

BOOT HILL PAYOFF

BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

Chapter I: The Laramies Ride

Five men were riding down the winding road that led to San Leon, and one was singing, in a toneless monotone:

"Early in the mornin' in the month of May,
Brady came down on the mornin' train.
Brady came down on the Shinin' Star.
And he shot Mr. Duncan in behind the bar!

"Shut up! Shut up!" It was the youngest of the riders who ripped out like that. A lanky, tow-headed kid, with a touch of pallor under his tan, and a rebellious smolder in his hot eyes.

The biggest man of the five grinned. "Bucky's nervous," he jeered genially.
"You don't want to be no derned bandit, do you, Bucky?"

The youngest glowered at him. "That welt on yore jaw ought to answer that, Jim," he growled.

"You fit like a catamount," agreed Big Jim placidly. "I thought we'd never git you on yore cayuse and started for San Leon, without knockin' you in the head. 'Bout the only way you show yo're a Laramie, Bucky, is in the handlin' of yore fists."

"T'ain't no honor to be a Laramie," flared Bucky. "You and Luke and Tom and Hank has dragged the name through slime. For the last three years you been worse'n a pack of starvin' lobos--stealin' cattle and horses; robbin' folks--why, the country's near ruint. And now yo're headin' to San Leon to put on the final touch--robbin' the Cattlemen's Bank, when you know dern well the help the ranchmen got from that bank's been all that kept 'em on their feet. Old man Brown's stretched hisself nigh to the bustin' p'int to help folks."

He gulped and fought back tears that betrayed his extreme youth. His brothers grinned tolerantly. "It's the last time," he informed them bitterly. "You won't git me into no raid again!"

"It's the last time for all of us," said Big Jim, biting off a cud of tobacco.
"We're through after this job. We'll live like honest men in Mexico."

"Serve you right if a posse caught us and hanged us all," said Bucky viciously.

"Not a chance." Big Jim's placidity was unruffled. "Nobody but us knows the trail that follows the secret waterholes acrost the desert. No posse'd dare to foller us. Once out of town and headed south for the border, the devil hisself couldn't catch us."

"I wonder if anybody'll ever stumble onto our secret hide-out up in the Los Diablos Mountains," mused Hank.

"I doubt it. Too well hid. Like the desert trail, nobody but us knows them mountain trails. It shore served us well. Think of all the steers and horses we've hid there, and drove through the mountains to Mexico! And the times we've laid up there laughin' in our sleeves as the posse chased around a circle."

Bucky muttered something under his breath; he retained no fond memories of that hidden lair high up in the barren Diablos. Three years before, he had reluctantly followed his brothers into it from the little ranch in the foothills where Old Man Laramie and his wife had worn away their lives in futile work. The old life, when their parents lived and had held their wild sons in check, had been drab and hard, but had lacked the bitterness he had known when cooking and tending house for his brothers in that hidden den from which they had ravaged the countryside.

Four good men gone bad--mighty bad.

San Leon lay as if slumbering in the desert heat as the five brothers rode up to the doors of the Cattlemen's Bank. None noted their coming; the Red Lode saloon, favorite rendezvous for the masculine element of San Leon, stood at the other end of the town, and out of sight around a slight bend in the street.

No words were passed; each man knew his part beforehand. The three elder Laramies slid lithely out of their saddles, throwing their reins to Bucky and Luke, the second youngest. They strode into the bank with a soft jingle of spurs and creak of leather, closing the door behind them.

Luke's face was impassive as an image's, as he dragged leisurely on a cigarette, though his eyes gleamed between slitted lids. But Bucky sweated and shivered, twisting nervously in his saddle.

By some twist of destiny, one son had inherited all the honesty that was his parents' to transmit. He had kept his hands clean. Now, in spite of himself, he was scarred with their brand.

He started convulsively as a gun crashed inside the bank; like an echo came another reverberation.

Luke's Colt was in his hand, and he snatched one foot clear of the stirrup, then feet pounded toward the street and the door burst open to emit the three outlaws. They carried bulging canvas sacks, and Hank's sleeve was crimson.

"Ride like hell!" grunted Big Jim, forking his roan. "Old Brown throwed down on Hank. Old fool! I had to salivate him permanent."

And like hell it was they rode, straight down the street toward the desert, yelling and firing as they went. They thundered past houses from which startled individuals peered bewilderedly, past stores where leathery faced storekeepers were dragging forth blue-barreled scatter-guns. They swept through the futile rain of lead that poured from the excited and befuddled crowd in front of the Red Lode, and whirled on toward the desert that stretched south of San Leon.

But not quite to the desert. For as they rounded the last bend in the twisting street and came abreast of the last house in the village, they were confronted by the gray-bearded figure of old "Pop" Anders, sheriff of San Leon County. The old man's gnarled right hand rested on the ancient single-action Colt on his thigh, his left was lifted in a seemingly futile command to halt.

Big Jim cursed and sawed back on the reins, and the big roan slid to a halt.

"Git outa the way, Pop!" roared Big Jim. "We don't want to hurt you."

The old warrior's eyes blazed with righteous wrath.

"Robbed the bank this time, eh?" he said in cold fury, his eyes on the canvas sacks. "Likely spilt blood, too. Good thing Frank Laramie died before he could know what skunks his boys turned out to be. You ain't content to steal our stock till we're nigh bankrupt; you got to rob our bank and take what little money we got left for a new start. Why, you damned human sidewinders!" the old man shrieked, his control snapping suddenly. "Ain't there nothin' that's too low-down for you to do?"

Behind them sounded the pound of running feet and a scattering banging of guns. The crowd from the Red Lode was closing in.

"You've wasted our time long enough, old man!" roared Luke, jabbing in the spurs and sending his horse rearing and plunging toward the indomitable figure. "Git outa the way, or--"

The old single-action jumped free in the gnarled hand. Two shots roared together, and Luke's sombrero went skyrocketing from his head. But the old sheriff fell face forward in the dust with a bullet through his heart, and the Laramie gang swept on into the desert, feeding their dust to their hurriedly mounted and disheartened pursuers.

Only young Buck Laramie looked back, to see the door of the last house fly open, and a pig-tailed girl run out to the still figure in the street. It was the sheriff's daughter, Judy. She and Buck had gone to the same school in the old days before the Laramies hit the wolf-trail. Buck had always been her champion. Now she went down on her knees in the dust beside her father's body, seeking frantically for a spark of life where there was none.

A red film blazed before Buck Laramie's eyes as he turned his livid face toward his brothers.

"Hell," Luke was fretting, "I didn't aim to salivate him permanent. The old lobo woulda hung everyone of us if he could of--but just the same I didn't aim to kill him."

Something snapped in Bucky's brain.

"You didn't aim to kill him!" he shrieked. "No, but you did! Yo're all a pack of low-down sidewinders just like he said! They ain't nothin' too dirty for you!" He brandished his clenched fists in the extremity of his passion. "You filthy scum!" he sobbed. "When I'm growed up I'm comin' back here and make up for ever' dollar you've stole, ever' life you've took. I'll do it if they hang me for tryin', s'help me!"

His brothers did not reply. They did not look at him. Big Jim hummed flatly and absently:

"Some say he shot him with a thirty-eight,
Some say he shot him with a forty-one;
But I say he shot him with a forty-four.
For I saw him as he lay on the barroom floor."

Bucky subsided, slumped in his saddle and rode dismally on. San Leon and the old life lay behind them all. Somewhere south of the hazy horizon the desert stretched into Mexico where lay their future destiny. And his destiny was inextricably interwoven with that of his brothers. He was an outlaw, too, now, and he must stay with the clan to the end of their last ride.

Some guiding angel must have caused Buck Laramie to lean forward to pat the head of his tired sorrel, for at that instant a bullet ripped through his hat-brim, instead of his head.

It came as a startling surprise, but his reaction was instant. He leaped from his horse and dove for the protection of a sand bank, a second bullet spurting dust at his heels. Then he was under cover, peering warily out, Colt in hand.

The tip of a white sombrero showed above a rim of sand, two hundred yards in front of him. Laramie blazed away at it, though knowing as he pulled the trigger that the range was too long and the target too small for six-gun accuracy. Nevertheless, the hat-top vanished.

"Takin' no chances," muttered Laramie. "Now who in hell is he? Here I am a good hour's ride from San Leon, and folks pottin' at me already. Looks bad for what I'm aimin' to do. Reckon it's somebody that knows me, after all these years?"

He could not believe it possible that anyone would recognize the lanky, half-grown boy of six years ago in the bronzed, range-hardened man who was returning to San Leon to keep the vow he had made as his clan rode southward with two dead men and a looted bank behind them.

The sun was burning hot, and the sand felt like an oven beneath Laramie. His canteen was slung to his saddle, and his horse was out of his reach, drooping under a scrubby mesquite. The other fellow would eventually work around to a point where his rifle would out-range Laramie's six-gun--or he might shoot the horse and leave Buck afoot in the desert.

The instant his attacker's next shot sang past his refuge, he was up and away in a stooping, weaving run to the next sand hill, to the right and slightly forward of his original position. He wanted to get in close quarters with his unknown enemy.

He wriggled from cover to cover, and sprinted in short dashes over narrow strips of open ground, taking advantage of every rock, cactus-bed and sand-bank, with lead hissing and spitting at him all the way. The hidden gunman had guessed his purpose, and obviously had no desire for a close-range fight. He was slinging lead every time Laramie showed an inch of flesh, cloth or leather, and Buck counted the shots. He was within striking distance of the sand rim when he believed the fellow's rifle was empty.

Springing recklessly to his feet he charged straight at his hidden enemy, his six-gun blazing. He had miscalculated about the rifle, for a bullet tore through the slack of his shirt. But then the Winchester was silent, and Laramie was raking the rim with such a barrage of lead that the gunman evidently dared not lift himself high enough to line the sights of a six-gun.

But a pistol was something that must be reckoned with, and as he spent his last bullet, Laramie dove behind a rise of sand and began desperately to jam cartridges into his empty gun. He had failed to cross the sand rim in that rush, but another try would gain it--unless hot lead cut him down on the way. Drum of hoofs reached his ears suddenly and glaring over his shelter he saw a pinto pony beyond the sand rim heading in the direction of San Leon. Its rider wore a white sombrero.

"Damn!" Laramie slammed the cylinder in place and sent a slug winging after the rapidly receding horseman. But he did not repeat the shot. The fellow was already out of range.

"Reckon the work was gettin' too close for him," he ruminated as he trudged back to his horse. "Hell, maybe he didn't want me to get a good look at him. But why? Nobody in these parts would be shy about shootin' at a Laramie, if they knew him as such. But who'd know I was a Laramie?"

He swung up into the saddle, then absently slapped his saddle bags and the faint clinking that resulted soothed him. Those bags were loaded with fifty thousand dollars in gold eagles, and every penny was meant for the people of San Leon.

"It'll help pay the debt the Laramies owe for the money the boys stole," he confided to the uninterested sorrel. "How I'm goin' to pay back for the men they killed is more'n I can figure out. But I'll try."

The money represented all he had accumulated from the sale of the Laramie stock and holdings in Mexico--holdings bought with money stolen from San Leon. It was his by right of inheritance, for he was the last of the Laramies. Big Jim, Tom, Hank, Luke, all had found trail's end in that lawless country south of the Border. As they had lived, so had they died, facing their killers, with smoking guns in their hands. They had tried to live straight in Mexico, but the wild blood was still there. Fate had dealt their hands, and Buck looked upon it all as a slate wiped clean, a record closed--with the exception of Luke's fate.

That memory vaguely troubled him now, as he rode toward San Leon to pay the debts his brothers contracted.

"Folks said Luke drawed first," he muttered. "But it wasn't like him to pick a barroom fight.

Funny the fellow that killed him cleared out so quick, if it was a fair fight."

He dismissed the old problem and reviewed the recent attack upon himself.

"If he knew I was a Laramie, it might have been anybody. But how could he know? Joel Waters wouldn't talk."

No, Joel Waters wouldn't talk; and, Joel Waters, old time friend of Laramie's father, long ago, and owner of the Boxed W ranch, was the only man who knew Buck Laramie was returning to San Leon.

"San Leon at last, cayuse," he murmured as he topped the last desert sand hill that sloped down to the town. "Last time I seen it was under circumstances most--what the devil!"

He started and stiffened as a rattle of gunfire burst on his ears. Battle in San Leon? He urged his weary steed down the hill. Two minutes later history was repeating itself.