

The **POPULAR BOOK** *of* **Boys' Stories** 1931



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Prairie Pals!



By
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A Roaring Western yarn featuring the Rio Kid, outlaw, and his tenderfoot pal.

CHAPTER I RIDE HIM!

"**R**IDE him, cowboy!" shouted the Rio Kid. "Ride him!"
Two or three punchers of the Bar-10 Ranch glanced round at the sound of his voice.

The Kid did not heed them.

He pulled in his mustang near the corral gate, and sat in the saddle, watching; watching the boy on the cow-pony.

His face was keen, his eyes bright, as he watched.

If there was anything that the Rio Kid admired, it was horsemanship. He could admire a guy who was quick on the draw, or unerring with the rope; but a galoot who could ride was sure of the Kid's greatest esteem.

And this boy could ride!

He did not look more than fifteen; a limber lad, with flushed face and sparkling eyes, a mop of fair hair, and a hand of iron on the rein. He

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reminded the Kid of himself not so many years ago, in the old days on the Double-Bar Ranch at Frio, before the shadow had fallen on his life, and fate had made him an outlaw.

A fresh, keen, clean-looking lad; and he rode the buck-jumping pony as few men could have ridden him. The Kid watched him with sheer pleasure. The Kid himself was a man to witch the world with noble horsemanship; but he figured that this boy was very nearly his equal with a wild cow-pony.

Crash! came the forefeet on the hard earth, the hind heels flying in the air, till it looked as if the pony would roll over headlong, crushing the rider. The boy was leaning back till his hat brushed the tossing tail of the cow-pony. Crash! came the hind heels down, and the forefeet sawed the air, and the boy's face was buried in the rough neck of the buck-jumper.

"Ride him, cowboy!" chuckled the Kid. "By the great horned toad, I'll say that kid can ride!"

His voice reached the boy, and even in the midst of his strenuous struggle with the savage cow-pony, he glanced at the stranger, and tossed him a fleeting smile.

Crash! crash! clatter! rang the beating heels.

The Kid slipped from his mustang.

He had horned in at the Bar-10 to water his horse and to fill his own can. A long ride lay behind the Rio Kid, and a long ride lay before him; for how close his pursuers were on his track, he did not know; but he knew they were not far behind. If the sheriff of Blue Grass and his men had been in full sight, the Kid would not have pulled out at this moment. He was going to see this through. Side-Kicker, the grey mustang, trotted away to the water-trough, while the Kid stood watching the fight between the boy and the buck-jumper.

Crash! clatter! crash!

The boy was riding him—riding him hard! Every trick and device known to an "outlaw" bronc was played by the buck-jumper, but the boy in the saddle put paid to every one of them.

They were a tough crowd at the Bar-10—a dog-goned tough bunch, the Kid reckoned, or they would never have let a lad in his early teens mount that savage bronc. He read in their faces that it was a rough joke on a tenderfoot; that they expected to see the boy thrown; and one of them, at least, was disappointed that he was not thrown. A burly, black-bearded cowman was scowling as it became clearer and clearer that the boy was mastering the bronc. And he scowled more blackly when one of the other punchers sang out:

"Say, Euchre Dave, you'll sure lose that bronc. That tenderfoot sure can ride him."

"Aw, can it!" growled the black-bearded cowman. "He ain't through yet."

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"I guess he's getting away with it, for sure."

"Forget it!" snapped Euchre Dave.

But the puncher was right, and the deepening scowl of Euchre Dave showed that he knew it. The boy was mastering the buck-jumper; slowly but steadily he was mastering him.

The wild hoofs still rang and crashed and clattered; the ears were back, the rolling eyes gleaming savagely; but the broncho's flanks dripped with sweat, and his efforts were weakening. Slowly but surely the fierce spirit of the bronc was yielding to the pertinacity of the rider.

"Say, fellers, ain't it a sight for sore eyes!" exclaimed the Rio Kid enthusiastically. "Ain't this jest pie, with the cream on?"

Some of the punchers nodded and grinned. Euchre Dave turned his black scowl on the handsome, sunburnt stranger.

"I guess it ain't pie for Dave!" grinned one of the cow-men. "Dave's standing to lose that bronc if the boy rides him."

"How come?" asked the Kid.

"The boy wanted to buy a cayuse, he sure did, and Dave offered him the bronc for ten dollars if he could ride him."

There was a laugh from the other punchers.

They had gathered round to see the joke on the tenderfoot, fully expecting the "outlaw" broncho to throw him and trample him. Now that the joke was turning against the horse's owner, they were enjoying it still more.

But the humour of that unexpected turn of events was lost on Euchre Dave. Savage as he was, the bronc was a good cayuse, and ten dollars would hardly pay for his trappings. Euchre Dave stood to make a gift of the horse to the boy who rode him.

The Kid grinned.

He was the man to horn into such a rough pleasantry, and put a stop to it, if the boy hadn't been able to ride the pony. But the boy could ride—he could ride in a way that made the Kid's eyes dance with delight. As the joke had turned out, the Kid was prepared to enjoy it thoroughly.

"Ride him, cowboy!" roared the Kid, as the cow-pony, in a last effort to get rid of the rider who seemed glued to his back, burst into a sudden mad gallop.

Away went horse and rider, at a speed that seemed like lightning; and then suddenly the bronc stopped and planted his forefeet hard on the earth, head down.

Even the Kid figured that the boy would shoot over the down-sloping neck. Euchre Dave grinned.

But he grinned too soon.

The boy was in the saddle like a rock. The head was dragged up as if his wrists were of steel.

The bronc shot on again. He raced on, almost out of sight; then wheeled and came racing back. But it was not of his own volition that

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he came. It was the guiding hand on the rein that drove him. The contest was over, and the buck-jumper was mastered.

With a clatter of hoofs, the tenderfoot brought the bronc up to the corral and halted him. He slipped from the saddle. The broncho stood trembling.

With a caressing hand, the boy touched the sweating neck. He ran his hand over the foamy muzzle, careless of the fierce teeth that, only a few minutes ago, would have torn him savagely. But the teeth did not tear now. The buck-jumper was beaten, and knew it; and he stood obedient beside his master.

With a hand on the bridle, flushed, breathless, but with a smile on his face, the boy looked at Euchre Dave.

"My cayuse, I guess!" he said.

CHAPTER II

THE KID HORNS IN!

THE Rio Kid walked to his mustang. Side-Kicker had drunk his fill, and was waiting. The Kid filled his can, but with a side glance on the boy and the group of punchers.

His eyes wandered, for a moment, to the sky-line southward, where the grass waved and glistened in the sunshine of Texas. But as yet, no bobbing Stetson hats showed over the glistening grass.

Some of the Bar-io punchers were congratulating the boy. Rough bunch as they were, they could admire horsemanship, and the tenderfoot had shown that he could ride.

But the Kid, with the corner of his eye on the bronc's owner—or, rather, former owner—figured that trouble was at hand. Euchre Dave's rough jest had turned against himself, and his looks showed that he did not aim to stand for it.

He stood silent, lowering, scowling, for some minutes. Rough-neck as he was, he had perhaps some sense of shame. But he was not giving away that bronc, if he knew it; a valuable animal, and still more valuable now that he had been brought to heel by a master hand.

He strode forward at last.

"My cayuse," said the boy, with a smile.

"Forget it, you, Jim Dinwoody," said the cowman harshly. "I guess this here joke has gone far enough. That ain't your cayuse, and never will be, unless you cough up his price."

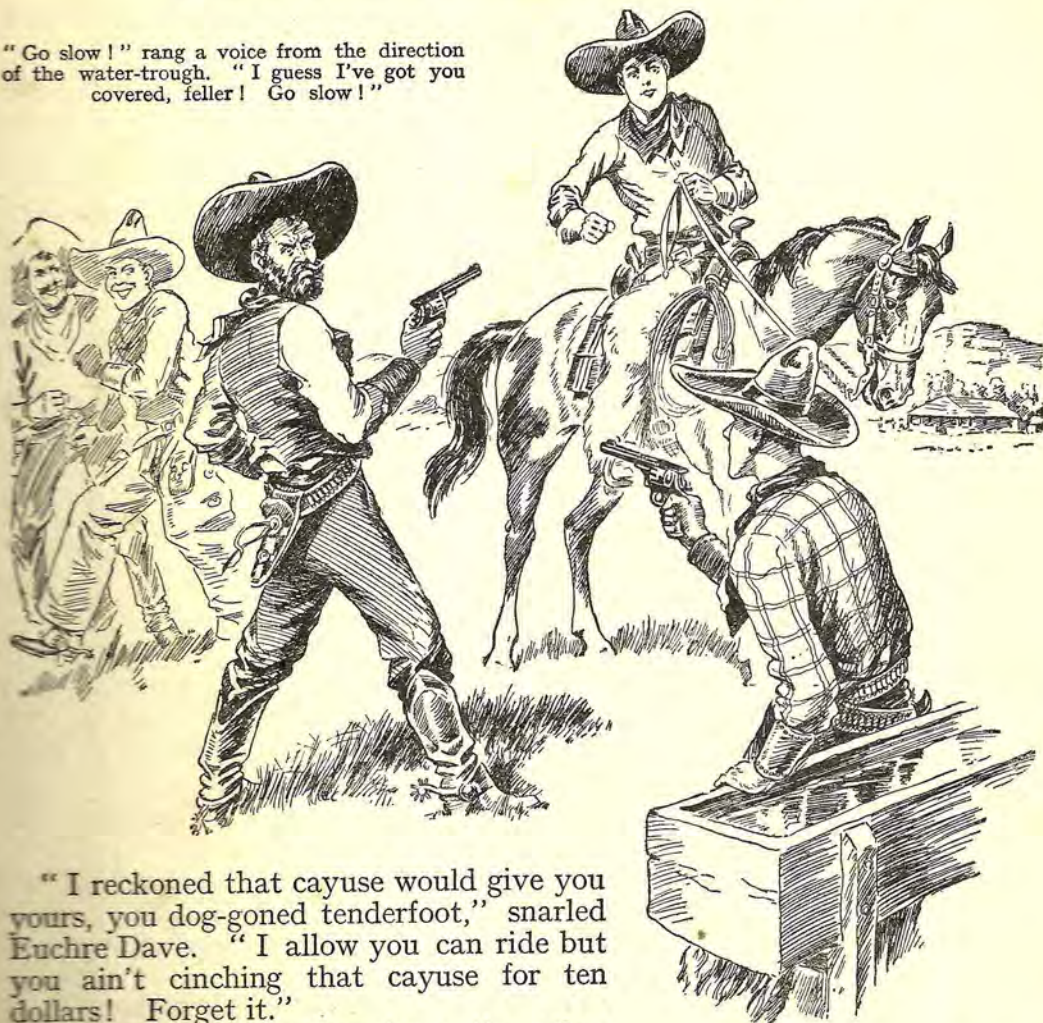
The boy's eyes flashed.

The burly cowman towered over him, and his hand, as if by instinct, hovered near his gun, but there was no fear in the face of the boy who had beaten the buck-jumper.

"I guess the price is ten dollars!" he snapped. "These guys are all witnesses. Ten dollars for that cayuse if I could ride him—your own words, feller."

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"Go slow!" rang a voice from the direction of the water-trough. "I guess I've got you covered, feller! Go slow!"



"I reckoned that cayuse would give you yours, you dog-goned tenderfoot," snarled Euchre Dave. "I allow you can ride but you ain't cinching that cayuse for ten dollars! Forget it."

There was a murmur from the other punchers. Rough as they were, they had their code, and backing out of a bargain was not in it. Euchre Dave cast a black scowl round him at the disapproving faces, and dropped his hand on his gun.

"I say that boy ain't cinching my cayuse!" he growled. "I got a gun hyer that says so! What about it?"

There was no answer, and the punchers backed a little. Nobody in the bunch intended to carry disapproval so far as gun-play.

Euchre Dave turned to the boy again.

"Beat it!" he said tersely. "You come on this ranch looking for a job—waal, I reckon you better grow some, first. Beat it while you're safe in one piece."

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"I guess I wouldn't ride with such a bunch," snapped the boy. "But I'm sure taking my hoss—there's your ten dollars."

He tossed a ten-dollar bill to the cowman. Euchre Dave made no motion to take it, and it fluttered to the ground.

The boy leaped lightly into the saddle again.

"By the great horned toad!" Euchre Dave's voice was husky with rage. "Git off that bronc! You hear me yaup? I guess I'll take my quirt to you, you gol-darned tenderfoot."

"Tenderfoot or not, I pack a gun," said the boy, "and you won't get a long way with your quirt, you dog-goned horse-thief."

In an instant the cowman's gun flashed from the holster, and was levelled at the boy rider.

"Light down!" he said hoarsely. "By thunder, you light down, or you get yours. Pronto!"

"Never!"

"Then by thunder——"

"Go slow!" rang a voice from the direction of the water-trough. "I guess I've got you covered, feller! Go slow."

Euchre Dave's eyes flashed round. The Rio Kid, a dozen paces away, had a walnut-butted gun in his grip, and the long bluish barrel looked straight at the infuriated face of the cowman.

There was a buzz from the Bar-io punchers as they hurriedly backed out of the line of fire. Some of them were grinning, evidently not displeased to see the bully of the bunk-house called to order. Euchre Dave gritted his teeth.

The revolver that had threatened the boy swung round towards the Rio Kid.

The movement was swift—Euchre Dave was the fastest man with a gun on the Bar-io—but it was not quite swift enough.

Bang!

The Kid's Colt roared.

The cowman fired the next second, but his bullet flew wide and wild as his arm dropped to his side, shattered at the elbow by the Kid's bullet.

There was a roar of pain from Euchre Dave, as his broken arm sagged, and his gun went with a crash to the earth.

He staggered back, white as chalk, till he backed on the corral wall, and leaned there, panting, wild-eyed.

The Kid advanced, his smoking revolver up.

One swift glance he gave the others; but he had no intervention to fear from them. It was man to man, and if the Bar-io man had come out at the little end of the horn, that was his own funeral. The Kid advanced on the panting ruffian.

"You dog-goned, pesky polecat," he said contemptuously. "You figured it was funny to see a tenderfoot killed by an outlaw bronc—and you

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don't stand for your own bargain now he's rode him and won him. You gol-darned, pie-faced greaser, I sure ought to have put that lead through your think-box—and, by the great horned toad, if you don't stand for your bargain, I'll riddle you like you was a colander. You get me? You selling the boy that hoss for ten dollars? Pronto!"

The Kid's eyes gleamed over the smoking gun.

For a second the cowman glared defiance; but the deadly glint in the eyes over the gun daunted him.

"The boy takes the cayuse!" he muttered. "I guess I stand to it!"

"That lets you out." The Kid holstered his gun, and turned to the boy. "It's your cayuse, you Jim! I guess you know how to ride him, sure." He smiled.

"I reckon I owe you a life, as well as a hoss, feller," said the boy soberly. "Shake!"

The Kid gripped his hand.

"Now you want to ride," he said.

"You riding?" asked the boy. His eager eyes ran over the Kid. It was easy to see that the liking was mutual.

The Kid hesitated a second, while his keen eyes flashed to the south. But there was no man in sight, and he nodded.

"I'm hitting north," he said.

"I guess it's all the same to me," said the boy. "Say, you wouldn't hate to have a tenderfoot along?"

The Kid smiled again.

"I'd sure like your company a whole lot," he answered.

"That goes, then."

The Kid mounted Side-Kicker. The Bar-io punchers stared after them as they rode away at a gallop. In a few minutes the waving grass of the prairie swallowed the Kid and the tenderfoot from sight.

CHAPTER III

TENDERFOOT AND OUTLAW!

THE Rio Kid's brow was moody as he sat with his back to the cottonwood and watched the boy building a camp fire.

The sun was setting in the west, towards the sierras of New Mexico. Shadows were lengthening and deepening in the timber island where the Kid and his comrade had camped.

The Kid, from under the wide brim of his Stetson, watched the boy moving actively, lithely, untired by a long day on the trail.

The boyish face was bright and happy.

But the Kid was moody. He was thinking, and his thoughts were not of a pleasant cast.

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Weeks had passed since that morning at the Bar-io.

The two comrades were still riding together. The Kid liked the companionship ; and it was plain that Jim Dinwoody liked it, and looked on his new comrade with admiring affection. The way the Kid had chipped in at the Bar-io had won his whole-hearted admiration ; and days and nights on the prairie and in the trackless chapparral had deepened it.

The boy, as he had told the Kid in his frank, confidential way that the Kid liked, came from a township in the San Antone country. Some family dispute, into which the Kid did not inquire, had led him to leave his home and strike west into the wilder cow-country.

He was a tenderfoot—fresh, inexperienced, unsuspicious ; and those qualities touched strangely some chord in the Kid's heart.

Jim took the Kid on trust.

He had come into the cow-country to take up punching cattle ; to " show them," as he rather vaguely said, that he could earn his own corn. His horse had been stolen—as might have been expected—and he had struck the Bar-io with a double object—to buy a horse and ask for a job. Hence the trouble into which the Kid had horned so opportunely.

As tender a tenderfoot, the Kid figured, as he had ever struck, from the Rio Grande to the Colorado River. And the boy outlaw liked him all the better for it.

Little more than a boy himself in years, the Kid had been hardened, seared, by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Few years had passed since he had been even as this boy was ; but the change that those few years had wrought brought a cloud to the Kid's brow, an ache to his heart, when he thought of it. There was a strange pleasure, mingled with pain, in seeing his own ingenuous boyhood over again in this fresh, frank lad.

" Boy Jim," as the Kid called him, playfully showed his " tenderness " in nothing more thoroughly than in taking the Kid on trust.

He asked no questions, and had no doubts.

The Kid looked like a puncher, as indeed he was ; but what a puncher was doing leading the Kid's life was a question anyone but a tenderfoot would have asked himself, with grim suspicion for the answer.

But the boy was content to ride and trail and camp, unquestioning ; admiring the Kid for his horsemanship, his wonderful shooting, his skill with the riata, his amazing accuracy in reading sign on a trail ; never thinking of asking what his wandering life meant.

It was pie to the Kid, accustomed to riding a lonely trail. The eager, fresh talk of the boy as they rode, his frank face flushed with the fire-light in camp, his eagerness to learn what the Kid could teach him of wood-craft, of camping dodges, of care of horses, of picking up sign—and there was little the Kid did not know of these things—gave a new pleasure to the " fire-bug " who was hunted by half the sheriffs in Texas—whose

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hand was against every man and against whom every man's hand was raised.

Why the Kid kept to solitary trails; why sometimes he held for days to a hidden camp in the chapparral; and at other times gave the word to let out the horses to top speed; why he avoided all the cow-towns and ranches, and even scanned the country carefully before approaching a lonely water-hole; the boy did not know and did not care.

Gradually he gathered that the Kid had enemies—a vague impression that his enemies were many and determined. But as the Kid said little, he asked nothing. He was content to take his new friend on trust.

Now, as the Kid sat in the timber, watching him build the fire, moody thought deepened in the outlaw's brow. This companionship, which he had lightly taken on for a day, had lengthened into weeks—and with every passing day the Kid realised that he would feel, more and more sharply, the inevitable parting when it came.

And it must come! Sooner or later the boy would guess, or something would happen to put him wise. And if he knew that his comrade of the trails was the Rio Kid—the outlaw whose name was a byword in every part of Texas, the fire-bug on whose head was a reward of a thousand dollars—

The Kid flinched at the thought, as if it struck him like a blow. The boy must never know that.

Wisdom dictated an early parting—before the boy knew! But there the Kid put it off. The boy's eager pleasure in his company was one reason. Another was his own pleasure in that frank, confiding friendship of a youthful heart unspoiled and unstained. And yet another was that the tenderfoot was booked for trouble in the rough cow-country when he left the Kid.

So the days had passed; and now the Kid was thinking hard. Side-Kicker, lying at his feet, lifted his head, and looked with his intelligent eyes at the Kid's troubled face. He knew that his master was troubled. The Kid stretched out a hand to pat the glossy neck, but it was done absently.

The boy, leaving the camp fire burning, strolled over to the Kid, and threw himself into the grass beside the outlaw.

The Kid noted, with a grim smile, the dense column of smoke rising from the fire. A signal, he reckoned, that would betray the camp to any galoot that had eyes for him within a dozen miles.

But he said nothing of it. What reason was he going to give for hiding the camp?



The Rio Kid, boy outlaw of Frio.

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Redskins? The boy would have believed him had he stated that there were Apaches or Yaqui to be feared. But a lie would have choked the Kid.

"Say, you got a grouch, Carfax!" said the boy, with a smile. "You sure look like you lost a Texas dollar and found a Mexican cent."

The Kid smiled.

"Nary a grouch!" he answered. "I just been thinking."

"Me, too!" said the boy. "Say, it was my lucky day you horned-in at the Bar-ro."

"You reckon?" said the Kid, with a wry face.

"Sure! I guess it was pie, falling in with a guy like you, Carfax," said the boy earnestly. "I don't rightly figure why you've given yourself the trouble of a tenderfoot, but it's jest pie to me."

"I sure like you a whole lot, feller," said the Kid, smiling.

"That's pie, too!" said Jim Dinwoody.

"You ain't tired of my company yet?" asked the Kid.

"Not on your life! I ain't quitting, so long as you'll have me. Say, this is the life I used to dream of, back in San Antone—with a pard like you!" The boy's dark eyes glistened. "Say, some day when you quit trailing, we'll punch cows together on a ranch—I guess you'll want to be at the job again some time. If you'll stay my friend, we'll get work on the same ranch——"

The Kid's face clouded.

Even on an outlying ranch like the Bar-ro he had ridden in for water at the risk of being recognised, and of having to fight his way out gun in hand. Few were the ranches of Texas where the Rio Kid could have off-saddled in safety.

"You sure got a grouch," said the boy, his eyes earnestly on the Kid's face. "You don't like the idea?"

"I sure do like it a lot," said the Kid, "but——"

"You got trouble waiting round the corner for you somewhere," said the boy shrewdly. "I ain't denying that I'm a tenderfoot, but I got eyes. You got some gunman trailing you, Carfax, or what?"

The Kid laughed.

If there was a gunman in Texas who could have scared the Kid, the boy outlaw was not wise to him. Something prompted him to speak.

"Ever heard of the Rio Kid?" he asked.

The boy started; the colour flickered in his face.

"Shucks! You got the Kid after you?" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"That fire-bug—that dog-goned outlaw who's shot up more guys than he's got fingers and toes! Say, it's a plumb shame that that pesky coyote has never been roped in and strung up to a limb."

The Kid winced.

"He's trailing you!" exclaimed Dinwoody.

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"I ain't saying that. But"—the Kid grinned with the whimsicality of the thought—"that guy, the Rio Kid, sure has given me more trouble than I can handle."

"Dog-gone him!" growled Jim Dinwoody. "I reckon you'd put paid even to that villain, Carfax, if you met up with him. I reckon you would! And I sure know you'd have a friend, tenderfoot or not, to stand by you, and face even the Rio Kid with a gun in his grip."

The Kid was silent.

If, for a moment, it had crossed his mind to tell the truth, to make some attempt to justify himself in the eyes of this boy whose opinion he strangely valued, he dismissed it now.

The name of the Rio Kid had been blackened past redemption; crimes of which he had never heard were laid to his charge and eagerly believed; and he knew, had he uttered the words that had risen to his tongue, that the boy by his side would have shrunk away in amazement and horror. Fire-bug, hold-up man, gunman, desperate and reckless outlaw—they said all that of the Kid, and worse; and what was the Kid's word against the testimony of all the cow-country?

He was silent.

The boy should never know; but if he was not to know, they must part; that dream of a fresh, unstained friendship must end. The Kid sighed.

"I guess we better be turning in!" he said abruptly.

In his blankets, with his feet to the fire, the boy slept peacefully the dreamless sleep of youth.

But it was long before the Kid's eyes closed.



Jim Dinwoody, in whom the Rio Kid finds a staunch pal.

CHAPTER IV

HUNTED DOWN!

CRACK! crack! crack!

The roar of the six-gun roused the Kid from the uneasy slumber into which he had fallen towards dawn.

Crack! crack!

The Kid threw off his blankets, half-rose, and gripped his gun. Faint starlight fell between the branches of the cottonwoods. The fire had died down to a faint glow.

The boy was on his feet, gun in hand, blazing away into the shadows. From the surrounding trees crack on crack answered.

The Kid's grasp on the boy dragged him down to cover. It was only

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in time. Bullets whizzed over the camp; there was a streak of blood on the boy's cheek where a shot had already grazed.

"Say, I guess it's some hold-up crowd," panted the boy. "They were creeping on us when I woke. I saw five or six, but I guess they jumped for cover when I opened on them—they sure did."

The Kid reckoned he knew why. They had figured that it was the Rio Kid shooting, and the sheriff of Blue Grass knew what the Kid's shooting was like.

They had trailed him down at last. That column of smoke from the timber island, likely, had done it. They had got him.

Crack! crack! crack! came from the surrounding gloom. Alive or dead, they meant to have the Kid.

A hoarse voice shouted from the darkness.

"Say you! We've got you cinched! We've got you dead to rights! Surrender, you durned fire-bug!"

The Kid's reply was a bullet in the direction of the shouting voice. There was a yell and a groan. It was not safe to crowd the Rio Kid.

"You sure got that guy, old-timer!" grinned the boy.

"Hug cover!" muttered the Kid.

"You bet!"

The Kid had a glimpse of his face in the star-gleam. It was tense with excitement, the eyes shining—no trace of fear there! Staunch as steel, boy as he was; the pard the Kid had longed for. The pard he had found; the pard he would keep!

Keep? They were sheriff's men round him—the boy was contending against the law; giving himself over, without knowing, to the wild, hunted life of an outlaw!

The Kid shut his teeth hard.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Close as they lay in the grass, in the darkness, the lead searched them near. The Kid reckoned that there would be a rush soon—and alone he would have cared little for it. But the boy? To make him an outlaw—to put the price of blood on his head—

"We got to beat it, feller!" whispered the Kid.

"Forget it!" breathed Jim Dinwoody. "Beat it nothing! We're fighting this out, Carfax—that's the crowd that's your enemies, I guess. Ain't that so?"

"Sure!" breathed the Kid. "But——"

"We're seeing this through, you and me, old-timer. Beat it to blazes! We're seeing this through."

He spoke through his set teeth. The Kid could have groaned. For whom did the boy take those foes of the night to be—gunmen, outlaws, perhaps, with the Rio Kid among them! And they were sheriff's men—men with a rope for the Rio Kid, a rope for any man who stood for him!

The Kid's grip closed on the boy's arm.

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"You leave this to me, feller. This is where we get off, I'm telling you."

"It's your say-so, Carfax." He was suddenly submissive. "If you figure it that-a-way, I ain't got no kick coming."

"Get to the cayuses while I keep them busy." The Kid's voice was the faintest of whispers in the boy's ear. "Put up your gun—you don't want to burn powder—you sure don't." The whispering voice shook with anxiety. "Put up that gun, dog-gone you!"

The boy slid the gun to his belt.

"Get the horses along the creek, on the edge of the timber, and wait till I show up."

"You're boss!" said the boy, but his voice was unwilling.

Unwilling or not, he obeyed. On his face in the thick grass he crawled for the horses, with the caution he had learned from the Kid.

The Kid, a gun in either hand now, opened fire. The boy should not burn more powder—already he had burned too much for one who was not an outlaw, who should never be an outlaw.

But the Kid burned powder freely, and the flashes of his six-guns leaped through the dark.

Flashes came from the night around him. At them the Kid fired, and the yelling from his foes showed that the lead searched close. The return fire came, fierce and fast, and lead spattered round the Kid; but this was a game at which the Rio Kid had no master.

Bang! bang! bang! roared the outlaw's heavy, long-barrelled Colts, and the yelling, the crackling in the thickets, showed that the enemy were drawing farther off from the deadly fire.

There was a crowd of them—a big bunch, the Kid reckoned—but they knew the Kid. They knew he was a bad man to crowd. They were in no hurry to close on him. It would come, but men who knew the Kid had no bunch to crowd him incautiously. Wounded men lay groaning in the black thickets among the cottonwoods—dead men lay in the tangled scrub. It had given the Blue Grass bunch pause.

The Kid reloaded his six-guns and holstered them. The boy had had time. While that fierce burst of firing was going on, centring attention on the Kid, he had had his chance with the horses, and unless the Kid was mistaken in him, the tenderfoot had made the grade.

Silent as a snake in the darkness, the Kid crept away. The horses were gone—Side-Kicker, and the bronc that had once been Euchre Dave's at the Bar-to. The boy had got them to the creek while the Kid held the attention of the enemy.

By the glimmering water on the edge of the timber, a score of yards from the camp, the Kid rose from the darkness like a phantom at the side of the boy as he held the cayuses. Jim Dinwoody did not start; he smiled.

"Hit the trail!" breathed the Kid.

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He swung himself on the grey mustang. The boy was as soon on the back of the cow-pony.

Crack ! crack ! crack ! crack ! roared in the darkness of the timber behind.

There was a shouting of hoarse voices, crackling of thickets and branches, yells of rage and disappointment. They had got wise to it that the Kid was gone. They were trampling in the deserted camp. Jingle of bridles and spurs, ringing from the darkness, showed that they had brought up their horses.

It was hard riding now, for life or for death. The Kid gave his mustang the spur.

" Ride, cowboy, ride ! " said the Kid.

They rode at a mad gallop under the dim light of the stars. By rolling prairie and dim arroyo, leaping dim barrancas, they rode—and ever behind, in the darkness, came the thunder of hoofs, the roar of guns blazing at random. A break-neck ride, where a false step meant death ; and the boy rode as the Kid rode, and, with Side-Kicker going all out, the boy kept pace.

Thunder of hoofs and flashes of guns—and the grey light of dawn in the east. Even yet the Blue Grass sheriff was counting on success.

But the Rio Kid was an old hand at this game.

How he dropped the fierce pursuit the tenderfoot did not know, but when the sun came up over the rim of the prairie they were riding alone on a boundless plain. At a slackened speed they still rode on, till the heat of noon drove them to camp, and they camped under the shadow of high rocks in a deep arroyo, where a stream flowed.

The boy washed his cheek, bleeding from the gash of the bullet that had gone very close, in the cool water. He looked round at the Kid, a smile in his eyes.

" We beat them to it, old-timer."

" We sure did ! " said the Kid.

" Say, who was that pesky crowd ? "

The Rio Kid busied himself with his mustang, and the question passed unanswered.

CHAPTER V

THE RIO KID'S FAREWELL !

" **B**ED down hyer ! " said the Kid abruptly.

The boy was more and more puzzled.

Hitherto, in trailing with the puncher who called himself Carfax the tenderfoot had noted how carefully his comrade had avoided towns and ranches ; but now, since the noonday rest in the arroyo, the signs were plain that they were approaching a town.

The Kid had been unusually silent during the ride.

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"Hug cover!" muttered the Kid.
"You bet!" answered Jim Dinwoody; and the Kid caught a glimpse of his smiling face—no trace of fear there!



Jim Dinwoody asked him no questions, but he was puzzled; many of the incidents of that night attack in the timber, now that he thought over them at leisure, perplexed him strangely.

No thought of distrust of his comrade had entered his mind, but he was puzzled. Still more so when the Kid drew rein on a well-trodden trail that evidently led to a cow-town at no great distance, and announced that they were to bed down in a belt of chapparral that bordered the trail.

They camped, but when the boy would have gathered wood for a fire, the Kid smiled and shook his head.

"You reckon that crowd are hunting us?" asked Boy Jim.

"I wouldn't put it past them," said the Kid.

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He reflected grimly that the sheriff of Blue Grass was hunting him, at least, and would never quit while the faintest ray of hope remained of cinching the outlaw of the Rio Grande.

The time of parting had come ! The Kid had put it off too long—and now it had come.

They knew—that enraged and disappointed posse from Blue Grass knew—that the Kid had a comrade, and they would want that comrade as they wanted the Kid. It was more than time to part.

But as the boy slept in his blankets the Kid lay unsleeping—thinking. His brow was dark and his heart was heavy.

The lonely trail of the outlaw had been lighter for the comradeship he had found ; all the more because of the shadow that lay on him, he had delighted in the frank confidence, the unsuspecting trust, of the tenderfoot. It was hard to part. But the time had more than come ! To link that fresh young life with his own wild and lawless trail—to watch the boy gradually opening his eyes to facts that stared him in the face, if he could but have seen them—to watch him learning, by degrees, what his comrade was——

The Kid shook his head sadly.

He rose quietly, in the darkness, and led Side-Kicker to a distance from the camp and left him waiting.

Then he moved back to the camp and stood looking down on the sleeping tenderfoot, rolled in his blankets, a dim shape in the gloom.

To go—without a word ?

That would be best—let the boy wake and find him gone. He would wonder—he would have a grouch against the comrade who had deserted him—but it was better so. Better so—yet something in the Kid's heart denied it. He could not go without a word.

He bent and lightly touched the sleeper's shoulder. The boy awakened at the touch ; his eyes sought the Kid's.

His hand slid to his gun, and the Kid smiled.

" You don't want your hardware, feller—there ain't any guys crowding us," he said.

" You woke me ? " said the boy.

" Sure ! "

Jim Dinwoody sat up. His eyes peered at the Kid, but in the darkness he could not see the outlaw's face.

" What is it, then ? Shoot ! " he said.

" Boy Jim," said the Kid, and there was a quiver in his voice. " Boy Jim, we've trailed together, I'll say I like you a whole lot, and I guess you've found me a white man——"

" The whitest man in Texas ! " said the boy.

The Kid laughed—a harsh laugh. The Rio Kid—fire-bug and outlaw, hunted on all trails—the whitest man in Texas !

THE POPULAR BOOK OF BOYS' STORIES

"Say, I don't get you." The boy's face was anxious. "What's the trouble, old-timer?"

"Listen to me, Boy Jim!" said the Kid soberly. "You're camped here only an hour's ride from Pecos Bend. You'll ride into town at dawn, and you won't talk a whole lot about the man you've trailed with. You'll hit the trail for home, boy—back to San Antone, where you belong, and where I reckon your folks will be plumb glad to see you again. This ain't the country for you, boy—it sure ain't. You'll hit the trail for home when I've quit."

"You ain't quitting!"

"I reckon," said the Kid, "that I got to quit, boy, and it was in my mind to quit without waking you, but I sure couldn't do it. I got to tell you, for I want you to think the best you can of the man you've trailed with, and that was a friend to you."

"I guess I couldn't think more of you than I do, old-timer," said the boy. "You got me guessing! I ain't quitting you none."

"Hit the trail for home!" said the Kid. He drew back a pace. "And when they tell you about that fire-bug, the Rio Kid, don't believe all they say, boy—not all of it! The Kid's a hard case—a durned hard case, and there ain't any two ways about that—but they put on him a lot of things he never did, and he sure ain't so black as all Texas paints him. Keep that in mind, boy, when you hear of the Rio Kid—the Kid that you've rode with and camped with and been friends with, and that's quitting you with a heavy heart because you're too good for his company, and he won't let you ride a wild trail like his own."

The voice died in a whisper, into silence.

The Kid was gone.

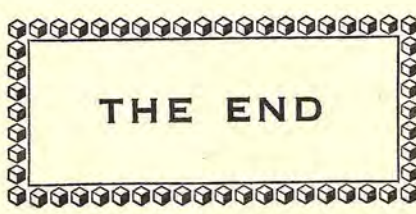
Amazed, thunderstruck, half-believing that he was still dreaming, the boy staggered to his feet. He called, hardly knowing what he called. The thunder of horse's hoofs in the darkness answered him; the thunder of hoofs dying away into the night.

"Kid!"

He called hoarsely.

"Kid!"

But only silence answered from the blackness of the night that had swallowed up the Rio Kid.



THE END