

CHAPTER 5

FIRST BLOOD

FOR an instant the scene held—then Scarface made a convulsive movement to duck behind the chair.

"Back up!" yelled Laramie, swinging his gun directly on him, and backing toward the door. But the tall outlaw who had impersonated Big Jim had recovered from the daze of his surprise. Even as Laramie's pistol muzzle moved in its short arc toward Braxton, the tall one's hand flashed like the stroke of a snake's head to his gun. It cleared leather just as Laramie's .45 banged.

Laramie felt hot wind fan his cheek, but the tall outlaw was sagging back and down, dying on his feet and grimly pulling trigger as he went. A hot welt burned across Laramie's left thigh, another slug ripped up splinters near his feet. Harrison had dived behind the Morris chair and Laramie's vengeful bullet smashed into the wall behind him.

It all happened so quickly that the others had barely unleathered their irons as he reached the threshold. He fired at Braxton, saw the scar-faced one drop his gun with a howl, saw "Big Jim" sprawl on the floor, done with impersonation and outlawry forever, and then he was slamming the door from the outside, wincing involuntarily as bullets smashed through the panels and whined about him.

His long legs flung him across the kitchen and he catapulted through the outer door. He collided head-on with the two men he had seen in the corral. All three went into the dust in a heap. One, even in falling, jammed his six-gun into Buck's belly and pulled trigger without stopping to see who it was. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber.

Laramie, flesh crawling with the narrowness of his escape, crashed his gun barrel down on the other's head and sprang up, kicking free of the second man whom he recognized as Mart Rawley, he of the white sombrero and flashy pinto.

Rawley's gun had been knocked out of his hand in the collision. With a yelp the drygulcher scuttled around the corner of the cabin on hands and knees. Laramie did not stop for him. He had seen the one thing that might save him—a horse, saddled and bridled, tied to the corral fence.

He heard the furious stamp of boots behind him. Harrison's voice screamed commands as his enemies streamed out of the house and started pouring lead after him. Then a dozen long leaps carried him spraddle-legged to the startled mustang. With one movement he had ripped loose the tether and swung aboard. Over his shoulder he saw the men spreading out to head him off in the dash they expected him to make toward the head of the canyon. Then he wrenched the cayuse around and spurred through the corral gate which the outlaws had left half open.

In an instant Laramie was the center of a milling whirlpool of maddened horses as he yelled, fired in the air, and lashed them with the quirt hanging from the horn.

"Close the gate!" shrieked Harrison. One of the men ran to obey the command, but as he did, the snorting beasts came thundering through. Only a frantic leap backward saved him from being trampled to death under the maddened horses.

His companions yelped and ran for the protection of the cabin, firing blindly into the dust cloud that rose as the herd pounded past.

Then Laramie was dashing through the scattering horde and drawing out of six-gun range, while his enemies howled like wolves behind him.

"Git along, cayuse!" yelled Laramie, drunk with the exhilaration of the hazard.
"We done better'n I hoped. They got to round up their broncs before they hit my trail, and that's goin' to take time!"

Thought of the guard waiting at the canyon entrance did not sober him.

"Only way out is through the tunnel. Maybe he thinks the shootin' was just a family affair, and won't drill a gent ridin' from inside the canyon. Anyway, cayuse, we takes it on the run."

A Winchester banged from the mouth of the tunnel and the bullet cut the air past his ear.

"Pull up!" yelled a voice, but there was hesitancy in the tone. Doubtless the first shot had been a warning, and the sentry was puzzled. Laramie gave no heed; he ducked low and jammed in the spurs. He could see the rifle now, the blue muzzle resting on a boulder, and the ragged crown of a hat behind it. Even as he saw it, flame spurted from the blue ring. Laramie's horse stumbled in its headlong stride as lead ploughed through the fleshy part of its shoulder. That stumble saved Laramie's life for it lunched him out of the path of the next slug. His own six-gun roared.

The bullet smashed on the rock beside the rifle muzzle. Dazed and half-blinded by splinters of stone, the outlaw reeled back into the open, and fired without aim. The Winchester flamed almost in Laramie's face. Then his answering slug knocked the guard down as if he had been hit with a hammer.

The Winchester flew out of his hands as he rolled on the ground. Laramie jerked the half-frantic mustang back on its haunches and dived out of the saddle to grab for the rifle.

"Damn!" It had struck the sharp edge of a rock as it fell. The lock was bent and the weapon useless. He cast it aside disgustedly, wheeled toward his horse, and then halted to stare down at the man he had shot. The fellow had hauled himself to a half-sitting position. His face was pallid, and blood oozed from a round hole in his shirt bosom. He was dying. Sudden revulsion shook Laramie as he saw his victim was hardly more than a boy. His berserk excitement faded.

"Laramie!" gasped the youth. "You must be Buck Laramie!"

"Yeah," admitted Laramie. "Anything—anything I can do?"

The boy grinned in spite of his pain.

"Thought so. Nobody but a Laramie could ride so reckless and shoot so straight. Seems funny—bein' plugged by a Laramie after worshippin' 'em most of my life."

"What?" ejaculated Laramie.

"I always wanted to be like 'em," gasped the youth. "Nobody could ride and shoot and fight like them. That's why I j'ined up with these polecats. They said they was startin' up a gang that was to be just like the Laramies. But they ain't; they're a passel of dirty coyotes. Once I started in with 'em, though, I had to stick."

Laramie said nothing. It was appalling to think that a young life had been so warped, and at last destroyed, by the evil example of his brothers.

"You better go and raise a posse if yo're aimin' to git them rats," the boy said.

"They's goin' to be hell to pay tonight."

"How's that?" questioned Laramie, remembering Harrison's remarks about something planned for the night.

"You got 'em scared," murmured the boy. "Harrison's scared you might have told Joel Waters he was boss-man of the gang. That's why he come here last night. They'd aimed to keep stealin' for another month. Old Harrison woulda had most all the ranches around here by then, foreclosin' mortgages.

"When Mart Rawley failed to git you, old Harrison sent out word for the boys to git together here today. They figgered on huntin' you down, if the posse from San Leon hadn't already got you. If they found out you didn't know nothin' and hadn't told nobody nothin', they just aimed to kill you and go on like they'd planned from the first. But if they didn't git you, or found you'd talked, they aimed to make their big cleanup tonight, and then ride."

"What's that?" asked Laramie.

"They're goin' down tonight and burn Joel Waters' ranch buildings, and the sheriff's, and some of the other big ones. They'll drive all the cattle off to Mexico over the old Laramie trail. Then old Harrison'll divide the loot and the gang will scatter.

If he finds you ain't spilled the works about him bein' the top man, he'll stay on in San Leon. That was his idee from the start—ruin the ranchers, buy up their outfits cheap and be king of San Leon."

"How many men's he got?"

"'Tween twenty-five and thirty," panted the youth. He was going fast. He choked, and a trickle of blood began at the corner of his mouth. "I ought not to be squealin', maybe; tain't the Laramie way. But I wouldn't to nobody but a Laramie. You didn't see near all of 'em. Two died on the way back from San Leon, yesterday. They left 'em out in the desert. The rest ain't got back from drivin' cattle to Mexico, but they'll be on hand by noon today."

Laramie was silent, reckoning on the force he could put in the field. Waters' punchers were all he could be sure of—six or seven men at the most, not counting the wounded Waters. The odds were stacking up.

"Got a smoke?" the youth asked weakly. Laramie rolled a cigarette, placed it between the blue lips and held a match. Looking back down the canyon, Laramie saw men saddling mounts. Precious time was passing, but he was loath to leave the dying lad.

"Get goin'," muttered the boy uneasily. "You got a tough job ahead of you—honest men and thieves both agen you—but I'mbettin' on the Laramies—the real ones—" He seemed wandering in his mind. He began to sing in a ghastly whisper the song that Laramie could never hear without a shudder.

"When Brady died they planted him deep, put a bottle of whisky at his head and feet.

Folded his arms across his breast.

And said: 'King Brady's gone to his rest!'"

The crimson trickle became a sudden spurt; the youth's voice trailed into silence. The cigarette slipped from his lips. He went limp and lay still, through forever with the wolf-trail.

Laramie rose heavily and groped for his horse, trembling in the shade of the rock. He tore the blanket rolled behind the saddle and covered the still figure. Another debt to be marked up against the Laramies.

He swung aboard and galloped through the tunnel to where his own horse was waiting—a faster mount than the cayuse he was riding. As he shifted mounts he heard shouts behind him, knew that his pursuers had halted at the body, knew the halt would be brief.

Without looking back, he hit the straightest trail he knew that led toward the ranch of Joel Waters.