

Chapter 4

SIDEWINDER RAMROD

MIDNIGHT found Laramie deep in the Diablos. He halted, tethered the sorrel, and spread his blankets at the foot of a low cliff. Night was not the time to venture further along the rock-strewn paths and treacherous precipices of the Diablos. He slept fitfully, his slumber disturbed by dreams of a girl kneeling beside a wounded man.

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With the first gray of dawn he was riding familiar trails that would lead him to the cabin in the hidden canyon that he knew so well, the old hideout of his gang, where he believed he would find the new band which was terrorizing the country. The hide-out had but one entrance—a rock-walled tunnel. How the fake gang could have learned of the place Laramie could not know.

The hideout was in a great bowl, on all sides of which rose walls of jumbled rock, impassable to a horseman. It was possible to climb the cliffs near the entrance of the tunnel, which, if the fake gang were following the customs of the real Laramies, would be guarded.

Half an hour after sunrise found him making his way on foot toward the canyon entrance. His horse he had left concealed among the rocks at a safe distance, and lariat in hand he crept along behind rocks and scrub growth toward the old river bed that formed the canyon. Presently, gazing through the underbrush that masked his approach, he saw, half hidden by a rock, a man in a tattered brown shirt who sat at the mouth of the canyon entrance, his hat pulled low over his eyes, and a Winchester across his knees.

Evidently a belief in the security of the hide-out made the sentry careless. Laramie had the drop on him; but to use his advantage incurred the possibility of a shot that would warn those inside the canyon and spoil his plans. So he retreated to a point where he would not be directly in the line of the guard's vision, if the man roused, and began working his way to a spot a few hundred yards to the left, where, as he knew of old, he could climb to the rim of the canyon.

In a few moments he had clambered up to a point from which he could glimpse the booted feet of the guard sticking from behind the rock. Laramie's flesh crawled at the thought of being picked off with a rifle bullet like a fly off a wall, if the guard looked his way.

But the boots did not move, he dislodged no stones large enough to make an alarming noise, and presently, panting and sweating, he heaved himself over the crest of the rim and lay on his belly gazing down into the canyon below him.

As he looked down into the bowl which had once been like a prison to him, bitterness of memory was mingled with a brief, sick longing for his dead brothers; after all, they were his brothers, and had been kind to him in their rough way.

The cabin below him had in no wise changed in the passing of the years. Smoke was pouring out of the chimney, and in the corral at the back, horses were milling about in an attempt to escape the ropes of two men who were seeking saddle mounts for the day.

Shaking out his lariat, Laramie crept along the canyon rim until he reached a spot where a stunted tree clung to the very edge. To this tree he made fast the rope, knotted it at intervals for handholds, and threw the other end over the cliff. It hung fifteen feet short of the bottom, but that was near enough.

As he went down it, with a knee hooked about the thin strand to take some of the strain off his hands, he grinned thinly as he remembered how he had used this descent long ago when he wanted to dodge Big Jim who was waiting at the entrance to give him a licking. His face hardened.

"Wish he was here with me now. We'd mop up these rats by ourselves."

Dangling at the end of the rope at arm's length he dropped, narrowly missing a heap of jagged rocks, and lit in the sand on his feet, going to his all-fours from the impact.

Bending low, sometimes on hands and knees, he headed circuitously for the cabin, keeping it between himself and the men in the corral. To his own wonderment he reached the cabin without hearing any alarm sounded. Maybe the occupants, if there were any in the canyon beside the men he had seen, had gone out the back way to the corral. He hoped so.

Cautiously he raised his head over a window sill and peered inside. He could see no one in the big room that constituted the front part of the cabin. Behind this room, he knew, were a bunk room and kitchen, and the back door was in the kitchen. There might be men in those backrooms; but he was willing to take the chance. He wanted to get in there and find a place where he could hide and spy.

The door was not locked; he pushed it open gently and stepped inside with a cat-like tread, Colt poked ahead of him.

"Stick 'em up!" Before he could complete the convulsive movement prompted by these unexpected words, he felt the barrel of a six-gun jammed hard against his backbone. He froze—opened his fingers and let his gun crash to the floor. There was nothing else for it.

The door to the bunk room swung open and two men came out with drawn guns and triumphant leers on their unshaven faces. A third emerged from the kitchen. All were strangers to Laramie. He ventured to twist his head to look at his captor, and saw a big-boned, powerful man with a scarred face, grinning exultantly.

"That was easy," rumbled one of the others, a tall, heavily built ruffian whose figure looked somehow familiar. Laramie eyed him closely.

"So yo're 'Big Jim'," he said.

The big man scowled, but Scarface laughed.

"Yeah! With a mask on nobody can tell the difference. You ain't so slick, for a Laramie. I seen you sneakin' through the bresh ten minutes ago, and we been watchin' you ever since. I seen you aimed to come and make yoreself to home, so I app'inted myself a welcome committee of one—behind the door. You couldn't see me from the winder. Hey, you Joe!" he raised his voice pompously. "Gimme a piece of rope. Mister Laramie's goin' to stay with us for a spell."

Scarface shoved the bound Laramie into an old Morris chair that stood near the kitchen door. Laramie remembered that chair well; the brothers had brought it with them when they left their ranch home in the foothills.

He was trying to catch a nebulous memory that had something to do with that chair, when steps sounded in the bunk room and "Jim" entered, accompanied by two others. One was an ordinary sort of criminal, slouchy, brutal faced and unshaven. The other was of an entirely different type. He was elderly and pale-faced, but that face was bleak and flinty. He did not seem range-bred like the others. Save for his high-heeled riding boots, he was dressed in town clothes, though the well-worn butt of a .45 jutted from a holster at his thigh.

Scarface hooked thumbs in belt and rocked back on his heels with an air of huge satisfaction. His big voice boomed in the cabin.

"Mister Harrison, I takes pleasure in makin' you acquainted with Mister Buck Laramie, the last of a family of honest horse-thieves, what's rode all the way from Mexico just to horn in on our play. And Mister Laramie, since you ain't long for this weary world, I'm likewise honored to interjuice you to Mister Ely Harrison, high man of our outfit and president of the Cattlemen's Bank of San Leon!"

Scarface had an eye for dramatics in his crude way. He bowed grotesquely, sweeping the floor with his Stetson and grinning gleefully at the astounded glare with which his prisoner greeted his introduction.

Harrison was less pleased.

"That tongue of yours wags too loose, Braxton," he snarled.

Scarface lapsed into injured silence, and Laramie found his tongue.

"Ely Harrison!" he said slowly. "Head of the gang—the pieces of this puzzle's beginnin' to fit. So you generously helps out the ranchers yore coyotes ruins—not forgettin' to grab a healthy mortgage while doin' it. And you was a hero and shot it out with the terrible bandits when they come for yore bank; only nobody gets hurt on either side."

Unconsciously he leaned further back in the Morris chair—and a lightning jolt of memory hit him just behind the ear. He stifled an involuntary grunt, and his fingers, hidden by his body from the eyes of his captors, began fumbling between the cushions of the chair.

He had remembered his jackknife, a beautiful implement, and the pride of his boyhood, stolen from him and hidden by his brother Tom, for a joke, a few days before they started for Mexico. Tom had forgotten all about it, and Buck had been too proud to beg him for it. But Tom had remembered, months later, in Mexico; had bought Buck a duplicate of the first knife, and told him that he had hidden the original between the cushions of the old Morris chair.

Laramie's heart almost choked him. It seemed too good to be true, this ace in the hole. Yet there was no reason to suppose anybody had found and removed the knife. His doubts were set at rest as his fingers encountered a smooth, hard object. It was not until that moment that he realized that Ely Harrison was speaking to him. He gathered his wits and concentrated on the man's rasping voice, while his hidden fingers fumbled with the knife, trying to open it.

"—damned unhealthy for a man to try to block *my* game," Harrison was saying harshly. "Why didn't you mind your own business?"

"How do you know I come here just to spoil yore game?" murmured Laramie absently.

"Then why *did* you come here?" Harrison's gaze was clouded with a sort of ferocious uncertainty. "Just how much did you know about our outfit before today? Did you know I was the leader of the gang?"

"Guess," suggested Laramie. The knife was open at last. He jammed the handle deep between the cushions and the chair-back, wedging it securely. The tendons along his wrists ached. It had been hard work, manipulating the knife with his cramped fingers, able to move just so far. His steady voice did not change in tone as he worked. "I was kind of ashamed of my name till I seen how much lower a man could go than my brothers ever went. They was hard men, but they was white, at least. Usin' my name to torture and murder behind my back plumb upsets me. Maybe I didn't come to San Leon just to spoil yore game; but maybe I decided to spoil it after I seen some of the hands you dealt."

"You'll spoil our game!" Harrison sneered. "Fat chance you've got of spoiling anybody's game. But you've got only yourself to blame. In another month I'd have owned every ranch within thirty miles of San Leon."

"So that's the idea, huh?" murmured Laramie, leaning forward to expectorate, and dragging his wrists hard across the knife-edge. He felt one strand part, and as he leaned back and repeated the movement, another gave way and the edge bit into his flesh. If he could sever one more strand, he would make his break.

"Just how much did you know about our outfit before you came here?" demanded Harrison again, his persistence betraying his apprehension on that point. "How much did you tell Joel Waters?"

"None of yore derved business," Laramie snapped. His nerves getting on edge with the approach of the crisis.

"You'd better talk," snarled Harrison. "I've got men here who'd think nothing of shoving your feet in the fire to roast. Not that it matters. We're all set anyway. Got ready when we heard you'd ridden in. It just means we move tonight instead of a month later. But if you can prove to me that you haven't told anybody that I'm the real leader of the gang—well, we can carry out our original plans, and you'll save your life. We might even let you join the outfit."

"Join the—do you see any snake-scales on me?" flared Laramie, fiercely expanding his arm muscles. Another strand parted and the cords fell away from his wrists.

"Why you—" Murderous passion burst all bounds as Harrison lurched forward, his fist lifted. And Laramie shot from the chair like a steel spring released, catching them all flat-footed, paralyzed by the unexpectedness of the move.

One hand ripped Harrison's Colt from its scabbard. The other knotted into a fist that smashed hard in the banker's face and knocked him headlong into the midst of the men who stood behind him.

"Reach for the ceilin', you yellow-bellied polecats!" snarled Laramie, livid with fury and savage purpose; his cocked .45 menaced them all. "Reach! I'm dealin' this hand!"