

## CHAPTER 7

### BOTTLED UP

A good three hours before sundown Laramie was in the foothills of the Diablos. In another hour, by dint of reckless riding over trails that were inches in width, which even he ordinarily would have shunned, he came in sight of the entrance to the hide-out. He had left signs farther down the trail to indicate, not the way he had come, but the best way for Waters' punchers to follow him.

Once more he dismounted some distance from the tunnel and stole cautiously forward. There would be a new sentry at the entrance, and Laramie's first job must be to dispose of him silently.

He was halfway to the tunnel when he glimpsed the guard, sitting several yards from the mouth, near a clump of bushes. It was the scar-faced fellow Harrison had called Braxton, and he seemed wide-awake.

Falling back on Indian tactics, acquired from the Yaquis in Mexico, Laramie began a stealthy, and necessarily slow, advance on the guard, swinging in a circle that would bring him behind the man. He crept up to within a dozen feet.

Braxton was getting restless. He shifted his position, craning his neck as he stared suspiciously about him. Laramie believed he had heard, but not yet located, faint sounds made in Laramie's progress. In another instant he would turn his head and stare full at the bushes which afforded the attacker scanty cover.

Gathering a handful of pebbles, Laramie rose stealthily to his knees and threw them over the guard's head. They hit with a loud clatter some yards beyond the man. Braxton started to his feet with an oath. He glared in the direction of the

sound with his Winchester half lifted, neck craned. At the same instant Laramie leaped for him with his six-gun raised like a club.

Scarface wheeled, and his eyes flared in amazement. He jerked the rifle around, but Laramie struck it aside with his left hand, and brought down his pistol barrel crushingly on the man's head. Braxton went to his knees like a felled ox; slumped full-length and lay still.

Laramie ripped off belts and neckerchief from the senseless figure; bound and gagged his captive securely. He appropriated his pistol, rifle and spare cartridges, then dragged him away from the tunnel mouth and shoved him in among a cluster of rocks and bushes, effectually concealing him from the casual glance.

"Won the first trick, by thunder!" grunted Laramie. "And now for the next deal."

The success of that deal depended on whether or not all the outlaws of Harrison's band were in the hide-out. Mart Rawley was probably outside, yet; maybe still back in San Leon. But Laramie knew he must take the chance that all the other outlaws were inside.

He glanced up to a ledge overhanging the tunnel mouth, where stood precariously balanced the huge boulder which had given him his idea for bottling up the canyon.

"Cork for my bottle!" muttered Laramie. "All I need now's a lever."

A broken tree limb sufficed for that, and a few moments later he had climbed to the ledge and was at work on the boulder. A moment's panic assailed him as he feared its base was too deeply imbedded for him to move it. But under his fierce efforts he felt the great mass give at last. A few minutes more of back-breaking effort, another heave that made the veins bulge on his temples—and

the boulder started toppling, crashed over the ledge and thundered down into the tunnel entrance. It jammed there, almost filling the space.

He swarmed down the wall and began wedging smaller rocks and brush in the apertures between the boulder and the tunnel sides. The only way his enemies could get out now was by climbing the canyon walls, a feat he considered practically impossible, or by laboriously picking out the stones he had jammed in place, and squeezing a way through a hole between the boulder and the tunnel wall. And neither method would be a cinch, with a resolute cowpuncher slinging lead at everything that moved.

Laramie estimated that his whole task had taken about half an hour. Slinging Braxton's rifle over his shoulder he clambered up the cliffs. At the spot on the canyon rim where he had spied upon the hide-out that morning, he fortified himself by the simple procedure of crouching behind a fair-sized rock, with the Winchester and pistols handy at his elbows. He had scarcely taken his position when he saw a mob of riders breaking away from the corral behind the cabin. As he had figured, the gang was getting away to an early start for its activities of the night.

He counted twenty-five of them; and the very sun that glinted on polished gun hammers and silver conchas seemed to reflect violence and evil deeds.

"Four hundred yards," muttered Laramie, squinting along the blue rifle barrel.

"Three fifty—three hundred—now I opens the ball!"

At the ping of the shot dust spurted in front of the horses' hoofs, and the riders scattered like quail, with startled yells.

"Drop them shootin' irons and hi'st yore hands!" roared Laramie. "Tunnel's corked up and you can't get out!"

His answer came in a vengeful hail of bullets, spattering along the canyon rim for yards in either direction. He had not expected any other reply. His shout had been more for rhetorical effect than anything else. But there was nothing theatrical about his second shot, which knocked a man out of his saddle. The fellow never moved after he hit the ground.

The outlaws converged toward the tunnel entrance, firing as they rode, aiming at Laramie's aerie, which they had finally located. Laramie replied in kind. A mustang smitten by a slug meant for his rider rolled to the ground and broke his rider's leg under him. A squat raider howled profanely as a slug ploughed through his breast muscles.

The half a dozen men in the lead jammed into the tunnel and found that Laramie had informed them truthfully. Their yells reached a crescendo of fury. The others slid from their horses and took cover behind the rocks that littered the edges of the canyon, dragging the wounded men with them.

From a rush and a dash the fight settled to a slow, deadly grind, with nobody taking any rash chances. Having located his tiny fort, they concentrated their fire on the spot of the rim he occupied. A storm of bullets drove him to cover behind the breastworks, and became exceedingly irksome.

He had not seen either Rawley or Harrison. Rawley, he hoped, was still in San Leon, but the absence of Harrison worried him. Had he, too, gone to San Leon? If so, there was every chance that he might get clean away, even if his band was wiped out. There was another chance, that he or Rawley, or both of them, might return to the hide-out and attack him from the rear. He cursed himself for not having divulged the true identity of the gang's leader to Judy Anders; but he always seemed addled when talking to her.

The ammunition supply of the outlaws seemed inexhaustible. He knew at least six men were in the tunnel, and he heard them cursing and shouting, their voices muffled. He found himself confronted by a quandary that seemed to admit of no solution. If he did not discourage them, they would be breaking through the blocked tunnel and potting him from the rear. But to affect this discouragement meant leaving his point of vantage, and giving the men below a chance to climb the canyon wall. He did not believe this could be done, but he did not know what additions to the fortress had been made by the new occupants. They might have chiseled out handholds at some point on the wall. Well, he'd have to look at the tunnel.

"Six-guns against rifles, if this keeps up much longer," he muttered, working his way over the ledges. "Cartridges most gone. Why the devil don't Joel's men show up? I can't keep these hombres hemmed up forever— damn!"

His arm thrust his six-gun out as he yelped. Stones and brush had been worked out at one place in the tunnel-mouth, and the head and shoulders of a man appeared. At the crash of Laramie's Colt the fellow howled and vanished. Laramie crouched, glaring; they would try it again, soon. If he was not there to give them lead-argument, the whole gang would be squeezing out of the tunnel in no time.

He could not get back to the rim, and leave the tunnel unguarded; yet there was always the possibility of somebody climbing the canyon wall.

Had he but known it, his fears were justified. For while he crouched on the ledge, glaring down at the tunnel-mouth, down in the canyon a man was wriggling toward a certain point of the cliff, where his keen eyes had discerned something dangling. He had discovered Laramie's rope, hanging from the stunted tree on the rim. Cautiously he lifted himself out of the tall grass, ready to

duck back in an instant, then as no shot came from the canyon rim, he scuttled like a rabbit toward the wall.

Kicking off his boots and slinging his rifle on his back, he began swarming, ape-like, up the almost sheer wall. His outstretched arm grasped the lower end of the rope, just as the others in the canyon saw what he was doing, and opened a furious fire on the rim to cover his activities. The outlaw on the rope swore luridly, and went up with amazing agility, his flesh crawling with the momentary expectation of a bullet in his back.

The renewed firing had just the effect on Laramie that the climber had feared it would have—it drew him back to his breastwork. It was not until he was crouching behind his breastwork that it occurred to him that the volleys might have been intended to draw him away from the tunnel. So he spared only a limited glance over the rocks, for the bullets were winging so close that he dared not lift his head high. He did not see the man on the rope cover the last few feet in a scrambling rush, and haul himself over the rim, unslinging his rifle as he did so.

Laramie turned and headed back for the ledge whence he could see the opening. And as he did so, he brought himself into full view of the outlaw who was standing upright on the rim, by the stunted tree.

The whip-like crack of his Winchester reached Laramie an instant after he felt a numbing impact in his left shoulder. The shock of the blow knocked him off his feet, and his head hit hard against a rock. Even as he fell he heard the crashing of brush down the trail, and his last, hopeless thought was that Rawley and Harrison were returning. Then the impact of his head against the rock knocked all thought into a stunned blank.