

## CHAPTER 6

### "STRING HIM UP!"

IT was nearly noon when Laramie pulled up his sweating bronc at the porch of the Boxed W ranch house. There were no punchers in sight. Hop Sing opened the door.

"Where's Waters?" rapped out Laramie.

"Solly!" Hop Sing beamed on the younger man. "He gone to town to see doctluh and get leg fixed. Slim Jones dlive him in in buckblood. He be back tonight."

"Damn!" groaned Laramie. He saw his plan being knocked into a cocked hat. That plan had been to lead a band of men straight to the outlaws' hide-out and bottle them up in their stronghold before they could scatter out over the range in their planned raid. The Boxed W punchers would not follow a stranger without their boss's orders, and only Waters could convince the bellicose citizens of San Leon that Laramie was on the level. Time was flying, and every minute counted.

There was only one risky course left open. He swung on his tiring horse and reined away on the road for San Leon.

He met no one on the road, for which he was thankful. When he drew up on the outskirts of the town his horse was drawing laboring breaths. He knew the animal would be useless in case he had to dust out of town with a posse on his heels.

Laramie knew of a back alley that led to the doctor's office, and by which he hoped to make it unseen. He dismounted and headed down the alley, leading the gelding by the reins.

He sighted the little adobe shack where the town's one physician lived and worked, when a jingle of spurs behind him caused him to jerk his head in time to see a man passing the end of the alley. It was Mart Rawley, and Laramie ducked behind his horse, cursing his luck. Rawley must have been prowling around the town, expecting him, and watching for him. His yell instantly split the lazy silence.

"Laramie!" howled Rawley. "Laramie's back! Hey, Bill! Lon! Joe! Everybody!

Laramie's in town again! This way!"

Laramie forked his mustang and spurred it into a lumbering run for the main street. Lead was singing down the alley as Laramie burst into Main Street, and saw Joel Waters sitting in a chair on the porch of the doctor's shack.

"Get all the men you can rustle and head for the Diablos!" he yelled at the astonished ranchman. "I'll leave a trail for you to follow. I found the gang at the old hide-out—and they're comin' out tonight for a big cleanup!"

Then he was off again, his clattering hoofs drowning Waters' voice as he shouted after the rider. Men were yelling and .45s banging. A horse and a foot they came at him, shooting as they ran. The dull, terrifying mob-roar rose, pierced with yells of: "String him up!" "He shot Bob Anders in the back!"

His way to open country was blocked, and his horse was exhausted. With a snarl Laramie wheeled and rode to the right for a narrow alley that did not seem to be blocked. It led between two buildings to a side-street, and was not wide enough for a horse to pass through. Maybe that was the reason it had been left unguarded. Laramie reached it, threw himself from his saddle and dived into the narrow mouth.

For an instant his mount, standing with drooping head in the opening, masked his master from bullets, though Laramie had not intended sacrificing his horse for his own hide. Laramie had run half the length of the alley before someone reached out gingerly, grasped the reins and jerked the horse away. Laramie half turned, without pausing in his run, and fired high and harmlessly back down the alley. The whistle of lead kept the alley clear until he bolted out the other end.

There, blocking his way in the side street, stood a figure beside a black racing horse. Laramie's gun came up—then he stopped short, mouth open in amazement. It was Judy Anders who stood beside the black horse.

Before he could speak she sprang forward and thrust the reins in his hand.

"Take him and go! He's fast!"

"Why—what?" Laramie sputtered, his thinking processes in a muddle. The mere sight of Judy Anders had that effect upon him. Hope flamed in him. Did her helping him mean—then reason returned and he took the gift the gods had given him without stopping for questions. As he grabbed the horn and swung up he managed: "I sure thank you kindly, miss—"

"Don't thank me," Judy Anders retorted curtly; her color was high, but her red lips were sulky. "You're a Laramie and ought to be hung, but you fought beside Bob yesterday when he needed help. The Anderses pay their debts. Will you go?"

A nervous stamp of her little foot emphasized the request. The advice was good. Three of the townsmen appeared with lifted guns around a corner of a nearby building. They hesitated as they saw the girl near him, but began maneuvering for a clear shot at him without endangering her.

"See Joel Waters, at the doctor's office!" he yelled to her, and was off for the open country, riding like an Apache, and not at all sure that she understood him. Men howled and guns crashed behind him, and maddened citizens ran cursing for their mounts, too crazy-mad to notice the girl who shrieked vainly at them, unheeding her waving arms.

"Stop! Stop! Wait! Listen to me!" Deaf to her cries they streamed past her, a horse and a foot, and burst out into the open. The mounted men spurred their horses savagely after the figure that was swiftly dwindling in the distance.

Judy dashed aside an angry tear and declaimed her opinion of men in general, and the citizens of San Leon in particular, in terms more expressive than lady-like.

"What's the matter?" It was Joel Waters, limping out of the alley, supported by the doctor. The old man seemed stunned by the rapidity of events. "What in the devil's all this mean? Where's Buck?"

She pointed. "There he goes, with all the idiots in San Leon after him."

"Not all the idiots," Waters corrected. "I'm still here. Dern it, the boy must be crazy, comin' here. I yelled myself deaf at them fools, but they wouldn't listen—"

"They wouldn't listen to me, either!" cried Judy despairingly. "But they won't catch him—ever, on that black of mine. And maybe when they come limping back, they'll be cooled down enough to hear the truth. If they won't listen to me, they will to Bob!"

"To Bob?" exclaimed the doctor. "Has he come out of his daze? I was just getting ready to come over and see him again, when Joel came in for his leg to be dressed."

"Bob came out of it just a little while ago. He told me it wasn't Laramie who shot him. He's still groggy and uncertain as to just what happened. He doesn't know who it was who shot him, but he knows it wasn't Buck Laramie. The last thing he remembers was Laramie running some little distance ahead of him. The bullet came from behind. He thinks a stray slug from the men behind them hit him."

"I don't believe it was a stray," grunted Waters, his eyes beginning to glitter. "I got a dern good idee who shot Bob. I'm goin' to talk—"

"Better not bother Bob too much right now," interrupted the doctor "I'll go over there—"

"Better go in a hurry if you want to catch Bob at home," the girl said grimly. "He was pulling on his boots and yelling for our cook to bring him his gun-belt when I left!"

"What? Why, he musn't get up yet!" The doctor transferred Waters' arm from his shoulder to that of the girl, and hurried away toward the house where Bob Anders was supposed to be convalescing.

"Why did Buck come back here?" Judy wailed to Waters.

"From what he hollered at me as he lighted past, I reckon he's found somethin' up in the Diablos. He come for help. Probably went to my ranch first, and findin' me not there, risked his neck comin' on here. Said send men after him, to foller signs he'd leave. I relayed that there information on to Slim Jones, my foreman.

Doc lent Slim a horse, and Slim's high-tailin' it for the Boxed W right now to round up my waddies and hit the trail. As soon as these San Leon snake-hunters has ruint their cayuses chasin' that black streak of light you give Buck, they'll be pullin' back into town. This time, I bet they'll listen."

"I'm glad he didn't shoot Bob," she murmured. "But why—why did he come back here in the first place?"

"He come to pay a debt he figgered he owed on behalf of his no-account brothers. His saddle bags is full of gold he aims to give back to the citizens of this here ongrateful town. What's the matter?"

For his fair companion had uttered a startled exclamation.

"N-nothing, only—only I didn't know it was that way! Then Buck never robbed or stole, like his brothers?"

"Course he didn't!" snapped the old man irascibly. "Think I'd kept on bein' his friend all his life, if he had? Buck ain't to blame for what his brothers did. He's straight and he's always been straight."

"But he was with them, when—when—"

"I know." Waters' voice was gentler. "But he didn't shoot yore dad. That was Luke. And Buck was with 'em only because they made him. He wasn't nothin' but a kid."

She did not reply and old Waters, noting the soft, new light glowing in her eyes, the faint, wistful smile that curved her lips, wisely said nothing.

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In the meantime the subject of their discussion was proving the worth of the sleek piece of horseflesh under him. He grinned as he saw the distance between him and his pursuers widen, thrilled to the marvel of the horse between his knees as any good horseman would. In half an hour he could no longer see the men who hunted him.

He pulled the black to an easier, swinging gait that would eat up the miles for long hours on end, and headed for the Diablos. But the desperate move he was making was not dominating his thoughts. He was mulling over a new puzzle; the problem of why Judy Anders had come to his aid. Considering her parting words, she didn't have much use for him. If Bob had survived his wound, and asserted Laramie's innocence, why were the citizens so hot for his blood? If not —would Judy Anders willingly aid a man she thought shot her brother? He thrilled at the memory of her, standing there with the horse that saved his life. If only he weren't a Laramie—How beautiful she was.