

ace
double

M-114 45¢

Never wrongly accuse a quicker triggerman

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS



Complete Novel

Stephen Payne

OWLHOOTERS' REVENGE

A noise that sounded like an Indian's war-whoop was followed by a fusillade of shots that ripped the night wide open. Men, with the herd, yelled and swore, but only for an instant were their voices heard before a second volley of shots plus the rattle of horns and thunder of hoofs, drowned all other sounds.

Sweeping toward the camp were two thousand cattle, a wall of horns and eyes and hurtling bodies!

The Stampede at Farway Pass is just one of the many thrill-packed events that make this exciting novel of the rangeland an Ace-high yarn in the best Western tradition.

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

STEPHEN PAYNE'S parents were pioneers in North Park, Colorado where his father built up a real cow-outfit from scratch the slow, hard way. Young Steve just about grew up on horseback. He took the opportunity to learn the three R's at a summer school where often he was the only pupil.

At thirteen, he was herding cattle at a lonely cow camp, batching with an older cowboy. Soon, he was making a hand with beef herds, trailing to the shipping point at Laramie, Wyoming. During all those years he had the privilege of knowing and working with prospectors, trappers, stage drivers, mule skinner, cowmen-ranchers and real cowpunchers—as well as school teachers and tenderfeet.

Steve sold his first story in 1924, one of many written one lonely winter while batching on a ranch and feeding hay to a herd of cattle. Following his initial sale, he switched from riding to writing. At that time, the 1920's, the Western pulp magazines were booming and hungry for copy. Steve supplied a lot of it, mostly shorts and novelettes. His first book was published in 1934 and since he has done sixteen more adult and juvenile Westerns. In this great writing game, Steve is now rated as an "old timer," —he is now eighty— but he still keeps his youthful zest and still loves to turn out a good Western yarn.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Stephen Payne

**ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036**

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Copyright ©, 1965, by Ace Books, Inc.

All Rights Reserved

Available from Ace Books:

NO JOB FOR A COWBOY by Stephen Payne (F-272)

LYNCH LAW CANYON

Copyright ©, 1965, by Brian Wynne Garfield

Printed in U.S.A.



I

ROCKY BILL said, "Them Scanlons'll fill our hides full of buckshot. That's what!" and Jim Hardy replied, "You can still turn back."

Bill shook his head. It was a large head, heavily thatched with iron-gray hair which looked as if it had been clipped by an amateur sheepshearer. The rest of Bill's features gave the impression of having been roughly cut and never polished, all in sharp contrast to the unlined cheeks and chestnut hair of Jim Hardy, a sunny, prankful young man of endless gay humor under normal conditions.

But a major tragedy had whipped both gaiety and irresponsibility from him and today Hardy's mood was tautly serious.

"Nope," declared Rocky Bill, translating into words the shake of his head. "When I side a man I side him all the way."

The two men, with a string of ten loose saddle horses and one pack animal, had topped out on a cedar-studded hill

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

overlooking the Slash J Ranch. It lay in a wide valley running north and south; wooded hills to eastward lifted gradually to meet distant canyon-scarred mountains. The big ranch, fenced and cross-fenced, was haystack-dotted; its log buildings and pole corrals stood on the bank of a clear stream.

Except for nine horses and a half-dozen milk cows the fields were empty, and noticing this, Hardy said, "They haven't rounded up yet. Let's make our talk right off."

"Let's," agreed Rocky Bill. His huge right hand plucked a long-barreled Colt from its holster; his left hand slipped one more loaded shell into the cylinder. "Six shots'll be better'n five, Jim."

"Cut it, old smoke eater. Remember, no shooting."

"More'n likely it'll be forced on us. I ain't no hope your loco idea'll work out like you figure."

Ahead of old timer and young rider the loose horses moved down the slope, crowded at a gate while it was being opened and went on to the Slash J ranch yard, there to scatter, seeking grass and water.

Watchful-eyed, Hardy and Bill drew up in front of the main house, Hardy calling, "Hello in there!"

Almost at once the door opened, framing a girl against the dim interior. Instinctively Hardy lifted his dust-coated hat; astonishment mingled with sudden admiration held him wordless. She wasn't just another girl, this dark-haired, flashing-eyed brunette. Slender, not tall, yet beautifully proportioned, she was an eyeful. Nature had been unusually generous when fashioning her smooth, delicately tanned oval face, and lips which seemed made for smiling.

Her eyes flicked a glance toward the loose horses and then came back to the two oddly contrasting riders. "A pair of drifting cowpunchers! We're in luck—we need cowhands mighty bad," she exclaimed with a happy laugh.

"You do?" said Hardy; and into the front of his mind came a thought Rocky Bill had planted there when he'd said, "That Scanlon outfit don't know either you nor me, Jim. You take another name. Then we'll hire out to 'em and get them

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Seven H cattle gathered before they catch on to you bein' old Dad Hardy's son."

"Yes," replied the girl. She nodded her shapely head and waved a hand to indicate the rough hills east of the valley. "Our fall roundup started yesterday, but we're short-handed."

Rocky Bill exclaimed, "Good 'nuff. Sure we want jobs. My name's Bill and my pard's is Curly—"

"Easy, Bill," Hardy cut in, and turned to the girl. "You said, 'Our fall roundup.' Are you a Scanlon?"

"Of course," as if the question surprised her. "I'm Maude Scanlon, Clyde's sister."

Hardy would have liked to rip out an oath. Instead he replied, "Why didn't Dad mention—um? I guess you have been away, Miss Scanlon?"

"That's right. I was called home for my father's funeral." The smile had vanished. "If you men stopped in Hermit Bend you must have heard that Savage Ed Scanlon was—was murdered."

Hardy's gaze caught Maude Scanlon's eyes and held them as he said bluntly, "We've heard one side of that story. I'm Jim Hardy . . . Junior."

In the second before full comprehension came to the girl, Rocky Bill growled low, "I could wring your damn fool neck, Jim."

"Jim Hardy! Old Dad Hardy's son!" The light of welcome had fled from Maude Scanlon's face. "And you've come here? Why?"

"Not to stir up more trouble, Miss Scanlon. But to ride your roundup, and to gather my father's Seven H cattle."

She looked as if she hadn't heard correctly. "Ride our roundup? You? A Hardy! Clyde'll kill you. If he doesn't, there's Spade Adams and Itchy-finger Rankin and—"

A window six or eight feet to Hardy's right slammed upward, and the barrel of a shotgun appeared. Behind the menacing weapon Hardy saw the face and figure of a wrinkled old crone.

"I heard ye!" she almost screamed. "Dad Hardy's cub!

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

It was your Pa killed Ed Scanlon. Cold blood, too. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, I say. I'll blow--"

In another second she might indeed have blown off Hardy's head, nor could he have stopped her. But Maude was no longer at the door and the cowboy heard the shotgun hit the floor.

"Go back to the kitchen, Aunt K, or I'll slap you silly," Maude Scanlon's voice scolded.

The old woman's vengeful voice was changed to a whine. "Yes, Maudie. All right, Maudie. But—" Her feet pattered across the floor.

Hardy swiveled his head around and saw Bill's eyes on him. "Your dad told me about *her*. Hermit Bend folks call her 'K.' Plumb loco. Ought to be locked up."

"Locked up?" echoed Maude, again at the door. "Don't be silly. She's foolish but harmless, and she's always lived with us."

Hardy frowned down his nose. "Harmless? Are you staying here alone with that cra— I s'pose she's some sort of relation?"

"There's a chore man on the place, Ed Willoby. No, Aunt K's no relation, but she minds me."

"I can be glad of that! Thanks for what you just did, Miss Scanlon."

"Don't mention it! You realize you aren't welcome here, so go away. Right now!"

From the corner of his eye Hardy caught Bill half-winking at him and grinning, as if the slab-shouldered old rider found something amusing about this clash. For Jim Hardy however, there was no humor in it. He bit off, "I'm going to your round-up. Where'll I find the chuck wagon?"

"Remember, I've warned you," Maude gave directions for finding the wagon, then, without another word, she turned into the house and closed the door.

Rocky Bill started to round up the small cavvy and Hardy squinted wishfully at the closed door, hoping Maude would reappear.

At last he called, "I want you to understand, Miss Scanlon,

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

there are two sides to that shooting affair. I believe in my father's. The final fight was a fair one. Not murder . . . Won't you tell me the story you heard?"

The house remained as silent as if uninhabited, so Hardy trailed along after his partner.

Rocky, slanting a shrewd glance at the younger man, drawled, "Still figurin' to join that Scanlon roundup?"

"You're damned right I am, old horse."

"Look-a-here, Cub, there's easier ways of committin' suicide. Too danged bad to get yourself a wooden overcoat just when the little feller with his arrows has nicked you."

Hardy glared and growled, "Show some sense."

"Well, my horsesense sez there ain't no way on God's earth for even Cupid to patch up this mess and make it come out like it should ought to. There's a something between you younguns too danged stark ever to be forgot or buried. Worse luck!"

Hardy began warmly, "Rocky, you're loco if you think—" He paused. "Still, the girl's being in this nasty mess is a complication I hadn't counted on."

"Counted on?" echoed Rocky Bill. "There ain't no way to count on nothin', as fifty-odd years of a tolerable hectic life have larned me. You figure out the deal, then up leaps somethin' you hadn't never thunk of."

Jim Hardy entertained a private thought—"I wish you'd shut up!"—but he didn't voice it because Rocky Bill, by his own account one-time miner, trapper, plainsman, freighter, cowpuncher, soldier of fortune and gun-hawk, had already proved to be an invaluable friend.

Rocky Bill had written the letter which had brought young Jim Hardy home in a hurry from south of the Rio Grande. Moreover, this lanky slab-shouldered, homely man had met Jim at Echo Springs, the designated railroad station on the plains, east of this area, and led him to a rendezvous with his father who was a man on the dodge, wanted for murder.

As he now rode away from the Slash J ranch, Hardy recalled his father's haggard eyes and hunted, yet defiant attitude. Briefly told, the older man's story was that after young

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Jim had gone a-roaming, two years ago, Hardy Senior had sold his small cow outfit and in Edgemont town had made a home for his wife and three children—all much younger than Jim.

Soon tiring of this uneventful life, Dad Hardy had gone in search of a new location. Eventually he had found what he wanted on the western slope of the Colorado Rockies, the 7 H spread with three-hundred-odd cattle, near the Slash J outfit and near Hermit Bend.

Then, after he had closed a deal for the land and cattle, including the 7 H brand, Hardy discovered he had also bought something he hadn't bargained for—trouble with Savage Ed Scanlon, boss of the Slash J. But Scanlon, a tough, knotty, unscrupulous range hog had met in Dad Hardy another cowman of the same early-day school and hard-bitten breed.

When threats failed to run out Hardy, Scanlon had attempted to frame him. In recounting this to his son Dad Hardy had said: "Your mother and the kids had stayed on in Edgemont, so I was alone on the place when some time after midnight something woke me up. It was a queer smell that came in through my open window—the smell of a freshly butchered beef. Scanlon hadn't made any noise, but just the same I caught him red-handed in my corral dressing out a yearling with his brand on it. I tied him solid, and got Sheriff Nate Crowder from Hermit Bend.

"Well, Scanlon lied stronger than a mule can kick. He convinced the lawman he'd caught me butchering and that I'd got the drop and tied him. Crowder turned Savage Ed loose, and started to take me in. I socked him over the head and left him unconscious. Which was bad. Then I made a point to meet Savage Ed Scanlon for a showdown. The showdown turned into a shoot-out. I gave Scanlon an even break, shot in self-defense, and killed him.

"Led by Savage Ed's son, Clyde, the Scanlon punchers made things damned hot for me. Ran me out. They say I murdered Scanlon in cold blood and tried to murder Sheriff Crowder. Now, it's up to you, son, to save the Seven H for

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

your mother and the kids—or get back the money I put in it. Clear my name, too, if you can, for I won't give myself up and go to the pen."

Oddly enough, it was while hiding out that Dad Hardy had met Rocky Bill and been moved to confide in him. Thereupon Rocky had offered to help this man in trouble and was now siding young Jim Hardy who had dared to show himself on Slash J range. Rocky Bill had also purchased the horses and the pack outfit for this venture. But why the old hand had befriended them, Jim did not know.

As the two men now rode through the hills to reach the Slash J roundup, they took time to inspect small bunches of cattle. Although they found the predominant brand to be Slash J, there was, mixed with the Slash J's, a scattering of 7 H's which prompted the younger puncher to say, "Like I feared, Bill. Dad's herd's scattered from hell to breakfast. The only way two men can gather 'em is to throw in with a big roundup crew."

The stars were bright above the roundup camp when the two at length reached it. Soft tinkle of cavvy bells and cheery light of a wood fire beckoned the tired riders, but Hardy realized only too clearly that he'd be unwelcome. Anticipation tightened his nerves. The sooner he had a showdown with Clyde Scanlon . . .

Rocky Bill interrupted his thought: "Doggoned funny, Jim. Only two men at that fire. Where's the Scanlon crew?"

"Night herding maybe."

"Nope. They ain't gathered no cattle yet. If they was nightherdin' a bunch we could see 'em or hear 'em. Somethin' screwy, Jim. T'night, don't tell 'em your handle. Let's see what we can larn 'fore they re'lize who you are."

"Have it your way, Rocky, unless Clyde Scanlon's there. If he is, I'll spread my hand face up right away."

Bill muttered, "That open-and-above-board stuff's the bunk. You sure got a heap to larn. Hello, the camp!"

"Come on in."

Catching their pack animal, the two rode into the circle

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

of firelight where a scrawny individual with a flour-sack apron around his middle pushed back from his bald head an object which had once been a hat, and said, "I'm Skillet Sam, the cook, and this here's the Slash J outfit's wagon, Clyde Scanlon's the boss." Then he waited, eying the newcomers with complete lack of hospitality.

Remembering that Rocky had asked for a free hand, Hardy turned his attention to the other man in camp, a fellow in batwing chaps and clean brown shirt who sat cross-legged, playing solitaire. He was about forty, Hardy thought, a solid hunk of man, brown hair, heavy-lidded brown eyes, square-cut face.

Looking up with no marked curiosity, he said, "I'm the Four Bars' rep, Bob Funkhouser," and went on with his game.

Rocky Bill was talking to the cook. "We're reps from west of here a piece. Figured some of our dogies had drifted this-a-way and 'lowed to ride your roundup. Glad to meet up with you, Sam. How 'bout grub?"

"There's a-plenty. Make yourselves t' home. Clyde ain't here."

"Too bad," said Rocky. He dismounted, moved to Hardy and continued, "Take care of the hosses, pard."

Then he fished in a saddle pocket under the slicker tied behind his saddle and produced a flat bottle. "Rickety old pumps need primin'," he whispered. "Surprisin' what a lot of water you can get from one after you prime it. . . . Hi-ya, grub spoiler, let's you and me put a couple o' base burners under our belts."

Skillet Sam reached for the bottle and, after his first gulp, shed his moroseness like a horse shedding an uncinched saddle. "Clyde and the boys high-tailed to Hermit Bend for a big toot," he informed. "Dang 'em, they wouldn't cut me in on it. Double dang 'em!" He smacked his lips. "But you're savin' my life, big feller."

Hardy wore a faint smile as he unpacked and unsaddled. Bareback, he rode away, driving his and Bill's saddle horses to where the Slash J cavvy was being nighthawked. A brief salutation to the youthful night wrangler and he returned to

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

the fire. The bottle was empty and Skillet Sam was happy, loquacious and friendly. He poured fresh coffee for Rocky and hustled to wait on Hardy as well. The Four Bars rep went on silently with his game of solitaire.

"I was some shocked to hear of Savage Ed's goin' west," said Rocky Bill. "Sam, what was the fight between him and that Hardy feller about?"

Sam hesitated while he loaded his cob pipe. Then it seemed that the liquor, warming stomach and brain, prompted him to throw caution to the winds.

"Hell, ol' Savage Ed was that doggoned ornery if he'd a-bit hisself he'd a-died of his own poison."

Rocky mumbled with a full mouth, "I don't believe it!"

The cook had hunkered down, facing him. His head jerked up as he snapped, "Don't you? Wal, just to show you how tricky he was, I'll tell you how he whipsawed the banker o' Hermit Bend a few years ago. Savage Ed was mortgagin' his dogies to raise jack and he had Kendrick, the money bags, count the Slash J herd. Yeah, count 'em 'round a hill! Savage got away with it, too. He made that banker b'lieve he had six-thousand-odd head."

"How many did he own, Sam?"

"Maybe a couple thousand."

Rocky lighted a vile black pipe. "How much did Scanlon raise on six thousand cattle, and what became of the money, Sam?"

"He glommed onto one hundred and twenty thousand dollars!" Sam related in an awed voice. "He used some of it to buy neighborin' ranches and stock, though never for what they was worth, and then—" The cook checked whatever he'd been about to say. "Well, somebody squealed to the money bags, puttin' him wise. So ol' Wallace Kendrick slaps a plaster on all of Savage Scanlon's land to even up for the cattle debt. Soaked him twelve per cent interest, too."

"Savage stood for it rather'n explain in court how come he mortgaged six thousand cattle when he didn't have 'em. Though he tried to lie outa it o' course, claimin' Farway Fred—a rustler and bandit who sometimes hides out in this neck

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

o' the woods—had stole him blind. But—" Skillet Sam shrugged into silence.

Rocky Bill asked, "How come he got in so deep?"

The cook glanced at Bob Funkhouser playing his lonesome card game and lowered his voice. "Jus' between you and me, fellers— Nope, I ain't tellin' after all. . . . Wish I had 'nother drink."

Hardy wished he did have a bottle, for the old cook had been about to tell something important. If only his tongue could be loosened a bit more!

"Hey," ejaculated Rocky, "now Savage has kicked the bucket ain't there an executor runnin' this shebang?"

Sam shook his head. "Nope. The old man prob'ly figgered he might stop lead 'most any time, for right after his funeral 'twas larnt he'd deeded the Slash J to Maude and Clyde, Clyde bein' the boss, o' course."

"'Course," agreed Bill. "Sam, you reckon Savage Ed resented Dad Hardy's gettin' the 7 H?"

"Hell, yes. He tried to run his whizzer on Hardy, a hombre just as tough as him. But Dad Hardy was plain damned fool enough to beef one of Savage Ed's critters."

Rocky Bill stabbed the cook with eyes gone cold and hard. "Might be Savage butchered that critter figurin' to frame Dad Hardy!"

"What you so het up about? All we know is what we heard. Sheriff Crowder's the only feller knows all about it, and nobody questions a lawman's word."

"No-o?" countered Bill drily. "What's Crowder say?"

"Dad Hardy done the butcherin'. Savage caught him. But Hardy turned the tables and went and got the lawman. Crowder seen right through it; Hardy figgerin' to railroad Savage Ed for killin' a beef he'd butchered hisself."

"Crowder turned Savage Ed loose, started to take Hardy in. Hardy blew his top, all but killed the sheriff, then lit out after Savage Ed and shot him in cold blood."

Cold sweat had broken out on young Jim Hardy. He heard Rocky ask, "Who found the body?"

"Why, Crowder."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"And Savage Ed didn't have no gun? No gun in his hand? No gun he'd fired?"

"Nope. Crowder said not. None of our fellers can say diff'rent and it's a cinch most of 'em wouldn't even if they could."

Even if they could! thought Hardy.

Skillet Sam was rambling on, "Old man Hardy got three-four hundred tons of hay stacked and fenced on the 7 H ranch before the big ruckus. So there is winter feed for them. But Hardy'll never dast show up on this range, or he'll stop plenty lead."

"I'll be hornswoggled!" said Rocky Bill. "This ol' man Hardy owns a ranch and cattle, yet don't dast show up on his own place. Anybody on this 7 H ranch, Sam?"

"Nope, and you can bet Clyde Scanlon wouldn't let nobody workin' for Hardy stay thar." The cook spat reflectively and hesitated before he went on. "I reckon as how, by hook or crook, Clyde figures to glom onto the hull shebang, ranch, horses, cattle."

"He does?" Rocky Bill put in as if astonished; and then, "Has this Clyde got men huntin' steady for Dad Hardy?"

"Not steady, but all hands workin' for Slash J has got orders to shoot Hardy at sight. One hundred bucks to the man who gets him. Too, Sheriff Crowder still hopes to nail ol' man Hardy."

"I'd sorta like to corner Crowder, ask him some hard questions," Rocky Bill said in a grim tone.

The cook's bloodshot eyes flashed strangely, and Hardy noticed that Bob Funkhouser's game of solitaire had stopped. The man was however unconcernedly rolling a smoke.

As if on a signal, the four men got up, stretched, passed some inconsequential remarks and went to bed. Hardy and Bill shared the blankets and tarp they'd brought along on their pack horse. But the younger man lay wide awake, gazing up at the brilliant stars and thinking.

Her eyes were black, or almost black, and she was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen. But she was a Scanlon and he was a Hardy and she hated him. The Slash J was mortgaged

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

to the hilt and her brother figured to "glom onto" the 7 H cattle and ranch.

Nice man, Clyde Scanlon. Did he know the truth about the death of his father? It was probable that he did, but as Rocky Bill had already hinted, Crowder was the man to corner and force to tell the truth!

Hardy heard the weird howling of coyotes in the distance, then, except for the soft tinkle of cavvy bells, the night became silent. Finally the picture of a lissom, dark-eyed girl faded from his mind as sleep claimed it.

II

"TAKE A LOOK, Jim!"

Hardy came wide awake and lifted himself on his elbows. It was full daylight, the jagged sweep of mountain skyline a flaming orange, though the sun was not yet in sight; Skillet Sam had a fire going and was at work with pots and pans. But what had brought forth Rocky's low words was the sight of six men riding into camp from the north, and leading one riderless horse!

Into Jim Hardy's ear Rocky Bill remarked low, "First time in fifty years on the range I ever seen hosses plumb kilt off by punchers on a spree." A half minute later he added, "Nor there ain't a drunk man in the bunch. . . . The showdown's here and now!"

Hardy didn't answer. He still believed he could present his case clearly and forcibly enough to convince Clyde Scanlon that nothing would be gained by a gun fight. He began to dress, not neglecting to watch the newcomers meanwhile.

He saw six dusty, tired men with haggard eyes and lined faces. A mixed crew in size, they were the toughest and hardest looking bunch Hardy had ever seen. Dismounting, they unsaddled, jerked the bridles from their horses and then whipped them out of camp.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Hardy's eyebrows drew down as he noticed two of the horses stop and stand spraddle-legged, heads dropping, too tired to move. One man strode to the fire. He was young, blocky, short-necked and big-shouldered, with dark, rough-hewn features. Hardy's father had described this fellow to young Jim—Clyde Scanlon, a chip off the old block.

"Chuck ready, Sam?" curtly.

"He sure ain't timid," whispered Rocky Bill to Hardy. "Nor self-effacin'."

"Pronto," returned the cook. "You bring me a bottle o' Three Star, Clyde?"

"No! I've told you before, no booze on roundup."

"But I bet you ornery sons has got a plenty," returned the cook sullenly.

Clyde Scanlon rapped suddenly, "Who's in that bed yonder?" He indicated Bob Funkhouser's tarp-covered bed.

"Rep from Four Bars," said Sam.

"Rep? I wasn't expecting any reps to join this roundup."

"Wasn't you? Couple more out there, too."

"Couple more? If this ain't one hell of a note! Came last night, did they? Who are they?"

"I never larnt their names."

Clyde Scanlon beckoned to his men, several of whom were putting up the rope corral for the night wrangler, who was now bringing in the cavvy. "This way, boys," and he stamped toward Jim Hardy's and Rocky Bill's bed.

These two had pulled on their boots and hats and buckled on their cartridge belts, and appeared quite unconcerned, although actually Hardy's nerves were wire tight. He noticed that Scanlon's eyes and hair were black like Maude's. But there all resemblance ceased. Coarseness, brutality and arrogance stamped Clyde Scanlon's attitude and features, whereas his sister was by nature loving and gay, and would be friendly if she were not prejudiced.

Scanlon halted. "I don't know you jiggers. Who are you?" he demanded truculently.

Three of the frozen-faced crew had moved up behind their boss, and Rocky threw a warning look at Hardy. But Hardy

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

broke the taut silence, announcing. "I'm Jim Hardy. My friend here's Rocky Bill."

None of the men moved except Scanlon, who jerked as if hornet stung. "Jim Hardy! Ol' Dad Hardy's son?"

"Yes. You're Clyde Scanlon. So let's talk this over reasonably."

But the three men behind Scanlon sprang quickly to his left as if to get out of the line of gunfire, and Rocky Bill, gliding sideways, placed a good six feet between himself and his cowboy friend. Hardy couldn't watch Rocky, nor did he know what the old hand intended to do. His attention was all on Clyde Scanlon.

Momentary amazement seemed to hold Clyde before he rasped, "Take care of the old snoozer, boys. Hardy, fill your hand!" his own right hand hovering claw-like a couple of inches above the handle of his holstered gun.

In this instant the arguments Jim Hardy had prepared to make were blotted from his mind as completely as if he had never rehearsed them. As Rocky Bill had predicted, the showdown had come in a curt, snarling, hate-filled demand from Scanlon for an immediate shoot-out. But Hardy now surprised both Rocky Bill and himself. His left hand moved to his belt buckle. He loosened the gun belt, and as it and his holstered gun dropped to the ground, he said: "Scanlon, run me off your roundup with your fists, or else back down."

Then, seeing Clyde Scanlon stare unwinkingly at him, as if measuring his antagonist, it came to Hardy that he had said the right thing. He had hurled a challenge which Scanlon could not ignore without losing face.

The silence again drew out, four men on one side, two on the other, tense, watchful, waiting for Clyde's next move, and in this interval Hardy heard the cavvy being brought into the rope corral by the night hawk. Then he heard Clyde Scanlon's rage-choked bellow: "So you'd rather I beefed you bare handed?" He was stripping off his gun belt. "Suits me," he said, adding an oath.

He was coming like a bull, head down, fists drawn back. Hardy leaped nimbly aside and got in the first lick, a right

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

arm blow to Clyde's ear which should have dropped him. The man merely shook his head, as if stung by a mosquito. Pivoting, he launched himself again, arms flailing. Again, Hardy dodged, but not quickly enough. Two smashing blows forced him to give ground.

Then as he snagged a spur in a clump of sage, he went down. Clyde pounced on him, reached for his throat. Hardy caught the other's powerful hands before they could close their strangle hold. Squirming like a badger, he fought Clyde off and gained his feet.

Then they were slugging toe to toe. Clyde's punches hurt, and how! Hardy was giving the fellow all he had in return, but he was suddenly groggy. Sweat mixed with blood was blinding him; his breath came in sobbing gasps. All he saw was Clyde Scanlon's wide-nostriled, brutal face and rage-inflamed eyes, at which he drove his ripping fists, taking terrific punishment as he did so.

The world was spinning. He was dizzy, sick, weak, his lungs crying for air. He couldn't go on. In another second he'd be down. Licked . . . Wasn't that Clyde's chin, wide open for a left uppercut? It was. Hardy summoned the last of his strength and shot his left fist with all the weight of his wiry body behind it to the other man's chin.

Hardy heard the blow land, heard the thud as Clyde hit earth, and by sheer willpower managed to stay on his feet—as if ready to resume the fight.

A tense high voice was crying, "Damned if he ain't knocked Clyde out!"

Rocky Bill's arm closed around Hardy's shoulders. "That settles that, you Slash J men," declared the old hand. "My pard and I stay on your roundup. . . . Any objections?"

"No objections," answered an unexpected voice. "Clyde was whipped in a fair fight."

This voice did more than anything else to clear Hardy's head, for it was a feminine voice. Wiping his eyes with his bandana, he discovered that Maude Scanlon was present. Not looking at him, she was dismounting from a trim black pony to give Clyde her entire attention.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

The Slash J men, including Skillet Sam and the nighthawk, also Bob Funkhouser, shrugged and began to scatter.

Whereupon Rocky Bill said to Hardy, "They ain't nowise pleased about this, but you've won for the time being. . . . The girl showed up with the cavvy. Saw the whole scrap." In a lower tone he added, "Boy, did you do the right thing! The only thing t'do! I'm so danged proud of you I could bust."

Clyde was now sitting up, one eye was swollen almost shut, and Maude had ruined a handkerchief wiping her brother's face.

"Maude! What the hell you doin' here?" Clyde demanded.

"I met Hardy's son yesterday and I came here to tell you another killing wouldn't bring Dad back."

Clyde stared at her. "Sis, I don't want none of your buttin' in on my business," he muttered surlily. "But now you're here, come to the wagon and get your breakfast."

A moment later, Hardy and Rocky, left to themselves, exchanged glances. Rocky spat reflectively and drawled, "I sorta reckon, son, as how that little girl has been ridin' herd on this camp ever since we hit it. But she come mighty nigh hornin' in too late."

Hardy's pulse leaped. "You mean she cared enough about stopping a fight to ride here and spend the night watching things?"

Rocky wagged his head wisely. "Uh-huh. Well, I see the grub's ready. Let's put on the nose bag."

While eating breakfast, the two heard no cross talk among the Scanlon punchers, although from time to time they did catch a few words between Clyde and Maude.

"Where were you fellows last night?" the girl asked.

"You know we were gone? We rode to Hermit Bend for some fun before startin' nightherdin' and hard work."

"What kind of fun, Clyde? You're sober this morning!"

"What if I am? I ain't in no mood to be razzed."

Silence for five minutes, when Maude ventured, "What became of Jed Harl? You brought back an extra horse. He must have ridden away with you. Where is he now?"

"Harl drawed his time, that's all. . . . Maude, I'm still

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

against lettin' that damned Hardy ride with us. What I ought to do is kill him."

"That would be foolish, Clyde. Let him gather the cattle. Let him sell them; the 7 H ranch, too, and then trail him. He'll head for where his father's hiding out. That way you get the old man."

Hardy choked on his last swallow of coffee. He had not been thinking of this girl as one of his enemies. Now he knew better. And she was far more clever than her brother!

From the corner of his eye he saw Clyde grin at her and heard him say, "You ain't dumb! But don't mess into things no more or I'll really get mad."

"Since half the outfit's mine I'll mess into things whenever I please," Maude replied. "I suppose you and the men can buy whisky on tick, but how could you pay Harl when we haven't any money?"

"I ain't forgot how to play poker and shoot craps. Done both las' night and Jed Harl got paid."

"If you made a killing, Clyde, divvy up with me. I'm short of grub on the ranch to feed Ed Willoby and Aunt K and myself."

"Divvy up with you? That's the first thing I'll do!"

"Clyde, how in the world did you and the men wear out your horses on a twenty mile ride, merely to and from Hermit Bend?"

Clyde Scanlon came to his feet, hands fisted. "Dry up, Sis. Dry up! This roundup's no place for you. Go home and stay there!"

Aside to Jim Hardy, Rocky Bill said, "I wouldn't want to hurt that pole-cat. No-o! I'd jus' like to drag him through a mile of prickly pear cactus."

Rocky's left arm stopped Hardy from attempting to join Maude, and, tight-lipped, he watched the girl walk to her black pony, mount and ride away.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

III

ROUNDUP BOSS, Clyde Scanlon, curtly told Hardy to stand first-night herd shift with Spade Adams till eight o'clock. Hardy was secretly happy to have this early night herd shift, for it gave him an opportunity to use the balance of the night for another purpose—to go to Hermit Bend.

Hermit Bend's log and frame buildings reminded Hardy of other small cowtowns he'd seen on the northern ranges. A short main street flanked on one side by a large general merchandise store, saloons, barber shop, a two story hotel, and a stone building which was the jail. On the other side more saloons, a restaurant and a bank, a blacksmith shop, livery stable and corral. At the far west end stood Alec Jensen's Bar. Private homes climbed a hillside to the north.

Hardy rode in to the lantern lighted stable and made talk with a stocky man who wore a black stocking cap on his bullet head—an oddity exciting Hardy's curiosity.

"Sheriff Crowder in town, mister?" he asked.

"Nope. Likely he's out in the hills a-trackin' and a-trailin'."

"Trackin' and trailin' what? Horse thieves? Rustlers?"

"Bigger game'n that! Ain't you heard of the train robbery? Happened last night at Rocky Edge station where trains stop for water, an eastbound train was held up, express car looted, messenger killed.

"But somebody shot one bandit. His pards—all masked—packed off that jigger, wounded or dead. They made off too with twenty-two thousand bucks, round figures. . . . 'Course Crowder hit out today, quick as he got the word. . . . I'll stall your horse."

"Thanks for the low-down," Hardy said. "By the way, has Jed Harl been hanging around town?"

"Hangin' 'round town? Nope, I ain't seen him since—um, since yesterday evenin', when Clyde and his bunch—seven,

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

countin' Clyde—loped into town to cut their wolves loose."

Trying to act as if the matter was of no great interest, Hardy asked, "And did they cut loose?"

"Man, you know it! Took their horses up to Alec Jensen's corral, then took over Jensen's Bar and whooped things up till daybreak afore they headed out for Clyde's roundup."

"So? You didn't look in on this wild party, Skullcap?"

"Not me! Most of the business men lock up and hunt their holes when an outfit like that hits town. It 'minds me of old trail herd days when the Texas punchers'd—"

"Right you are," Hardy interrupted. "Where's Jensen's corral?"

"Now why the heck did you ask that? It's at the far west end of town, behind Jensen's Saloon, but down on Hermit Crick which runs along the north side of this burg."

"Does Jensen have feed for horses in this corral?"

"Water, but no hay, no grass. Yet, doggone his hide, he don't charge for puttin' horses in his corral and that cuts into my—"

"Tell me, Skullcap, does Sheriff Crowder have a deputy?"

"Huh? Deputy? This county couldn't afford one." Abruptly, the liveryman directed both his gaze and his voice toward an outside corner of the stable which was visible from the drive-in way. "Hi, feller? You lookin' for me?"

Hardy looked for the man Skullcap must have seen. But he saw no one, nor was there a reply to the question.

"Was sure I sighted a geezer half hid by big cowboy hat," muttered the liveryman. "If you don't mind a straight question, Jim, why you want to see Nate Crowder?"

Hardy merely hunched a shoulder and Skullcap went on. "Maybe so you're a lawman, too. Yep. Could be a Deputy J. S. Marshal, here to try to cut sign on Farway Fred."

Hardy shook his head and chuckled when he had seldom felt less like chuckling. He now suspected—and it wasn't a pleasant thought—that, although he had been permitted to leave the roundup camp, Clyde had set a man to ride herd on him.

"Who's Farway Fred?" he inquired.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"You sure must be a stranger in this neck o' the woods if you ain't heard of that bandit. Strikes at night and is forty, fifty miles away before dawn. That's how Fred got his nickname. 'Faraway' shortened to 'Farway.' Folks named the mountains east o' this area, Farway Range. Same for the pass over 'em. That was 'cause Fred used to whoop horses and cattle over that pass. Get plumb away with 'em somehow 'rother, too."

"Thanks, Skullcap," said Hardy. "This bandit been around lately?"

"Sure pop, he has! Who else 'cept Farway and his wild bunch would have robbed that train last night? Sa-ay, you asked had I seen Jed Harl. Likely you'll find him on the Slash J roundup. Friend of yours?"

"No friend of mine," the reply slipped out before Hardy realized. "Well, now I'm here, I'll take a look at your town. See you later."

Hardy's spurs tinkled as he hurried on up the street. He walked past the light lanes thrown out from windows and the door of Alec Jensen's Bar, and turned right to the big pole corral.

Circling this enclosure took Hardy down into the valley of Hermit Creek whose running water made music in the starlight. Inside the corral were willows, alders and cottonwoods, but no stock of any kind. But when Hardy found the gate, he ascertained that a good many horses had certainly come out through that gate.

Tension and excitement built up in him as he thought, An expert tracker seeing this sign by daylight, could read a lot from it. Uh-huh, he could verify the theory I'm working on—that the Slash J outfit's saddle horses were ridden out of this corral early last night—and took the trail for Rough Edge.

He took note that the saloon's back door opened to the corral, then stepped up to the front door. When he stepped through the bat-wing doors his first thought was, this dump doesn't look like a wild spree had been staged here last night.

The big room was lighted by hanging lamps; a long and ornate bar with mirrors behind it ran the full length of its

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

west side; at the far end, and also against the east wall were roulette outfits, blackjack tables, poker tables and plenty of chairs. Present tonight however were only six men, five playing a spiritless game of poker, the bartender watching them.

Hardy's entrance brought immediate silence and all eyes were suddenly on him. How, he wondered, would Rocky Bill go about getting the dope I want? Bill would "set 'em up" to these men, and start talk with a whopping big lie.

The bartender moved leisurely around behind his bar and said, "What'll it be?"

Hardy saw a blonde, middle-aged man, with a fox-like face ornamented by a neat hairline mustache. His thin lips were faintly smiling, but his pale blue eyes were inscrutable. His hands were the long, supple-fingered hands of an expert gambler.

"Quart of your best whiskey and I'll set 'em up to your company," said Hardy genially. "Are you the boss, Alec Jensen?"

"Right stranger." Jensen clipped his words, turned to select a bottle.

In the mirror, Hardy saw the men at the table watching him. Four appeared to be run of the mill town folks. The fifth man was huge and gross in appearance. His smooth-shaven cheeks reminded Hardy of the rolls of a swelled-fork saddle, and his beady eyes were deep in caverns between overhanging brows and cheeks.

An ornery stinker, Hardy thought, and strong as a Percheron stud!

Hardy paid for the bottle which Jensen had produced, picked it up and walked to the poker table.

"Evenin', gents. Have a drink on me. . . . Heard the Slash J outfit was here last night, had a rip-snortin' spree."

"You know it, feller," spoke one man and reached for the bottle. "I come up here 'bout 'leven o'clock and"—jerking the bottle to indicate the huge, gross man—"Moose, Jensen's danged bouncer, was guardin' the door, wouldn't let me in. I'm still sore 'bout it."

"Forget it, Mike," Jensen placated. "Moose was only carry-

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

ing out my orders. Clyde Scanlon didn't want nobody hornin' in on his party. You could hear 'em, Mike?"

"Could I! One voice singin' *I'm a She Wolf from Bitter Creek*, stompin', breakin' glasses, even shootin'. . . . Here's to you, stranger," lifting his filled glass to Hardy. "Huntin' a job? Cowpuncher sticks out all over you. . . . Hey! You look like somebody I orter know."

Other men were staring as fixedly as Mike, as if trying to recall where they had seen this cowboy, and Jensen said pointedly, "You got my name, but we didn't get yours, stranger."

Common sense told Hardy not to reveal his identity. But, on the other hand, if he did, he would at once find out how his father stood with the citizens of Hermit Bend. Decision however was taken from him, as Mike lunged to his feet, shouting, "I got him tagged, men. This feller's younger, but a dead ringer for old man Hardy. I mean the man who bought the 7 H spread, and seemed like a square-shooter till—"

"Till," cried another man, "he mighty nigh killed Sheriff Crowder and did salivate Savage Ed Scanlon. Yep, this young buck looks like old Dad Hardy!"

Chairs rattled as they were overturned. All the men were suddenly on their feet. Two were reaching for their guns. But Jensen's voice arrested their hands. "Take it easy, fellows. No killing in my place."

He faced Hardy and rapped out, "Are you related to old Dad Hardy? Maybe his son?"

"I'm Dad Hardy's son. Why you fellows so worked up? I'm here to prove my father didn't—"

"And you had the raw gall to come here," one man shouted. "We go all out for Nate Crowder. We liked Savage Ed, too. Given a chance, we'll help hang old man Hardy, so let's give his cub a dose of tar and feathers and ride him outa town on a rail!"

Jim Hardy knew it was time to leave. He ran toward the door. But Moose, moving with astonishing speed for a fleshy man, intercepted him, clamped his arms around him before Hardy could either pull his Colt or fend him off. Caught in

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

a bearlike embrace, Hardy strained and writhed as they crashed to the floor, Moose on top.

"Get your head outa the way, Moose, so I can kick his teeth loose!" someone yelled.

Hardy's thin hope that Jensen would interfere died as he heard the saloon owner snap, "Rough him up good, and throw him out, Moose."

IV

BY A SUPER effort Hardy squirmed free and gained his feet. Two other men slugged him and knocked him down, and again Moose pounced on him crushing his body against the floor.

Then dazedly and as if from a long way off, Hardy heard a new voice, a steady commanding voice.

"Hold it! Back off! Let the man get up!"

With one eye, peering out from under Moose's bulk, Hardy saw a tall man in cowboy attire; saw the blued steel of the six-shooter level in his right hand, and, when his gaze reached farther he saw a long-jawed, deeply lined face the color of roundup coffee. It was topped by an enormous black hat.

"Farway Fred!" gasped Jensen, shocked out of his imperturbability. "Do as he says, men. Moose, that means you too!"

Moose scrambled to his feet, and as if awed, all the men stood back in a half circle. Up went their hands.

"Can you get up, cowboy?" the gunman asked, not taking his eyes from the six men however.

Hardy lifted himself upright, but found himself woozy from the rough man-handling he had experienced.

Jensen demanded, "Why'd you butt in, Farway?"

The bandit's teeth gleamed in a mirthless smile. "You forgot my reputation, Alec Jensen? I often side the underdog. Ready, Jim Hardy? We'll go."

"Hold still Moose," Jensen ordered sharply, "you can't buck

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

his gun. Tell me, Farway, how come you come up here when I s'pose you know Crowder's huntin' you at Rough Edge for train robbery."

"Maybe I figured this was the last place Crowder'd look for me. 'Nough foolin' 'round, Jensen. You—and I mean you—hold all these men here for thirty minutes, then hold your bouncer off my trail for good, or my boys'll get orders to wreck your dump. . . . Walk out ahead of me, Hardy."

Following Hardy, the bandit backed out of Jensen's Bar, then he led the way to the livery stable. Apparently Skull-cap Porter had gone to bed, for there was no one on duty. Hardy got his horse and when he rode out of the stable, Farway Fred swung up behind the cowboy's saddle. "South out of town to where I left my horse," he directed.

A few minutes later, Hardy stopped and waited while the other led a magnificent black horse out of a dense cluster of cedars. As he mounted, Farway said, "Before I pulled you out of that trap I figured we could work together."

Hardy showed his amazement. "You, an outlaw, and me work together. For what purpose?"

"To get the deadwood on whoever robbed that train last night."

Hardy whistled sharply. "You and your outfit didn't do the job?"

"Nol" explosively. "Now that I know you're old Dad Hardy's son, and mighty nigh as unpopular in this neck of the woods as I am, I'll spread my cards face up."

"Fair 'nuff. But shouldn't we make tracks away from this town?"

"I reckon. Not that Jensen and the scissorbills who were in his joint will try to find us. But that overgrown ape they call Moose is plenty dangerous. Dangerous because he's a sadist with a one-track mind. Right now he's the cat who just lost the mouse he was hell-bent to torture—and how he'd like to get his claws on that mouse again."

Hardy flinched, yet, after a moment's thought, privately admitted the figure of speech was appropriate. "I'm due

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

back at the Slash J's roundup camp before daybreak," he said. "You riding that way?"

"Might as well." They let their impatient horses move along at a rapid walk. "You, a Hardy, on Clyde Scanlon's roundup? Sure, I've heard about the Hardy-Scanlon-Crowder ruckus and I know Clyde Scanlon—perhaps better than he knows himself."

"How do you size him up, Farway?" Hardy asked tautly. It was inconceivable that he might join forces with this staunch outlaw to get help with his problems, yet the man had already shown that he had some good qualities. He'd be a strong ally, fearless and efficient.

"Brutal, ruthless," said Farway promptly. "Hell-bent to feather his own nest. Uses his brains as well as his muscles and he'll gyp his own sister out of her share of the Slash J."

"Thanks," Hardy agreed, and went on, "but you're wondering why I'm here. First, to try to clear my father's name; next, to gather his cattle and take care of his ranch. If nothing works out so Dad can come back to his outfit, I'll try to sell it."

"How can you clear your father's name? The way I heard it, he murdered Savage Ed, and—"

"You heard only the Scanlon-Crowder side," Hardy rapped out, and then told his father's story of the fight.

"So somebody's lying," commented the bandit. "How'd you get in touch with Dad Hardy?"

"An amazing old-timer named Rocky Bill, met up with Dad and sent for me. Clyde has backed water barely enough to permit us to ride his roundup."

"Now that I savvy your side of it," spoke Farway, "I figure that you and Rocky Bill'll have a lot of luck—all bad. But you're impatient to hear my story."

"So happens that my outfit was camped not far from Rough Edge when the train was robbed last night, and one of my boys, who isn't known to be an outlaw, was at this station. Thus I got the news before daybreak this morning. We broke camp, pronto, and some of us began cutting for sign."

"Here's what I've learned while keeping out of sight of

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Sheriff Crowder from Hermit Bend, another sheriff from farther north and also a railroad detective. Seven men, well mounted, took part in the robbery, and killed the express car guard. One of the seven stopped lead but was carried off by the others. They left a plain trail north for five-six miles to a rocky ridge where the horse tracks petered out. Plumb, so far as the lawmen are concerned."

"So far as the lawmen are concerned?" Hardy repeated. "Meaning?"

"They'll not pick up the trail again. But one of my boys is a halfbreed Apache, who can trail a mouse across a carpet. 'Nuff said. The train robbers made this false trail, then cut south through the hills back to the place from which they had started—Alec Jensen's Bar and corral in Hermit Bend."

Hardy smothered a comment and listened attentively as Farway resumed, "But they didn't stay there. Seems like they wanted early-rising citizens to see them flog out of that corral, acting as if they were loaded to the gills with Jensen's rot-gut booze."

The outlaw stopped, then asked abruptly, "Hardy, if you were at Slash J's roundup camp last night, what did you see early this morning? Did you see six cowpunchers, on sweat-streaked, hollow-flanked horses, lead in one extra mount, flog into the camp, all of them drunk as—?"

Excitement was rampant in Jim Hardy, "Right, except they weren't drunk! What did they do with the puncher who was either wounded or dead? Your Apache trailer find out?"

"Yes. They threw his body over a cliff where only magpies, crows or buzzards can get to it. I heard you ask the liveryman about Jed Harl. He's the cowboy who was missing!"

"Yes. Maude Scanlon asked Clyde where he was. Clyde said he had quit his job."

"Does that mean Maude Scanlon is making a hand on the Slash J roundup?" Farway asked very sharply.

"No. But she was on hand early this morning, in time to see the punchers come back from Hermit Bend. Their jaded horses and the men being sober puzzled Maude as much as it did me and Rocky Hill."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"Jaded horses? H'mm . . . Counting the false trail those buzzards made from Rough Edge, they actually put fifty to fifty-five miles under their horses' hoofs last night. . . . Maude went back home?"

Hardy nodded and Farway Fred changed the subject. "I moseyed into town soon after dark and prowled with my ears cocked. Talk I heard was mostly about the train robbery. Folks allowed that Farway Fred had struck once again. Be a big feather in Crowder's cap if he got that bandit and his tough nuts. Only other subject worth talking about was that Slash J had put on a rip-tootin' spree last night, took over Jensen's Bar and wouldn't let anybody else in. Whooped things up till daybreak, then zinged out of town.

"Eventually, I caught sight of you, Hardy. Had you tagged as a lawman who'd maybe come from Echo Springs. So I rode close herd on you, but didn't get your number till the men in Jensen's Saloon pinned you down as Dad Hardy's son."

As the two men resumed their journey toward the Slash J roundup camp, excitement and a sense of triumph tingled through Hardy's tired, bruised body. He and Farway Fred now knew who had robbed the train and murdered the express car messenger. The arrest and conviction of Clyde Scanlon and his men would get the Slash J off Dad Hardy's neck!

"Now we've got the deadwood on Clyde, what are you going to do about it?" Hardy asked.

Farway kicked his feet out of the stirrups and stretched his long legs. "I'm still burned up about getting the blame for a job I didn't do," he said. "But remember the old saw, 'Second chief best owner'? Losing the swag will hit Clyde where it hurts. But where is the dough? Likely Alec Jensen's got it."

"Jensen?" asked Hardy. "Why would—?"

"You forgetting that Jensen and Moose are the Slash J outfit's alibi? They'll take oath that Clyde and all his crew were in Jensen's saloon all night long."

"Oho!" Hardy whistled. "I had overlooked that alibi!"

"Well, don't, for it's one of several reasons why you, Hardy, now who is guilty, even though you can't prove it—"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"Well," said Hardy, "I've got to get to the roundup camp. You're still bent to steal the train's loot from the robbers?"

"That's right," agreed Farway with a wide grin which gave his lined face a mischievous and somewhat diabolic expression. "You can do me a good turn—if what I ask won't cut too deep into your ethics—by keeping your eyes open and your nose twitching to smell out whereabouts Clyde has stashed that twenty-two thousand bucks; and if you get a smell of it, let me know."

On the point of a harsh, "Hell, no!" Hardy abruptly changed his mind and said, "Hell, yes, I'll do anything within reason to upset Clyde Scanlon's crooked work. . . ."

"Thanks. So long and good luck, Jim Hardy."

The bandit was gone at a lope; a copse of cedars immediately concealed both black horse and rider.

V

THE FOLLOWING night Hardy rode herd again. He had been dozing when suddenly, out of the dark close to Hardy a soft voice called, "Is that you, Jim Hardy?"

Hardy's heart did a dizzying dance and crowded into his throat. That voice! Lovely Maude Scanlon had never been far from his thoughts, though he had tried to put her out of his mind.

"Yes," he replied.

A horse and rider materialized, the rider so well-hidden by a black cowboy hat and black slicker that Maude would have passed for a man even in a far brighter light. Hardy's eyes, trained to better than average night vision by years of night herding, saw the girl's face as she lifted it to look at him.

"Maudel" Emotion throbbed in the one word.

"Yes, it's me, and I'm so glad I've found you. Listen close. Time's running short." Maude's words tumbled over one another. "The Slash J men, Spade, Itchy Finger, Grouchy

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Dave—Clyde's not with them, thank God—have been hunting Farway Fred all day. And they caught him."

"Caught Farway! How could—"

"They shot his horse. The horse fell on Fred, pinned him down. Now Club Foot and Skinny Smith have joined the others, making five Slash J men."

"The five of 'em have got Farway and—"

"Please don't interrupt, Jim. I'm trying to tell you what I saw and what I know. They are bringing Farway to Skeleton Creek. It is over yon hill to our west about one mile. On this creek in a grove is a wide-limbed cottonwood where Savage Ed once hanged two rustlers.

"Spade Adams' idea that it would be proper to hang Farway from this tree has delayed the horrible job. If you hurry, you can yet get to the grove where the hanging tree is before they do and save Farway."

Hardy was silent thinking. Why should I try to save that outlaw?

Maude rushed on, "There was no way I could stop the awful thing, nor was there anyone except you I could reach quickly enough. . . . Oh, I know he's stolen Slash J cattle and horses, yet I can't bear the thought of—" Her voice broke. "It's horrible, Jim. Horrible!"

"Horrible," Hardy agreed. "Chances are ten to one, I won't succeed or even save my own hide, but—"

"I can take your place here, so no one will know you're gone," Maude resumed. "And you will win out and will come back here, Jim!"

"Will win out and will come back," he repeated looking at the girl's strained face and fear-haunted eyes. "Tell me how to find this exact spot."

When Maude finished, Hardy turned his horse and gave it the spurs.

But with him rode hectic thoughts: If he lost his life now what would happen to the job he was doing for his father? What would happen to Dad Hardy? I shouldn't risk my neck for a doggoned bandit. But Farway did me a good turn and if I can save his bacon, maybe good'll come of it. . . . Hell,

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

I'm crazy to think I can stop that hanging. Better get clear while the getting's good.

But the sure-footed swift roan horse Hardy rode had topped out on a hill and was zinging down its opposite slope, twisting right and left through scrub oak brush. Soon they were in a valley so dark a fellow couldn't see a hundred feet. But Maude had said, "Up along that valley just a little way you'll come to the grove and see the top of the big tree standing out above the other cottonwoods."

Aha, here he was at the grove. Hardy stopped the roan, listened and heard above the music of the light misty rain a medley of sounds. He tied his mount and stole forward on foot. The hanging tree was in an open space at the far north end of the grove.

In the open area beyond the tree were four saddle horses; directly under the wide branches of the tall tree stood one more horse, a man astride it. One man held the horse's bridle, four more men were bunched behind the horse. Apparently they had tossed a rope up and over a limb, for Hardy heard a man say, "Let me show you how to tie the hangman's knot."

Hardy was thinking, Once they get the noose on Farway's neck, and quirt the horse it'll be too late for me to— What's my best play? Knock down the man holding the horse, jump up behind Farway and—no good. Those devils would mount in a split second and use their smoke sticks. Got to spook their horses. Set 'em afoot.

Swiftly now Hardy sped back to his own mount, hearing Spade Adams say, "For the last time, Farway, I'm askin' where to find your bandits. Tell us that and save your neck."

Hardy's thought raced, If only they'll keep gabbing it'll give me a break. Well, here's Roany.

He jerked loose the bridle reins and swung to saddle, and as he moved his mount cautiously through the small cottonwoods, he reached underneath his slicker and got his Colt .45.

He heard Spade's voice again. "You orter have a wad of dough hid someplace, too. Buy your life by leadin' us to it."

"Ye-ah? How long would I live after leading you coyotes

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

to my wad?" Farway's voice was cool, controlled and contemptuous. He would be a cool customer under any conditions.

"Hell, Spade," one man spat out, "he won't trust us. Here's your hangman's noose, knot tied right."

Hardy was now at the edge of the grove and scarcely ten feet from Farway's mount when—to his dismay and alarm—Roany, seeing the other horses, voiced a shrill whinny. At this, Hardy ripped the horse with savage spurs, and when Roany tried to avoid the target at which he was aimed, Hardy wrenched him to the left and forced him to ram into the man who was holding Farway's mount. Roany knocked the fellow galley-west, his hoofs trampling him.

That same moment, Hardy belted Farway's mount across its rump, and with a terrified snort the horse instantly leaped to a dead run. Behind the spot where it had stood, four men dodged right and left to avoid Hardy's onrushing roan. Later, Hardy realized that he owed his life to the fact that all of the four had to reach under their slickers to get at their six-shooters.

Even so, those Slash J men had their Colts roaring in an incredibly short time. But Hardy had stampeded their horses, only four in number, since they had put Farway on one of their mounts. To the accompaniment of snapping bridle reins as horses stepped on them and broke them, they were running like startled deer, while Hardy's roan was taking him out of six-shooter range!

Now to catch up with Farway, he thought exultantly. And, here he comes!

Farway's spooked mount, as is the nature of horses, had circled back to join the other horses. To Hardy's astonishment, Farway himself was behind his saddle, bent forward and working with his teeth at the knots in the heavy cord which bound his wrists to the saddle horn. As Hardy pushed his mount up alongside and caught Farway's horse by its bridle, the outlaw straightened up, hands now free.

His teeth gleamed white in the darkness as he grinned at Hardy. "Good work, friend, whoever you are."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"Jim Hardy."

"My night riding pall Judging by loud talk I heard as my horse circled back this way, those Slash J renegades didn't recognize you. They figure one of my band stopped their fun."

"In that case, I can go back to the roundup camp. I must get there before they do."

The rain had slacked off, but the night was still starless and dark. Nevertheless, Hardy found his way back to the roundup and, circling around the cavvy and the camp, made his way to the bedded herd. The cattle had quieted down and even their bawling had ceased, but a chill of apprehension washed Hardy's back when he discovered three riders with the bunch instead of two.

Then he told himself the third rider could be no other than Rocky Bill, the only cowboy who had been left in camp. The racket of shots must have awakened him and he had ridden out to the herd.

Hidden at the edge of a cluster of cedars, Hardy watched the three riders, spaced far apart, circle slowly around the cattle. Ah, they were Rocky, Funkhouser and Maude. No one who didn't know she was here would have realized she was not Jim Hardy.

Hardy waited until she was abreast of him, then whistled softly. Instantly the girl rode to meet him and stopped in the shadow of the small trees.

"You, Jim? Thank God!" she whispered. "I heard the shooting and I've been paralyzed with fear."

"The play came off all to the good," Hardy said quickly. "Farway's alive and free. I wasn't recognized, so I'll be in the clear, unless Rocky has gummed things up for us."

"When he came out to the herd, he wanted to talk to me, but I pretended I had to dash out to head off a calf. Then he made his talk with Funkhouser."

"So nobody is wise to you?" Hardy wanted to press closer to the girl, look into her face and put an arm around her. But even though they had worked together this hectic night, he remembered they were on opposite sides.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"No one except you, Jim." She came closer and was smiling at him. "Thanks so much for what you did. Now swing into my place here, tend to your night herding, and I'll make myself hard to find."

"B-but, Maude, where will you go? You must go somewhere to get out of those wet duds, and--"

"I wasn't raised a pet. G'bye, and may luck still ride with you." Maude's horse skirted around the cedars and vanished.

VI

THE FOLLOWING day, Hardy was once again on day herd duty, and that evening, Clyde Scanlon, after being gone five days rejoined the roundup. He brought with him three cowboys to bolster the small crew. When Rocky and Hardy sized up the newcomers, Hardy was inclined to reserve judgment. But Rocky said at once, "If Clyde had scouted the Rocky Mountains from Canada to deep down in Mexico, he couldn't have found three critters—I say critters, for 'though they look human, they ain't—better qualified to tie up with his gang."

Clyde told everyone that the only reason for his trip was to pick up more men. "We been dawdling on this roundup. Now we'll whoop it up."

Once again he took full charge and next day, sent riders out alone on circle; one man to do the work of two and thus cover twice as much country as previous circles had done.

Hardy was happy to be alone, for if no Slash J man was near him, he might meet Farway Fred, or his own father, or possibly Maude. More and more he caught himself thinking of her, worrying about her safety and her problems.

Therefore, he was more than delighted when he did see the girl of the Slash J. She was riding a trim black pony, and all of her clothing, lightweight, bat-wing chaps, man's shirt, hat, and neckerchief knotted loosely about her throat, were

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

dark in color. Yet the absence of bright colors did not detract from her charm, and the startled cowpuncher was conscious of his heart's sudden high beat. Thoughts wild and crazy went swirling through his mind as he waited for the sound of her voice, a voice which could stir him as none other.

After a momentary hesitation her words came with a rush, "You must leave the roundup! You must leave this country before it's too late."

Hardy's smile vanished. "I appreciate the tip," he began. But she moved her mount closer, and the power of her wonderful eyes compelled him to meet them squarely.

"Then take my advice, Jim!" Her voice was low and tense with feeling.

Hardy hesitated, then thinking, Might just as well let her have it straight from the shoulder, he said, "I recall that you, Maude Scanlon, suggested to your hateful brother that I be allowed to gather the 7 H herd and sell it. Afterwards he could trail me to wherever my father is hiding. . . . Did you know that I overheard that remark?"

"I suspected it." She was meeting his stormy eyes. "I don't think you're stupid. So draw your own conclusions why I made that suggestion."

She had scored a disconcerting hit. "Uh?" Hardy stammered. "Was—was it to spike his guns temporarily?"

"What do you think? But now I know you're marked for death. Soon."

Hardy looked at the bundle behind her saddle. Wasn't it probable that it contained food and a blanket or two? "Are you camping out at night, and keeping tabs on—"

"Tabs on my 'hateful brother,' as you called him, and on his men. But don't tell Clyde about this."

"As if I would!" Hardy's eyes admired the dark girl. She was a true Westerner, possessing both pluck and grit, and it seemed as if she didn't trust Clyde Scanlon any too far either!

In a low voice she said, "Forget your pride, Jim. Pride that won't let you run away—to save your life."

"Run—to save my life? Maude, I've had no chance to lis-

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

ten to Clyde's talk with his men. Have they found out that we saved Farway's neck?"

"No. So far as I know that is still our secret, and Farway Fred's. But there must not be another killing on Slash J range Take your pard, Rocky Bill, slip out of camp tonight and don't come back."

"Listen, Maude, I've reason to believe I'm safe until the roundup ends. Clyde's men have me branded as one of Farway's men. Yet they lay off me, because I'm tagged as Clyde's meat."

He had caught the girl's complete attention. "I can't believe you are one of Farway's men. Are you, Jim?"

"No! But I did meet him not so long ago. We got to know each other fairly well. Do you know him, Maude?"

"In a way, yes. I saw Farway a few times, several years ago, when I was much younger, and once had a brief talk with the picturesque scoundrel. The man fascinated me, so erect in the saddle, as if born to ride, flashing dark eyes and a winning smile. I even dreamed happily about him—a dashing, handsome Robin Hood bandit."

Hardy smiled. Maude had let herself go, telling a cherished girlhood incident.

"But my father, Savage Ed, and Clyde and our men said Farway stole Slash J horses and cattle. Now Clyde and the toughs he's hired—who I believe are outlaws themselves—simply hate Farway."

Hardy looked around the rough landscape, suddenly remembering that he and Maude might be spied upon by Slash J riders. That he saw no one did not ease his worry and he said, "Let's move into yonder cluster of cedars where we'll be out of sight," leading the way as he spoke. "But you don't hate Farway?" he added.

"No," she said emphatically. "One reason I've been scouting this range is in hope of finding Farway Fred, and—this is a crazy idea—asking him to pay me for cattle and horses he stole from Savage Ed."

"Not such a crazy idea," Hardy commented. "Your eyes,

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

your voice, your personality would work wonders on a tougher man than Farway."

"Nonsense! My eyes and voice and personality haven't influenced your stubborn mind. You're determined to stay here when I know you are marked for death. Soon."

"How can you know this, Maude?"

"Sometimes I get close to two or three Slash J men when they're riding, and I listen to their talk. Sometimes I steal close to the camp fire and hear things. Though mostly just fragments I have to piece together."

Hardy said impulsively, "You've got more pluck and grit than ninety-nine out of a hundred men."

She drew a deep breath. "Thank you, Jim. You will quit this roundup."

"No! I'll take my chances. But I thank—"

"I was afraid you wouldn't go. I might say, been nice knowing you, even though you're a Hardy. So long."

She turned her back up the hillside and vanished in the scrub oak brush. With an ache in his heart, Jim Hardy wondered if he would ever see her again?

VII

MAUDE SCANLON rode far back into a rocky glen, staked out her horse, made a small fire and prepared a simple meal. Afterwards she sat as motionless as a pine tree, gazing at the dying coals without seeing them, lost in thoughts which held few bright episodes.

While riding herd on the roundup crew, she had overheard enough to let her know Hardy's life was to be snuffed out though the where and when and how of this she had not been able to discover.

Hardy's blunt refusal to leave and save himself had lifted him in her estimation. A stubborn and determined man in his position could scarcely have done otherwise and she ad-

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

mired his stand. But although Maude told herself he meant nothing to her, she felt she must do something more to avert further tragedy and bloodshed on Slash J range. She thought of appealing to Clyde to forget his obsession for vengeance and to behave himself. But nothing she might do or say would move or change her cruel, vindictive brother.

Looking back on her twenty-two years, Maude Scanlon could recall the one great tragedy of her otherwise happy, carefree childhood—the loss of her mother. But at five years, no child fully realizes such a loss.

Aunt K had taken over, and she had been a pleasant person in those dimly remembered days, sympathetic and understanding, mothering the two Scanlon children as if they were her own. Scanlon, too, old Savage Ed, had been kind. Maude always choked up inside when she recalled how he had loved her. He had married Maude's mother quite late in his own life and her loss had cut him deeply; so deeply that never afterwards was he quite the same.

In those days there had been no school, no town of Hermit Bend, and the rough, virgin land where Scanlon had built his home was far from beaten trails. Aunt K had given the Scanlon children their early schooling, and later Scanlon had sent Maude to Denver to get "book and social learning."

He'd have done the same for Clyde, but Clyde was already completely out of hand. Aunt K had helplessly let him whipsaw her all too long, and even Savage Ed, though stern and grim toward his hired men and all others with whom he had dealings, indulgently let Clyde do as he pleased. Clyde would have none of that sissy, stick-his-nose-in-a-book stuff. He preferred the companionship of tough cowhands and other shady characters.

Maude could now see how it was no wonder Clyde had steadily gone from bad to worse. They'd soon drifted apart and had lost all sense of sympathy with one another.

"A chip off the old block," was what they called Clyde in Hermit Bend, meaning that, like his father, he was a hard-bitten, ruthless fighter out to build up and to hold the Slash J

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

ranch and range by any means, fair or foul, and never pull his punches.

Maude Scanlon still cherished illusions of that tough and knotty old cowman, though she held none about Clyde. She had known before Clyde left home, three years ago this past spring, to sow his wild oats, that he was cruel, deceitful and dishonest.

Although shocked, she wasn't greatly surprised when, less than six months after he'd left home, Clyde got into serious trouble in Montana. Savage Ed at first refused to show her the letter which told of this. Later, however, with his face twisted and bleak, he had said, "Maybe it'll be best if you know what's up, Maude."

The letter was from a law firm in a Montana town, and after stating that Clyde Scanlon was under arrest accused of four robberies, the law firm suggested that if Ed Scanlon could put up a great deal of ready cash they might get his son clear without much publicity. Clyde had told the lawyers he was sure his dad could patch things up.

Savage Ed had gone to Montana and patched things up with thirty thousand dollars of cattle mortgage money, which more than anything else had put the Slash J on the skids. Clyde had returned to the ranch and so far as Maude knew, no one in Hermit Bend had been told of this unsavory episode.

Slash J's old hands did know about it, and Aunt K, having been the housekeeper before Savage Ed married Maude's mother, knew everything about the Scanlon family. This strange old woman had now become one of Maude's major problems. A problem she had hoped to avoid, as she had also hoped to avoid any further contact with Clyde, by leaving home herself, soon after Clyde's return.

Maude had talked this over with Savage Ed and although she hadn't said, "Dad, I can't and won't live under the same roof with Clyde," she suspected Scanlon knew this was her main reason for going away.

He had regarded her with stolid bitterness. "So I'm to lose the one person I really love. . . . Don't leave me, Maude."

After that, Maude had cried herself to sleep. But she had

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

gone nevertheless, hoping never to see Clyde again. But it was Savage Ed whom she was never to see again, and with her crooked and tricky brother as her partner in an outfit teetering drunkenly on its last legs, she was now back on the old Slash J.

Upon her return, Maude had found Aunt K acting as if she were half crazy. The strange old woman jabbered about her great love for Savage Ed Scanlon. Maude knew it was unrequited love, since he had noticed her no more than if she had been a dummy. But Aunt K declared his death had broken her heart, and this had made her savage and vengeful.

She would seat herself in Scanlon's favorite chair, rock violently and mumble over and over, "I know something. I know something." Staring vindictively at Maude, she would add, "Don't you wish you knew what I know?"

When Maude asked what that something was, the old woman replied only with silly laughter.

Other habits Aunt K had acquired were even more annoying. She would follow the girl around, demanding attention, waiting on, petting. She prowled about the house during the night, waking Maude to ask foolish questions or to beg for some service of which she herself was capable.

All of this was driving Maude half-frantic. Clyde, as was to be expected, dumped the entire responsibility of Aunt K squarely in Maude's lap. "I can't be bothered," he growled. "Send her to an asylum if you want."

Maude, however, remembered all that Aunt K had done for her and her brother when they were children, and was reluctant to send her away. There were so many other problems about which to worry. Since Maude's return to the old ranch, life had become complicated and thorny, stripped of its former happiness and of any remote sense of contentment.

Rousing herself now from her reverie, the girl saddled her black pony and cut air-line across the colorful hills to Hermit Bend. It was mid-afternoon when she arrived to find the small town, as usual, placidly dozing. Turning in at the livery stable, Maude put a question to Skullcap Porter, a staunch friend, "Sheriff Crowder in town?"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"No, Maude. He keeps his hoss here, so I happen to know he rode out to the roundup wagon to see Clyde."

"To see Clyde?" The girl had a panicky moment, before she reassured herself that Crowder could not arrest Jim Hardy for anything Jim's father had done.

Porter said, "Humph-a-mile! Crowder ought still to be huntin' them train bandits. . . . You ain't heard the news?"

The liveryman led her horse into a stall, and when he returned he told her all that he knew about the train robbery.

Not greatly interested, Maude interposed a question, "Is Jed Harl in town, Skullcap?"

"Ain't seen him, Maude, since—not since all the Slash J boys was in here t'other night."

"That was the night of the twenty-fourth. Clyde said Harl quit. I want to ask him if he got his back pay."

"He ain't hanging around nowhere," Skullcap Porter said. "The twenty-fourth was the night of the big holdup. Crowder got word and went next day—the twenty-fifth—to see what he could do. But he give up pretty quick. Told us when he got back how the bandits headed north from Rocky Edge and left a reasonably plain trail for five-six miles. Then the tracks plumb petered out. Reckon 'twas Farway Fred's gang."

But the girl was still intent on her own line of thought, for as half-owner of the outfit, she was jointly responsible for its financial obligations and she greatly feared that Clyde was continuing to run up bills in town.

"Did Clyde and the other Slash J men stable their horses with you, Skullcap?" she asked.

"They put 'em in Jensen's corral, in back of his saloon."

Fire flashed in Maude's eyes, for she believed horses deserved the best of care. "I suppose they left them there all night without feed? When the punchers got back to the roundup camp that next morning their horses certainly looked as if—"

She broke off, for Skullcap was talking: "I heard that Clyde and all them rannies cut loose on a hell-bender at Jensen's. Didn't leave till toward daylight."

"Cut loose on a hell-bender?" Puzzled lines formed between

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

he girl's brows. Clyde and his crew were a rowdy, drunken lot, but they hadn't been drunk when they arrived back at the chuck wagon! "Did you happen to look in on this toot?"

"No, but word got 'round how the Slash J punchers was still rippin' off the lid at four 'clock in the mornin'. . . . What are you tryin' to get at, Maude?"

"I don't exactly know myself." Maude felt bewildered. Nonetheless she managed to smile, and added, "I've some errands to do. So long, Skullcap."

She had planned to ask Crowder to keep peace on the Slash J roundup and in some manner protect Jim Hardy. Since she had missed Crowder, that was out, but she could now have a business talk with Wallace Kendrick.

Kendrick, a dapper gentleman with a gray mustache and hair graying at the temples, was cordial, yet the girl found in his greeting a wary politeness.

When he answered her first question, he steepled his fingers, looked down his nose and said judicially, "Just how badly off are you? And what can you do toward saving the Slash J? There's nothing you can do, Miss Scanlon. Nothing."

"An extension of time—or a new loan perhaps?"

Kendrick jerked open a drawer in his desk. "I'll show you some cold figures. Here we are: Slash J Outfit."

Maude's eyes skimmed over the neat figures and notations to focus upon:

Total sales value of Slash J land, horses, equipment and cattle—one hundred thousand dollars. Indebtedness due this bank (does not include local bills, wages or taxes)—one hundred thousand dollars plus one year's interest at twelve per cent (now long overdue) Total: one hundred and twelve thousand dollars.

As if from a long way off the girl heard Kendrick say, "The original loan was for one hundred and twenty thousand dollars. However, Scanlon did repay twenty thousand and he did manage to keep up the interest for two years. As you can see, Miss Scanlon, I am now holding the sack."

"Does that mean that if we could sell the outfit for the

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

value you put on it, we'd still owe you approximately twelve thousand dollars?"

Kendrick reached for a cigar and bit off the end as if he didn't like its taste. "Yes. I could foreclose, but I don't want the outfit. Savage Ed played me for a sucker and hooked me!"

Twin spots of color flamed in Maude's cheeks. "Mr. Kendrick, I know they say that he tricked you into counting the Slash J herd around a hill—an old, old trick—and that you counted the same herd three times. But I've never believed it."

"It's the blunt truth, Miss Scanlon. When I learned that he actually owned only two thousand cattle, I put a mortgage on the ranch as well as the stock. However, I see this subject is painful to you, so let's not discuss it."

"But I do want to save the old outfit," said Maude. "And run it in such a manner that you won't lose a dime. Can it be done?"

Kendrick thumped his fist down on his desk. "Not with a man like your brother in charge! That fellow—I beg your pardon. . . . Still, if Clyde were out of it and if you could make me a liberal payment you could win out." He shook his gray head. "But there's no use discussing such improbabilities. . . . By the way, Spade Adams was in town last night."

Maude said dully, "I shouldn't think he'd have left the roundup when Cyde's short-handed."

"Clyde sent him to tell Crowder he wanted to see him."

The girl's interest quickened. "Clyde sent for Crowder? I wonder why?"

Kendrick relighted his cigar. "Spade asked me to come to the roundup tomorrow morning. . . . Has Clyde told you that Alec Jensen is interested in buying part, or all, of the Slash J herd?"

"No! Jensen going into the cow business? I can't feature it."

"Neither can I, Miss Scanlon. However I'll get the straight of it tomorrow when I ride out there with Jensen. You understand of course that in any business deal the Slash J now makes I must be consulted?"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Maude got to her feet, twisting her gloves in her slender brown hands. "I'd gathered as much. . . . I don't like to say this, Mr. Kendrick, but if—if Clyde and Alec Jensen have put their heads together, watch your step."

She was gone before the amazed banker could stop her. Pausing on the sidewalk, Maude considered her next move. Tonight she wouldn't go back to her self-appointed job of riding herd on the roundup crew. With Crowder there Clyde would not be likely to start trouble with Jim Hardy. Should she go home then? But Aunt K was at home, and with her nerves rubbed raw as they were, Maude felt she could not stand the queer woman's company. After all kindly old Ed Willoby, the one man on Slash J, understood Aunt K and would take care of her.

All at once, realization of how deathly tired she was swept over Maude. Oh, for a hot bath and one night's good rest. Tonight, although she had very little money, she would put up at Hermit Bend's hotel.

VIII

IT WAS TWO P.M. when Jim Hardy whooped a small herd of cattle into the main herd at the bunch ground, and almost immediately noticed there was a stranger at the camp fire with Clyde Scanlon. Others of the crew were also eating their dinner, but Rocky Bill came riding around the herd, drew up close enough to Hardy to make himself heard above the bawling of cows and calves and said tensely, "I seen the ol' man 's mornin'."

"You mean my Dad?"

"Uh-huh. He's lyin' low, but kinder gettin' an eagle-eye view of things. 'Course he wanted to see you, but it so happened my circle took me close to where he was. Was he tickled at the progress we're makin'!"

"That was fine and dandy, Rocky. But, damn it! What if this pack of drygulchers cut sign of him!"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"Rest easy 'bout that. He's usin' his own feet to get around, and not leavin' tracks. Hasn't got a hoss to nicker at the wrong time and give him away."

"Dad walking, carrying a pack, sleeping out without half enough bedding! I don't like it. How'd he seem, Rocky?"

"He's in plumb good shape, tough as an ol' fur trapper. O' course he was mighty anxious to know if had we got any dope to throw the kind of light he wants thrown on his fight with Savage Ed, and I had to tell him no."

"But after I make talk with Sheriff Crowder, we may have news for Dad. . . . Where can I find him, Rocky?"

"You can't find him. Like before, it's up to him to find one or the other of us. . . . By the way, that Dennison, the lawman from Rough Edge, with his two man hunters came a-past camp a while ago. Hadn't been able to cut sign on Farway Fred a-tall, and they was headin' back to where they came from. That cheer you up, Jim?"

"Yes, in some ways, I'm relieved that Dennison has given up the hunt. Still, if only we could have put a bug in his ear and made him believe us— Time to break this up. Here comes Spade Adams."

The bearded, swarthy, hook-nosed man reined up near the two 7 H cowboys. "Go eat," he said abruptly.

Bill and Hardy had started toward the wagon when something prompted Hardy to hip around in his saddle. "Who's the visitor, Spade?"

More often than otherwise when Hardy put a direct question to any of Scanlon's crew, except Skillet Sam and Mell Andrews, he'd get merely a cold look or a shrug. But Spade Adams did vouchsafe two words, "Sheriff Crowder."

"Crowder!" Hardy echoed, and added to himself, "Is this luck!"

As they rode on, Rocky Bill leaned toward his companion. "One or t'other of us has got to get that lyin' snake of a Crowder off by himself and— You know what."

"Yes, Farway Fred said, 'Trim his toe nails with a red hot branding iron.' Let me try to reason with him, Rocky."

"Hunky. But," shaking his head, "you're still too danged

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

easy goin'. It'll be up to me to use some redskin tactics on that gentleman!"

At the camp Hardy saw no chance of speaking with Crowder privately. Clyde Scanlon had attached himself to the lawman as though he were his bodyguard. Imitating Rocky Bill's indifferent manner Hardy exhibited no open curiosity regarding the sheriff, but while he was eating his dinner, he unobtrusively sized up the man.

Crowder was a six-footer, fleshy though not soft, blonde and blue-eyed, with thinning hair and flat, expressionless features. For all Hardy could tell, he might be a strong character or quite otherwise. Yet the younger man did believe the sheriff was weak, and could be easily led.

Hardy heard him ask Clyde Scanlon, "Who're those birds?" and with his thumb Crowder indicated Hardy and Bill.

Scanlon looked at Hardy as if to tell him to keep still before he said, "Some new hands I picked up. . . . Let's go out on herd."

Crowder stayed that night at the roundup camp, and Jim Hardy, though literally biting his finger nails, bided his time to get the sheriff off by himself, unnoticed by the Slash J crew. But either Scanlon or Spade Adams or Itchy-finger Rankin—the snake-eyed runt habitually loaded down with two big guns—was always with the lawman.

At daybreak however the cowpuncher learned that Crowder was heading back to Hermit Bend and, as good luck would have it, at least so Hardy thought at the time, Clyde Scanlon sent him on circle all alone. There was nothing odd in this, since Clyde was now sending lone riders single-handed to do the work of two or more men.

Having now gained some familiarity with the country, Hardy cut northward to strike the road to Hermit Bend. This he soon reached, and after following it for several miles he found a set-up to his liking. Here, a convenient turn in a winding gulch gave him the opportunity to take the lawman by complete surprise.

Minutes heightened by anticipation dragged on until the high, sharp crack of a rifle whipped across the wooded

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

hills, startling Hardy like a thunder clap out of a clear sky. Not far away along the gulch through which he had ridden that rifle had sounded. As its echoes faded, he waited, listening tensely. Hearing nothing more, he climbed the ridge at his right, and backtrailed, his intent gaze fastened on the brown ribbon of road in the gulch below.

When he saw a saddled, riderless horse with bridle reins a-trail, now fallen to grazing, and a human figure dark against the ground near the road, Hardy's stomach turned over and closed up.

Moving onward until he reached a point abreast of that still figure, he stopped and cut for sign. There was none that he could find. Yet he hesitated. On a range ridden by dry-gulchers it is risky to go near a murdered man. But the victim of this cowardly attack might not be dead. He must see if there was anything he could do.

It was not until Hardy had reached the fallen man that he realized it was Sheriff Crowder. Shock and rage ran through him. Crowder, the one man, who, so far as Hardy knew, could tell the truth about Dad Hardy's fight with Savage Ed Scanlon, had been shot.

Hardy believed Crowder was dead. Yet he gently turned the man over and to his surprise, Crowder blinked his eyes. Looking up into the cowpuncher's face, he blurted, "Double crossers! I've been scairt of it. Fixed things so you buzzards'll follow me to hell."

Hardy, trying to stop the flow of blood, put his face close to the sheriff's. "Crowder, look at me. I'm not one of 'em. I'm Hardy's son. Hardy's! You get it?"

Crowder's eyes opened in a wide stare. The muscles in his face jerked. "Hardy's son?"

"Yes! Tell me that my dad didn't kill Scanlon in cold blood. I'll write it down and you sign it."

He fumbled for paper and pencil, finding nothing except cigarette papers, no pencil. Crowder stared, unwinking, and then whispered, "Conscience hurts me. I did write truth of Scanlon-Hardy fight. Put it—"

"Where? Where'd you put it?" Hardy interrupted. The

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

sheriff's words had been so low he'd scarcely followed them. He bent even closer to the dying man, and Crowder, rallying once again, gasped: "Double crossers! I'll get revenge. Revenge! It's in my safe. They don't know. Get-it!"

He coughed, relaxed, and life went out of him. Hardy stood, white-lipped, as if made of wood. Who'd the sheriff meant by double crossers? Scanlon and his crew of course. It meant that the dead man had been hand-in-glove with them. And now, though double-crossed and murdered, he still could have revenge. There was something in his safe which would tell the truth about them!

Suddenly the steady beat of hoofs rolled to the cowboy's ears. He whirled, half crouching, instinctively snaking out his Colt. But he didn't raise it. The three men coming from the direction of Hermit Bend were none of Scanlon's crew.

Their clothing and the way in which they sat their horses marked them as town men. One was a coarse individual with a moon-like face. His huge body overflowed a seventeen-inch saddle; another, slender and dressed like a gambler, reminded Hardy of a sly and cunning tinhorn. Once again Hardy was facing Alec Jensen and Moose!

In contrast, the third man appeared strangely out of place, respectability and position in the business world speaking plainly in his features, his manner and his appearance. And in this moment of sizing him up, Hardy felt certain that this neat, gray-haired, gray-mustached man was dependable and on the square.

They had halted, in a shocked, uncertain manner, and were goggling at Crowder's body and his horse and at Jim Hardy. He holstered his gun, stepped forward and spoke in a husky tone, "I'm mighty glad to see you men. Sheriff Crowder has been dry-gulched and I—"

He got no farther. Alec Jensen whipped out his six-shooters and covered him. "Crowder murdered," he shouted. "Hoist 'em, killer!"

"Don't be a damned fool!" Hardy retorted. "This man was hit by a rifle bullet. I've got only a short iron."

Jensen snapped, "Left your long gun on the ridge, eh?"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

We'll have a look. . . . Kendrick," to the gray-mustached man, "you ride up on the ridge on the west side o' this gulch and scout. Moose, take the other side. I'll keep this fellow quiet."

The two men rode away and Hardy, controlling his flaming rage, waited in silence. He believed that Kendrick, the banker of Hermit Bend would be reasonable. Nor could Jensen pin anything on the cowpuncher, much as he seemed to wish to do it.

Moose, first to return, said, "No sign up there, boss."

"Get the jigger's smoke stick anyhow, Moose," Jensen ordered, and Hardy permitted himself to be disarmed.

Eventually Kendrick came riding down the slope with his head bent, looking at the tracks left by Hardy's horse when it had earlier descended this same slope. Drawing nearer, the banker held up a rifle!

His face had set in hard lines; his sharp eyes looked right through Jim Hardy as he said, "I found this gun up there. Obviously the killer wanted to get rid of it, and—the empty shell is still in it!"

Hardy heard himself say, "Mr. Kendrick, I looked carefully before I rode down from that ridge. There was no rifle there then!"

"No?" said the banker drily. He dismounted, laid down the rifle, went to Hardy's horse and picked up one front foot to look at hoof and shoe. He dropped the animal's foot and remarked in flat, cold tones, "This man's horse left the plain tracks I have now seen. He rode up along that ridge to a point abreast of where Crowder's body is lying. There he stopped his horse and apparently was looking down into this gulch.

"I'm certain he fired from his saddle, dropped the rifle and rode down the slope to make sure of what he had done. The horse tracks and the finding of the rifle prove that this cowboy killed Crowder. Jensen, our trip to the roundup is off. We must take this cowboy to Hermit Bend and jail him."

Kendrick broke off, but after looking at Alec Jensen in a perplexed manner, he asked, "But who is this rider and what possible motive—"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"Motive!" Jensen interrupted in a booming voice. "Motive? Kendrick, this man is old Dad Hardy's son, Jim Hardy! Old man Hardy had a fight with Crowder, mighty near killed the heriff. His son aimed to finish the job—and he did!"

IX

MAUDE SCANLON was resting on the hotel porch in Hermit Bend when she saw riders coming into town. Easily recognizable while still at a distance, they were Alec Jensen, with his gorilla-like henchman, Moose, and Wallace Kendrick!

Behind these three were two led horses. One, the big gray Crowder usually rode, but now, slung across its saddle was a body. On the second led horse, a cowboy, erect in his saddle, though his hands were lashed to the saddle horn, looked startlingly familiar. Blood drained from the girl's face. It was Jim Hardy.

Not knowing what to do or think or say, Maude soon heard the startling news spread by word of mouth. "Jim Hardy, old man Hardy's son, beefed Sheriff Crowder! Shot him from over. Jensen, Moose and Kendrick caught young Hardy red-handed. Got him dead to rights!"

Immediately after this, the town reminded Maude of an aroused ant hill or a punctured hornets' nest. She hadn't known Crowder was well-liked, but now, citizens gathering on the hotel porch, extolled his virtues in one breath and in the next damned the Hardys, father and son, as cowardly, brutal killers.

Because Maude was a Scanlon, and Hardy Senior had shot her father, the girl found herself the center of attention. Furthermore, as if for her special benefit, men hashed and rehashed the account of what young Hardy had done today, as related by Alec Jensen. She stood it as long as she could, then slipped away to her hotel room and locked the door behind her.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

As she sank into a chair, she caught her reflection in the mirror and scarcely recognized her lips and eyes with the tight lines about them as part of her own features. Why was this ghastly thing so disturbing? Not because she cared anything about Jim Hardy. It was only because he was getting an unfair, raw deal.

Tipped off by scraps of talk she had overheard while eavesdropping on the Slash J roundup crew, she had known that some sinister plot against Hardy was brewing, and that he was marked for death. Death by bushwhacker lead, she had supposed. Now however she recalled the exact words of Clyde Scanlon and Spade Adams, whom she had heard conferring together. Spade had said, "All's necessary is to crowd Hardy into a gun fight."

Clyde had negatived this. "Nothing that crude, Spade. Too damned many questions'd be raised which we'd have trouble answering. . . ." Then, "I've got a sardonic sense of humor. To me it seems fitting that—" Whisper, whisper.

Spade had answered, "Sardonic sense of humor you say? You mean plain hellish. . . . Sure there'll be long chances of some slip-up. On t'other hand it may work out slicker'n dabbing your rope on a yearling."

What was this scheme which had appealed to Clyde's "sardonic sense of humor"? This scheme which held chances of failure yet might work?

Thinking back, Maude recalled certain things she had learned yesterday. These now took on added significance. Spade Adams had asked Sheriff Crowder to visit the roundup; Jensen had approached Wallace Kendrick with a sudden decision to buy some Slash J cattle and had asked the banker to ride with him to the roundup today.

Was it by sheer coincidence that Crowder had stayed over night with the roundup crew, and had ridden homeward toward Hermit Bend this morning? Was it by coincidence that Wallace Kendrick, Alec Jensen and Moose had come upon the body of the murdered sheriff and had there caught Jim Hardy apparently red-handed?

Maude shook her head. The coincidences were just too

glaring. How strange for Jensen to express a wish to buy cattle. Only by this means could he, a man whom Kendrick held in contempt, persuade the banker to ride out of town with him. Was it not probable that Wallace Kendrick was unwittingly being used by the conspirators? Used to bolster and substantiate the proof of Hardy's guilt through the word of Hermit Bend's most respected citizen!

The sound of a rifle shot, lifting above other turbulent noises on the street, startled Maude from her chair and frightened her to near panic. However, from her window she failed to see any sign of a brawl. At the jail, which was also Crowder's living quarters, a large crowd had gathered. Hardy was now locked in a cell of course, but Maude's breath caught in her tight throat. How long would he remain locked up in safety?

Already the temper of Hermit Bend was aroused, harsh voices demanding immediate vengeance on the "dirty killer." Rope justice! Jensen was evidently supplying free whisky to inflame the crowd, as Maude could see. She also saw Kendrick standing in front of the jail gesticulating wildly in an attempt to make himself heard. But he was being shouted down.

The girl of the Slash J reached for her belt and gun hanging on the bed post, reached for her cowgirl hat on the dresser, and then went out quickly. Down the back stairs and along the alley, she sped like a graceful antelope, and through Skullcap Porter's corral to the rear door of the livery stable.

She was thinking that Rocky Bill, who had impressed her as a thoroughly likable, rough and ready old range hand, would help her in this crisis. But the roundup was much too far away for Maude to get Rocky on the job. Whatever was to be done for Hardy must be done at once. *At once.*

Skullcap Porter was leaving by the front door to join those at the jail, when Maude, running up behind him, halted him with a panted, "We must stop these crazy folks from lynching Hardy. He isn't guilty!"

The liveryman gaped at her as if unable to believe that a canon was serious about helping a Hardy. He found his

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

tongue, rapped out, "The hell Hardy ain't guilty! Maude, it's been cinched on him."

"Cinched on him? No! It's—it's all a—"

"Hol' on, girl. They got the bullet that killed Crowder and they have fired another cartridge from that rifle Kendrick found where the drygulcher dropped it and—"

"That was the shot I heard?"

"Sure. By testin' the two bullets they have proved that rifle is the one that was used to shoot Crowder. On top of all that, Jensen says that Hardy's one of Farway Fred's wild bunch. Jensen can prove it, because Farway himself stormed into Jensen's saloon the night of the twenty-fifth, and at gun-point took Hardy out of a trap he'd gotten into. String the dirty cur up, I say, and I'm goin' to help, you bet!"

Porter was gone at a run, and Maude saw a half dozen men seize Wallace Kendrick and push the protesting banker up the street. Her only hopes of getting help were gone! Yet after a moment of despair she thought, I'm not licked yet!

She remembered that Hermit Creek, almost dry at this season ran on the north side of town, not far from the back of the jail. Might she not make use of that deep channel now? But first to create a diversion, get the would-be lynchers' attention on something else!

Her hot, bright eyes raked the length of main street. A scattering of saddle horses and teams were tied to hitch-rails. But there were no horses in Jensen's corral. This meant that the only horses other than those on the street were here in Porter's livery. With the outline of a plan in mind, Maude ran into the stable office.

From a peg on the wall she snatched a cartridge belt with holstered gun, snatched somebody's long rain coat from another peg, and somebody else's bandana draped old hat. Dropping these articles for the moment, she darted into the stable proper, backed her own mount from one stall and another horse as well. Both of these she bridled, tied them to a stall post and then turned all the other horses into the corral.

Buckling on the extra belt and gun over her own, she slipped into the rain coat, tugged the hat low on her black hair

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

and tied the bandana over the lower part of her face. Time was so pressing. So important! But a glance assured her Hardy hadn't yet been dragged out of the jail.

Mounting bareback, and leading the second horse, Maude went out at the livery's back door. She swung open the corral gate and whooping out all the loose horses, she lashed them to a wild gallop along main street. As she had dared to hope this racing cavvy had the immediate effect of causing all saddle horses and teams at the hitch rails to break tie ropes and join the stampede.

Dust swirling up under hammering hoofs screened the girl from the crowd at the jail where pandemonium reigned. Above the drumming of galloping hoofs, Maude heard astounded oaths and equally astounded shouts:

"What's busted loose?"

"What spooked them horses?"

"Hell's bells! Somebody's whoopin' 'em outa town."

"Horse thieves! Shoot 'em. Shoot 'em!"

"Maybe it's Farway Fred!"

"Come on, men. We've got to catch that—"

Clouds of dust alone saved Maude from a dozen wild shots. This same dust prevented her from seeing reward, but exultation surged through her, for men were tearing out after the stampeded horses. She had effected an interlude for Hardy!

On out of town, westward, for possibly a quarter mile, Maude lashed the racing cavvy. Then she swerved to the north, circling back to Hermit Bend by means of the steep-banked water course. This creek bed saved her being seen by the wrathful men pursuing the horses, yet she realized they would all too soon succeed in catching some of them.

Opposite the rear of the jail, she stopped, tied her two excited horses, climbed the creek bank and had a look. No one was visible behind the sturdy rock jail. Her gaze traveled on to the high, barred window at the rear. No possible chance of her ripping loose those bars. She must go around to the front.

Maude jerked her hat lower and again adjusted the bandana mask. It would be best if no one recognized the girl of

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

the Slash J. She drew the Colt she'd appropriated at the stable, and taut-nerved, heart pounding, she stole along the wall of the jail, looked around the corner into the street. With boundless relief she let out her held breath. Except for two men, the crowd was gone after the horses.

Around the corner stepped Maude, a weird figure in long rain coat, black hat and bandana mask, with Colt in hand. "Get 'em high, you jiggers!"

What if the two refused to obey? In the few seconds while the men, mouths dropping open, eyes bugging, stared at her, Maude lived a hundred suspenseful years. Then they jerked their arms upward.

"Hold 'em that way," trying to make her order gruff. "Keep abreast and get inside. Okay, now where are the keys? I see 'em! Get on to that empty cell!"

Through the open door of this cell the men stepped. Maude slammed the door, heard its spring lock click, and whirled back to get the keys from the top of Sheriff Crowder's small steel safe.

Jim Hardy was looking out through the barred door of the other cell as she fumbled frantically with the keys, trying to find the right one. Never would she forget the expression of his face and eyes when the door at last swung open, for somehow he had penetrated her disguise, and his lips formed the one word, "Maudel!"

She answered, "Come! Horses out back."

Ominous sounds now on the street, voices, and thump of boots. Maude was across the small office ahead of Hardy, looking out at a dozen or more men not thirty feet away.

She thought, "I'm too late. Too late!"

But Hardy had taken the initiative. He caught her hand and pulled her with him. Out through the door and around the corner, and the sound of footsteps and voices died as if the men of Hermit bend had turned to stone. Amazement held them thus while Hardy and the girl leaped down into the creek's dry channel.

Hardy saw the horses at once. Lifting Maude, he tossed her astride her black, jerked the tied reins loose, and his mount

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

was running as he swung aboard, while yells, oaths, shots rang behind them.

They came to a jam of brush in the creek but turned their horses to the right and leaped up out of the channel. Not far distant, mounted men sweeping forward, other men yelling to these, "Jail break! Yonder they go!"

Hardy's teeth gleamed in a brief smile. "Which way, Maude?"

"East, to our left. Lots of brush. Lots of gullies. We'll throw them off!"

Three hours later, they were resting their horses a-top a forested ridge which offered both concealment and a view of the nearby surrounding country; country which Hardy had found to be rough, jumbled hills apparently still uninhabited.

Eluding the man hunters hadn't been easy, and though Maude refused to admit it, Hardy realized that she was very tired. Making use of her rain coat as a pillow, he insisted that she rest against a fallen log while he took sentry duty upon himself.

Time dragged as they waited, but at long last the sun went down, its rainbow hues gradually fading until full darkness blotted out the rugged mountains. Night had come to cloak their movements with its secrecy.

Maude came close to the cowboy and her voice was plaintive as she said. "I've done what I could today, Jim. I can't help you again and now—good-by."

He felt his nerves touched as if by wild fire. She stood so near him, her head tipped back, her great luminous eyes seeking his, her hands held down rigidly at her sides as if—as if she feared to lift them. There was a choke in his throat as he asked, "Where will you go?"

"Home," she said sadly. "I don't know what will happen. Somehow I can't think of the future. Or plan for anything."

Something moved his arms, even though he had willed that they should not move. Then he was holding her trembling, precious figure. Holding her tight, with a heady ecstasy

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

running through him uncontrolled. Her arms stole up around his neck. She drew his head down. Their lips met.

"Jim, I love you. Jim! Oh, dear God, help us!"

1

X

AS A USUAL thing Hermit Bend went early to bed, and tonight was no exception. There were only a few dwellings still showing lights when Jim Hardy left his horse in a cluster of cedars and moved warily into the town.

The unshaded window of one neat cottage drew his studied attention, for against the light he saw Wallace Kendrick and a woman and two good-sized children, undoubtedly the banker's family. The tall man himself was pretending to be relaxed and at ease, but Hardy at once realized he was a very disturbed gentleman. The book he was looking at as if he were reading was upside down in his hands.

Remembering how Kendrick had done his best to stop Hermit Bend from taking the law into its own hands, Hardy felt a sense of gratitude toward the banker, and although Kendrick had branded him a killer, the cowpuncher believed he had been honestly mistaken.

Therefore, was it not probable he might obtain this man's help? Reluctantly discarding the idea as involving too great a risk, Hardy went on toward the jail. Surging through him was the exhilaration of great anticipation. In a few minutes he'd see for himself what Crowder had hidden in his safe. If that something proved as valuable as Hardy had reason to believe, he'd have proof, revealed by the sheriff's own handwriting, that Jim Hardy Sr. was not guilty of the murder of Savage Ed Scanlon.

Moving stealthily along an alley, Hardy grimaced as he realized that he had no way of shielding Maude from shocking revelations and he wondered, with sharp fear, if she had put herself in danger by aiding him. Long before this hour

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Permit Bend must have guessed who had saved Hardy's life.

He found some reassurance in the belief that the citizens wouldn't do anything to the girl. But he could find none in the thought that when Clyde Scanlon heard of Maude's act he'd do more than just raise hell about it.

Paused behind the rock jail, Hardy listened. Hearing no suspicious sound, he slipped around to the front, searched the shadows with his eyes, and then moved to the door. He had feared it would be locked, but it gave to his touch. The first major hurdle had been crossed.

The Colt with which Maude had provided him was in his hand and as he entered and for several minutes remained motionless. No sound either in the office or from the cells, and with his eyes accustomed to the darkness, he crouched in front of Crowder's steel safe.

All at once he rocked back on his bootheels; an icy hand seemed to clamp the back of his neck; cold sweat beaded his face. The safe door stood open!

Sudden fury blazed in the cowboy. Someone had already opened the safe! It was probably the man who had dry-gulched Crowder. It was likely he had been present and listening when Sheriff Crowder spoke his last words!

Slowly Hardy stumbled out to the street. The hopelessness of frustration had its way with him. He'd ride to the Slash and persuade Maude to go with him because she had nothing here to hold her, and because she loved him. They'd go far away to find in some new country where they were unknown, the happiness to which they were entitled. They'd run from all this horror and hellishness and—

Suddenly, the stern, rugged face of a rapidly aging man rose all unbidden in Hardy's consciousness. The face of his father as Hardy had last seen it. He seemed to hear the older man's voice, "I'm bankin' on you, son."

But, Dad, Hardy cried out in thought, it's all so hopeless. So damned hopeless now that Crowder is dead, his safe opened!

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

While yet some distance from the Slash J Maude Scanlon lifted her bridle hand. There was lamp light in the house and a man had just stepped out, leaving the door open behind him. In the bright funnel of light Maude saw him clearly, and all the mysterious and wonderful thoughts of a girl who has discovered love were instantly blotted from her mind. The warmth of Hardy's kiss which had lingered on her lips was forgotten.

She hadn't expected to find Clyde Scanlon at the ranch. She didn't want to face him tonight—or ever. But there he was, looking to right and left, stamping back and forth impatiently, with his heavy shoulders hunched and his jaw set at an ugly angle.

"Damn the girl anyhow!" he rapped out. "Is she never coming home?"

On the still night air, the high, thin voice of Aunt K carried to Maude's ears: "Clyde, my dear boy, what's upset you?"

"Upset me? That's putting it mild. Maude's been prowling the range and spying on her brother. Chances are she overheard—What am I saying?"

"You can talk plain to me," said Aunt K. "I know something . . . I know plenty."

"One of the men sighted her a few days back, but the fool didn't tell me until today! After we'd got word Maude is siding Hardy."

Aunt K asked a question which Maude did not hear, but unrestrained fury continued to lift Clyde's voice much higher than he probably realized.

"The young Hardy, I mean. Not the old man. I wouldn't believe it till Alec Jensen sent us the news from Hermit Bend. Maude took Hardy out of jail and out of town before a hangman's noose got around his neck. Tried to disguise herself, but that was a flop."

"Siding Hardy!" cried Aunt K. Now her voice too was more than high and excited. It was vengeful as well. "That settles it! I've been hunting an excuse to break my word to Savage Ed, and now—now Maude's forfeited all right to that money. She's got no right to any part of Slash J anyhow."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"What you mean by that, K?" Clyde demanded. But to Maude's disappointment, he did not wait for an answer. "Money! What money?" he shouted, wheeling back into the house, and slamming the door.

Minutes later, after tying her horse out of sight in the willows Maude stole to the window at the rear of the living room. She saw the wizened old woman seated in Savage Ed's favorite chair near the table upon which stood the big reading lamp. Her face flushed, her eyes held a strange glitter and she was rocking back and forth violently. In front of her stood Clyde, his rock-hard face tense with expectancy.

"Wheeo!" he whistled. "So *that's* the something you know? You say Savage Ed made you promise never to mention it to anybody except Maude?"

"That's what I said," returned the woman. "I wouldn't go back on that promise only now I got reason to, and I hate her. How I hate her!"

"Cut it," snapped Clyde. "You're working yourself up so you'll have a fit if—"

"I used to like Maude when she was little and cute. But I've hated her since when you get in bad trouble, for you were always my favorite. Savage Ed stood by you, Clyde, but Maude just up and left Slash J when you came home. Now she's here again I've been tormentin' her and getting joy out of it. I ain't crazy. Anyhow, not very crazy."

"The hell with all that. You mentioned money!"

"So I did, Clyde." The witch-like old woman leaned forward. "It was after Savage Ed and you came home from Montana that time he got you out of trouble. He asked me to tell Maude when he was dead and when the Slash J was lost and when you were gone far away, about this money he'd left for her. For her!" Aunt K's laughter was weirdly hysterical.

Seizing the old crone's shoulders, Clyde shook her violently. "Where is it?" he demanded.

Severe coughing racked Aunt K, and for moments it seemed as if she would faint. With an effort she rallied, threw back

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

her head and gasped, "Under flat rock near rose bush west side of house. And I know something else, I do."

Clyde wasn't listening. Maude saw his nostrils twitching like the nostrils of an animal scenting blood, as he bounded out of the room.

Aunt K got up, gripped the edge of the table to steady herself and stumbled on into her bedroom.

By this time Maude, recovering somewhat from her bewilderment, had decided upon what she must do—get the chore man, Ed Willoby to help her. If there was money on the ranch, it must go toward paying Slash J debts. But if Clyde Scanlon got it . . .

Stealing quickly around the east end of the house, Maude drifted like a shadow to the dark bunkhouse. The door was open. She went in, closed the door behind her and called in a whisper, "Ed! Ed Willoby! Wake up."

Only silence answered. Again she called softly, not daring to raise a light. Willoby was old and puttering and slow, no hand to depend upon in such a crisis as this, but Maude stood in such mortal terror of Clyde Scanlon she simply could not confront him alone.

When there was still no reply, she groped around the big room, running her hands over each bunk until she stood again by the door, frustrated. Ed Willoby wasn't here.

Maude ran back to the house around its east end, and then along the north wall to the corner. Halted, she dimly saw Clyde down on his knees, frantically digging with his hands. Soon he was tugging at some object much as a robin tugs at an angleworm when pulling it up out of the ground.

Succeeding in this, he crouched again. Maude distinctly heard the clink of metal, followed by Clyde's excitement-ridden ejaculation, "Double eagles! And a hell of a lot of 'em."

He shoved a hand into his right pocket, straightened in the attitude of one listening intently, no doubt deciding on his next move.

Maude, scarcely breathing, thought, I hope—how I hope the loot's too heavy for him to lug! Anyhow, he's not the kind to cut in any of his pals on this haul.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

She let her breath escape as Clyde put the container back into the hole, covered it with the flat rock and smoothed the earth. Apparently satisfied, he went to the front door. Maude, returning to her window, heard him call, "Aunt K, I got too much to do to hang around here any longer. Got to hike back to the roundup. You won't open your trap about this to anybody?"

The old woman had returned to her rocking chair where she was sitting stiffly, her head tipped grotesquely to one side. The rocker was still for once, and so was she. Very still. Her hands in her lap held an envelope. But this Clyde did not notice as he bent across the table to look closely at the silent woman.

Clyde's heavy face whitened. He started back with a gasp, "She's dead!" A moment later he recovered his cold-blooded arrogance and said complacently, "Well, she hung on just long enough!" He went out and closed the door behind him.

Numbed by all she had heard and witnessed, Maude heard Clyde lead his horse from the stable. But not until all sound of the horse's hoofbeats had faded did she give herself a mental shake and enter the house by the kitchen door.

An hour ago she had been weak with hunger. Now she was just deathly tired and faint and shocked. But with death in the house she couldn't fall into bed and sleep. Too long she had delayed in taking action against Clyde and his cohorts—delayed because until earlier today, she had hoped against hope that he wasn't what she now knew him to be.

Mechanically she had started a fire in the wood range and put on kettle and coffee pot when she recalled that her saddle was still in Hermit Bend and that her horse was tied in the willows without feed. She went and got the black, stalled it and fed it hay. Then, by lantern light, she prowled the barn to see if Ed Willoby were there. She feared she might find him dead, too like Aunt K. It was a relief to note that Ed's horse and saddle were gone, indicating that he had merely ridden off somewhere.

Once more at the house she nerved herself for the ordeal of carrying Aunt K's body—it was very light—into the old

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

woman's bedroom and covering it with a sheet. Maude wasn't going to cry. No! But it was through a mist of tears she saw on the living room rug the envelope dropped from Aunt K's lifeless hands, and picked it up to take with her to the kitchen.

The warmed-over coffee was ready. She got bread and cold meat and sat down. While she ate the food, not tasting it at all, she opened the unmarked envelope to find in it a bulky letter, written in Savage Ed Scanlon's well-known hand.

My darling Maude,

I am just back from Montana, and I have decided that the only way I can protect you from want when I am gone is to put aside for you alone twenty thousand dollars of the cash I now have. Aunt K will give you this letter at the proper time and tell you where to find the money.

I raised this cash, and a good deal more, by mortgaging to Wallace Kendrick three times as many cattle as I owned.

Maude stopped reading and gazed into space. The last prop in her firm belief of Savage Ed's honesty had been shattered. She nibbled bread and tough meat, washed it down with black coffee and went on with the letter.

At that time, I had a chance to buy seven thousand cattle at a price which would have made Slash J rich. So rich I could have repaid the big loan within two years, and still have, free of debt, a strong, prosperous outfit—to leave to my kids.

But before I could close that cattle deal, I had to rush to Montana to get Clyde out of trouble. Before I got home the chance was gone—and Clyde had cost me thirty thousand dollars!

If I can hang on, for ten years longer, I'll clear up all indebtedness. If on the other hand, I die within the next two or three years, I'll be obliged to leave Slash J bur-

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

dened with debt. But I don't think Kendrick will lose a dime if he is obliged to foreclose. So by all means, hold tight to the cash I have tucked away for you, my dear. In you I see your mother all over again and I love you more than I love my son. Considering what Clyde really is, I thank God that—

To Maude's ears came the definite sound of hoof beats entering the dooryard. She sprang to her feet with a hand at her throat to control the leap of her heart. Had Clyde come back? Swiftly she folded the letter, shoved it and envelope deep into a pocket of her overalls and sped out the back door. But the voice she heard quieted her fear.

"Hi, K! I'm back. Can I come in?"

Ed Willoby's voice! Maude hurried to the front door and opened it. "Come in Ed. I'm terribly glad to see you."

This was no understatement, for Maude had known the doddering old ranch hand for all of her life. Sometimes she looked upon him as if he were her grandfather. Beyond Ed, now at the door, were two horses, one carrying a pack on top of which was lashed a saddle.

"Goes double, Maude," the man said, "seein' as you're home for a change."

"Home for a change," Maude repeated, and her laugh was a bit hysterical.

"Where's K?" Ed turned back to the two horses. "Tell her I got some grub and them gew-gaws she wanted from town, too."

"How come you went to town, Ed?" Maude asked. "And where'd you get money for grub?"

"Twas this way. Clyde showed up, said he expected you, Maude, and he'd wait for a spell. I up and told him you women was livin' on beef or venison and he had order get some store grub for you. And do you know, Clyde s'prised me."

"Yes?" she said eagerly.

"Somethin' was eatin' on Clyde. Mad as badger headed off from its hole, he was, but he forked over twenty bucks

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

and told me, 'Take a pack horse, go to town, get what you need most—and be sure to bring back Maude's saddle, blanket and so on from the livery stable. Hustle, too,' he said, so I hustled and I brung your saddle, Maude."

Ed dropped the saddle on the ground and loaded his arms with packages. "You see Clyde? He's gone back to the roundup a'ready?"

Maude didn't answer. Ed carried the packages on into the kitchen and returned. "Skullcap Porter acted the funniest and asked the darnedest crazy questions when I asked him for your saddle, Maude. But he let me have it, 'course . . . Where's K?"

"I dread telling you, Ed, but I must. Aunt K is dead. In there," pointing to the bedroom door.

The wizened old hand flinched, but he stepped into K's bedroom and lighted a match. When he came out, he closed the door very softly behind him. "K's gone all right. Hits me pretty hard. . . . Used to be a real swell, nice woman. After she turned queer, I still got along with her and still liked her."

When Maude, choked up and unable to speak, merely nodded, the man said, "Reckon I'll take care of the horses . . . Clyde hiked out, uh?"

"Yes . . . Ed, it's up to you and me to notify the coroner and a doctor and try to give Aunt K a decent funeral. Would you, could you take care of—?"

"I sure 'nuff will, Maude, and anything else you want me to do."

Tears flooded the girl's eyes. "Yes, there is something more, Ed. I'm going away because I never want to see Clyde again."

"I'd be a blind chump if I didn't know he's pretty near the devil hisself, so I'll help you get clear of him."

"Thank you, Ed. I want to put a few things on your pack horse, bedding, food, my war sack—" *Should she tell him about the money? She must because she could not get the heavy gold packed on the horse without Ed's seeing it.*

She continued, "And also a sum of money I've just found out that Savage Ed left hidden for me."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"Good for ol' Savage Ed! One of the best things he ever done. . . . Let's get you ready to hit the trail."

"We must hurry, for Clyde may come back."

Maude hardly thought Clyde would return to Slash J. But, mounted on her own pony, leading the pack horse, the girl was only a half mile on her way toward Hermit Bend, when a mounted man with a gun in his hand materialized ahead of her and another man closed in behind her. Flight was out of the question.

Maude stopped and said as steadily as icy chills would permit, "Now who're you and what do you want?"

"Hal! Don't you *recognize* your kind, loving brother, Maude? I missed you earlier at the ranch. But I think so much of my dear sis that I decided to come back to take you along on the pleasure trip I have planned."

The smell of whisky told the girl that Clyde was drunk. "How lovely," she said. "What is this pleasure trip?"

"Is it there, Rankin?" Clyde asked the man who had come up behind Maude and who had been poking into the pack of the led horse.

"Sure is! Stout canvas sacks, crammed with gold coins, Clyde. . . . Say-hey, you figured right—like you 'most always do—that she sneaked into the ranch when you was there and seen you, and that she'd try to take this dough to Hermit Bend."

Still using the same mocking voice, Clyde resumed, "Now you see, dear sis, that my trip to Slash J paid off big, just as Rankin's trip to Hermit Bend—he has only just come back to join me—paid off big. Did it, oh man! He brought a bottle back with him, too!"

"You mean," the girl managed to say, "that Itchy-finger Rankin found Jim Hardy and killed him?"

Clyde hesitated, but Rankin said, thick-tongued, "No such luck. But I'm an expert at opening safes, and I got what Clyde sent me to get out of Sheriff Crowder's strong box. Yep."

Instantly Maude felt tremendously relieved. Hardy was still alive. "What was it?" she inquired practically.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"Itchy-finger, you talk too much," Clyde said. "But, Maude, I'm feeling so cocky I'll let you know that what Rankin did tonight spiked Jim Hardy's last gun. Plumb. That foxy cuss'll never be able to prove that his dad didn't murder Savage Ed. . . . Of course Crowder and I've known all the time that the Savage Ed-Dad Hardy ruckus ended in a fair fight. Savage Ed drew first, fired first. But Crowder's dead, and I'll never tell the truth about it. Never."

"You have just told me the truth," Maude pointed out.

Clyde shrugged his heavy shoulders. "So what? Let me have your pistol before you nerve yourself to try to use it."

Maude's right hand flashed to her holster, but Clyde grabbed her wrist, the grip of his fingers numbing her hand. A moment later, he had the gun and was saying, "Now your teeth are pulled, I'll lead your horse, Rankin will tag along behind and we'll begin the pleasure trip, sis."

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Clyde."

"No? I may need your help to sell the Slash J cattle—over two thousand head, not counting calves—and the 7 H herd of three hundred-odd critters. We should get sixty-nine thousand dollars cash. That'll leave me a wad after paying the men."

Maude felt her head swimming. She had suspected ever since coming home for Savage Ed's funeral, that Clyde would try to swindle both her and Wallace Kendrick. But he hadn't realized it would be possible for him to sell the cattle.

She said bitingly, "Leave *you* a wad? What about Kendrick and me?"

"String along with me, sis, and you won't be left holding the sack, and Kendrick can take over the Slash J ranch, damn him."

"Clyde you can't sell Dad Hardy's 7 H herd!"

"A bill of sale signed presumably by Dad Hardy will easily take care of that."

"You think of everything, so I suppose you've taken care that neither Rocky Bill or the Four Bars rep will upset your plans?"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Maude shivered, thinking of what had probably happened to both men, and Clyde's smug expression as seen in the starlight seemed to confirm her great fear.

"I hadn't overlooked those cowpunchers," he said. "Nor others who might get troublesome. Only this morning, Jensen, having told Kendrick he might buy some Slash J cattle, was bringing the banker to the roundup. They didn't get there, so now Jensen has told Kendrick he's no longer a buyer, and Kendrick'll have no reason to come to where the roundup was camped—and get wise to my play. We're satisfied that Farway Fred has lit a shuck, and none of my men have cut sign on old Dad Hardy, so we reckon he's skeedaddled, too. Anyhow, what could he do? Nothing. More questions, sis?"

"Yes. Why are you taking me with you?"

"I may need your signature as co-owner on the bill of sale for the Slash J herd. But the main reasons are that it's probable that you know for sure who robbed the train at Rough Edge, and might be believed if you were to squeal and also"—the man's voice changed and he almost snarled—"that you've meddled too damned much, and when you jerked Hardy out of the lynching mob at Hermit Bend you laid yourself open to mighty rough treatment from your brother. . . . Let's ride!"

XI

THE BRIGHT stars of night still held watch over the rough, wooded land when Jim Hardy rode up to the top of bald knob which stood about one mile west of where the Slash J roundup camp had been yesterday morning.

Skillet Sam had told Hardy that he reckoned it would be the last camp site; that yesterday's circle—which Hardy had missed completely—would end the roundup. And about time, Hardy had thought, considering that the day herd had grown to over two thousand cattle, not counting calves, and

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

now kept so many of the punchers busy that few were free to gather more cattle.

Neither Rocky Bill nor Hardy nor Bob Funkhouser could figure out why Clyde Scanlon had not from time to time sent the stock home to the Slash J. Clyde had stubbornly refused to let Rocky and Hardy cut the 7 H animals out and trail them to the 7 H ranch.

In addition to his other problems, deep worry as to Rocky Bill's fate had been with Hardy for all of his night ride southward from Hermit Bend. His bareback mount was the same horse with which Maude had provided him. It had done surprisingly well by the fugitive yesterday, but now was footsore and jaded. He had five live cartridges for the six-shooter which Maude had also supplied but no extras. But he still had the hope of getting efficient help!

Along his back trail he had picked up a small pole about twelve feet in length, and now, a-top the knob, he stripped off his shirt, and tied it to one end of the pole. He then built up a small mound of rocks with the pole erect in the center of it.

Farway had said he'd be spyglassing round about. But would he see this flag? Clyde and his men had been trying to cut sign on the outlaw, but it seemed as if he had left this range.

Hardy grimaced, thinking, I still don't like to ask for outlaw help. Yet how I hope Farway'll show up. Mighty soon! Now to leave a message for the damned likeable scoundrel.

He'd been searched yesterday. He had no money, not even a pocket knife; not a scrap of paper or a pencil. He tore loose one of his overall pockets and by pressing the bullet nose of a cartridge hard against the material he wrote, *On dodge.*

Hardy put the message on top of the rock pile and weighted it down with a stone. Will Farway find this? If he does, will he have his gang? If alone, what can he do? Wonder how Maude's making out? Best not to think of her now.

He jumped onto his horse and rode toward where the roundup camp had been. Why don't I hear cattle bawling?

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

he wondered. If the camp and cattle have been moved, Clyde'd still figure you'll come here and set an ambush for you!

Watching and listening, Hardy rode into a heavy growth of cedars on a low hill which overlooked yesterday's roundup camp site. To eastward, the jagged mountain skyline flamed orange and mauve with the glory of the rising sun. Mists hovered above deep canyons, and at last daylight was driving darkness from the lower hills and valleys.

Hardy slid off his mount and looked out from his sanctuary into the big valley which yesterday had been alive with cattle. He blinked sleep-hungry eyes and looked again. No horses, no cattle in sight, no chuck wagon, no men. Crows, magpies, camp robbers, and one lone coyote were investigating the spot where Skillet Sam's chuck wagon had stood. No scrap of food would be left for Jim Hardy.

Maybe Clyde let Rocky take home our 7 H cattle, he told himself. Dad's ranch is only four miles west of here, so, I'll check on it.

A whisper of sound startled him. It was no louder than the scrape of a man's coat against branches, but it brought Hardy sharply around on his boot heels, with gun in his hand. None too soon!

Looming up like a grizzly bear, arms spread ready to throw around his victim, was Moose. Instantly Hardy leaped back and to the left, avoiding the burly giant's forward lunge. Moose swiftly turned and came back.

"Stop, or I'll kill you!" Hardy barked.

Moose stopped. "Drop gun. Fight with fists," he challenged.

"Nothing doing! If you've got a shootin' iron—use it."

"No iron. You a yella-belly?"

"Darned right I'm yellow, if tangling with you bare-handed makes me so. Why're you here?"

Moose said, "Drop gun."

"Go to—" Hardy began. But, bent low, the giant was ushering at him. Hardy fired and bounded aside. Moose ripped and fell headlong.

Sure he had not killed the man, Hardy waited for his

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

next move. Slowly Moose rolled over, sat up and gawped at blood spurting from his right arm. His wicked eyes grew wide and frightened; his heavy face turned pale.

"Arm busted," he whispered. Then shrieked, "I'll bleed t'death."

"And plenty good 'nuff for you," Hardy snapped, but he was amazed that wounded, and fearing death, Moose had become a frightened, almost pitiful object.

"I doan' want to die. Scairt. You tie up this," he pleaded, holding out his arm which was broken between elbow and wrist.

"If I do," said Hard grimly, "you got to swear you won't try to get me with your left hand."

"Swear not fight you!"

"Tell me all you know about Jensen and Clyde or I'll let you die."

"Dunno much. They not tell me much."

Hardy holstered his gun, got Moose's bandana, and fashioned a tourniquet on the wounded arm, twisting it with a stick tightly to stop the flow of blood.

Trembling and sweating, the man stammered, "Funny. You shoot me, then save my hide."

"Uh-huh. How come you're here?"

"Boss sent me tell Clyde you got away from mob."

Hardy nodded. "Did Clyde go to Hermit Bend early last night to tap Crowder's safe?"

"I don't know."

"You can answer this one," said Hardy bitterly. "Clyde ordered you to lay for me here?"

"No. I ask him let me lay for you. Clyde laughed, said that please him. . . . I think Jensen and Clyde won't like me no more."

"Moose, who's holding the loot from the train robbery at Rough Edge? Jensen? Clyde?"

The big fellow shook his head. "They don't tell me."

"Where has the Slash J roundup outfit gone?"

With his left hand Moose pointed to the mountains. "Far-way Pass to Echo Springs."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Hardy, who had been squatting on boot heels came erect in one supple movement. "Is that the truth?"

"They trailed out at dark."

"What the hell has Clyde hatched up? Moose, you know what happened to Rocky Bill and Bob Funkhouser and Mel Andrews?"

"Mister, I'm awful sick and thirsty. I got horse back in them trees. Grub and can of water on saddle."

"Good enough, Moose. Don't be a softie. You can get up and hike to this horse. Answer my last question."

As the two men walked through the cedars, Moose said over his shoulder, "Wrangler they took 'long. Four Bars rep old some of 'em he was pulling out. Guns was coverin' him fore he could wink. I seen this, heard Spade say, 'We been onto you for a long time, Bob. You're working for the lamned banker, Kendrick, tallying Slash J dogies and now you know too much.'"

Hardy said, "And I never tumbled to that close-mouthed puncher's game. They kill him, Moose?"

"Nopel! Said he might be useful as hostage. He went with outfit, tied."

Hardy dreaded the answer to his next question. "What happened to Rocky Bill?"

"Rocky Bill? Oh, yeah! I 'member some of 'em sayin' Rocky Bill never come back from ridin' circle. They was quirmy 'bout him, told me to kill him if I seen him. Here's my horse."

Hardy felt a sense of triumph. Canny old Rocky Bill had outsmarted Scanlon's toughs! He gave his attention to Moose's mount, a gray Percheron draft horse with a collar mark on its neck. This plug would give Hardy a change of mounts and enable him to overtake the Slash J herd.

A canteen hung from the horn of the old saddle, and behind the saddle was tied a large, slicker-wrapped bundle.

Hardy gave Moose the canteen, hurried to unwrap the bundle feeling suddenly as wild for food as a starving wolf. There were cheese sandwiches, slices of boiled beef, two cans of tomatoes, a butcher knife, a spoon and a badly

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

crushed fruit pie. Other items were an old black sweater, a towel and a clean blue shirt.

Hardy bit into a sandwich, and said, "Grab a feed, Moose."

Moose had gulped some of the water. "Sick. Goin' to lose breakfast." He stretched out on the ground. "Can you tie it up?"

"Why'd you bring along a towel and clean shirt, Moose?"

"Huh? I'd get messy, knockin' hell outa you like I figgered. Towel'd clean me up. I'd put on clean shirt to go back to town. . . . Where's your shirt, Mister Hardy?"

Hardy wolfed another sandwich. "I'll borrow yours, Moose, take your horse, too. Woo-hoo! Wouldn't Jensen and Clyde burn if they knew how sending you to nab me has back-fired!"

Moose lifted his head, alarm in his beady eyes. "Don't take horse. Got to get to doctor."

"You can use the nag I was riding, bareback. Now grit your teeth. I'll tie up your arm."

With the butcher knife, Hardy snipped strings from the old saddle, and made use of the towel for a bandage. "Moose, did Clyde himself ride to the Slash J last evening?"

"Yep. Clyde had sent Itchy-finger Rankin to town, and Itchy was to meet up with Clyde at Slash J."

"What the hell? Moose, did you see Clyde and Rankin come back from Slash J? To trail after the herd?"

"Yep. I was layin' for you, awake, and I seen three riders before midnight going toward Farway Pass."

"The three were—?"

"Mister Hardy, you sure look funny, act funny. . . . I seen 'em good. Three riders, one pack horse. Clyde ahead, Itchy-finger behind, Clyde's sister between 'em, and Clyde leadin' her horse. Hey what hit you so danged hard?"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

XII

"WHOA UP, Jim! An' don't shoot. This is Rocky!"

Jim Hardy, riding up the canyon trail which led to Farway Pass, reined in the big grey Percheron, which was now his mount, and sang out, "Show yourself!"

As Rocky's gangling figure emerged from the concealment of willows and underbrush at Hardy's left, he added, "I've never in my life been so all-fired glad to see a friend. But what's this? You on foot and gunless?"

"You called the turn," said Rocky Bill, running his squint-eyed gaze over the younger man and his strange mount. "Now where'd you glom onto that elephant you're settin' on? And the shirt you're wearin'. On you, it looks like a tent. Anyhow you got a bundle behind your saddle. Grub by any chance?"

"Yes, Rocky. But are we safe here from Clyde's gunhawks?"

The old hand shrugged. "They give up huntin' me quite a while ago. Mostly 'cause none can be spared from the cattle drive. Howsoever, we'll be safer up on the ridge. Give me a lift 'cause I'm that danged footsore and leg weary I can't walk."

Rocky untied the bundle and sprang up on the Percheron's broad rump. "Sure glad you got a strong mount. How come, Jim?"

"Sandwiches in the package. Open it, and chew as we ride," said Hardy.

He pointed the horse up the steep slope at their left to bring them out atop the ridge on the canyon's north side. "We haven't seen each other since yest'day morning, so—"

"First, tell me how you made out with Sheriff Crowder? You got a posse or other help comin'?"

"Holy smoke, Rocky, seems you haven't heard how I didn't make out with Crowder! We'll get no help unless it comes from Farway Fred."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Rocky was eating a sandwich. He mumbled an oath and began, "Yesterday mornin' I could smell trouble, though them tough close-mouths never opened their heads. You and Clyde was already gone when three of 'em ganged up on me and said they wanted my lead-chucker and belt. Since they had them in their fists, I forked over, and they let me ride out on circle. But I hid and kept track of what they was doin'. Clyde came back to camp 'bout noon. Other circle riders showed up later, and toward evenin', a big feller who, from your description, I tagged as Jensen's bouncer, Moose, showed up. Hey—he was forkin' this same elephant you now got!

"What Moose told 'em sparked a lot of excitement, Clyde and his toughs puttin' heads together. I seen 'em stop Bob Funkhouser from ridin' out. They tied him to take 'long with 'em. Same for Andrews. Wagon, cavvy and cattle hit the trail for Farway Pass. Then at last I savvied what was up! Cussed myself, you and Funkhouser 'cause we hadn't tumbled to what that slick son of a gun had in mind all the time of the roundup.

"I had to play a lone hand, so I pointed my horse up the canyon well ahead of the Slash J outfit. 'Course I knew you hadn't come back, but couldn't do a darned thing for you then."

"What was your plan?" Hardy prompted, guiding their mount around fallen timber and making slow progress to the top of the ridge. "That when the herd stopped you'd stampede it back down the canyon?"

"Tha's right, son. My other plan was to flog to Echo Spring, really get help, set a trap for ol' Clyde. . . . Hell's foghorn, Jim, I hate to admit it, but I overlooked how dog-goned smart that Clyde is. He'd sent one of his best killers up Farway Canyon."

Hardy whistled. "Clyde anticipated what you might do to stop his play."

"Ye-ah," said Rocky in a bitter tone. "First I knowed of it, a rifle cracked and my horse dropped so sudden he all but pinned me down. Next three-four bullets—I didn't stop to

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

count 'em—was reachin' right for me. But I was makin' a snake outa myself, glidin' into the brush and rocks and timber. 'Cause the heavy wooded south side of the canyon offered the best cover. That's where I went. . . . At full dark the killer gave up the hunt and joined the herd.

"Well, Jim, bein' afoot and gunless and no good at walkin' I figured only thing I could do was come back down the canyon, hope to meet you and hope you'd have help. Now the two of us is together, what's our next move?"

At a vantage point on the ridge Hardy reined up and looked down country, his eyes searching for the flag he had erected on the bald knob. He just could make it out, but to his disappointment no men were in sight there, no men in sight anywhere in the lower country.

"Our next move" he said grimly, "the one that comes ahead of saving the herd or anything else to my notion, is to get Maude Scanlon out of Clyde's camp alive—tonight."

Rocky Bill's hand clamped on Hardy's shoulder, his voice was tight. "You mean to say that—that—I ain't got a name that fits him—has took Maude with him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Maybe a fear she'd upset his plans once again. Or maybe taking out his spite on her because she saved my life. Let's keep riding up along this ridge while I give you an earful about yesterday."

When Hardy had brought his partner up-to-date, Rocky exclaimed, "I'll be a seven-toed goliwog! That story beats any camp fire windy I ever cooked up, but I know it's true. You wouldn't be ridin' today if it hadn't been for the quick thinkin' and plain grit of that fine girl. If only her mother were ivin' how proud she could be of Maude."

"Partner, what's your real stake in this ugly game?" Hardy asked abruptly. He kept the double burdened horse moving long through the scattered timber and rocks on the high ridge; both men looked constantly ahead and to the right and left, hoping thus to spot a bushwhacker before he potted them.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"Chew that finer," Rocky said.

"All right you've risked your neck for us Hardys, and you are as concerned about Maude's predicament as I am."

"Concerned? You danged well said it! Maude's my niece."

"Your—niece?"

"Her mother was my sister. I'm the only one of the family still livin'."

"Rocky, how long had you been out of touch with this sister?"

"I'd have to figure that out, Jim. I left home at thirteen and I never seen her again. Once in a long time I'd get a letter from her. At first I answered 'em. Then, 'cause I wasn't a writin' man and 'cause I was always in some scrape or other—maybe even on the dodge, for I've lived vigorous—I stopped."

"And lost all touch with your sister, eh? Tell me more, Rocky."

"The reproach in your remark is excusable, Jim. 'Course, if I had my life to live over I'd do different. Or would I? Human critters is doggoned contrary, ornery. Take ol' Savage Ed—"

"Stick to the subject!"

"'Bout twenty years ago I finally got another letter from my sister. It had been forwarded and re-forwarded, before it caught up with me, and 'twas plain that Maude—that was her name, too, same as that of the little girl you and me both love—had written others I'd never got. Part of it went like this:

I won't repeat what I've written before when I had hopes you'd give me a lift. But now at last everything has worked out nicely for me. I have married Savage Ed Scanlon. He's a big cowman, owner of the Slash J, near Hermit Bend.

"She asked me to write, asked me to come see her, but—" he shrugged, "I figured she was sittin' pretty and wouldn't want to see an ol' rapsallion like me anyhow."

Hardy frowned thoughtfully, said over his shoulder, "Thanks, Rocky. How'd you happen to horn into this mess?"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"I was roamin' New Mexico, out of a job when it so happened I seen a girl working in a restaurant," Rocky replied. "She hooked my eye 'cause she reminded me of somebody I had ought to know. That evenin' I buttonholed her boss and asked who she was. 'Maude Scanlon.' 'Where from?' says I, somethin' clickin' in my head. 'Hermit Bend,' says he. 'Colorado, I b'lieve. She's lit out for there anyhow, for she got a wire today sayin' her father had been shot.'

"Now you see, Jim, she had lit out a'ready, so I hadn't no chance to talk with her. But if her father'd been shot it looked like her and her ma was in trouble. I felt little and mean, never having helped my sister none, so I came a-hikin'. That's all."

"Not *all*. Rocky," Jim Hardy corrected. "You went about helping your niece in a darned peculiar way."

"Uh-huh. . . . Jim, I ain't lived the rough life I have without philosophizing some. A man ain't never master of circumstances. He figures out some line he's going to follow and then Fate or Luck or maybe Destiny"—Rocky Bill shook his shaggy head—"steps in. All my life, I've seen the workings of whatever 'tis.

"Destiny took a hand when I hit this Slash J neck-of-the-woods. How else was it I stumbled onto your Dad hidin' out from the law and from a bunch of ringy Slash J cow-punchers? I've hid out myself, so he had my sympathy right off the bat—and we got chummy.

"And Jim, I can generally tell when another feller's tellin' the truth. 'Twas a sock under the belt, me learning he was the man who'd shot Scanlon, but his story how and why he done it rang true.

"From him I learned Mrs. Scanlon, my sister, had been a long time dead, and I already knew her daughter had been earnin' her own living away from home. Now why? I asked myself, and guessed there was somethin' plenty rotten about the whole Slash J outfit, 'cept only Maude. So I throwed in with your dad, aiming not only to help him, but also, when I did get the lowdown, to help Maude, too."

When Hardy merely nodded, Rocky went on, "There's

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

times when a man gets too damned mad to cuss. Once, long ago, when I was jus' a kid, I come on a mess of skunk kittens. Nice furry little things, so cute I hadn't the heart to kill 'em. Then come fall, them kittens got under our ranch house and into our chicken coop, and how I wished I'd a-killed 'em!"

"Meaning," said Hardy, fetching a deep breath, "we should have killed Clyde and most of his crew before the roundup ended?"

"Yep!" Rocky growled.

"Should ha' dry-gulched that stinker—even though he's Maude's brother!"

"Now at last, I admit you're right," Hardy gritted. "Rocky, it's been brought home to me how much better a fellow's hindsight is than his foresight. I asked, almost begged Farway Fred, to lay off Clyde until roundup's end, and he yielded. Now, too late, I see it was a mistake."

"Good man to admit a mistake," Rocky said. "If Farway had struck, this hellish situation would not have come about."

Difficult traveling forced the Percheron to a snail's pace, and in spite of his resolution to keep cool Hardy was desperately worried. How long would Maude be allowed to live? Facing the grisly situation honestly, he could see no hope of being able to bring about her rescue, but he found some consolation in knowing that even the hardest of toughs rebels at murdering a woman, any woman.

"How far you suppose the herd'll make before Clyde camps?" he asked Rocky Bill.

"H'mm? That outfit has been on the trail all last night and they'll keep knockin' all day today. But they'll camp t'night 'cause cattle and men'll be wore down to a whisper. And I don't give a yelp how many men a rustler's got, it ain't nowise possible to make any herd with lots of cows and calves in it hit a fast clip. 'Specially in country where it's uphill along a twisting canyon crowded with rocks and fallen timber, and you've got to cross the river again and again. Even so, they'll make a total o' thirty-five miles before t'night. That'll put the herd on the open area right a-top Farway Pass."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Suddenly Hardy stopped the horse and drew his gun. "Come out of that brush, you!"

"Coming!" returned a high, boyish voice.

Mel Andrews, bedraggled, dirty, and plainly almost all in, stepped out of the bushes. "I was hidin'," he said, "cause I had to be sure who you was 'fore I showed myself. Clyde, or any of his pets'd shoot me. Gosh, I'm tickled to see you fellers!"

"Goes double, son," agreed Rocky Bill. "Give us what you know. But fast."

Mel Andrews' eyes sparkled and weariness dropped from him. "I sure can give you an earful. Clyde and his gun hawks is goin' to get set back on their haunches t'night. . . . Got anything to eat? I rocked a snow-shoe rabbit, and 'et it raw, but I'm awful hungry again."

"What about Maude?" Hardy asked impatiently.

"Should I know somethin' about her?" returned the wrangler, and went on. "Jim, I've met up with your Dad. Uh-huh, with old man Hardy!"

"Twas still night when somebody afoot was alongside me. In the canyon it was, me being tied on a horse that Grouchy Dave, poundin' the drags along, was leadin'. This somebody cut me loose quick and picked me off the horse and lugged me into the willows alongside the trail. Then we climbed up the slope out of the canyon and at last he told me who he was."

"Rocky and I have been wondering where Dad might be," Hardy exclaimed. "Where's he now?"

"Jim, your Dad said for me to find you and Rocky Bill and tell you he'll stampede the herd t'night. If the outfit pitches camp behind the cattle, as he figures likely, he'll head the stampede back down the canyon trail right over their camp!"

"Right over their camp!" said Hardy in a strange voice, from a throat suddenly tight. "Mel, didn't Dad know Maude was with 'em? That she's almost certain to be in that camp?"

The wrangler's face fell. He looked at stony-faced Rocky Bill and back again to Hardy. "Wh-why, you fellers are

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

scairt stiff. Maude with Clyde? I didn't know it, and Dad Hardy couldn't have neither or he'd have said so."

Hardy said tensely, "Slide off, Rocky. Let this horse rest and graze while we make talk." He dismounted. "Any chance I can find my Dad, Mel?"

"Although he was afoot, he was going to hike out and get plumb ahead of the cattle, and keep track of 'em from a safe distance. Still, even if you can get ahead of the herd, how can you find him?"

"I've got to try to do it. Got to do it!" Hardy replied.

Rocky Bill said practically, "Mel, here's a couple of sandwiches and a can of tomatoes." He opened the can with his jack knife. "Set and gobble while us men chew the fat. . . . What 'bout Funkhouser? Did Dad Hardy get him free, too?"

"Termaters! Oh, boy! Thanks for the grub, Rocky. . . . Funkhouser? I was so excited I forgot to tell Dad Hardy how Bob was tied on a horse, like me. Your dad didn't mention him neither."

Hardy had climbed up onto the highest point in the vicinity and was staring bleakly down country. He returned to Mel, Rocky and the horse which was grazing unconcernedly. "I can't see my flag signal from here," he reported. "Nor any dust banner to show that Farway is coming. . . . Mel, can you walk several miles?"

"What was that 'bout Farway? Yes, Jim, I never was twice as leg-weary, but I can keep hikin', you bet."

"Good! Here's what I want you to do—take the back trail, keeping as much as you can to cover, in case Clyde does have a killer looking for you and Rocky and me."

Mel choked on a swallow of tomato juice and gulped, "Me go alone? I'm scairt. I don't want to leave you fellers."

"But you must," clicked Hardy, and gave the boy directions for finding the bald knob and the shirt flag.

"Wait there in the hope that Farway Fred and his men will come."

The boy wrangler's woe-begone expression vanished. He cried excitedly, "You think Farway'll come to that flag? I'll get to meet him and talk to him?"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

In spite of the bitterness of his thoughts Hardy chuckled. "That's what we hope, Mel. If Farway shows up, you tell him all about this situation. Be sure to warn him that the herd may be stampeded tonight so he won't get trapped ahead of it down in the canyon. Tell Farway, Rocky and I are going to do our darnedest to find Dad Hardy, stop him from spooking the herd, and try to get Maude and Funkhouser out of Clyde Scanlon's camp. Tell Farway to use his own judgment. Got it, Mel?"

"I sure have, Jim! Do I want to meet that outlaw! Uh—gosh. How'll I keep alive if Farway don't come with nothin' to eat?"

"If he doesn't come by tomorrow morning, tighten your belt and hike to Hermit Bend. That's all the advice I can give you."

Rocky Bill added with a grin, "A boy who can down a raw rabbit ain't goin' to starve. Luck, Mel. Get a'goin'. We're stickin' together, Jim, you and me?"

"Yes, and we're thankful we've got a horse that can carry double!"

XIII

DARKNESS had fallen before Hardy and Rocky Bill reached the crest of Farway Range. Except for a vast open area, south and east of where the two men now found themselves, the mountains were forested with Engelmann spruce. Overhead the bright stars seemed close enough to grasp. The chill of high country air nipped through the men's inadequate clothing and they also, like the gallant horse, were bone-weary and half-starved. But the bawling of cattle assured them that the big herd was being held for the night in the open area.

Hardy slid off the Percheron and Rocky Bill slipped into the saddle. "The old man is sure to be on the far side of the

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

cattle," he said. "He'll recognize my figure, and maybeso I'll get in touch with him."

"No 'maybeso' 'bout it. You've got to find him," Hardy emphasized. "Take our one gun," handing Rocky the Colt. "Remember, only four shells in it. I'll scout the camp, get Maude out of it."

"That you jus' must do," Rocky stated. "But don't forget ol' Skillet Sam and Funkhouser." He held out his hand. "Shake, Jim."

Their hands met; then Hardy walked southward. Soon he saw the cheerful, beckoning light of a camp fire, and, etched by the firelight, the Slash J chuck wagon.

Keeping to the cover of trees, Hardy looked for a sentry posted on this north side of the camp. Apparently there was none, even though Clyde must have known that both Rocky Bill and Mel Andrews had escaped. As for fearing Jim Hardy, it was probable that Clyde believed Moose would have taken care of him.

The land sloped sharply toward the entrance of Farway Canyon, out of which the cattle had come. If stampeded, this was the trail they would instinctively take—back to their native range—and the animals would certainly run over the camp site.

Like a cat stealing up on its prey, Hardy moved in on the camp, and as he drew nearer, relief, shot through with fear, gripped him, for Maude was there! He paused beside a huge rock pile which he examined with care, for it might prove his one and only hope of saving Maude's life.

This certainly could not be done while she was sitting close to the fire with four Slash J men grouped about it, eating supper, Skillet Sam doing the cooking. Bed rolls lay near the fire. Others were spread out for use at no great distance from it.

Hardy lay flat, body hugging the earth and waited. If only he had a half-dozen good men with him. If only he were heeled. On the brighter side, however, he still held hope that Farway Fred, with some good fighting men, would show up in time to help.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

He had by this time identified the punchers near the fire. Clyde Scanlon, Itchy-finger Rankin, and two of the three men Clyde had brought back from his earlier trip to Echo Springs. One was known only as "Bucktooth." The other could possibly be using his right name, Abner Jones.

Where was Bob Funkhouser? Hardy's searching eyes failed to find him, but did locate four saddled horses, tied at the edge of a cluster of spruces south of the camp proper. Still farther to the south, and thus up along the small stream which rippled past the camp site, was the grazing cavvy. Eastward, a quarter mile or more was the great mass of cattle. Tired though the animals must be, they were noisy, restless, ornery, keeping the night herders busy.

The good smells of coffee, Dutch oven biscuits and sizzling steaks were delightful, yet to Hardy with no chance of satisfying his gnawing hunger, it was torture as well. But surely three of the four men would soon ride out to relive the night herders. He writhed with impatience when they finally put their dishes into the cook's "wrecking pan," then sat, smoking cigarettes in weary contentment. This, when at any minute—unless Rocky had found Dad Hardy—the herd might be spooked.

In desperation, Hardy thought, *I'll get to those saddled horses and start something.*

Circling to the right, crawling on hands and knees in the hope he'd not be seen by the Slash J men, Hardy reached the spruce cluster. Here, to his astonishment, he found Bob Funkhouser seated against a tree, his body snubbed to the tree.

"I'd decided they'd beefed you," Hardy whispered, drawing from his boot top the butcher knife he had taken from Moose. Soon Funkhouser was flexing his arms and legs to get circulation and feeling into them, while he and Hardy whispered to each other.

"Thanks, Hardy. You've got helpers?"

"Only Rocky Bill. He's hunting Dad Hardy, far side the herd. We know my dad aims to spook this herd."

Funkhouser pulled in a deep breath. "All to the good—if

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

the girl and Skillet Sam weren't in the camp. You got a gun for me?"

"No. Not even for myself. How come Sam's still alive?"

"I happen to know he was caught between a rock and a cliff. He could drive the wagon and go on cooking, or be left behind for buzzard feed."

Hardy moved up to the tied horses and ran his hands over the saddles. He found slickers and ropes but no firearms. He appropriated one lariat and returned to Funkhouser.

"Bob, can we fork horses, rope the four men at the fire, put 'em out of commission?"

"Suicide," Funkhouser said tersely. "You must be plumb desperate. . . . So as not to alarm those toughs at the fire, I'll take out on foot, get one of my own ponies out of the cavy and help Rocky find Dad Hardy. Meanwhile, you hold a tight rein, wait for a break to get Maude and Sam out of danger. . . . Or have you a better idea?"

"No. Get moving, Bob. Luck."

Funkhouser vanished. Hardy again circled to get back to the best spot he could find for spying and for action—if the stampede did break loose.

A few moments later the Slash J puncher known as Skinny Smith rode up into the circle of firelight. "Bad news, Clyde," he said. "Funkhouser's done got away!"

Clyde came to his feet as if from a firecracker exploding. "What the hell! I'm fed up with the stupidity and inefficiency of some of you knotheads. First, Rocky Bill gets plumb away from a killer who should have shot him before he shot the horse. Next, that kid wrangler gives the man guardin' him the slip! Now Funkhouser's busted his hobbles! How'd it happen?"

"I dunno, boss. Jus' now, as I rid to camp, I seen he was gone. . . . 'Course he can't get a smoke stick."

"Maybe not, but that husky bird can steal a horse, flag his kite to Echo Springs, get lawman help! Damn it, he's got to be nabbed or shot. Bucktooth, Jones, fork your brones, find Funkhouser. . . . What you waitin' for? Get goin'!"

To Hardy's joy—he had hoped the toughs might get into

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

a fight among themselves—Abner Jones retorted belligerently, "Hold your horses, Clyde! Me and Bucktooth and Scar Dolan ain't plumb satisfied you're goin' to give us a square deal."

"Of all the raw gall," Clyde barked. "Well, speak your piece."

Hardy saw Skillet Sam, a pot lifter in his hand, stand as if frozen. Maude was suddenly sitting upright, hat pushed back from her face. Skinny Smith moved his horse out of the camp and dismounted, saying, "I'm grabbin' a bite to eat . . . Them fellers on herd are howlin' for you to relieve 'em, Clyde."

"Shut up, Skinny!" Clyde snapped. "Jones, what you and Bucktooth and Scar Dolan got to beef about?"

"Plenty," said Abner Jones defiantly. "We've heard whippers among your hands who was on the job before we was. Seems there's a big wad of train robbery loot to be split among them old hands and you. You figurin' to shortchange Bucktooth, Dolan and me—right?"

"Not right," said Clyde. "Was keepin' the news for a s'prise. You three'll get yours. But pay-off time won't come until I get the cash for all of these cattle safe in my pockets. Any more questions, Jones?"

"Uh-huh," Jones said. "Where at is the train robbery swag?"

Jim Hardy keened his ears. This was something he would like very much to know.

"D'you take me for a damned fool?" Clyde said with a dry humorless laugh. "None of my old hands, not even Spade Adams, know where that's hidden."

"They figure you brought it with you on your ride to Echo Springs a while back and cached it on this Farway Pass. . . . You ain't dug it up yet, that's sure."

"Now I wonder which of my men are running off at the mouth too damned much?" Clyde replied with deceptive mildness. "Jones, trust me to produce the jack when the sign's right. Satisfied?"

"Partly, Clyde. Only partly."

"Only partly satisfied, huh?" Clyde was stalking back and

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

forth, hands fisted. "I couldn't get cattle buyers to come to Slash J ranch and buy the herd. Damn 'em they insisted the cattle be delivered to the railroad at Echo Springs, I had to agree. But a cash buyer will be there to meet us, and I'll rake in about seventy thousand bucks. Every man working for me'll get a liberal cut."

"Maybe not," spoke Jones softly. "You might double-cross Dolan and Bucktooth and me, same like you double-crossed Sheriff Crowder."

Clyde whirled around and crouched as if to draw his gun. "Get this, Jones—Crowder was trying to blackmail me. I admit he was useful. He tipped us off to the right time and right place to make a haul by robbing the train, and then had the gall to demand a bigger cut than I'd stand for."

Jones asked the question which was on Hardy's tongue. "How could he blackmail you?"

"He threatened to tell the truth about Savage Ed's attempt to frame young Jim Hardy's father. Also, to knock the props from under that murder charge against old man Hardy unless I paid through the nose."

"But how, Clyde? How?" Jones demanded.

Hardy looked at Maude. The girl was bending forward, eagerly listening to disclosures which Clyde, very certain he had nothing more to fear from her, was making to placate three men whom he badly needed.

"That damned crooked lawman witnessed the fight between Savage Ed and old man Hardy. Later, Crowder moved in, twisted Savage Ed's gun from his fingers—it had been fired three times—and then reported that Savage Ed was bushwhacked by Hardy in cold blood."

"Crowder was trying to bluff you," Jones commented.

"Bluffing or not, I had to cook his goose. When I sent him word to visit the roundup I'd decided to kill two birds with one stone: I'd frame Jim Hardy for the bush-whacking of well-liked, respected Sheriff Crowder. Smart, I figured."

"You needed a lot of luck on your side though," Jones said thoughtfully.

"Luck was with me! By sticking 'round after I fired the

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

hot, I heard Crowder tell Hardy there was something in his afe that'd clear Dad Hardy and send me and the boys over he road. So, I had Rankin get to the John Law's strong box first, and that spiked Crowder's last gun!"

"Plenty smart, Clyde," commented Jones, turning away. Us three fellers'll string right along with you till the big payoff."

"Fair enough," said Clyde. "Now straddle your horses and circle 'round the camp. Keep at it and shoot anything that moves."

Skinny Smith kept on with his supper, but Jones, Bucktooth and Rankin went to their horses.

Hardy was keenly alive to the danger which now menaced him. There was no cover for him nearer than the rock pile he had noticed, and in circling that huge rock they'd be sure to find him. One of several spread-out tarp-covered beds yonder offered a hiding place. A desperate hope, but the only one.

Like a combination snake and squirrel, Hardy wriggled across the ground, coming dangerously near to the circle of firelight as he approached the beds and crawled under the first one.

XIV

SAFELY HIDDEN Hardy had not long to wait until the thing he most dreaded happened.

A noise that sounded like an Indian's war-whoop was followed by a fusillade of shots that ripped the night wide open. Men, with the herd, yelled and swore, but only for an instant were their voices heard before a second volley of shots plus the rattle of horns and thunder of hoofs, drowned all other sounds.

Sweeping toward the camp were two thousand odd cattle, a wall of horns and eyes and hurtling bodies!

Hardy lifted his bedding cover and saw Clyde and Skinny

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

run to their horses and bound into their saddles. Neither attempted to take Maude with him, but instead of spurring north or south or west to save their lives, Clyde and Skinny rode straight toward the oncoming herd. Itchy-finger Rankin and Bucktooth and Jones were doing the same! Whatever else those brutal toughs might be, they were still cowhands! Their first thought was to turn the herd and hold it.

Meanwhile Skillet Sam had hopped up onto the tongue of his chuck wagon. "Maudel! Come here. Jump in wagon," he screamed.

But the girl was gazing toward the stampede as if hypnotized. Hardy flung aside the bed which had concealed him and bounded toward her. Picking her up in his arms, he ran toward the rock pile as he had never run before. "Sam, follow me!" he yelled, knowing Sam could see him even if he could not hear his voice; knowing too, the wagon might be overturned and wrecked.

A swift over-shoulder glance assured Hardy that Sam was close behind him. He tripped and almost fell and Sam reached out a hand to help him. Then the three were safe behind the jumbled pile of rocks, an isle of safety that would break the flow of cattle should the herd thunder over the camp site.

As Hardy set Maude on her feet, he heard Sam's shrill voice, "Look! Look a-comin' from the canyon! Who is they?"

Hardy felt Maude's hands tighten on his arm in thrilled excitement. In the bright starlight he saw six mounted men, spaced wide apart, sweeping forward. Each rider had a white band around his hat, another on his left arm, and one of the six—tall and erect in his saddle—wore an enormous black hat.

"Maude, that's Farway Fred," Hardy yelled to make himself heard. "Help at last for us Hardys and Rocky Bill and you."

Never would he forget the thrill and drama of those moments; the onward sweep of those reckless horsemen, dashing past the rock pile to right and left, zinging on toward the herd. Like the Slash J punchers, they were going all out to stop the stampede.

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

But the man with the huge hat with white band around it pulled up short. "Maude! Hardy!" his voice boomed. "You here?"

Hardy ran out where he could be seen, shouting at the top of his voice, "Farway, this is Hardy! Maude's safe!"

"Thank God!" was the answer. "Don't get into this fight!" Then Farway was gone.

Out yonder only a few hundred yards, visible to Maude and Hardy and Sam, a battle—cowboys versus panicked cattle—was raging. Out there, Slash J cowboys and Farway's outlaws were meeting the charging herd with yells and swinging ropes and waving slickers.

Hardy did not realize that he was swinging his arms as if he himself was in the midst of this action—the swiftest and most clever cowboy and cow-horse work he had even seen or would ever see again. Like flashing trout, the sure-footed ponies darted here; there and everywhere, and not one cow got past them. They were compelled to give ground, but they turned the herd northward, and then the men—working as a unit—forced the lead cattle farther and farther to the right until at last the great herd was running in a circle.

"They got 'em millin'!" whooped Skillet Sam, "so they'll soon run down. Gawsh all fishooks! Neatest, slickest bit o' cowboy work I ever hope to see."

"Same here," said Maude. "Those men, those horses—it was magnificent! Slash J alone could not have done what they have done. . . . But listen. Guns talking. Oh, this is the horrible part."

"That's the way it's got to be," Hardy told her grimly. Dust clouds eddied back to where the three stood, the herd now so far away they could see nothing of what was going on. But above the racket of hoofs and the bawling, they heard crackling gun fire.

"Hey, Jim, jus' what's that gun-play mean?" Sam asked. "Showdown between Slash J and Farway Fred. They hate each other's guts."

"Yeah, I know it, and I've larnt that Clyde's punchers is

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

worse bad eggs than Farway's outlaws. . . . Hi-yi, what if Clyde wins? Better we be makin' us hard to find."

As the three moved back to the farther side of the rocks, they heard a horseman coming in fast. The man dashed up to the chuck wagon and flinging himself from his saddle sprang up into the wagon box.

Sam identified him. "Itchy-finger Rankin!"

"I've still got the lariat I took when I released Funkhouser," Hardy said tensely. "Now to catch Itchy alive." He ran toward the wagon.

The man was crouched down, obviously looking for something important to him and did not realize his danger. When he stood upright with a war sack in his hands, Hardy's loop sped. It dropped over Rankin's head and was instantly jerked tight around his neck. Then, with a violent yank, Hardy toppled his victim over the rim of the wagon box, and pounced on him. After taking Rankin's belt and gun, Hardy tied him to one wheel of the wagon.

No use to try to catch the man's frightened horse for it had fled, and a second rider was charging toward the camp as if chased by Indians. Hardy scooted back to the rock pile as the safest spot, but this second rider rode straight to the rocks, pulled up short and harshly shouted, "Hardy! Jim Hardy, I saw you lug Maude to these rocks. Come out where I can see you and shoot it out with me—if you've got the guts!"

"That's Clydel" Maude whispered her lips close to Hardy's ear. "Oh, Jim, stay hidden. You must for you don't have a gun."

"I just got a Colt," said Hardy and in an emotion-choked voice added, "Maude, dear, I've got to face up to this showdown. . . . Coming, Clyde," he yelled and tossed a small stone out to his right.

The noise of the falling pebble hooked Clyde's attention, giving Hardy opportunity to move to the left, away from the rock pile and from Maude and Sam.

Clyde had not dismounted. His Colt was in his hand, his glance darting here and there, seeking his quarry. In that

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

moment Jim Hardy knew that whatever this ruthless man's faults, cowardice was not one of them.

"Here I am, Clyde," he called. "Cut your wolf loose."

Two vivid flashes of gunfire seemed to meet in space and in together; one bullet whistled close past Hardy's left ear, the other thudded into flesh and bone. Clyde Scanlon's stocky body swayed in the saddle. His panicked horse wheeled, and fled, kicking at its erstwhile rider as he toppled backwards over its rump.

Hardy recoiled his gun and moved forward cautiously. But Skillet Sam was ahead of him. Sam squatted beside Clyde, then stood erect and said, "He's done for, Jim. No need for you to look."

"I don't want to look. Get his belt and six-shooter for yourself. Empty his pockets. See if you can find an envelope or folded paper."

A few minutes later, Sam reported, "A money belt, purse and jack knife. No envelope or paper of no kind."

"Thanks, Sam. I hadn't really held hope that Clyde would keep the paper which Rankin stole from Crowder's safe. Take care of the money, Sam. Later it'll go to pay debts—including your wages."

"Good 'nuff, Jim. Listen! Somebody else comin'. Better we get back to them rocks."

They waited only a few moments before Farway Fred joined in a panting horse that was sweating through its coat of dust. "Hardy, you there?" speaking fast. "Clyde Scanlon gave us the slip. You've seen him?"

Hardy moved into the starlight. "Yes. I just shot him. Had to."

"Had to, of course," said the tall outlaw. "Believe me, I wanted to do that job myself, spare you the necessity."

Sam stepped out where Farway could see him. "Is the ruckus over? You win?"

"One Slash J man's still missing, but we've won. Our white bands saved us from being shot at by Rocky Bill, Dad Hardy, and Funkhouser. Likewise, those bands stopped us from killing each other. On the other hand, we were marked

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

men for Slash J fire. Our losses, one wounded, one dead. We have no captives."

"No captives?" said Sam in an awed tone. "But Hardy got Itchy-finger Rankin. He's snubbed to a wagon wheel."

"Good work, Jim," the outlaw put in. "That accounts for all of 'em."

"Farway," said Sam, "it puzzles me why you bandits'd go all out to stop the stampede, when the cattle would have jus' gone back to where they belonged. Has Maude Scanlon and the Hardys got outa the boilin' pot into the fire? Meanin' you now figure to steal the hull herd, same as Clyde was doin'?"

"Don't get me wrong," Farway shot back. "Maude, are you listening?"

"Yes," answered the girl joining Hardy and Sam.

"Good to see you, lady!" Farway doffed his hat. "I regret that I didn't get back on this job sooner. Hardy had persuaded me to lay off Slash J until the roundup ended. I believed I had time to make a long trip to pick up money I had cached—twenty thousand dollars for you, Maude Scanlon, to repay you for the horses and cattle I stole from Savage Ed."

"Can this be true, Farway?" Maude asked.

"Yes. You and Hardy saved my life. I told him I'd not forget it. It also took me some time to round up my scattered men, but we did get here—barely in time to help. . . . As for why we stopped the herd, Sam. My men are cowboys gone haywire, but still cow punchers—surest thing you know, all of us 'd try to stop a stampeded herd!

"More than that, Sam, if those cattle had roared down into Farway Canyon, at least one hundred head would have been crippled or killed. A total loss, and it'd take the rest of the cattle all winter to recover from the ordeal."

"We stopped the herd, not to steal it but to save the critters for Dad Hardy and Maude Scanlon."

Farway leaned down from his saddle to bring his face closer to Maude's and said gently, "It's been one hellish ordeal for you, but Clyde had to be stopped. My men will be your cowboys until you can hire others. Sam, you'll stay on as cook?"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"You bet you!" Sam affirmed.

"And Mel Andrews—good kid—wants to stay as horse wrangler. Does that take care of your immediate problems as boss of Slash J, Maude?"

"Wh-why, of course, Farway. I'm so overwhelmed I don't know what to say."

The bandit turned his horse to go back to the herd. Hardy stopped him with upraised hand.

"Farway, are you still minded to snatch the train robbery loot?"

The tall rider stiffened, eyes flashing. "You still won't string along with my idea that second thief's best owner?"

"No!"

Skillet Sam burst out, "Clyde was the only feller who knowed where the swag's hid. Now nobody can find it."

Farway was thoughtfully silent while Hardy waited. Finally, "If the loot is found, take it to the right people, Hardy, and do the best you can to clear me of that false charge."

"I'll do that."

"Shake on it, Jim. . . . I'm getting soft. Have just kissed twenty-odd-thousand bucks good-by. . . . Must go give the boys a hand and tell them you shot Clyde and captured Rankin. I'll send men to get Clyde's body and bury it along with the others. S'long for now."

Grumbling about the "double-danged dust over and into everything," Sam hurried to his wagon. Maude and Hardy gazed after Farway until he and his horse vanished. Hardy saw tears in the girl's eyes and her breath caught in her throat. He did not interrupt her thoughts. Just then two men rode up to the chuck wagon.

Hardy heard Rocky Bill shout, "Yippee! The dogies didn't hit the camp. That you, Sam? I've been scairt wordless that you and Hardy and Maude didn't get clear."

"All three of us is hunkydory," Sam replied, lighting his fire. "Rankin's tied to a wagon wheel and Clyde jus' went west with his boots on, gun smokin' in his fist."

"Best news ever I heard!" Rocky whooped. "Maude, come out where I can see you. Want to make sure you're all hunky

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

... Jim, I didn't find Dad Hardy in time to stop his play. But the salty ol' warhorse is with me now."

"Where'd you get those horses?" Hardy asked, as he and Maude walked toward the two mounted men.

"Twas easy," said Rocky. "Your ol' Dad emptied three saddles. He took one horse; Bob and I managed to get the other two. Me turning loose our wore-out Percheron. We got belts and guns from them Slash J punchers who'll never need 'em again. Farway's boys are holdin' the cattle and Funkhouser's gone to round up the cavy."

Although listening to Rocky Bill, Hardy had greeted his father, a man who, as Maude said later, looked like the wild man of the mountains, with his battered hat, long hair, whiskers, small pack lashed to his shoulders, rifle across the fork of his saddle, crossed cartridge belts and at least two six-shooters.

He greeted his son, acknowledged an introduction to Maude and then apologized, "Believe me, young lady, I didn't know you were here and that I'd be placing you in danger by spooking the herd. Great scott, what if—?"

"It's all right, Dad Hardy," Maude interrupted. "Jim carried me to those big rocks and the worst didn't happen."

"No thanks to you, Dad," Hardy said grimly. "You must have known that both the cook and Bob Funkhouser were—"

"Yes," Dad Hardy cut in. "But I had both of them tagged as Scanlon men, and thanks to you, son, and to your outlaw friend, my stampede didn't kill any innocent people. I'm plumb all-in, Jim." He dismounted and sat down on a bed roll.

Jim Hardy, still too highly keyed to feel either hunger or weariness, saw Rocky Bill standing with his hands on Maude's shoulders gazing into her upturned face, and whispering something which seemed to astonish her. Suddenly Maude cried, "Uncle Rocky! That's wonderful!" She drew the old timer's head down and kissed him.

Rocky voiced an odd noise and pulled away. "Farway told me Mel Andrews is holdin' their extra horses out yonder," he

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

announced, and facing in the direction of Farway Canyon, he yelled, "Mell You can come to camp."

Mel's voice answered, "About time. I'm starved!"

Maude was helping the cook, and Hardy was up in the wagon box trying to discover what Rankin had wanted so desperately to find, when Mel Andrews arrived. The kid, mounted bareback, was leading nine horses, three of them carrying packs.

The thrilled boy started to tell of his adventures, but Rocky stopped him with, "Later, son. Right now, help me unpack these horses so Sam can use Farway's grub."

Dad Hardy called, "Rocky, did you and Jim get evidence to clear my name of that butchered beef frame-up-and-murder charge Sheriff Crowder pinned on me?" His clothing hung on his gaunt frame in shreds; his boots so completely worn out that his feet swollen and blistered, were visible.

"Dog bite my britches!" said Rocky, pulling the pack off a horse, "We plumb fell down. Now that Crowder's dead, I dunno how—"

"Hold it, Uncle Rocky," Maude cried, drawing an envelope from her overalls pocket. "This, Dad Hardy, is Sheriff Crowder's confession. It tells about the crooked tie-up between Crowder, Alec Jensen and Clyde and his men, states that they robbed the train, a robbery Crowder helped plan. But the part I've memorized reads:

"Dad Hardy's version of the butchering frame-up which Savage Ed Scanlon and I put over on him, and of Hardy's fight later with Savage Ed, is the truth. Savage Ed fired first. Later, I twisted the gun from his hand and lied to pin guilt on old man Hardy and to keep myself in solid with Clyde."

Dad Hardy said hoarsely, "Does that take a load off mel I can go back to my ranch and send for my wife and live as a man should. Maude Scanlon, how can I thank you?"

"Don't try," said Maude. "Take this envelope and keep it safe. . . . Oh, your poor feet. I'll wash them and get something to rub on them."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

She turned toward the wagon, and seeing Hardy said, "Toss me my war sack."

"I've already found your sack, Maude. For it's the one Rankin dropped when I roped him. Why should Rankin have wanted it?"

"Rankin hoped to escape with my money."

Hardy handed the girl the canvas bag which was so heavy she let it plunk to the ground. "Your-money?"

"Yes. Oh! I've not told you what happened only last night."

As briefly as possible Maude told of her harrowing adventure on the Slash J, and of being captured by Rankin and Clyde, ending, "Because he was with Clyde, Rankin learned about this money, too."

Hardy's fingers tightened on the rim of the wagon box and he whistled his amazement. "How did you get hold of the paper from Sheriff Crowder's safe?"

"On the trail, Clyde was leading my horse and at times it would come up alongside his mount. I saw the edge of a white envelope sticking out of his hip pocket."

"Maude, you're always amazing me."

"Tch! I must take care of your father's feet." She opened the war sack, took out soap, towel, and a bottle which evidently contained some lotion.

"Is the cash still here?" she asked herself. "It is. I recall Clyde's saying, when at last we overtook the chuck wagon, 'Nobody will look in your war bag, sis. Nobody, not even the cook, will pry into any cowboy's war sack for that matter. It's his private property.'"

Meanwhile Rocky and Mel had gone away with Dad Hardy's mount and Farway's horses to put them in the cavvy. Skillet Sam had appropriated flour and potatoes and canned items from Farway's grub supply and was very busy.

Hardy was still in the wagon when Itchy-finger Rankin suddenly complained, "I'm damned uncomfortable, Jim, lemme set on a bed."

On the point of snapping, "Shut up!" Hardy changed his mind. "If I treat you well, will you do something for me, Itchy-finger?"

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

"Name it."

"Will you tell Wallace Kendrick and others in Hermit Bend that you know Clyde Scanlon drygulched Sheriff Crowder?"

"Lemme think it over. . . . Hell! Alec Jensen and Moose, when driv into a corner, will clear you of that charge. So-o? Yeah, I'll tell the truth, too."

Hardy released the man, tied his hands behind his back, led him to a bedroll near the fire, and then tied his ankles. "Where's the train robbery swag, Itchy-finger?"

"All I know is Clyde said he'd hide it a-top this Pass. He didn't dast keep it with the outfit as we worked on roundup. Some one or more of the punchers would get it and light a shuck."

Hardy's thoughts turned to what Clyde had told Maude about cowboys' war sacks. He snapped his fingers and exclaimed, "As Rocky'd say, I'll bet my last chaw that's the way of it! Maude, come to the wagon."

Once again Hardy climbed up into the wagon box, Rankin, Skillet Sam, Dad Hardy and Maude watching him. He lighted a match, looked at the sacks, including his own, and found the one tagged, "Clyde Scanlon."

As he tossed it to the ground and jumped down, Maude asked, "What have you found now, Jim?"

"Just a minute. Here come Rocky and Funkhouser and Farway. . . . Fellows, you're just in time. Keep your eyes on this bag. Clyde was sly and clever. I'm betting he hid the train loot in plain sight. . . . Funkhouser, you open the sack and empty it."

Exposed were Clyde's personal belongings. But rolled in shirts and underwear were sheaves of greenbacks and small sacks of gold and silver coins. Farway stepped from his saddle and had his look. "The train robbery cash! How'd you get onto it, Jim?"

"Maude gave me the idea. Hmm? Who'll take this loot and our prisoner to Echo Springs, then take the train back to Rough Edge?"

Bob Funkhouser said, "I'll be glad to handle both jobs."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Rocky faced the stocky rider. "I never did quite get your number, Silent Bob. Tell us where you fit in."

Funkhouser laughed. "I'm surprised you didn't. I let on that I was a rep for the Four Bars. Actually I was working for Wallace Kendrick to tally the Slash J herd and see that Clyde and his thieves didn't hide out three or four hundred cattle or whoop them out of the country—I didn't savvy Clyde's game until it was too late. Kendrick'll be disappointed in me."

"Understatement," said Farway Fred, giving Funkhouser a close inspection. "But I believe you're a square shooter, so I'm suggesting you do more than take charge of this money and the captive. When you get to Rough Edge, drop down to Hermit Bend, pronto, and set Wallace Kendrick straight on all this funny business. Help him grab Alec Jensen before Jensen smells a rat. Finally, warm his money-bags heart with news that Maude is going to make a big payment on the debt against Slash J."

"Thanks for the chance to be useful," Funkhouser replied. "I must say you're a most unusual bandit, Farway."

"I get a kick out of doing the unexpected," Farway said. "But when I side a man I side him all the way, and there's a bit of unfinished business here that has me baffled."

Dad Hardy, Funkhouser and Rocky Bill gave the outlaw their attention, silently asking him to explain. Ignoring them, Farway dropped one arm around Jim Hardy's shoulders, the other around Maude's waist and drew them to him.

"Young lady, before we break camp tomorrow I'll give you the cash I have already mentioned. And I'd love to help both of you with the hardest problem of all. Won't you talk it over now and see if—"

"Yes, yes, we will," Maude interrupted. "Jim, it's going to be all right with us."

Hardy was trembling, his voice tight, "How can it ever be all right with us—with you and me—darling?"

"Actually, Farway, Jim, instead of feeling bitterness and grief I am more relieved than at any time since this wicked war began."

STAMPEDE ON FARWAY PASS

Maude moved so she was facing both Hardy and Farway. Her own face and eyes were radiant, as she continued. "At last I know the truth about myself. Savage Ed left a letter for me with Aunt K. The last part of it told me Clyde was his son by his first wife, that he was a widower when he married my mother—who was a widow with one baby daughter. Mel

"Because Savage Ed wanted it that way, my mother agreed that I should take the Scanlon name. So Clyde and I grew up believing we were brother and sister. But I am not Savage Ed's daughter!"

A moment of silence followed before Farway Fred said, "Your move, Jim!" He pushed Maude into Hardy's arms and quickly turned away.

Rocky Bill slapped Dad Hardy on the back and whooped with joy.

Neither Maude nor Hardy heard him.

Skillet Sam yelled, "Hot stuff. Come and get it!"

They didn't hear him either.