly, standing erect, but keeping the corral between himself and the windows. If anyone were up — which Mat doubted — they would have observed that he approached openly. If they were asleep, they would find him ambushed behind the corral when they came out of the cabin door.

Mat did not exactly trust Dusty. The buckshot had missed the nester by too little to inspire a friendly confidence.

A ten-year-old girl wearing nothing but a slip cut from flour sacks, with the printing clearly visible, was the first Neale out. The Southwest dressed itself in flour sacking for more than a generation before the companies won the hearts of all economical women by using washable ink. Until then, if you were a finicky woman or if you had dreams that your children would dress nicely some day, you sewed up the sacks so that the advertisement would be next to the skin. Mrs. Neale, to judge by her daughter, was a realist. Some of the printing was inside, some was outside. With seven to clothe, she was too busy to take pains.

One by one the seven appeared. Three were boys, the eldest about fifteen, the next thirteen, and the youngest close to eight. Then Dusty himself appeared, wearing his boots, his levis, and his hat. Mat recalled the old proverb: *a Texan wakes up, gives himself a shake, puts on his hat, and makes up his mind for the day*. Mat let the nester walk clear into the open, twenty feet from any shelter.

"Hold it, Dusty!" he grated, and shoved the barrel of the carbine through the poles.

The nester jerked his head toward the sound of the voice and swallowed hard.

"Drygulched!" he called out. "Well — be damned to yuh!"

"Just Mat Karney — cravin' a pow-wow. Kin I light and set?" Mat asked. Once again he had to admire Dusty's courage. The nester was scowling under his eyebrows like a bull which has lowered its head.

"Just Mat Karney," he repeated sarcastically. "Come to finish what you started, right in front of my kids? You're a gunslinger, and I want no truck with yuh!"

"I got proof Tom Parks is behind the rustling!" That was a little more than the truth, but Mat was nonplussed. He hadn't realized he was as short with the range as all this.

"You hear him, Alec? He wants to talk with your pa — over a rifle-gun!"

The cabin, crowded with seven kids and the woman, was ominously quiet. Mat swore under his breath and stood up leaving his carbine on the ground.

"Loose your rein, hombre!" he urged. "Damned if you ain't

the plumb bull-headedest cuss! I missed yuh day before yesterday, didn't I? Do I miss without meaning to — at thirty feet with a sawed-off gun? If I was here to git you, would I let yore kids see my face? Or would I shoot and git? Fact is, I got evidence, Dusty, and I need an honest friend."

"Might be so, at that," the nester conceded. He cleared his throat loudly. "Real fact is — you better look behind you."

Though the request was an old trick, the cool triumph in the tone made Mat turn slowly. From the angle of the corral fence behind him, the muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun stared him in the eye. Mat swung to face Dusty. Now a Winchester was poked through the broken pane of the shack window. The blue steel was lined steadily on his belt buckle.

"Just shuck out of that gunbelt, son," Dusty ordered. "It's right hard to stick up seven people. I've got rough neighbors, and I've trained my young-uns."

Evidently this was no boast. The eleven-year-old boy marched from the house with his pa's six-gun; the eight-year-old followed with a pigging string. Dusty held the gun against Mat while the cattleman was getting rid of his gunbelt; then Dusty tied his hands.

"You a deputy?" Mat protested bitterly.

"Might be I'm chairman of the vigilance committee," said Dusty. He was in dead earnest. "Seems to me like law in Toltec has gone to hell, and I ought to form one. Now — you craved to talk. Talk!"

He pushed his prisoner gently toward the shack and seated him at the big table. Seven excited, curious children's faces formed a circle. Mrs. Neale laid down the Winchester and started cutting sow-belly into a frying pan. All of their actions were matter-of-fact, but the Neales were all bursting with self-importance, including Dusty. Words dried up in Mat's mouth.

"H-how'd you get out there?" he stammered to Alec.

"Drain ditch. Pa dug her a-purpose," said the youngster.

"I've got the hide of the cow that was shot with the .22 —"

"Where's Jerry Hackett?" Dusty interrupted eagerly.

"I shot him in town yesterday morning —"

Dusty jerked upright on the wooden bench. "Hell you say! Then — then the hide don't signify!"

"Why don't it? Jerry was rustlin' —"

"'Cause we're beyond rustlin'," Dusty cut in firmly. "Shore, Mat, your calf tally showed your stock was bein' lifted. If you got Hackett, I allow you got the rustler. But we're talkin' war. Now, you looka here, son: you wouldn't let us hang Dick. He was plumb guilty of *something*. You shot Baxter. I was in front of the jail at the time, but the talk is you plugged him while he was calling on yuh to surrender —"

"You believe that lie?"

"I asked yuh to surrender, and yuh cut down on me with buckshot!" Dusty retorted. "Then you holed up and shore enough treed the town. You git away and I go home and then what? You plug Hackett. Who's doin' the killin'? Ain't it you?"

"You're sizing this up dead wrong, Dusty! I got the better of the gun play, yes. But it was face to face, and in self-defense!"

"Faster gunslinger is always shootin' in self-defense," Dusty retorted. "Quick draw makes law, so they say. I ain't no legal judge. I ain't tryin' yuh, Karney. I'm a plain man that always stood straight and square for the law, and I've no use for the law officers we got. I'm figurin' what a square man should *do* with you."

Dusty looked around at his family for approval, and received it. He rose and paced the length of the kitchen — as self important, as straightforward, as a bull, Mat reflected. And as dumb. And — and as dangerous.

"What you should do is form your vigilance committee," Mat suggested. "Five men will be enough to start with. Good ones, scattered over the range so they will know if rustling is still going on, and they'll be able to stop it. That's what I came to you for, Dusty. Meanwhile, I'll smoke out Tom Parks. I'll show how close he is to gobbling the whole Valley."

"How?"

"I got ways," Mat evaded.

"What?" Dusty insisted. When Mat sat silent he turned to his oldest son. "See him, Alec? He cain't answer 'cause he don't know. He's got a suspicion and a quick gun, and neither's legal. You mind your pa brought you up to uphold the law, son. And when it comes your time, you do it like

your pa did: direct, straight. This hombre has shot two men. He ain't answered to the law for either. That's clear enough for me. I'm a-goin' to take him back to jail in Toltec and see he stands trial. Him and Dick. A regular legal judge and jury'll git to the bottom of this."

And makes up his mind for the day, Mat reflected bitterly. "You're handing Tom Parks the Valley, Dusty," he said. "I reckon you mean well. And I know you ain't in Tom's pay now. But when the war's over, for the sake of your kids, ask Tom to pay off. *And you'll find he will!*"

"Ketch up the horses, Alec," Dusty ordered. It was a rebuff.

"Catch mine. They're roped and I don't want to leave them," Mat suggested, and he located the spot for the boy. "Furthermore, Dusty — a lone hand must be gun-fast. They say that, too."

Mat was trusting to luck. There was a chance that Tap and Doughbelly might see the party on the way to town. Luck did intervene after they had ridden about halfway down the Valley, but it came strictly according to the odds. Tom had a dozen riders on the range to Mat's two. It was a Flying T puncher who first saw the two Neales and their prisoner.

For Mat, what followed was like a bad dream. He struggled with the cord which bound his wrists as a sleeper fights vainly to awake; he knew in advance of each move just what would happen. The nightmare was his powerlessness to prevent the steady unrolling of events.

The Flying T puncher spurred off in the direction of his ranch.

"That hombre has gone to get help. We ought to ride higher — in the cedars," Mat pointed out grimly.

"Why? I'm taking you where they want you took. They got to be witnesses against you anyhow."

Mat explained desperately. Dusty plodded straight ahead down the center of the Valley. He could just as well have been deaf.

A few miles further on, Tom Parks and four of his punchers topped a rise on the lope, angling to intercept the Neales.

"See that?" Mat commented bitterly. "Now will you listen to me? You got your kid with you. You think of Alec. If you start something, Alec's liable to get hurt." *And so am I, you bull-headed fool.* Mat thought. *Tom's aching for an excuse to shoot.*

"Quit orderin' me around," Dusty snarled. But his eyebrows drew down uneasily.

The Flying T group divided, two punchers swinging right, two left, while Tom Parks came straight on. The maneuver set up a perfect crossfire, and Tom, instead of riding up to Dusty, reined in twenty yards away.

"I'll take him, Dusty," he boomed. "Thanks for catching him for me. I won't forget it."

"I'm a-takin' Karney to the law at Toltecl"

"No, you ain't. I am. He's my meat. Now you and your kid head back."

Dusty's brows were down, and he was shaking with fury.

"No! For God's sake, *no!*" Mat whispered.

Dusty gave him one look. Shame and apology flamed in his face, but beneath was stubborn, righteous anger.

"Go over to the sidewinder. You was right," Dusty choked, as though the admission killed him.

Instantly Mat kneed his horse forward. The four punchers closed in from right and left. Tom grinned, showing an edge of teeth through tight lips.

"Okay, Dusty. See you when we finish roundup," Tom called.

The nester held his horse still as a rock.

"Tom, I'm sending my kid home. Okay with you?" he demanded thickly.

"Sure, but —"

"Git goin', Alec."

The iron discipline of the Neales held in the crisis. The kid's eyes were big and his lips quivered, but he turned his pony reluctantly and started slowly. Ten yards, twenty — then the men heard him break into wild sobs. He spurred, flinging his arms around the pony's neck to keep from looking back.

Tom had his hand on his gun. Dusty Neale eyed him, head lowered, eyebrows down. His own hands gripped the saddle horn.

"I aim to follow yuh. That's all," said Dusty Neale. "Karney's goin' to go to jail and git a court trial. I won't turn coyote in front of my own kid."

For a second Tom Parks weighed the consequences of a double murder. They were not good. He realized the fact by the uneasiness of his own cowpunchers. After all, he would have Mat at the Flying T. Dusty could not be bluffed, but he might be outwitted.

"Hell, you act like I was going to gun this gunslinger!" he blustered. "You're 'way off trail, neighbor! What kind of law have we got in town? If you took this hombre to Toltec, are you sure the law would hold him?"

"You held me up. That ain't right neither," Dusty grumbled, but Tom's shrewdness had hit on a valid argument.

"Okay, maybe I was hasty and talked rough. I'm sorry; it's just that I don't trust nobody. You ride along with us to the Flying T, Dusty. I'm glad to have you. We'll tie this hombre up tight, and then I'll push on to town. You can come with me or stay with him, just as you've a mind. When the law in Toltec gets organized, I'll come back to the ranch with a posse. That sound straight, Dusty?"

"I'll ride along with it," the nester agreed. He raised his head and joined the others; but to Mat, the fact that Dusty took a position a little apart and behind the others was significant. The nester was trying to be neutral, but that position would be impossible to maintain very long. Blindly and bravely he would help the law — but what law would come riding out to the Flying T?

Tom Parks' law, I reckon, Mat reflected grimly. Still and all, I won't get shot in the back. Not right away, anyhow. I owe the old geezer that much.

At the Flying T, Mat was tied hand and foot in a storeroom of the main ranch-house. His bonds were too secure. He soon stopped struggling.

Chapter XIV

WHEN Sally Flandreau turned her back on Mat Karney in Moss Abbott's store and marched out into the sunshine, she went directly to her room in the hotel. There was a mirror over the washstand. It was small, cheap, and fly-specked,

yet better than her own at the dugout. She pulled the straight-backed chair close, and faced herself in the glass.

"You ain't licked yet, Sally. He still cares what you think about him," she announced to her reflection.

Her self stared back, unsmiling and uncomfortable.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, pecking at a crumb like that. Like a sick chicken," Sally told herself firmly. "You ain't, though . . . Quit starin' at me like that, wooden-faced as a clothes-pin doll. You're mad. That ain't going to get you nothing."

The reflection smiled, a little bitterly. Then its eyes fell. Silent, sitting rigidly in the uncomfortable chair, Sally thought the thing out.

In all her life she had never known anything except plodding, sweaty struggle against odds the neighbors considered hopeless. A granger lives on reluctant soil that begrudges a pittance. He exists at the mercy of a harsh climate; he is treated with a hostility slightly softened by contempt. There is never enough flour in the barrel or water in the bucket; there is never any comfort. If the fear that he might be licked in the end made a granger quit, he would never start. In a land that is brown he imagines a square patch of green. His land; he's going to make it so.

In the end, he does. From the Atlantic westward, first the forest, then the sod too thick for a plow to cut, and finally the dry lands, changed to homesteads under the run-over bootheels of a breed who persistently met a defeat with a second try.

Not to give up was bred in Sally's bones.

"I want him, and he ought to want me," she told herself. "Now, that's settled."

A shot made her hurry to the window. She could see nothing of the gunfight except the exchange of shots at the very end and the fall of Hackett. Afterward, in the store and when Nita and Mat paraded along the street, Sally locked her jaw and endured defeat; but her decision was unchanged. After the fire was put out and the excitement in Toltec had had time to die down, she went to the restaurant, bought food for Dick, and carried the tray to the jail.

Waco Stroude admitted her, and slouched back to his

comfortable seat. She sat as close as possible to the bars as Dick began to eat.

"Did Jerry plug Johnny Regan?" she whispered.

"Might have. I don't really know," Dick whispered back.

Sally dropped her voice even lower, barely moving her lips. "Who was the third hombre?"

Dick frowned and shook his head.

"This is the family, brother. I have to know."

He studied her face intently. "Maybe you'd better, at that," he muttered. Swiftly he traced two initials on the cell floor with the toe of his boot. *T. P.*

Sally gave a violent start.

"W-was he the other train bandit, too?"

"Nah!" Dick whispered contemptuously. "That was Jake. The kid was so trigger-itchy Jerry had to get rid of him. Quit frettin', Sis! I ain't such a plumb fool as to do sundown work without having the boss in it as deep as me."

He handed her his dirty dishes and grinned triumphantly. Dick figured he was on the winning side.

To Sally, on the other hand, the whole setup looked so fluid that she decided to stay in town with Hen until something more definite developed. She anticipated a long delay. Actually, the break came on the following afternoon when the news spread through Toltec that Waco was in the saloon enrolling a posse to bring Mat in from the Flying T.

Sally heard the report with consternation. She didn't want Mat jailed; above all, she didn't want him jailed in Toltec, where he would be close to Nita. Also Mat's best chance to clear himself would be to involve Dick in a conspiracy with the Flying T. Whatever the verdict on Mat, a trial was liable to be most unhealthy for her younger brother.

"Hen," she decided, "sashay out and get yourself on that posse. They'll take you because Mat jailed your brother. You let on you hate him plenty."

"Let on?" Hen protested. "He bent a rifle barrel over my haid, didn't he?"

"Between us, brother, that ain't nothing. You know how thick your head is," said Sally gently. "I ain't mad at Mat at all. Fact is, after you get on that posse, you help Mat to escape the first chance you get."

The big toil-worn granger stared. He knew he wasn't very

bright. This was all too deep for him, except that Sister wanted Mat to get away. She'd always told him what to do, and never told him wrong.

"I'll try," he promised.

"You got to, Hen. It's for me," she said, and patted his arm. "They'd never let a girl ride with them, or I'd go."

Out at the Flying T, Mat Karney heard the posse ride in and unsaddle just after sundown. Waco came to the store-room at once. He cut the pigging strings which bound Mat's wrists and ankles, and then handcuffed his hands in front of his body.

"Get me a trace chain. A long one," the deputy told Tom Parks. "And bring a cot and blankets for me, and blankets for him."

"You aim to sleep here?" Tom protested.

"You heard me," said Waco in the tone a general uses to a second lieutenant. He took the trace chain, and after some important-looking study, he looped one end through the hasp of a harness chest and padlocked the other end to the chain of Mat's handcuffs. He tossed Mat's blankets close to the chest, and had the cot set up close to the door, a good eight feet beyond the reach of the chain.

"This is my chance to get myself elected sheriff," said Waco, suddenly breaking a silence that had become oppressive. "'Vote for Waco Stroude. He stopped the Karney-Parks cattle war.' I'm stopping it, right now. I figure both of you are guilty of plenty. I don't give a damn which of you is the guiltier. Get it?"

"Steppin' kind of high, ain't yuh?" Tom Parks pointed out.

"Law's law and duty's duty," cut in Dusty Neale. "If you —"

"Baa-baa is baa-baa. Quit makin' noises like a sheep," Waco interrupted. "Lawmen work for themselves, just like other folks."

"You have a proposition," said Mat.

Waco nodded importantly. "Tom," he declared, "there'll be no 'accident' with my prisoner. All you'll get by book law will be a trial. Anybody who doesn't think the Baxter killing was in self-defense is a half-wit. The Hackett shooting was premeditated assault with intent to kill. Legally, Mat's guilty.

Judge will tell the jury there's no legal evidence Hackett was waiting to waylay him. Jury will say, 'What was Jerry doing? Hiding by himself to play solitaire?' and Mat will walk out of court a free man."

Tom shrugged. "Maybe. I'm making the charge just the same."

"He knows you'll be in jail at least six months before the case is tried, Mat. I don't think Tap Carter can hold the Bar K together that long. So I reckon you'd better be reasonable," Waco urged. "Is twenty thousand dollars a fair price for your brand — land, water rights, and stock?"

"It might be," Mat admitted.

"My proposition is that you sell out to Tom."

"I ain't buying! Twenty thousand? Hell, I —"

"Oh, you have the dinero," Waco cut in blandly. "You better buy, Tom, or else I'll arrest you tomorrow for the riots in Toltec. You and every one of your punchers. You'll be in jail six months, too, and before we get through grilling your riders —"

"I call yuh on that!" Big Tom roared. He stood glaring, fists on his hips near his gun. "Arrest *me*? You ain't got the nerve! You can grill my riders to hell and gone and you won't find out nothing! You're playin' a four-flush!"

Waco Stroude met the outburst without moving a finger — flagrantly motionless, trusting to the fact that he did represent the law, and that Dusty Neale was at Tom's back.

"It'd be legal," he said. "Better sit down, Tom. A sell-out has angles, for all of us. I dislike to mention a petticoat, but there's one in this."

"Going to arrest me? I was in that fracas!" exclaimed Dusty, whose mind worked slowly.

"No," said Waco. "Doubt if I arrest anybody . . . I ain't threatening you, Gents. I'm just putting pressure on you for a sensible peace."

"How about Johnny?" demanded Mat. "That was murder. Leaving a cold killer go free won't elect you."

"Well —" Waco hedged.

"Selling out seems like blood-money to me," Mat said. "The proposition has the tinhorn in it."

"Baxter was shot down!" Big Tom insisted. "I ain't buying out the man who plugged my foreman."

"Right is right and wrong is wrong," declared Dusty Neale. "That wasn't no riot, Waco. Mat was keepin' a drygulcher out of our hands, and that's facts!"

"Besides, I don't own the Bar K right now," Mat said. "I signed a deed off as a gift."

All three men stared at him.

"It's my business to whom," he said with finality. "The ranch is safe, whatever happens to me."

Waco stared at his handmade boots. "Well," he muttered. "I'll be damned!"

The self-importance seemed to ooze out of him. He hadn't been big enough to meet his big opportunity. He had really overlooked the angle presented by Johnny Regan. "I get to the bottom of it! I'll jail you both, so help me!" he blustered.

Big Tom strode out, angry and red-faced. Dusty Neale yawned. "Reckon I can go to sleep, Waco," he commented. "Anyways, you can look after a prisoner right good."

When Waco pulled the cot across the door — all the locks to the storeroom were on the outside — Mat was of the same opinion. But Hen Flandreau was no brilliant schemer. Some time after midnight, when the posseman he relieved had had time to fall asleep, Hen pushed firmly against the door. Of course he awakened Waco, and Mat as well.

"Someone is prowling around out here!" he whispered.

Waco was cautious. He opened the door just enough to stick out his head to listen. Hen smacked the exposed skull with the barrel of a .45, lifted the unconscious deputy back on the cot, and methodically gagged him. Then he fished the keys out of Waco's pocket.

"Sally said to turn you loose. I don't know why," Hen whispered to Mat. "Now — how are we going to get horses?"

"Can you ride bareback?"

"Not if they pitch any. Ain't rode much."

"They'll spook some at first. Tell you what: you go pick two saddles and bridles off the fence. Walk north. I'll rope mounts and follow."

Hen stepped to the window and pulled it loose with one slow, powerful heave. Mat squirmed through after him, holding his breath, but the ranch-house was as quiet as the prairie.

The night was moonless, but brilliantly starlit — the flam-

ing Western stars that seem close enough to touch. There was enough light to see Hen move away with the saddles for the first thirty or forty feet. Mat could make out fully a dozen horses in the corral. They stirred, but ponies often did that at night; there was no sound so far to awaken a sleeper.

Mat coiled two ropes and climbed the fence. He roped a mount with his first cast — he made sure of that. Instantly the horses began to mill and snort. This would bring someone. Mat held the first pony and twisted an Indian hackamore into its mouth; then he shook out his second loop. The horses weaved, each trying to get as far from the man with the rope as possible. It happened always, but Mat's heart began to pound.

He swung the gate open — and the hinges squeaked alarm. The ponies began to edge toward the opening, but not fast enough. Mat swung astride, and rode out. His hope was to rope the first horse to follow, and he did. He saved a few seconds, undoubtedly; but he was also a few seconds too late.

From a ranch-house window a carbine flamed. The bullet hit Mat in the side. The shock was like being hit with a brick.

Somehow he kept astride as the horses bolted. He heard more shots, but not the bullets. He felt no pain, but the stars weren't clear any more. They swung slowly in hazy streamers, left and right, and back again.

There was a frantic shout. He guessed he'd passed Hen already . . . He sawed at the rope, managing to pull the horses to a stop just as the stars began to spin, and he fell from the slippery back. Only the horseman's instinct that holds the reins, no matter how bad the fall, kept him gripping the ropes.

He felt Hen fumbling at his side. Tearing, jagged agony ripped through him.

"No!" Mat moaned.

"It's clear through yuh! I got to strap it! You're bleeding from both sides like a pig!" Hen tried again to tighten a belt over the rags he had wadded on the wounds. Mat struck at his hand.

"Yuh hurt too much. Git the saddles on and take me toward the Bar K. I'll tell yuh where to stop."

Although he had emptied the corral, there would be one or two horses which would not run far. The Flying T could mount five or six men in half an hour or less. They knew he was hit and would ride straight to the Bar K. Therefore, he couldn't hole up there, whereas if Hen could bring Tap out with help and supplies, he might still escape. Mat had used some hard words about Hen in the past, but Sally's older brother was showing himself to be steady and sure.

A long time afterward, as it seemed to Mat, he saw the gleam of the white outcrop in the starlight.

"Put me down here. Tell Tap to bring lots of water," he instructed.

Only a moment afterward, as it seemed — he must have lain in a stupor — Mat was roused by Tap's attempts at first aid. There was one spot where a touch was still agony.

"It's bad," Tap reported. "Wish I dast strike a light. Seems like the bullet hit a rib and followed it. There's two holes about four inches apart, and the bone's smashed."

"You're tellin' mel" Mat said through clenched teeth.

"You got to have doctoring. This will fester sure, and the fever'll hit you soon," Tap diagnosed.

Mat weighed the chances. "I won't give myself up yet," he decided. "Did you bring the water?"

"Four-gallon bag and two gallons in canteens."

"I'll hole up with Hen in the malpais. You remember the cave we found hunting antelope?"

"Sure. How about your horses?"

"We'll turn them loose. Have you blankets to wrap the hoofs?"

"Got blankets. Reckon you can spare one," said Tap.

"Mat, I admit that cave won't be found easy. But you'll just sicken and die there."

"You tell Nita. She'll see me through," said Mat confidently.

"Oh!" said Tap. "I still don't like it," he added doubtfully. "But — okay. I'll ride to town."

Hen Flandreau straightened from his crouch and took two or three slow steps.

"Gents," he began protestingly, "I ain't going to walk out on you, but kin I have a word? When Sally told me to turn you loose, Mat, she sure never planned havin' you nursed by this Evans person. I say Sally should know where you're at."

"He's right!" Tap cut in.

"What are you so eager about?" Mat grumbled. "Still — tell her, if you-all want to."

Malpais — the word literally means bad land — is formed where molten lava has flowed slowly across gently sloping land. The lava is from ten to thirty feet thick, sooty black in color, and full of air bubbles, like a very coarse pumice. As the molten stuff cooled and then burst out through its own crust, it formed sharp ridges, caves and winding canyons where, in the course of ages, soil has formed and grass grows thick.

With the last of his strength, Mat reached the cave he had mentioned. He then fell into an uneasy sleep which soon became feverish. Meanwhile, Hen rode the horses well out on the baldies, cut the strips of blanket from their hoofs, and carried back the saddles. For a few days they were safe.

Chapter XV

THERE IS a saying that only God perceives the full implications of an event; man sees a fragment, distorted by his own character and self-interest. To everyone in the Valley, Mat's escape was decisive, but the reactions were as numerous as the individuals concerned.

Waco Stroude was in a blind, unreasoning fury. Promptly he deputized Big Tom Parks and every Flying T rider. Waco's one idea was to silence any snickering at himself by bringing in Mat, dead or alive.

To get a badge himself and have all his cowboys on the side of the law suited Big Tom, but he refused to waste his own time riding in circles. Tom had fired the rifle from the ranch-house, and he was confident his shot hadn't been far off plumb center. The way to get Mat, he insisted, was to go to Toltec and either head off any help, or trail it to Mat's hiding place. Waco thought so much of this idea that he decided to make his headquarters in town, too.

However, Dusty Neale refused to serve in what he called "a damn private army." He had a scheme for combing Mat out that he wasn't going to share "with any range hog or slick-talkin' sheriff dude." Dusty didn't realize he was on Mat's side, but his sympathy was with the nesters. He

couldn't figure why Hen had mixed in unless somehow Mat was right.

That morning, however, Tap Carter was the man who held the trumps. Tap reached Toltec about the time that Waco and Big Tom started toward it. He saw Nita on the street — but he only touched his hat and rode straight on to the jail. He made no attempt whatever to find Sally. Drawing Tex out of earshot of Dick, Tap gave the marshal a brief account of Mat's escape and his wound. He told what Hen had done, but not why — Sally's name was never mentioned. He ended by revealing the location of the hide-out.

"Did Mat send you to me?" Tex asked, frowning thoughtfully.

"No," Tap admitted. "He was out of his head and planning foolish. His idea would kill him. My way, you make the arrest without gunplay and bring him to a doctor."

"Plumb noble and public spirited," commented Tex sarcastically. "Your story don't add up. Realize that?"

"Meaning I lie?"

"Not precisely. Just that Hen Flandreau never started nothing but a furrow. If he was on that posse, Sally told him to go. That being so, Mat's crazy idea was to get help from a girl. *Which one did he pick?*" Tex demanded with sudden violence.

"Nital" Tap snarled back with venom. "And I'm damned if I help bring them together! Okay — now yuh know!"

Tex jerked out a gun with an amazing speed that had the drop on Tap before the cowhand even started to move.

"Unbuckle your belt and let your guns drop," the marshal warned. "Okay — walk into that empty cell. You're arrested for aiding the escape of a prisoner."

"You dirty son!" Tap exploded.

"Get going! You sagebrush Judas, how complete can you kid yourself! Doctor, hell! You're so sore and crazy jealous you jump at the first chance to get Mat out of the way!"

"Had one last night," Tap snarled over his shoulder.

Tex slammed the cell door on him, aware that Dick was taking this all in.

"Well, yeah," the marshal added more gently. "Reckon you ain't all bad."

He turned on his heel, locked the outer door of the jail

behind him, and went as far as the nearest bench under the wooden awning.

Tell Nita? Tell Sally? Tell neither? He wiped off perspiration, though the early morning air was cool. At last he rose stiffly and went to Moss Abbott, to whom he offered his resignation both as deputy and as town marshal, as of that moment. He turned over his badge and the jail keys.

"You're right — I'm sick," he responded to a question.

Next to the livery stable, he hired two horses, one to be packed with a week's provisions for a trip through dry country. All the while he was stalling off the moment of decision. He must have wasted an hour in all before he shook his yellow head, as a big dog shakes off a fly, and walked to Nita's house.

"Mat's out in the malpais with a bad wound, and he's sent for you," he told her abruptly. "But you can't go to him. At least, not quick — nor direct."

"Why not — and how come it's you telling me?" Nita flared.

"Point is, there's a posse after him, too," Tex explained. "I want you to start out driving a buckboard. You'll be followed, and you can lead most of the posse astray."

"While Mat dies?" Nita jeered.

"I'm going to send Sally in direct to him tonight. Her brother is with him now."

"Sally? To my Mat? Oh, no!"

"Ever nurse a sick man? Uh-huh, you haven't. This is showdown, Nita. We each play our best hands. You aren't the person he needs now."

"It's a showdown, all right. But you're not considering Mat only."

"Okay. Showdown for Steve Abercrombie, alias Tex Smith. I want you for myself. The range, the law, the risk — they're secondary."

"Where's my Mat?" Nita demanded, direct as a pistol shot.

"Never mind!" Tex retorted, rocklike. "'My Mat,' you say? I say he's your Mat by luck. Before I give you up to him I'm going to equalize it."

"Don't start me hating you, Tex. I went to your office to get Mat if I could. That wasn't luck. I won't be shoved aside. Where is he?"

"You went because Mat meant excitement to you. He meant danger. And that's what you love. You ain't tame, Nita. You got fire in your blood and you've got to have a kick in your life. Do you care whether the grass grows high and green? Will you be content, just so the calves are fat? Not you. It's thrill you want."

"I've got what I want. Where —"

"You've had it," Tex contradicted. "You're a woman for a man who lives with a gun on his hip. That's been Mat. When the range war's over, he'll settle into being a ranchman. But I'll still be fighting somewhere and needing you and your wits."

Both were leaning forward. Their eyes were locked, and the will of neither would yield.

"I don't hate you. It's Sally I hate," said Nita. "I won't give up to her. For the last time — where's Mat? Or don't you dare tell?"

"Take the little trail in on the west side of the malpais," Tex began. The entire directions were complicated, but he gave them clearly and truthfully. "That's how scared I am of a gamble," he ended. "Now — do I get a chance to fight?"

"How?" Nita asked, eyeing him as before.

Tex touched the blank spot on the breast of his shirt where the cloth had been frayed by the pin of his badge. "I'm a free man, going to the malpais for a look-see," he said. "I want you to lead the men from Toltec off the trail, and that's all."

"Sally goes today?"

"You'll join him before next sunrise. Ain't that enough?"

For answer Nita rose and took denim trousers and a bush jacket from the chest. She buckled on a .45, and slipped a gambler's derringer — an ugly little two-barreled gun of .41 caliber — into the bosom of her dress.

"You were right about my liking excitement," she said. "Tex — don't you tell that freckled granger that I know the hideout."

Tex nodded. They left together, she turning toward the livery stable while he headed for the hotel. From the clerk he learned that Sally already had a visitor — Big Tom Parks. He also heard that Waco was looking for him.

"Tell Waco I've resigned," Tex grunted, and picked a chair

in the lobby from which he could watch the stairs. The hotel clock read 8:30. To the malpais was a ride of several hours.

Upstairs, Sally was listening to Big Tom with growing wonder.

"I've come to say that I'll see there is no charge laid against Dick. I got influence around here." Tom was boasting. "I'll go to the jail now, and make Tex turn Dick loose, too. You see if I don't. You and me . . . ought to be friends, Sally."

"You're mighty generous all of a sudden," Sally retorted, ignoring that word "friends."

"Oh, I want something, of course," Tom admitted with bluff heartiness. "If I clear your brothers, you send word to Hen that he's safe, and you want him to come in. Take it easy, now! Sure that means Mat has got to give up, but what can Hen do for him — except drive away the flies? He'll get word to you where he is."

"It's a fact Hen can't do anything for a man that's hurt. He's plumb clumsy with anything lighter than a whiffletree or a plow. He'll tie dirty rags on a wound without cleaning it, and he can't cook anything but bacon and beans." Sally stared at the wall as though she saw the scene in the hideout. Her fingers slowly clenched.

"Why didn't Mat send for me?" she demanded.

"He didn't. Mat asked for Nita," Tom answered brutally. "Nita will try to go to him, too. But if you're willing to help us bring Mat in, we'll guarantee to head Nita off. We'd like to get even with that wench."

Tom saw her expression alter, and thought to himself that he had put the argument shrewdly. He knew he had made Sally's decision. She was jealous, and that had swung her over. However, jealous she was, she was also determined; and she had grit, and her loyalty was fanatical.

Part of what Sally saw was the picture of Hen, stubbornly fighting off a posse to protect a man whom he was slowly killing by his clumsy, well-meant care. Part was rivalry — the vision of herself saying to Mat, "Oh, Nita was told. I don't know why she ain't here." And part was the image of Mat, not powerful, not on horseback any more, but needing her.

Tom saw only a slight change of the lines around her mouth and eyes, but this was a new Sally facing him now: cool, sharp-witted, fighting the battle in which everything is fair.

"You held back something, Tom. 'Friends,' you said. How good friends?"

He backed off, as a man does when a girl is too direct. "You're a mighty pretty girl —"

"Sure. I ain't a kid school teacher from the East, Tom. I know I'm pretty, but I want to know where I stand. You wouldn't be the first man to get at a pretty girl through her brothers."

"*That?* Hell, no!" Tom exclaimed. He was quite sincere. "I never had no such notion, Sally. I ain't a kid, either. I reckon we both know what marriage is all about. I have been waiting for a woman who was pretty enough, and who liked it on a ranch. You suit me. I got no use for town women. You'll live good with me, and I'll help out your brothers. I need another foreman, and Hen can look after my wheat. That sound agreeable?"

"Does if you ain't braggin'," said Sally shortly.

"Come watch me," he promised.

As they came down the stairs into the lobby together, Tex noticed that Tom had Sally by the arm, and that they were both excited. Tex was no mind reader. He tried to speak to Sally, but Tom stepped between them.

"Tex, I want Dick Flandreau out of jail, right now," he ordered. "Reckon I don't need to explain no more."

"Guess not," said Tex. "Or else, huh?"

"That's right," declared Tom.

"Fine, only it's too bad you're too late," Tex came back. "Mat Karney already give me the order. Here's Mat's dismissal of the charge — if you want to show off." Tex took out the paper and jammed it against Tom's hand — against and not into his hand, because the ranchman refused to take it.

"Dick gets out on my say-so," he threatened.

"He gets out, and I don't give a damn who does it." Tex's eyes were snapping. "I've resigned as marshal — in case you ain't noticed. Now get out of my way. I want a private word with Sally."

"I'm acting for Sally," Tom refused.

She stepped on his toe, hard. "He said 'private,' Tom," she reminded. "And you don't look so tall as you made out to be, either." She threw Tom a look to remind him of what their plan really had been, and gave Tex a smile. Then she led the way into the street.

Waco was running from the livery stable toward the hotel. From the start of Tex's rapid-fire instructions to Sally's last word there elapsed no more than twenty seconds. The great decisions of a lifetime are often crowded into an instant, and made without conscious reasoning.

Sally took the news like a blow and recovered like a fighter.

"I'll go . . . Since Tap's coyotin', hadn't I better change the hideout first thing?"

To say "yes" would have been so easy for Tex, and so treacherous! "No," he decided.

Now Sally faced the future. "I was starting to win Mat's range for him," she whispered swiftly. "I have to lay over an hour . . . I'll go, but Mat would tell me to take the risk of a little delay, if he were here."

"You're doctor," Tex scowled. He had never owned land, nor worked it. He had seen a dozen men risk death for their range, and women sacrifice their youth to a parched quarter section, without understanding the compelling urge behind the battle. He felt that Sally was letting Mat down, whereas her decision had been to strive for complete victory.

"Tom, Nita's driving out with a buckboard!" Waco bawled as soon as he was near enough.

"Well, follow her," Tom snapped back, stepping to the hotel door. "Give me your jail keys, and I'll look after this end!"

He welcomed the chance to show his authority, for the encounter with Tex had not impressed Sally as much as he wished. Letting Dick out of the cell was better. Sally kissed him — in gratitude, of course, and after she kissed Dick — but the kiss was hearty, and Sally's arms went around Tom's neck. She refused a second kiss, but she was flirting, and Tom knew it.

Dick bubbled over with glee when he learned that Tom and Sally were close to an understanding. To be brother-in-law and foreman would practically put Tom Parks in his

pocket. He would as good as own the big spread. When Sally let it be known that she had learned where Mat was, Dick insisted that she tell him. There was no need for a girl to mix into men's business. He would go and bring Hen back, while she and Tom could stay in town.

"Dick, you hate Mat. We want him alive," Sally refused.

"Sally, I promise you —"

It was the opening she had angled for. To her this was a big moment. She looked at both men.

"Promises to a girl aren't always kept," she implied archly.

"Ain't I kept mine, Sally?" Tom boasted.

"A little one." She looked at him sidewise, and his pulse began to pound. "You've made big ones I reckon I could persuade you to keep — if you was able. Land for the boys and a nice house with money in the drawer for me. Big promises, Tom. I don't doubt your word. But have you got it — or is your land pre-empted range you don't really own, and your money credit at the bank? I'm from Missouri, Tom!" She smiled invitingly, but her heart was in her throat. Fifteen minutes wasted already — unless Tom would show her through his house from top to bottom.

Tom was shrewd himself, and not four-flushing. He approved of her caution.

"Okay, Missouri! What'll I show you?" he challenged.

"The Flying T, right down to the money box and the deeds. Dick's with us. It's all right to ride out there."

You little hellion! Tom gloated. You may send Dick after Mat yet. I'll throw gold money right in your lap, and stack the double eagles one by one before your eyes . . .

"Sure. Sure, let's go," he said aloud.

She changed to range clothing and packed a saddlebag at the hotel while they saddled up. There were two clean sheets for bandages in the bag, and no clothing at all, but how did Tom and Dick know that? She stopped at the Flandreau dugout on the way, saying she wanted one good dress. Dick winked at Tom, who grinned back. Into the bag went the bottle of Pain Killer, a set of veterinary instruments, needles, thread and scissors from her sewing basket. The saddlebag wasn't much bulkier. She had treated cuts and a pitchfork stab through Hen's foot. She'd helped set Dick's

arm once. She was flushed, and she kept glancing at the sun, rising now toward noon.

They all ground-reined their ponies at the Flying T, leaving the saddles on. The place was deserted; even the cook was with the posse.

"Three's a crowd," said Dick. "I'll watch the horses."

"Show me all the rooms first," Sally ordered. A .22 rifle might be on one of the racks. Probably it was hidden, but ranch-houses didn't have closets. Clothing hung on-nails.

There were dozens of firearms, but nothing in sight was smaller than .30 caliber. It was a fine house. Sally could admire it, even with Tom's arm around her waist.

"That's all — except my room," he told her.

"I ain't seen any money."

"It's in the chest under my bed."

"That's what I came to see."

She felt his arm tighten.

"How much gold have you ever held in your hands, Sally?"

"Just one piece. Twenty dollars."

"Just wait," he promised, releasing her and opening the door.

There were weapons and clothing hanging everywhere, all in good order. She hadn't thought of Tom as an orderly man, but everything had its place. There was no .22, but ranchmen weren't supposed to own them. The bed was a broad wooden-framed cot, with a mattress of rawhide, covered with Navaho blankets. Tom dragged it aside, revealing an iron chest of Spanish make.

"Sit down and watch me close, but don't jump if you think I'm throwin' something at you. I promise not to hurt," he grinned.

She leaned over his shoulder . . . The .22 rifle lay on top of some bundles of papers. There was also a canvas bag, into which Tom plunged both hands. Now that she knew exactly where the rifle was she could swear out a search warrant. She had tied Tom to the rustling. The chain of evidence was complete.

The double handful of gold coins that landed in her lap took her so by surprise that she froze, eyes eager, lips parted.

"Handle them? Ain't they pretty, Sally?" Tom breathed. His hands closed firmly on her knees.

She sprang up, sending the coins flying. "You're fresh!" she said, but not too sharply. She jerked away from his fingers and walked to the door, fast, but not running. She did not seem to be escaping — just getting outside.

"Aw, come back herel! Don't be mad!" he wheedled.

She closed the door, and then she ran. Outside the house she caught her horse and swung into the saddle.

"Dick, he was fresh," she called to her brother. "Keep him from following for a spell."

She caught the reins of the other two horses to make sure, but she turned them loose half a mile away. A start was enough. From a glance at the sun she guessed that she had sacrificed about an hour. The posse would not be surprised to see her riding up to them. She had done as much at the jail when Dick was in trouble. She would tell them that she would try to persuade Hen to surrender, and the posse would let her through.

Chapter XVI

MAT's muttering became louder. In his uneasy sleep he was fighting someone. Hen leaned over and placed a big hand gently over his mouth. Mat awoke, grimacing and licking at his lips. As full consciousness returned he smiled in wan apology.

"Feller was holding me down and knifing me," he explained. "Still feels like needles. Did I sleep long?"

"Reckon it's after noon." Hen nodded toward a slanting shaft of sunlight which angled through a crevice a little thicker than a man's body, and about twice as wide, at the end of the cavern. The hideout was nothing more than a narrow, twisting space left where two flows of lava had moved slowly into contact. "Want a drink?"

"Mouth feels packed full of cotton," Mat admitted. "Hey — not that much, Hen!"

The granger continued to tilt the water bag until the tin cup was full. Evaporation had cooled the water. Mat drank it all, though he tried to restrain himself. Hen poured himself a swallow, no more.

"Roll over," he commanded, and examined the wound. He was silent so long after he replaced the bandage that Mat questioned him.

"Ain't doing well. Reckon your luck's run out," Hen replied. He squatted, elbows on knees, slowly shaking his shaggy red head. "I've done my possible, but I'll be packing you out to the posse before mornin'. What beats me is this: why ain't a man allowed to mind his own business? Folks are always saying, 'You mind your business and I'll mind mine.' Then they don't, and they fix it so you can't. All we wanted to begin with was some decent farming land to work. If that's a crime, why'd they pass the Homestead Act?"

"What do you mean, to begin with?"

"Right now, I'd swap the homestead for a little skill at doctorin'. I can't finish what I started, and that riles me. Sally has put you first since — well, since you gave her the gloves, and —"

"You're loco! Sally's took the whip to me! Why she —"

"Ain't kept out of your business. You try to figure it some other way. When she had a chance she just sat like a bump on a log, and now she's lost out, she's bull-headed. I reckon a girl don't know when she's licked, either. And then Dick —"

"To hell with Dick! I — I don't believe you. She wouldn't be beholden to me, that's all. She —"

"I didn't cotton to you at first, but now I wish you'd hit it off," said Hen. "I reckon it's all a kind of luck. Something happens, or sometimes it just nearly happens. Afterward, everything is different. I —"

He jerked up his head and reached for a gun. There was a sound in the passage. A voice warned, "It's me! Don't shoot!"

Hen cried out, "Sally! Yuh made it!" but Mat only lifted on one elbow. For an instant his eyes were on the blackness behind Sally, expectant, waiting. She saw his expression. He grinned welcome then, but she had seen.

She knelt beside him and opened the saddlebag. "Let's see how bad you are," she said. A doctor could have been no more professional.

The dark stone absorbed the sunshine so completely that the brightest spot was gray. As Mat looked up to read the

verdict in her face, the freckles were distinct. Her eyes were like smoke.

"It's got to be opened up, Mat. From here, to here." Her touch hurt, but the firm pressure was more endurable than Hen's fumbling. "I'll have to pick out the loose splinters of bone, and likely I must cut some splinters loose from the rib. Scrape it smooth, like. You'll bleed worse than when the bullet hit you. I'm scared, Mat. You've seen a short rib that's been hit with a cleaver? I think it's like that. I'll have to cut into your live flesh, and pull pieces of bone right out of you."

"Like God done to Adam?"

"Don't you joke about holy things. I feel ignorant enough already. If you were a dog or a horse I'd go ahead, but — Mat, I can pin the rustling on Tom! I can lead a sheriff to that .22! Why don't you give up and go to jail, and leave Hen and me to handle your range affairs?"

"Tom was set to murder me," said Mat simply. "I don't see any choice. Moss Abbott ain't a doctor, either, Sally. I'd as soon have you as him — if you can go through with it."

"I won't faint with it half done, if that's what you mean. Only —"

She was thinking, *Only I'll hurt you terribly, and whenever you look at me again you'll remember pain. Doctors won't cut on those they love!*

"Only what?" Mat asked.

"Nothing," said Sally. "Except that I was wondering how to boil water without making smoke."

"Did you bring turpentine?" demanded Hen. "Pour some on a soft rock. It will smoke some, but this rough stone will catch it."

"Better give me a belt to set my teeth in," said Mat.

The nerves which carry the sensation of pain do not run through bone, though none of the three knew that. What hurt was the knife, the improvised retractors, the probing of the tweezers, the swabbing at the blood which kept Sally from seeing what she did. Her face, set and white, swayed before Mat's eyes until she said sharply:

"Don't watch me. Shut your eyes!"

At last there was the jab of a needle as she sewed the wound, then the touch of a wet cloth as she wiped the sweat

from his face. He looked up. The freckles were like pencil marks. She was beginning to pant in reaction to the ordeal, and the intent look melted into utter weariness.

"It feels better. Like a splinter when it's out," he lied encouragingly.

She smiled mechanically. Her mind was on the wound she had closed, wondering what mistake she had made. "Wasn't deep," she muttered, thinking aloud. "Hen, wipe the blood off my hands. I can't stand to look at them . . . Now lift him up. Easy!"

"Going to hold him, Sis?"

"Yes, I'm going to hold him! He's got to rest. Lay his head in my lap!"

The softness lulled him. He tried to thank her, but she whispered, "Sh!"

He rolled his eyes to look at her, but she was leaning back — as limp and exhausted as he, had he known it. But he was conscious only of the softness beneath his head. Without willing it, he slept.

The sunbeam slanted westward and began to fade. Sally half-sat, half-lay against the sloping rock. When a fly buzzed near Mat's face she flicked it away with a motion of one hand. Color was back in her cheeks; but her chin was on her chest, and she brooded. The smell of the drying blood on the swabs became unpleasant. Hen heaved himself from his crouch and carried them toward the entrance.

"Ain't he heavy? Let me roll a pillow for him."

"Leave him be. I don't mind," Sally contradicted. "Hen, I've been sitting here studying. When it gets black dark, I want you to slip out and keep walking until you can borrow a pony from some nester. Ride and get the sheriff at the county seat. Have him swear out a court search warrant, and then arrest Tom Parks and dig out the evidence. I don't want any more shooting. I wouldn't let you fight if they did find us here."

Hen pondered, elbows and head on knees. "Long ride," he objected. "A day out, and a day back. I dunno."

"I cured him. Ain't I got a right to nurse him?" Sally whispered defiantly.

"Sure earned it. Will it do you any good?"

"I have to try. I got to break through to him. Hen, there's

been something holding us away, always! He was expecting Nita when he saw me. When I held him, he didn't reach out for my hand. He didn't even turn his cheek against me!"

In the gloom Hen hunched lower over his knees. "I don't care to see you miss out."

"A man doesn't see a girl as she is. Girls know that and men don't. What chance have I had to make him want me? Most of the time he's seen me doing a man's work. I had Pa to bury. I had a house to dig. I had Dick to help. I had him to cut on like a butcher! How else can he see me but tough, and ornery? I ain't like that, and I'm going to make him know it!"

"Okay, Sis," Hen said slowly. "Now — just what do I say to the sheriff?"

When Mat awoke, clear-headed out of a sleep that had been dreamless, the cave was pitch-black and utterly silent. His side throbbed, but the pain was of a different and healthier kind. He lay very comfortably. In particular his head was pillowed on something softer than any rolled blanket. He lifted his hand and touched Sally.

"Yes?" she whispered. "Want something? A drink?"

"No, I'm fine. You can set me down. You must be cramped and sore holding my head. You need sleep, too."

"I slept," Sally equivocated. "You lie still. Your head isn't heavy."

"Don't know how I can thank you."

"Thanks are for strangers. You don't need to thank me."

His hand groped upward. She laid her fingers in his — strong, slim, calloused fingers, warm with vitality.

"First time I saw you, you must have been sitting just this way."

He could feel her shudder. "Don't remind me. You aren't going to die. This time there isn't death and hate between us."

His fingers were lax in her hand. She thought he was falling asleep again when he muttered, "Where's Hen? I can't hear him breathing."

"I sent Hen to the sheriff at the county seat," said Sally steadily. "That way, we can hide out longer and be accomplishing something."

"You took too much on yourself," he replied quietly. "I'll be able to get around enough to use a gun in another day. I don't reckon I could ride. I feel I'm getting better faster than you may have figured on."

"If I've made a mistake, it was open-eyed, and I'm not sorry," Sally answered.

He heard the rustle of wool on stone as she spread a blanket. Then, he heard another sound which made his hand shoot out in the darkness and close on Sally's ankle. She had heard, too. There was a double click as she cocked a Colt. Then, as they held their breath, came the faint scrape of denim against rough stone. Someone was creeping into the cave from the canyon passage.

"It's Nita, Mat!" came a warning whisper. "Is Sally with you?"

"Yes, she's here," Mat whispered back uneasily.

"Tell her not to shoot."

Standing rigid in the blackness, with the cocked .45 in her fist, Sally followed Nita's progress by ear. Nita was crawling, for she had no idea of how wide the cave was, nor how high the roof. She almost brushed against Sally as she passed.

The scrape of stiff denim on rough stone ceased. There was a sigh of content from Mat, a murmur, "*Querida!*" and the sound of a kiss.

"Stop that!" Sally whispered sharply.

"Tell her you'll do what you please, Mat," Nita demanded. "Tell her to *vamosé*. I'm here to look after you now."

"Yes, now that I've cured him! You kiss him again and I'll shoot this gun at the roof! I'll bring the posse down on you!"

"Try it!" Nita blazed. "I tell you — git!"

Mat must have snatched in the dark for the Derringer, and failed to catch Nita's arm. He said firmly:

"Calm down, both of you. Put up those guns."

There was silence, tense and terrible — broken by a distant sound which made both girls change the aim of their weapons and turn toward the passage.

"It's me — Tex Smith!" warned a throaty whisper. "Quiet down! That time I could hear you talking from outside. You

could have waked the posse if they weren't all bedded down for the night."

"Where did you crawl from?" Nita demanded in a bitter whisper.

"Me? I dealt the cards in this game," Tex retorted grimly. "You didn't think I was going to toss in my chips before the play of the hand? I've been hiding up the canyon since darkness fell."

Chapter XVII

IN THE earliest grayness of the first light Tex erased the slightest vestige of footprints from the passageway and the canyon nearby. Now that three people had disappeared into the malpais, all entering by the same main canyon, he presumed that the posse was aware of the general area in which the hideout was located. But with ordinary precautions they were still reasonably safe from discovery. Their greatest disadvantage was that they had been compelled to abandon their horses.

Tex did his work thoroughly, but even so he was back in the cave a half hour before true dawn. He found three other people who had nothing more to do. Mat's bandage had been changed. He reclined against the slope of rock which had supported Sally while she held his head. He was bare to the waist except for the six-inch-wide strips of torn sheet around his ribs. The tan of his face and neck, and of his hands, were like gloves and a mask in contrast to the whiteness of his chest. Every muscle in the arms and the lean torso was modeled in the leanness and power of a greyhound or a fine horse.

"Now, about tonight," Tex began. "I was with the posse yesterday afternoon when they weren't positive which side I was on. The two I'm worried about are Dick and Dusty Neale. Dick's like a wild man. He's for burning grass — lucky for us the ground is too stony — and all that. He'd butcher anybody to be Big Tom's ramrod."

"He'd have married me off fast enough," Sally agreed. "I'm afraid he's gone over the edge."

"Wilddest broncs cool off. Send him out of the state for a year or so, and he'll cool down," Mat suggested.

"You don't know him. Here or up north, he'll be the same," Sally contradicted bleakly. "Awful thing to say about your own brother, but he's gone bad. I'll try to help him, but I know deep inside he'll always be killin' and schemin' and snatchin'."

"One slip don't make anybody bad," said Nita sharply. Tex nodded.

"What about Dusty, Tex?" Mat asked.

"Lying on his stomach glued to a field glass, him and his two kids," Tex announced grimly. "He says hideouts are never found. They find themselves by smoke and smells."

"Could my cigarette —" began Nita.

"Ain't likely. But it adds up to a move."

"Mat, you're not able to travel yet," said Sally firmly. "Are you?"

"Not far. Still, I got here. I could move."

"I say we should wait for Hen," Sally pronounced. Mat glanced at Tex with approval.

"Not to belittle her scheme, it's got a human weakness," the big man began slowly. "I grant you, Mat, the sheriff will come. But it's a political office, and Tom's important. Will the sheriff go direct to the Flying T, kind of behind the back of Tom and his own deputy? Or will he come here to find Waco and see how the land lies? I say we should get that evidence out of Tom's iron box and into our hands before there is a leak. Right now Tom is rounding us up — he thinks. It's our chance."

"Would be, if I can make it," Mat agreed. "I dislike having others do my work . . . But it's a long way . . ."

"It's a foolish and unnecessary risk!" Sally cried out.

"Not for Tex," Nita replied earnestly. "I think you ought to tell them, Tex. They're as trustworthy as — well, as me, even."

Mat hitched himself higher up the slope of rock. Had he been well, he would have leaned forward. Under his breath he muttered, "So . . ." and he glanced significantly at Sally. "Tex has used us," he explained.

"You can judge," said the big man, simply and directly. "I admit I had personal reasons. Fact is, Tom has deadwood on me. It's probable the evidence is in that strong box. Now

that I've come out on your side, when Tom meets the sheriff he'll naturally prove I'm an outlaw."

"Won't he accuse you anyway?"

"Sure," Tex shrugged contemptuously. "You murdered his foreman. I murdered a man in Wyoming. Hen and Sally rustled his steers. Nita — well, Nita helped tree the town. Charges fly thick in a range war. The sheriff will come to make peace, like Waco tried to. By the time he gets around to investigating all the leads, I'll be in Mexico."

"Mexico?" Nita queried. "You're running out?" In the half light of the cave her delicate face was bloodless. The two dark braids of hair, thick as her wrist, made her seem younger. Sally sat like a statue in pale blue stone, all ears, hardly seeming to breathe.

"It's a nice country. You'd love it, Nita," Tex answered. "I'd have gone there when the gold vein pinched out and Toltec went back to cattle if it hadn't been for you." He turned his rumpled head to face Mat. "I don't give a damn about the range," Tex said. "From first to last, I've been in this fight for Nita. She ain't your girl, Mat. You only slapped your iron on her, in a stampede."

"I like the iron," Nita said, and she turned to Mat, "Don't you, *querida*?"

"Yes, it was sudden, but no stampede," Mat answered. "Only I won't go to Mexico. My roots are here."

"Not if I asked you?" Nita said significantly. "It's the safest plan."

"Don't!" Mat answered. "Nita, please don't! Not ever."

Nita looked into Mat's face for a second. Her lips tightened, and relaxed.

"What you see in a spread of dry dirt, God only knows," she replied very quietly, and with only an edge of bitterness. "You can't help how you're made, I guess."

"You don't need to take it that way," said Mat evenly.

"I do, though. You love something I don't understand at all more than you do me. This has been coming ever since you gave me the deed to your ranch. You didn't act like yourself then, Mat. I knew there was something that you couldn't face, but that was the only time you had ever lied to me, and I let it pass, then."

A deep breath tightened the stiff denim jacket. Nita's head came up and her eyes fixed on Sally's.

"Is whatever he wants real? Can you give it to him?" Nita demanded. "You shamed me, and I shamed you back when I made him walk the street in Toltec with me. But I'm asking you. Mat told me when he asked me to the *baille* that he wanted something more than what he knew I could give. I really started loving him then. I had more to give him than looks. He could have all, but he couldn't give me all back. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Sally said gently. "I do understand. And it is real."

There was silence. The four were motionless: Tex on the shelf of rock just below the opening of the crevice; Mat reclining on the slope; Nita and Sally sitting between. Then Nita pushed herself backward with her hands, so that her position was a little closer to Tex, and a little further from Mat. That was all. The silence was unbroken, yet she had made her decision.

Tex lifted his big yellow head from his deep chest. "Cards get sorted in the play of a hand, I reckon — clubs with clubs and diamonds with diamonds."

"Here's a wedding present for you, Sally," Nita offered. She took the deed from the inner pocket of her jacket. "Or no! Mat gets this. I want you to have a silk dress. If you'll wear what I picked out?"

"Happy to," Sally answered, as grave and shy as a child.

"When do I get mine?" Tex demanded. "I have a wedding present coming to me too, ain't I?"

"You get a paper present like Mat — tonight at the Flying T," Nita teased. "We'll stop off there on our way to Mexico, and this time I'll help you burn it."

"Suits me," Tex agreed. "I still got a few bones to pick hereabouts. Meanwhile, as Mat might say, the doctor better do some bandaging, and the cook might rustle some more grub."

"Biscuits and water is about what you'll always get when I'm cook," Nita informed him. "Or chili. I'm not up to tamales."

"I'll learn you to fry steak," Tex told her gravely, and all four found they were smiling.

Since a move from the cave was planned and might sud-

denly become necessary, Sally bandaged Mat for travel by winding layer after layer of sheeting around his torso from the hips, to the upper ribs. She pulled each turn as tight as she could draw it.

The sun was well to the west, leaving about an hour and a half before dark, when Sally, at lookout, uttered an exclamation of dismay.

All crowded up beside her to look, even Mat. The nearest member of the posse was still a good quarter of a mile away, and a few were turning back as though to supper; but from an entirely different direction two boys were stumbling across the malpais directly toward the hideout. They moved with the directness of persons heading for a definite destination. The older boy kept waving the younger back. The latter, about a thirteen-year-old, kept stubbornly coming along, even when his big brother threw a lump of pumice at him.

"Those are Dusty's kids," said Mat. "The big one is Alec. He's a fine, smart little hellion."

"Do you suppose they saw me?" Sally demanded.

"Act like it," Tex said grimly. "Hate to say so, but I reckon the sunlight hit your hair. It's bright enough."

"The men aren't paying any attention," Sally pointed out hopefully.

"No, Dusty ain't got much use for that crowd. I reckon they think the kids are just fooling around." Tex answered, but his tone was more hopeless than before. "Men I could deal with, but what are we going to do against kids?"

They watched in fascination as the two figures approached. All the posse were on their way to supper now. Alec had stopped trying to drive his brother back. There was no doubt they had discovered something.

"Get off the step," Mat ordered quietly. "They're only kids, and they can't be sure what they saw. Curiosity killed the cat, remember."

Tex nodded and moved to one side and out of sight from above. Mat posted himself on the opposite side. The girls moved farther back.

A shadow fell on the step as Alec leaned over the crevice to look down. Seeing nothing, he cautiously extended his foot to climb below. Instantly Tex caught him by the ankle, and

jerked. The boy cried out as he fell, but Tex threw himself upon the boy and smothered any coherent shout of alarm with a huge hand across the youth's mouth.

"Alec! Alec! Did you fall? Alec — are you hurt, Alec?"

They could see the littler boy's shadow, hear the fright in his voice, watch the shadow shift as he steeled himself to go to Alec's rescue. Mat caught his ankle at the first step and smothered his cry. Sally gagged the boys one after the other with strips of sheet.

"Now what do we do?" Tex pleaded. "Dusty won't let them out of his sight long! We got to move pronto or be smoked out while there's still light. Oh, if only they were men —"

"I got it!" Nita exclaimed. "Tie them up — but not too tight. Fix the ropes so they can work loose. That'll give us an hour — half an hour's start —"

"Good girl!" Tex approved. But Mat frowned and peered out across the malpais from the step.

"None of the posse noticed," he reported. "I don't see Dusty a-running. I figure Dusty went to supper."

"Mat, it's ten to one they are found or work loose. Isn't that a fair gamble — considering ours?" Nita argued.

"One chance in a thousand is too much," Mat said. "We take them with us." He reached out and rubbed Alec's ears with rough affection. "We won't hurt you, son, but your Pa will dust your britches for bein' careless."

"Okay, but it looks like our luck has run out," said Tex. "I think you have made a mistake, Mat."

Sally had already taken down the bottles of water. There had been no question in her mind. She had gagged the boys and then prepared to go.

Even Mat had only a general idea of the lie of the land. The main canyon from which the cave opened divided the malpais roughly in two. At least, it went through the badlands, though there were side canyons by the dozen — some blind-box canyons, and others not. He put himself at the head of the party. Sally walked at his shoulder. Next were Alec and his kid brother, shepherded by Nita. Tex covered the rear.

Mat looked back at Tex. There were beads of sweat on

the marshal's forehead, and he was chewing at his lip. The level sun was coloring the rim of the canyon walls a dusky orange. Where they stood the shadow was heavier, tinted with sepla.

"The posse is going to catch up with us," said Tex. "Damn it, we miss out by about half an hour!"

"Taking the kids with us didn't cause that," Sally retorted with spirit. At a sign from Mat she began to loosen the gags.

"Even now they'll locate us quicker because of them," Tex grumbled.

"Not to signify. Don't be itchy, Tex," Mat reproved. "What's your name?" he asked the littler boy as the gag fell off.

"Georgie," the kid muttered, shrinking back against his brother.

"Well, Georgie, you just do what Alec tells you," Mat ordered gravely. "And, Alec, you git to your pa. Signal if you've a mind to. It really don't matter, kid. But tell Dusty I've really got deadwood on Tom Parks now, and to keep out of the fight tonight."

Alec wet his lips and nodded, but his eyes were already on the slope of the canyon walls. At a sign from Mat he ran like a jack rabbit, with his brother at his heels — diagonally up the slope, over and away. He did not shout, even after he had disappeared.

Mat pushed ahead. "Watch for a rider coming from behind," he directed over his shoulder. "I'm looking for a spot where I can fort up."

"Will telling Dusty do any good?" Sally demanded.

"It'll plague Tom Parks, once Dusty gets the idea in his bull head," Mat commented. "I'm right fond of Dusty."

They had pushed on another quarter mile when Tex suddenly ran up the side of the canyon, peered over the rim, fired twice with his carbine, and plunged back down the slope.

"Five hundred yards," he said. "The lead will slow 'em some. That's all."

Tex had climbed at a spot just before the canyon forked. As they stood, the main canyon angled to the right; off to the left was a narrower canyon, hardly twenty feet wide at the top, with walls that were almost vertical. The canyon looked

as though it would pinch out or box within a short distance, but it was a trench that would be an obstacle to pursuit from the bed of the malpais.

At the fork, the slowly moving lava had hardened into a small hill, barely fifteen feet higher than the general level at the rear, and perhaps forty feet high from the canyon face. But it was formed of huge slabs that had cooled and been carried along by the flow until their bulk checked it. The hill was roughly triangular and all angles and holes, much like a pile of cracked flagstones tossed together at a street corner, except about twenty times bigger.

"That's as good a fort as I'm likely to find," Mat decided. "I can hold them off from there for quite a spell."

"I've counted eight men, and haven't seen Tom or Dick or Waco," Tex said dubiously. "Sure you don't want us to hold off a rush after dark?"

"I'm holding *out*, not *holing up*," Mat denied with emphasis. "I'll buy the time that you and Hen need to win with. No, you go on."

Tex handed the Winchester carbine and its belt of cartridges to Sally. Nita passed her the bottle and the one canteen which remained full — all the water they had. Suddenly Nita's arms were around Mat and her lips pressed to his. She clung for a second, then whirled with a sob. For an instant she looked at Sally; then rising on tiptoe, she kissed Sally on the lips.

"Take care of him," Nita choked. "Watch behind and to the sides! *Think* for him!"

Before Sally could move or answer Nita was stumbling down the canyon as fast as she could walk. Slowly Tex started to follow; then he lengthened his stride. Neither looked back.

"You — you never asked me if I'd stay!" Sally whispered to Mat.

He had already begun to pick his way up the rough slope of the hill. He turned his head in complete surprise.

"Ask you? Why? I knew it. We all knew it!" he exclaimed.

Chapter XVIII

SEVERAL POSSEMEN were running and stumbling across the lava when Mat and Sally reached the top of the hill. At Mat's first shot every figure vanished, as though a sponge had passed across a blackboard. The answering bullets struck the soft pumice with a slapping thud: the sound a bullet makes against a sand bag, not the scream of a ricochet from hard stone.

After the first exchange there was not much firing. No one wanted to betray his position. The first phase of the skirmish was like the slow tightening of a cord, a sense of increasing pressure that must surely end in a burst of flame and bone-shattered oblivion.

Here — there — a man would pop into sight, run a few steps, and fling himself into a hole — each time a little nearer; each glimpse for fewer seconds. The first targets had been hundreds of yards away; now the closest was in a hole at the edge of the branch canyon. It had all taken time. The orange glow cast on the rock by the setting sun had faded; the targets now were black against a grayish black.

Mat fired; he kept his carbine covering the spot, and fired again when the man moved. He missed and swore under his breath. A ragged fusillade ran around a circle that was now only a hundred yards in radius at its widest point: flashes from the rim, from the opposite edge of the main canyon, and one from behind, on the promontory from which the little hill jutted. None of these bullets hit far from the flash of Mat's carbine. He could feel the shocks, and he could taste the drifting dust.

"You hit? What's wrong?" Sally whispered.

"Tom," Mat answered. "I followed him all the way in, and missed my good chances." He spoke with low, bitter disgust.

"Is Dick —"

"Haven't seen him and that's funny. Waco's out there. They're fighting smarter than I figured. Next move is to cross the canyon and creep up the hill from all sides at once. Then they'll rush us."

"How long . . . before the rush, Mat?"

"Twenty minutes before it gets real dark and they start. Then . . . half an hour, maybe more. They'll come slow.

Maybe only one of two will have the guts to come at all, but Tom will try. I'd better send you away now. They don't even know I've got you with me."

"Not . . . yet, Mat. I want every minute. Mat — can't I help?"

They lay on their stomachs, shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip, in an angle between the slanting slabs. Her face now was a grayish blur with two dark patches for eyes, so close the merest whisper sufficed. Mat passed an arm across Sally's shoulders, cradling the back of her head in his palm. The movement began with a tender and firm protectiveness, as though he must break bad news. It ended with an electric quiver of his fingers, and a barely audible gasp. His whisper was husky; for an instant he had lost the thread of what he meant to say.

"If they've got the guts — I mean your help wouldn't win —" Mat's voice steadied. "Being brave does nothing against numbers, Sally. They'd only get us both instead of one." His fingers were gently stroking the back of her neck.

"You . . . jumped, Mat. Why?"

"Your hair," he whispered. "It's so soft! Nothing was ever so soft and fine. I've looked at you a thousand times, and never knew."

"You've only looked at the shell of me, Mat dearest." Her arm crept over his shoulder. "The desert wind makes my face rough. It makes my hair brittle, too, but it can't change the real me inside." For a moment Sally lay silent. "Just now I learned something, too. I understand something I used to be ornery and mean about. I won't ever be bitter, Mat dearest. Not ever!"

"About what?"

"Everything . . . Passing me over for Nita. And everything afterward. Mat, you shan't send me away. I won't leave you. Maybe we've got less than an hour left. If I were afraid — if I had doubts that an hour might be all there was — I could snatch it. But it wouldn't be being true to you, Mat. It wouldn't be me."

They lay perfectly still, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip. His hand cradled her head; her arm lay lightly across his shoulder, with only the least pressure of finger tips. Faces were no longer even a gray blur. His whisper, when it came,

was husky and choked with the burden of all that he had felt, but never expressed.

"Sally, at the first sight something passed between us. Somehow I felt you were better and bigger than me — no, not bigger — grander. And the only way I could be your size was by beating you down. I wanted to lord it over you, and I couldn't. I wanted to hurt you, and you wouldn't cry.

"Then I found out that when I hurt you, I was empty. Always you were between me and the sky, and I wanted something to hug to me. Never for one whole day — I can't say not for an hour — but never for one whole day from the first day have you been out of my mind. And I'll tell you this too: I never have nor could tell any other woman I loved her. But I love you, Sally. I want to marry you. I want you with me, and I always will."

Mat stopped, breathless. His arm tightened; his kiss hurt. Both suddenly felt exhausted. He brushed her cheek with his fingers as he withdrew his arm, and once she passed fingers through his hair.

"You've spoken," Sally whispered. "I'm mighty happy and proud . . . Mat, there must be some way out for us. I want to live! Mat, it's already black dark!" She could sense his desperate mental struggle for a plan; she knew by the tautening of his body when finally he had found one, and she knew that it was desperate.

"Follow me close when I start," he whispered, and passed her the carbine. "No matter how scared you get, don't whisper or shoot unless I do."

"What are you going to do?" Sally pleaded anxiously.

"You better not know. Just follow me."

He lay listening. She listened too with an intentness which became an exhausting effort; she heard nothing for what must have been ten endless minutes. Then, from below, she caught the faintest scrape of a boot sole on rough rock. She had heard that sound before, in the cave.

It came again from a different point, and this time a small stone rolled down the rocky slope. To her over-strained ears the little noise resounded like a landslide; and to judge by the complete, breath-held silence that followed, the sound must have seemed as loud to the men who had started to crawl up the steep, jagged slopes of the hill.

How many men there were Sally could not decide, listen as she would. At least two, and she believed more; but the sounds were so faint, so scattered, and so irregular in time that she could never quite know whether a different man had betrayed himself, or whether the same one had managed to move a few feet with utter stealthiness.

They were all moving upward — about to the halfway point, she guessed. She could determine the direction of a sound, but not its distance. Her nerves tightened to the breaking point. She wanted to crawl away, to shoot. She did clutch at Mat. In return there was a steady, reassuring pressure from his fingers.

Then, with infinite precaution, Mat began to move. She felt him inching forward, toward the face of the hills, the creeping enemies. Only the full strength of her will checked her whisper of protest. She could feel him swing his legs around to descend feet first. He eased himself over the edge of the slope; his fingers tugged at her shoulder, urging her to follow. She copied his movement: numb, all protest.

Attack them? Why?

The lip of the first slab was a full four feet of bare lava — steep, but so rough her body did not slip when she flattened herself against the surface. Mat kept tugging at her ankle. She moved like a snake, with only the faintest rasp of denim on rough stone. Her leg touched the angle of the next slab. Another two feet, and her hips were in a V, slanting to the left and downward where two slabs abutted.

In a flash of comprehension, she felt the lump leave her throat. However, the taste of fear lingered sharp and salt. The face of the hill was a zigzag series of these V-shaped troughs, blocked here and there by a slab such as she had just crossed. Ascent and descent was channeled into many different paths.

Sally could visualize how the scene would have looked in daylight: two, or three or perhaps four men — with intervals between them — so that they would close in at the top from all directions at once — crawling upward; Mat and herself, inching downward. Each blindly followed a channel in the jumble of huge stones, each aware that life hung on stealth.

There was room to pass, by the width of a huge slab or

two. And there was the chance that already, a few yards below Mat, an enemy pressed himself against the rock in the same channel as that to which they had committed themselves.

Below her, a bit of lava crumbled beneath Mat's weight and slithered and tumbled down the slope. Instantly his hands gripped her ankle, but involuntarily Sally had tried to move the carbine into position for defense. To her ears the rasp of the butt on the stone was as loud as a file against a saw.

No further sound came for many seconds. There was only Mat's grip on her ankle and the growing suffocation as she held her breath. Would the others guess, or were they also flattened, not daring to breathe, dreading the flash of a shot?

Those others had companions to right and left, and at last those others began to climb again. The sounds were on the same level now. There was a full minute while a man passed. Through that endless time, Mat's clutch was steady on Sally's ankle. She knew his ruse had succeeded when he released her and he moved downward again.

Her knees buckled when her feet touched the floor of the canyon. Mat held her, but he was shaking himself from the nervous strain. Foot by foot now, testing each step and yet seeming to move fast in comparison with the descent, Mat led Sally into the side canyon. They rounded a bend — they could feel with their hands when the steep walls changed direction, though they could not see. They had pressed on for what seemed a long distance, and which was probably seventy-five yards, when a yell from behind them told that the attack had at last reached the top of the hill and discovered it unguarded.

The walls of the narrow canyon funneled the noise. Big Tom swore like a mad bull, mostly at the cowboys he had posted in the promontory behind the hill to cut off retreat. They yelled back that not so much as a pack rat had gotten by, and were told they were yellow liars.

Tom ordered pursuit in all directions and was told to dry up and wait for morning. Mat could not walk far. They'd get him when they found out where he was, but to spread out and go after him singly right now would be suicide.

Mat reached back for Sally. "We're safe till sunup," he

whispered in her ear. "Can you keep going? I'm about beat out."

"Did the wound break open?"

"No. Just plumb weak," he whispered.

They could feel the walls of the canyon drawing in, as one entering a room in darkness senses whether it is small or large. The night was starless, but within a few yards they began to stumble over rounded stones, and next were stopped by what felt like a vertical wall.

"Waterfall here when it rains," Mat whispered in bitter disappointment. "Sally, we're boxed in."

Behind the round stones thrown outward by the force of the falling water was a bed of sand. Mat sat down with a long breath of complete weariness, and drew Sally down beside him.

"I wish we could have had all the luck. Though we had plenty. This ain't a bad hole, but we're cornered."

"Hen can be here by tomorrow."

"Oh, sure," Mat conceded. "Here, put your head on my shoulder, Sally, and rest."

"You sleep. I can keep watch," Sally argued.

Mat would not have it that way. He reclined against the bank of sand with his arm around her. Undoubtedly, he meant to stay awake, but in ten minutes his breathing grew regular. Sally shifted her position to make him more comfortable. Instantly the arm around her tightened, holding her close.

Sally waited; then tried again. Once more came that guarding clasp. As long as she was still, Mat's arm was lax; but whenever she tried to move away, he held her.

Mat was sunk in the sleep of exhaustion. The action was unconscious, expressive of a will deeper than thought, more central to his being than the needs of the body.

To Sally came the happiness that is too complete for smiles or tears. More than any word or conscious act, that simple pressure of an arm told her how much she was wanted.

"Oh God, please keep him for me," she whispered. "We need each other so much!"

Chapter XIX

TIME! Mat was buying it, but how to deliver? Urgency goaded Tex and Nita along the main canyon in the orange-tinted twilight; the echoes of the first shots exchanged between Mat and the posse only emphasized the necessity for speed and the frustration of being afoot.

Even Tex had only a general and hearsay knowledge of the lay of the land and the location of the nearest nester's shack. When night fell starless and pocket-black, he damned his luck. A yellow sunset was caused by haze and overcast in the sky. It was a sign of cloudy weather to follow, as everyone knew. But why on this night of all nights, Tex complained to Nita, couldn't the stars have shown through for at least an hour or two?

"Tex, you're spooking yourself," Nita cut in sharply. "I wish you'd shut up, because I feel the same way. Luck always evens. For instance, the stars you and I want would skyline Mat, up on top of that hill as he is. Let's us just play out our hand."

"Okay, but I hate dark nights. Never knew a town marshal who didn't, either," Tex subsided.

They stumbled and groped along, hour after hour. They cursed the octatilla cactus that they could not see in time to avoid. It was three in the morning when a dog, barking back at a wailing coyote, guided them to the nester's shack; otherwise they might have blundered past the little cabin, set in a fold of invisible hills.

The nester refused to lend them horses and saddles, and was not at all anxious to sell, even at a high price. In the end, Tex had to convince the man that he was going to buy the horses, or fight for them. It all took time. They did get coffee and a hot meal, but they lost another hour.

There was just light enough to see by when they finally reached the Flying T. The spread looked deserted: no horses in the corral, gates open. Tex hailed the house. There was no answer.

He moved his horse close to Nita.

"This seems too good — like matching a buried ace on the third round," he whispered uneasily.

Nita leaned forward in the saddle to scrutinize the low,

dark mass of the buildings. "I can't see anything wrong, but I smell fresh horse sign," she whispered back. "If Tom did pull away all his men, sign would have had two days to dry."

"Someone might have passed. Could even be from our ponies."

"Maybe," Nita admitted nervously. "But . . . would Tom leave this spread uncovered . . . two whole days?"

"Nita, we're spooked," said Tex in a natural voice. "I'm the fastest man with a gun in the Valley. And you're the fastest thinker. Okay — let's go!"

He whirled his pony and loped to the blacksmith shop. When he rode back he was carrying a sledge hammer.

"Here's the key to Tom's iron chest," he declared loudly. "Ready?"

Nita dismounted and tied both ponies to the corral fence. Tex carefully loosened his guns. Nita took out the Derringer, thought for an instant, and slipped it into her hat before she loosened her own Colt.

"That's a gambler's trick," Tex commented. "Ain't we spooked complete, though?" He grinned, and Nita smiled back. They admitted to one another that the premonition of danger was so strong as to be all but tangible. They were going forward, laughing at their own precautions, but as ready for the unknown as preparation and alertness could make them. Perhaps they were the only human beings within miles. And yet —

Tex entered the ranch-house first. He found and lighted a lantern. He was through the door of the main room, covering that room and scouting the room ahead through the door he had opened, before Nita entered the house.

They were making it as difficult as possible for both of them to be covered at once. The space of the room between them was their safeguard. Tex was at one door with the lantern; Nita at the edge of the circle of light, some twenty feet behind, also standing in a doorway. She protected Tex's back; he was between her and any danger in front.

Ahead was Tom Parks' bedroom. The door was shut. Tex ran forward and kicked it open, six-gun aimed at the darkness within. Nita ran when he did; she crouched in the doorway Tex had just quitted, her Colt upraised and poised.

"Nothing here," Tex called over his shoulder. He set the

lantern on the floor of Tom's bedroom and dragged the iron chest from beneath the bunk.

"Wait!" Nita called. "Put that lantern between us — out in the middle room here, so's you can see by the light that comes through the open door without standing in the light yourself."

He obeyed. Nita darted past the lantern into the bedroom, and stood a second inside the bedroom door, out of the path of light cast by the lantern. She looked the room over. There was nothing but the clothing hanging from nails, the big chest for other clothing and gear in the corner, the bunk, the table and two chairs, and the iron chest. Satisfied that the bedroom was secure, Nita knelt close to the door, turning her back on Tex and covering the rooms through which they had advanced.

"Okay. Knock the chest apart," she whispered.

Tex holstered his gun to free both hands for the sledge. Three times the heavy hammer clanged on iron before the lock gave. The lid grated and squeaked as he wrenched the chest open.

"The .22 is still here. Ain't light enough to tell which paper I want," he reported.

"Take the whole bundle out to the lantern," Nita directed, without turning.

Tex was just straightening up when a third voice in the bedroom spoke. It was the voice of Dick Flandreau, cold and gloatingly triumphant. But in the shock of discovery there seemed to be no Dick. The shadows in the bedroom looked as they had before.

"Freeze — both of you!" Dick's voice said.

Eyes that darted at every shadow could find no target. Gun hands that jerked involuntarily froze into rigid, tense wariness.

"You big sidewinder! You painted wench!" said Dick Flandreau. "You wiped your feet on me. And now I got you, you poor damn fools!"

Now Tex and Nita could locate him — but still they could not see him. They saw only the barrel of the Winchester Dick aimed at them.

The rifle protruded from beneath the slightly raised lid of the big chest which Nita had believed to contain nothing

save Tom Parks' extra clothing and gear. Dick must have emptied the chest long before their arrival. He must have crept in like a spider when they rode near, knowing that eventually they would come to the bedroom.

Never was there a colder drop. Despite the vicious sadism that spoke through Dick's taunt, neither Tex nor Nita dared move. The fastest gunman cannot beat a finger crooked on a trigger. At ten feet, Dick would not miss.

"Drop your gun, wench!" he ordered. "I wasn't good enough to drink with, eh? I wasn't fit to look at, in the cell. I ain't forgot."

Nita's Colt thudded on the floor. The Winchester pointed unwaveringly at Tex's chest, not at her. Tex stood as he had frozen at the first word — arms half bent, fingers hooked and thumbs up. He was ready for the flashing move that clears a Colt from the holster and cocks it with the same motion. But in the fixed aim of the rifle lay death for him. As he stood Nita could not see his face; she dared not risk the word that might prepare him for what she meant to do.

Nita was afraid, so afraid that she knew her voice might play her false, but shift the aim of that rifle toward her own body she must! She was no gunfighter, but she might distract Dick.

"Don't hurt me! I didn't mean nothing by it, Dick! I never knew you cared for me, Dick. See, I've dropped my gun. I'm putting my hands up!"

Pleading, imploring, she raised her hands slowly toward her hat, and the Derringer within.

Tex threw his hands toward his guns. His Colts were clear of the leather when the Winchester spat fire. The impact of the bullet knocked Tex down. He fell backward, still gripping his guns. The lid of the closet snapped up as Dick levered the Winchester to reload. Nita's hat was off. But her snatch at the Derringer found butt and barrel, not the trigger. She was slow — slow in that split second before Tex shot from where he lay.

He fired once . . . twice, with that infinitesimal pause for aim. Then there was drum fire until the hammers of the Colts clicked. The last shots hit the walls. The smoking Colts rolled from Tex's limp hands. The lid of the chest fell on a

Winchester barrel that poked upward at a wild angle which threatened only the ceiling. And then Nita found the trigger of the Derringer and fired two slugs.

She hit the chest, she thought. She never learned, for she never looked to see. The fight was over in the fraction of a second between Tex's move and her two shots. For when Nita picked up her revolver and flung open the chest in which Dick had hidden, there was a bullet hole in the forehead of the face that stared back at her. Later she did notice that the lever of the Winchester was down, and the sliding bolt back. In the cramped space Dick had never had time to finish the loading motion.

But at that moment, once sure that Dick was dead, Nita knelt over Tex. He was conscious by an effort of will. He tried to speak, but a bloody froth trickled from the corner of his mouth. There was a patch of blood soaking around a tear in the right side of the shirt, high up on the chest, and Nita felt blood on his back when she tried to lift him. He was so heavy that in her first attempt she hardly more than got her arm under his back. He coughed, spat out a mouthful of blood, and smiled at her.

"I don't know what to do, Tex!" she cried out wildly.

He formed the word, "Okay" with his lips rather than spoke it, but Nita understood. He was still smiling. She let his head rest on the floor again and dragged the cot as close to him as she could. Summoning all her strength, she lifted and dragged him until he sat with his back against it. He managed to hook an elbow over the edge of the cot, though the effort made a slight froth of blood appear at the corner of his mouth. Nita wiped the stain away with a corner of the sheet, and stood panting.

The little smile was still on his lips. The realization that Tex was not dying, at least not instantly and however badly he might be hurt, dawned on Nita and enabled her to recover herself. That he was too heavy for her to lift was awful, and yet there was an appeal in his helplessness.

"What can I do now, Tex?" Nita asked, and managed to smile herself.

He motioned with his head and stirred one leg. Again she understood. She stood on the cot, took him firmly under the armpits, and lifted with all her strength. For a second or

two the tug of war was a balanced thing; then Tex made a supreme effort that got his hips on the bed and nearly cost Nita her balance. Yet she could lift his legs and roll him onto the cot, prop him up with a pillow, cut away the shirt and undershirt and put a compress on the two dark spots that slowly oozed blood. Last she applied a bandage — all very much as Nita had seen Sally doctor Mat.

"You all right? Suppose I dare get water?"

He nodded. She washed him, and then herself. There was light now; Nita blew out the lantern and sat beside Tex on the edge of the cot. The whole world seemed to narrow to the head and shoulders of this big blond man who lay so still and quiet, a little strip of Navaho blanket, and her own hands, lying on her knee like the hands of someone else.

The past and the future, premonition and the danger of death, even the frustrations of her helplessness to aid Tex further, fell away. Nita forgot that Dick lay dead not ten feet away, that two yards from her an iron chest lay open. There was only Tex and herself, exhausted, silent, and together.

"I don't know how to help you any more, Tex," she said. "All I can do is to stay with you. Whoever comes, we'll just have to give up and send them for a doctor. You're shot through the lung, high up. I can only hope you'll pull through. Whatever happens, I guess it just has to be."

Tex nodded. Clearly he wanted to speak, but he feared the effort would bring blood from his lung. Nita leaned close to his lips. It was the faintest whisper, more lip-movement than breath.

"You tried to draw his shot."

"Sure. Would have given you a chance." Nita looked at Tex sharply for blood, but none appeared on his lips. "You started too soon, Tex."

"No." In the faintest whisper.

"But yes!" Nita insisted aloud. "When he saw me with a gun, he'd have shifted aim —"

"Never would," Tex whispered. "Disarmed you. Not me."

Nita sat up straight and stared. "That's so! He told me to drop my gun, and never talked to you at all! You mean — he didn't care about your gun because he was going to kill

you, but he wanted me disarmed so he could . . . get me later? Oh, Tex!"

"Right."

"You took a bullet on the chance you'd live long enough to get a shot back?"

Tex nodded and gave a shrug as though to say, "I knew I'd get the bullet anyway."

"Don't shrug it off, Tex. That was mighty fine," said Nita quietly. "Tex, let me tell you something from the heart. If nerve was all that was needed between a man and a woman, you and I would be rich. We've never had to wonder about courage. But you know I had you in my mind, and still made a play for Mat. And I did. But Tex, there are very few women in the world who haven't done the same thing.

"A very few — Sally is one of them, I'm sure — are so lucky that they never have to measure one man against another. A few more — though not as many as men think — aren't woman enough to have a chance to measure men. They just balance marriage against being an old maid. But most women — and I — have another man somewhere whom we didn't marry. We don't talk about this very often because it isn't necessary. Usually it's better for all to leave the past alone. You know, and so I'm speaking out. I always did love you, Tex — plenty. I won't be a worse wife, or a worse mother. Because you're my last man, Tex—the one I stay with."

He signed to her to bend down.

"Staying with me is all I ask, now or ever," he whispered. Nita laid her cheek against his a moment; then, rising, she went to the iron chest and returned with a folded paper, with Tex's eyes following every move. She touched a match to the reward notice and dropped it to the floor.

A last curl of smoke drifted into the air. A puff of breeze caught the thin sheet of ash, broke it, and drove the pieces here and there while they crumbled more and more into dust.

"That's the last of our past, Tex," said Nita softly. "Now, can I do anything to make you more comfortable, dear?"

They did not know it, but complete rest is one of the best treatments for a lung wound, often far better than probing or an operation.

Chapter XX

SUDDENLY Mat Karney snapped wide awake. He jerked his arm from beneath Sally and reached for a gun, knowing only that some danger had roused him. The night was still impenetrably dark, and he could hear nothing.

But then again he caught a distant, muffled *click* of a shod hoof striking stone. He relaxed. The rider was far off; not even in the side canyon. At the same moment a loud hail reverberated down the narrow canyon.

"Hello the camp! Hi there, hello!"

"Hen!" whispered Sally excitedly. "Mat, that's Hen's voice! He's back with the sheriff!"

"Seems so. You sure it's Hen?"

"Oh, yes! Isn't it wonderful? He must have talked the sheriff into riding all night —"

"Sh!" Mat warned. The hail had been answered by Big Tom, who warned whoever it was to ride in real slow. There was about half a minute of silence; then a murmur of voices began which continued for at least ten minutes. Strain as he would, Mat could not follow the argument, though an argument it undoubtedly was — the tone and timing of question and reply indicated that much.

Although the canyon walls acted like sounding boards, individual words were indistinguishable unless a man raised his voice, and only once did anyone become angry enough to speak above the normal pitch. That man was Dusty Neale. The exclamation which came clearly to Mat was:

"To hell with that! I'm pulling out right now!"

Thereafter the whole pitch of the conversation sank to a murmur and soon ceased.

"Why would Dusty pull out — in the middle of the night?" Sally whispered.

"I wish I knew!" Mat replied fervently. "For no reason that's going to help us."

"Do you think Hen brought the sheriff?"

"Yeah, I do. Guess Tex had the sheriff figured right. Dusty don't cotton much to politics."

They watched alertly together for fully three quarters of an hour, without hearing a sound from the other camp. Then the silence was split by a yell of rage.

"What — why, damn yuh!"

The voice was cut off, as by a hand over the mouth. But no shot — not even the murmur of a word — followed.

"That wasn't Dusty," Mat whispered.

"Nor Hen. Strange voice to me."

"Well, it sure enough wasn't Tom Parks, and it was the start of fight talk," Mat decided. "I don't like it."

He would have liked it less if he had been able to gain complete knowledge, though probably Mat's actions on the dawn to follow would have been the same. On the whole, his surmises had been quite accurate, as far as they went.

Hen Flandreau had been able to persuade the sheriff to ride all night by pointing out that Mat might very well be killed during even one extra hour of daylight. The same argument, however, militated against any stop at the Flying T. The best evidence, Sheriff Ed Smalley declared cogently, is useless to a corpse.

Smalley was a hard-bitten old-timer who had worn his star since the Apache wars. He allowed a barber to cut his hair, but he cropped his iron-gray beard himself with sheep shears because that method was simpler and proved he was no dude. He had seen the Indian and the miner go, and he believed that in the long run the strongest man controls the land. At the moment he was balancing between the big cattleman and the granger, but for the nester he had no earthly use.

Consequently, when he sat down with Tom Parks and Waco at the camp they had established at the juncture of the two canyons, Smalley had no intention of letting Tom Parks know that he was under suspicion. But Hen, in his simplicity, blurted out the facts about the bullet Sally had found.

"That's for later," Smalley had countered instantly, and with apparent indifference. "I haven't ridden day and night on a two-bit rustlin' case. Fact is, you've got a killer holed up. You've made a mess of this chase like the muttonheads you are. I'm takin' over before this Mat Karney kills a couple more of yuh — as he will, come morning."

"You talk tough, Ed," growled Big Tom.

"Saves time. Come morning, all you damn cowpokes will

turn in those stars I see pinned on yuh. You'll git for home and stay there. Me and Waco will track this Mat down and bring him in. I've trailed Injuns, and I doubt if he's got the moxie to crack down on me. Savvy?"

"Like hell," said Big Tom. "Sheriff, you can have your tin star. But me and my boys stick until we see Mat in handcuffs. He's a tough hombre, and he's killed my foreman and my friend —"

"You had him in handcuffs, and he wasn't so damn tough this evening," cut in Dusty Neale.

Tom hitched his big body forward and eyed the sheriff narrowly.

"An arrest won't settle nothing. There's too many dead already," he said.

"By hell, that's what I've been waitin' to hear," cried Neale. His voice was beginning to rise. "Mat hisself told me so, and like a fool I didn't tumble! Yuh did want him dead when yuh stopped me! You're out to get him, yuh — yuh damned —"

"Shut up, stranger," said Ed Smalley. "You buzz like a horse fly. Go fly some place else."

"To hell with that! I'm pulling out right now!" Dusty shouted. His head lowered, and he glowered at them all. For a moment his mouth worked soundlessly in rage. When he did manage to get a word in, his voice was choked and almost inaudible. "Mat is right! I'm with him, savvy? You kill him and this war still ain't finished."

Dusty turned on his heel and started for his horse. Ed Smalley spat into the fire imperturbably. During the altercation only his eyes had moved.

"Excitable cuss," he remarked. "Never use threats myself. Find they just waste time. You know where my stick floats, Tom."

"Now, Sheriff," began Waco.

"Oh, go look in a mirror," said Ed Smalley.

Within half an hour all the camp was asleep except for Big Tom and the horse guard. The ranchman had only pretended to close his eyes. While the others were settling down, he put two and two together. Sally's ruse was transparent now. She had been smart, but not smart enough. He

had been the really smart one when he sent Dick back to cover the Flying T. Dick had turned killer; he'd attend to that end.

Nevertheless, Tom wished that Dick were in camp tonight. He needed a reliable accomplice. Dick would have been perfect, but in his absence Kansas Joe would have to do. Kansas was ornery enough, but liable to be squeamish. He had never actually drygulched anybody.

Tom snaked out of his blankets and eased into the shadows until he found the horse guard.

"Kansas, do you want to be foreman of the Flying T? And take over Jerry Hackett's end?" he began abruptly.

"That would be good money," Kansas answered guardedly.

"There's some risk, of course. I'm going to kill Mat Karney tomorrow."

"How about the sheriff?"

"He won't kick much when it's over. It'll be a fair killing."

"Yeah? Telling me about it now to hear your head rattle, huh?" Kansas demanded derisively.

"Of course not," Tom growled. "You saw Dusty Neale go stomping off? He's a great one for hiding out and spyin', ain't he? I don't figure he went far. I want you to keep him off my neck."

"Oh! And that's all?"

"Well, use your head," said Big Tom. "When you go off guard, sift out of camp. Climb on top of the canyon, high up, and hide out. When I corner Mat — well, it all depends, don't it? What caliber gun do you shoot?"

".45."

"So do I," said Big Tom. "The foreman's job anyhow. That's legitimate. Jerry Hackett's end, too, if —"

Tom let the end of the sentence hang.

"You'll shake on that?" demanded Kansas. Tom reached out a hand and gripped firmly.

"Wondering how you can get rid of the sheriff — pardner," said Kansas.

"Watch," Tom invited.

He tiptoed back to the camp and hit Hen across the head with the barrel of a Colt. The thud made Ed Smalley lift his gray head like an alarmed snapping turtle. Big Tom covered the sheriff with a six-gun.

"What — why, damn yuh!" Smalley yelled.

Big Tom leaped on him, knees driving into Smalley's chest and knocking out his wind. Methodically Tom gagged and bound the sheriff, and then Hen, while his ranch hands stared.

"I'm still boss," Tom told them. "You'll earn your keep tomorrow, or else! And pull in those eyes before a calf starts suckin' on them."

Mat's ears had not deceived him. After the sheriff's yell, the camp was silent until the darkness dimmed into a gray, cloudy, somber dawn.

With the coming of light Mat saw that Sally and he would be traced to their hiding place without difficulty. Nor was their refuge capable of prolonged defense. The bend in the canyon was about fifty yards away — too far to place a .45 bullet to the inch, but well within effective range for a Colt, and pointblank shooting distance for a Winchester. The walls were nearly vertical — Mat abandoned any hope of climbing out at the first glance — and about thirty feet high.

At the bend, the canyon was less than twenty feet in width; where he sat beneath the overhang of the waterfall was about five feet. The sand and boulders thrown up by the falling water made a fairly effective breastwork against attack from the floor of the canyon, but the fatal weakness of the position was that Mat and Sally were exposed to fire from the rim of the canyon walls.

"When we're found, I want you to walk out to them, Sally," Mat decided in a whisper. "Tell the sheriff I'll give myself up to him."

Watching him from behind and to the side, Sally saw that the dark, unshaven profile was drawn fine by something more than the gauntness of privation and lack of sleep. She had seen that look on the faces of horse wranglers as they held the reins and poised the spurs waiting for the bronco to buck. As he lay with the carbine thrust across the stones, Mat's figure seemed muscle-loose, but poised.

His eyes, she observed, roved the canyon rim oftener than the bend in the wall. She recalled that since dawn he had said nothing of the ominous noises of the previous night. Behind his apparently matter-of-fact decision lay what in-

terpretation of the facts? *He's expecting the worst, but he isn't going to bother me with notions*, Sally thought.

The top of a hat poked into sight at the bend of the canyon. Mat sighted and fired. His bullet sent the hat spinning off the end of the stick which held it.

"Send me the sheriff! Sally Flandreau's with me, and I'm ready to talk!" he called out clearly.

There was a long silence — five minutes . . . ten . . . fifteen . . . Only Mat's eyes moved, going in quick circles around both rims, darting downward; then going around the rims again. At last came the voice of Big Tom Parks, speaking from close behind the bend.

"Karney? Here's the sheriff. Better not shoot!"

"Keep low, Sally!" Mat whispered.

Ed Smalley came from behind the rock with three long steps that took him to the center of the canyon. His star was bright on his chest, and two guns swung at his hips. His hands were held behind his back.

"Mat Karney, I order yuh to surrender," he said with firm authority.

"Not until Tom and his gang are where I can see them, Sheriff!"

"You heard the hombre, Parks," Smalley said without turning his head.

"Turn around and give him the rest of the talk," Tom ordered.

Smalley swung slowly around on one heel. His hands were tied behind his back. At the end of the turn he was facing Mat again.

"I'm saying what I'm told to," he declared. "Tom says you shot two of his friends. He says a trial won't end nothing between you two. That right, Karney?"

"It ain't wrong, Sheriff," Mat agreed.

"Tom says he'll shoot it out with you now, gun to gun. Does that suit you too?"

"Say no, Mat!" Sally whispered. "It's a trick! Sheriff," she called out, "Tom Parks was with my brother Dick when Johnny Regan was drygulched. Tom don't dare have Mat brought to trial!" Her voice echoed shrilly in the canyon.

"Ma'am, right now that don't signify," the sheriff answered

inflexibly. "Tom has a gun aimed at me. Okay, Karney — what's your choice?"

"I'll meet Tom in the open," Mat said.

"Mat, it's a trick! He's up to something!" Sally pleaded.

"Don't I know it!" Mat whispered back without relaxing his vigilance. "Sally, stand up, slow. Walk half way to the sheriff. Keep out of my line of fire. Stop as close as you can get to the canyon wall."

Sally knew better than to distract Mat by a touch or a word. She rose, ashen-faced. Her step was steady, but when she reached the wall she leaned rather than stood, and clenched her hands. Her face was turned to Mat.

"Go stand beside her, Sheriff," Mat ordered.

The sheriff turned his head slightly for instructions from Tom; then he started forward.

"How do Tom's cowboys feel about this?" Mat called.

"They ain't happy," Smalley answered drily, without breaking his stride.

"Tell Tom to step out. He can trust me," Mat called.

"Like hell!" the ranchman barked from concealment. "You're stepping out first!"

"Okay," Mat called back after an instant's silence. "Ready? One . . . two . . . three . . ."

Mat did not move. From where he lay he fired at the canyon rim. Sally cried out; Smalley gave a convulsive movement and twisted to look upward. Over the crumbling edge of the canyon slid a Colt .45. It fell on the black sand halfway between the sheriff and the bend in the canyon. There was no groan or movement of injury from above: only the slight thud of the weapon which had slipped from Kansas' fingers when Mat's bullet tore through the head upraised behind the outthrust gunhand.

"Now I'm ready, Tom!" Mat shouted. He leaped over the barrier of stone, leaving the carbine smoking, and stood against the black wall, arms bent and fingers hooked.

Big Tom Parks came out shooting with two guns. Tex had said it. He was cunning and treacherous, but no coward. What he felt in the seconds between the death of his assassin and his own mad charge into the open can only be guessed at — red rage, most likely, for he came punching

with both hands as though the bullets he flung were sped from his fists.

Six shots he got off. The exploded cartridges were counted later. Mat fired twice; his first shot blending with Tom's third. But both Mat's bullets were aimed.

The first straightened Tom up as though a fist had slammed the big red face under the jaw. The second dropped him motionless under the slowly rising cloud of his own gun smoke. The two bullets did not hit six inches apart. One was at the base of the thick throat; the other struck under the heart.

Mat had holstered his gun before Sally reached him. He was running his left hand over his body — exhausted and shaking from the strain.

"I ain't hit," he muttered, as though he could not believe it. Ed Smalley thrust his bound hands between them.

"Get me loose!" he ordered. Mechanically, Sally obeyed. Ed took the Colt from Mat and thrust it into his belt while he reloaded his own weapons. Always he was watching the bend in the canyon. But though Waco and two of Tom's ranch hands were in sight, they were staring at the body.

"Somebody bring Karney a drink — water if you got nothing better," he barked. "Mat, I'll make you deputy for this end of the county whenever you'll take the oath!"

"Good God, no!" Mat muttered fervently.

"Well, it was a cool, level-headed play. How'd you know that Tom had a man hidden out? He'd have shot me if I'd hinted."

"Took too long to send for you. I figured it couldn't be you he was waiting for," Mat said. "Tom's mind ran to drygulching, anyhow. I was expecting it."

"Well, it was as fair a fight as I ever saw," Smalley summed up. "Maybe it's better this way, at that. Does end things. This Valley will settle down now. You claim there's evidence at the Flying T? Can you prove this Parks helped drygulch Regan? Not that it really signifies. But how soon can you ride out?"

"Sheriff, you leave Mat be," said Sally firmly. "Nita came here in a buckboard, and Mat will ride out in that. I've got to change his bandage and cook him something fit to eat before you move him a foot. You tend to the others and

leave Mat to me. What happened to my brother, and why ain't he here?"

"He's tied up in camp with a headache," Smalley grunted. "He ain't hurt to signify. Kind of a rock, that brother of yours. I'm wondering what became of this Neale hombre."

"You'll find him holed up on some hill, too far off to reach us in time," Mat surmised. "It's Dusty's only fault, Sheriff. He don't realize you've got to jump into the middle of a mess to clear one up."

As it turned out, that was just what Dusty had done.

Chapter XXI

VERY LATE that same afternoon, Mat Karney awoke slowly from a deep and refreshing sleep. He lay on a cot in a small rear room at the Flying T. He was bathed, and only a thin bandage circled his side. He had protested against being put to bed, about noon, but now he realized how much he had needed rest.

The day was still cloudy, but as nearly as he could judge the time was a half hour before sunset.

Almost exactly twenty-four hours ago Sally and he had started to climb the little hill, while Tex and Nita walked away up the main canyon. Nothing had been left then except the will to go struggling on; and now there was nothing left to struggle for. Peace had returned to the Valley, to be used as best he could.

Mat rose and pulled on clean underwear and fresh clothing which had been brought from the Bar K while he slept. There had been many goings and comings that morning before he had been forced into bed. The war had collapsed with the death of Big Tom and Dick. There was no one left to swear out on indictment, or against whom one might be served. But there had been much to do.

Horses had been corralled, riders sent to Toltec for Moss Abbott, and then on for a doctor, to the Bar K, and to the Flandreau dugout. Three bodies had been placed in a wagon and started for Toltec for burial. Waco Stroude had been stripped of his star, and had ridden off early. No one asked or cared where he was headed. The Flying T ranch hands

packed their turkeys as soon as they had corralled the horses, and sifted away one by one.

Ed Smalley let them go. He even paid off the four who had nerve enough to demand their time, taking a receipt in the name of the ranch. What those men knew they weren't telling. They were small fry; and if they kept out of the county in the future, Ed was satisfied.

Out of the whole morning, the keenest memory for Mat was the expression which had been on Nita's face as she ran out to meet the buckboard — the relief and the concern. Nita had drawn Sally aside, kept her back while the sheriff hurried into the house. Even though prepared, Sally had taken Dick's death desperately hard — with a dry-eyed, driving refusal to yield to grief that recalled Mat's first memory of her.

She had looked at the body and sobbed once; then she turned to lift the clumsy bandages on Tex's chest. She had not turned while the sheriff carried out Dick's body. She said that she thought Tex would pull through. The sheriff, returning a few minutes later, agreed with her. They could hear the heavy farm wagon driving away with the bodies as he gave his opinion. Then Sally had taken care of Mat. She had left him saying there was food to get.

Mat went outside and shaved. As he returned he met Nita, still wearing the brown denims.

"Haven't your clothes come?"

"No one is in from Toltec yet. Sally's got here, but she wouldn't change. Said she didn't have time. Mat, I'd leave her alone. She'll work herself out of it."

He was silent, clearly he was not of the same opinion.

"When Tex gets well, you'll be heading right for Mexico?"

"Yes, Mat. We want to get married in Mexico. So everything will start new."

He nodded and passed inside to put away the razor. In the kitchen Sally had cleaned the sink, scoured the frying pans, and was scrubbing at the range with a wad of rags on the end of a stick. Mat recognized the fierce, unnecessary work that deadens the mind. Sally looked up with irritation — not at him, but at any interruption.

He leaned in the doorway, tall, dark, hollow-cheeked.

"I want you to do me a favor, Sally," he said.

"What?" she demanded, but her expression softened.

"Your clothes are here. Clean up and get dressed and meet me outside."

"I've dinner to get —"

"Never asked a favor of you before, Sally."

"Oh, all right." She picked the kettle of hot water off the stove.

"Don't be long. I aim to be back before dark."

The harried look left Sally's face. "All right. I will be quick," she promised; and now she was a very tired girl, responding to tenderness.

The hot water soothed her. When one has been dirty, there is healing magic in becoming clean. The clothing was patched and old, the first garments a cowboy strange to the dugout had snatched up. But to throw away the filthy denims and feel the touch of petticoat and skirt helped her, too.

Mat lifted her to the buckboard seat and drove uphill, in silence, for nearly a mile, swinging the rig around at last on the top of a knoll. Below lay the oval of Toltec Valley, like two cupped hands. It was the last of the twilight. To a Western eye, the outlines were soft; far away, like a small gold square, Sally could distinguish her own forty acres of ripening wheat.

"It's so quiet," Sally choked. "It's . . . still there, and for Dick it's too late! Oh Mat, Hen is worth ten of Dick, but I loved Dick the best! He didn't want to be mean. He's just couldn't slog like us! He couldn't keep goin' on and on!" A tear slid down her cheek, and she brushed it away.

"I know," Mat said. "I just want you to see what all we've been through is about, Sally. There it is, growing. That's what all the fighting is for, when it's done. To keep something like the Valley peaceful and growing."

"I . . . feel better, Mat."

"Thought you might."

The reins lay motionless in his left hand. "When we go on our honeymoon, where would you like it to be? Omaha? Chicago?"

"I want to go where you do, and that's to some spot like this," Sally answered. "Somewhere high."

"I know the spot," Mat told her. "We will have to ride high, clear up into the pinons. I want to hold you in my

arms, Sally, and look down at all the length and peace of the world."

Sally covered Mat's hand with both her own. They sat while the twilight deepened until someone lit a lamp in the ranch-house. Then Mat lifted the reins, and the ponies bolted for the corral. The lamp was like a beacon, guiding them toward a home of their own.

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