

The POPULAR BOOK OF BOYS' STORIES



The POPULAR BOOK *of* Boys' Stories 1932



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Fate has made the Rio Kid an Outlaw—but the Kid possesses a heart of gold and a code of friendship that will make an instantaneous appeal.

CHAPTER I

WHAT THE RIO KID REMEMBERED.

THE Rio Kid had seen him before ; he was sure of that. The rest of the bunch were strangers to the Kid ; but the young puncher with the claw scratches on his sunburnt cheek was no stranger. The Kid's eyes turned on him curiously in the glimmering light of the camp fire. He remembered the fellow, but he could not, for the moment, " place " him.

Not that it mattered. Nothing much mattered to the Rio Kid now, except to keep an iron nerve and a stiff upper lip to face the music, and take what was coming to him. The boy outlaw of the plains, who had so long defied sheriffs and Rangers, was a prisoner—bound with ropes. He sat with his back to a tree, and the riata that bound him passed round the trunk, knotted and doubly knotted. His capture had been easy—ridiculously easy—and the Bar-X bunch fairly gloated over their success.

They had come on the Kid's camp on the edge of the chaparral by sheer chance, a bunch of a dozen punchers, riding from the ranch to the distant cow-town of Saddlehorn. They had dropped on the Kid before he was fairly awake ; rolled in his blanket, he had opened his eyes on a six-gun jammed in his face. What sheriffs and Rangers had failed to do, that bunch of cow-punchers had unexpectedly and easily done. It was just a stroke

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of sheer ill-luck for the Kid; fortune, so long his friend, had failed him at last.

The Kid took it philosophically. He was not the man to sit up and howl when the cards turned against him. He was a prisoner now, bound to the tree. His faithful mustang, Side-Kicker, tethered close at hand, looked mournfully at his master. The punchers, eating their supper round the camp fire, grinned with glee when they looked at the Kid. When they broke camp in the morning, they were going to take him on to Saddlehorn and hand him over to the sheriff there. In the meantime, they had him safe. They shared their supper with him, and the Kid had eaten a little, cheerily, to show that there was no ill-feeling. He bore them no grudge. They had got him, and his game was up; but they were good boys, and he had no grouch against them. A hard fate had made him an outlaw by no fault of his own; but it was not so very long since he had been a cow-puncher like the men of the Bar-X bunch.

At dawn he was going on with them to Saddlehorn, to the sheriff's clutches, to take what was coming to him. The Rio Kid, as he sat with his strong limbs helpless in the binding rope, figured that he was very near the end of his trail. Yet his thoughts were less on the morrow, and what it meant, than on the little problem that now occupied his mind. Among the Bar-X bunch was that young puncher with claw scratches on a sunburnt cheek, and the Kid was certain that he had seen him before—that he knew him well. And several times he saw the scarred puncher glancing at him—not grinning with glee like the rest, but with a thoughtful and rather troubled look. But he did not come near the Kid; he had spoken no word to him. He sat in silence, a little apart from the rest, seemingly deep in thought. And when the rest of the bunch rolled in their blankets, and went to sleep with their feet to the fire, the scarred puncher still sat on a log, his brow clouded with thought, his eyes on the sinking fire.

And the Kid—not disposed for sleep himself—watched him curiously. A leaping flame cast bright light on the sunburnt face with the scars—and then, suddenly, the Kid knew. He remembered where he had seen that young puncher before—where and when—and it was one of the wildest adventures of the Rio Kid's chequered life that came back to his mind.

A wild adventure in the Mal Pais—the Evil Country—a few months ago, and the Kid remembered it as if it had happened yesterday. And this is what the Rio Kid remembered:

CHAPTER II

THE KID CROWDED!

WHY he rode into the Mal Pais, the Rio Kid hardly knew. It was a barren land, a land of rocks, and scraggy pines, of precipitous cliffs and rugged gorges and brawling torrents. Here and there, hidden in rocky recesses, were fertile patches, where there was provender

for his horse ; but they were few and far between. All round the Mal Pais lay the rolling prairies of the cow-country ; but it was seldom that the sound of a hoof-stroke woke the echoes of that barren tract. Lonely and lifeless was the Mal Pais ; well deserving its name of the Bad Country. Wolves lurked in the deep canyons, snarling coyotes crept and howled in the straggling thickets, and the tawny puma dragged his lithe limbs over the rocks of the rugged gorges. The Kid knew the Bad Country well : once he had been cornered there by the Texas Rangers, and hunted for long days and nights from one savage recess to another. Few men in Texas knew the ways of the Mal Pais ; but the boy outlaw knew every winding arroyo and dizzy ledge.

The Kid hardly knew why he turned Side-Kicker into the stony canyon that led into the heart of the Mal Pais. For days the sheriff of Blue Grass and his men had been on his trail, and the llano and the chaparral were growing hot for the Kid. His pursuers were crowding him ; but the Kid had been crowded before, and always the walnut-butted guns, or the speed of the grey mustang, had saved him. Perhaps the Kid was growing tired of the long hunt, and figured that in the dim recesses of the Bad Lands he would lie doggo for a time, till Sheriff Lick rode home again to Blue Grass, giving up the chase of the elusive outlaw as many a Texas sheriff had had to give it up before.

Anyhow, there the Kid was, in the heart of the Mal Pais, camping in a steep canyon hundreds of feet above the level of the cow-country that lay round the Mal Pais.

Below his camp, on the bank of a brawling stream, was a wilderness of, canyon and arroyo through which the Kid reckoned that the men from Blue Grass would never pick up his trail. Above him, the canyon narrowed and a deep black barranca split it from side to side, a gulf a hundred feet deep. To ride higher into the sierra, a horseman had to follow a narrow ledge that ran along the face of the cliff—a rugged ledge a few feet wide, uneven, precipitous, with little footing for a horse—on the left of it, a steep mountain-wall, on the right of it, a yawning chasm. That was the Kid's way, if his pursuers followed him so far ; and Side-Kicker, he reckoned, would be able to make the grade, if it came to that.

But the Kid did not reckon that it would come to that, as he sat by his fire in the keen morning, cooking his beans and bacon for breakfast. Keen and clear was the mountain air, and it made the Kid feel good when he turned out of his blankets that morning. A fire of pine chips blazed and crackled merrily, and cooking bacon and beans and steaming hot coffee gave out an appetising scent. The Rio Kid was feeling at his ease. Sheriff Lick was a determined man, and he led a posse of men as determined as himself ; and the Regulators of Blue Grass had sworn to run down the Rio Kid ; but the boy outlaw figured that he had left them guessing.

So it came as rather a surprise to the Kid when a bullet suddenly smashed

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into the tin pan and sent bacon and beans scattering and sizzling over the fire. The report of a rifle, rolling up the canyon, followed the crash of the bullet. Before it reached him, however, the Kid was in cover. He had not expected the enemy, but the Kid was wary and swift.

"Aw, shucks!" murmured the Kid as he dropped behind a boulder. "They're sure crowding me agin! I'll say that doggoned sheriff is some sticker!"

He peered round the rock.

Far down the canyon, moving figures came into distant view, horsemen pushing up the rugged way, appearing and disappearing among the piled rocks and straggling pines. One of the Regulators had sighted the Kid in his camp, and loosed off a bullet, which had cost the Kid his breakfast. The Kid could see the smoking rifle that had sent the shot, in the hands of one of the Blue Grass crowd.

He released a walnut-butted six-gun from its holster, and glanced along the long barrel.

Bang!

The smoking rifle spun from the hands of the Regulator as the Kid's bullet struck it. He heard from the distance the man's yell of surprise, and chuckled.

"I guess that guy is sure rattled!" murmured the Kid.

In a moment the Blue Grass Regulators were hunting cover. Shot on shot awoke the echoes of the Mal Pais, and bullets splintered on the rocks round the Rio Kid.

He laughed lightly.

The Regulators were not likely to rush his position. The walnut-butted guns would have taken too heavy a toll. And the Kid figured that they could loose off all the lead they liked while he and his mustang lay in cover behind the big boulder. Only if an active man climbed the steep side of the canyon and pitched bullets at him from a higher level, was the Kid in real danger. And if it came to that, he had a way of retreat open behind him—up the ledge that wound along the face of the cliff—a way that few horsemen would have cared or dared to ride; but the Rio Kid was one of the few.

Keeping in careful cover, the Kid watched lest a rush should come. More than once he sighted the Regulators dodging and skipping among the rocks down the canyon; more than once he could have dropped a man if he had chosen. But the Kid did not choose. He was an outlaw, hunted for his life; yet never had the Kid burned powder unless he was driven to it. Outlaw as he was, with a wild reputation from the Rio Grande to the Colorado River, the Kid was at heart still the cheery, kind-natured cow-puncher he had once been in the old days on the Double-Bar Ranch at Frio. Twenty men were creeping up the rugged canyon, intent on his capture, alive or dead; yet the Kid held his fire and spared lives. Not

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unless he was crowded too hard would the Rio Kid show the Blue Grass Regulators how he could shoot if he liked.

From a clump of thickets down the canyon a deep voice, hoarse with rage, hailed him. He knew the voice of the Blue Grass sheriff.

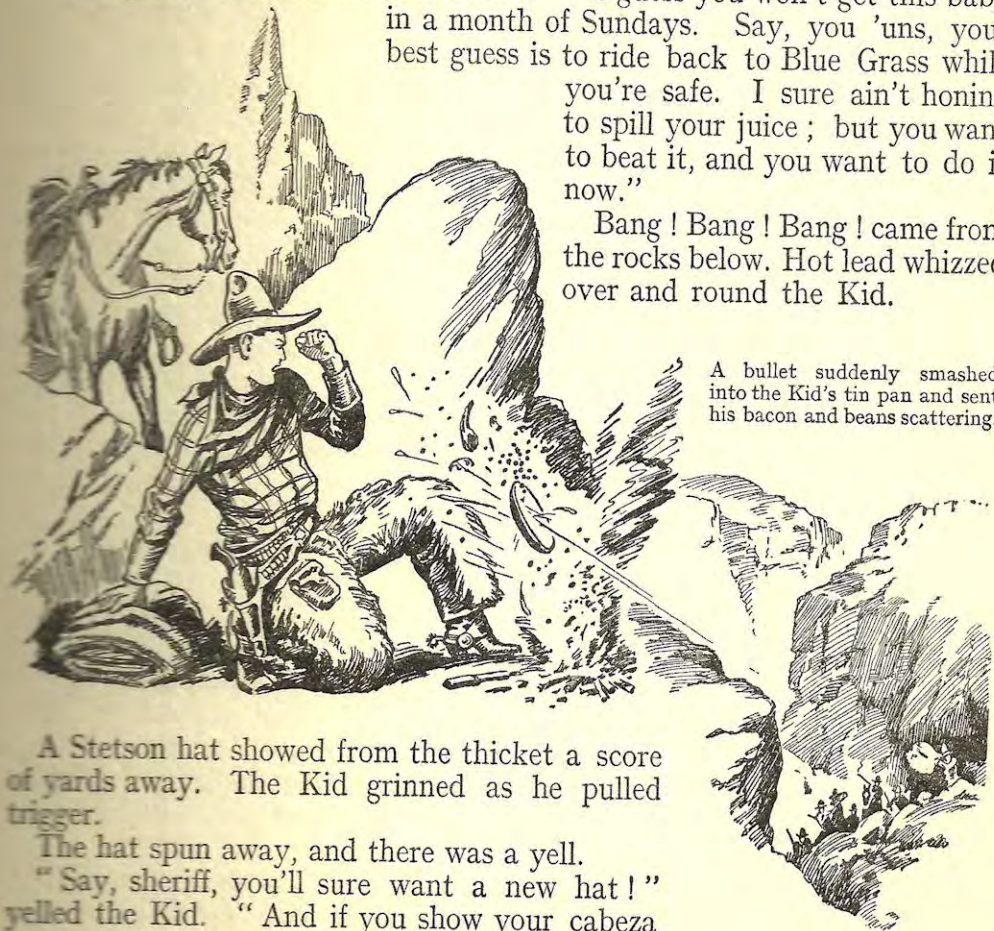
"You doggoned fire-bug, we've got you now! Doggone you, we've got you dead to rights at last!"

The Kid laughed.

"Forget it, sheriff!" he called back. "I guess you won't get this baby in a month of Sundays. Say, you 'uns, your best guess is to ride back to Blue Grass while you're safe. I sure ain't honing to spill your juice; but you want to beat it, and you want to do it now."

Bang! Bang! Bang! came from the rocks below. Hot lead whizzed over and round the Kid.

A bullet suddenly smashed into the Kid's tin pan and sent his bacon and beans scattering.



A Stetson hat showed from the thicket a score of yards away. The Kid grinned as he pulled trigger.

The hat spun away, and there was a yell.

"Say, sheriff, you'll sure want a new hat!" yelled the Kid. "And if you show your cabeza agin you'll want a new head! You get me?"

Loud and lurid came the cursing of Sheriff Lick, scrambling into deeper cover. The bullet that had carried away his hat might have passed through his brain if the Kid had chosen, and Sheriff Lick knew it. And he panted with rage in the thicket.

Bang! Bang!

The Regulators fired from cover, but they hugged their cover close. The man they were hunting had only played with them so far, in sheer

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lightness of heart ; but they knew where the Rio Kid could plant his bullets if he wanted to. They were determined to get him if they could, but they knew that it would cost lives to get the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande. They were brave men—brave and reckless. But there was certain death in the walnut-butted guns in the grip of the Rio Kid.

The Kid waited, and as he waited he whistled the merry tune of a Mexican fandango. It might have been supposed that the reckless outlaw welcomed this break in the monotony of his sojourn amid the rocks of the Mal Pais. His clear whistling went on cheerily while hot lead spattered on the rocks round him.

But it ceased all of a sudden as a bullet tore through his goatskin chaps, grazing the Kid's leg, and smashed on the earth under him. For that bullet came from the height of the canyon wall, from some marksman who had climbed rugged, steep rocks and reached a height that overlooked his position.

The Kid ceased to whistle. His teeth shut hard, and the gleam that came into his eyes was deadly. Gun in hand, he searched the high walls of the canyon below him with his eyes, keen as an eagle's, and detected the thin streak of smoke from the rifle that had so nearly picked him off. The wall of the canyon was almost perpendicular ; only a young and active man could have climbed it ; a man with an iron nerve and a steady head ; but one, evidently, of the Blue Grass Regulators had done so, and he had come very near to getting the Kid. That puff of smoke curled from a patch of sassafras on the canyon wall, a flimsy cover that hid the marksman, but the Kid knew where he was now. And with his eye gleaming over his long-barrelled Colt, the Kid waited for the man on the cliff to take a second pot-shot.

He had not to wait long.

From that patch of thicket high on the canyon wall the barrel of a rifle was thrust out, and over it showed a face, looking down towards the Kid.

It was a boyish face, no older than the Kid's own. The Kid knew that face—it was Buck Lick, the son of the sheriff of Blue Grass. For a second the Kid's finger trembled on the trigger, about to speed the death-shot that would have sent the boy tumbling down the steep rocks with a bullet in his brain, to fall, lifeless and shattered, almost at the sheriff's feet. But the Kid did not pull trigger. The boy, keen, eager in the hunt for the outlaw whose wild deeds were the talk of every rodeo and cow-camp in Texas, was sighting his rifle for another shot ; but the Rio Kid could not blot out that young life. He lowered the Colt and rolled aside, and the rifle cracked from the canyon wall, the bullet spattering the ground where the Kid had lain a moment before.

The Kid grunted angrily, angry with himself.

"You doggoned bonehead !" he growled. "You sure are the prize jay from Jaysville ! You surely are !"

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He thrust his gun into the holster.

"Say, old hoss, I guess we're beating it," said the Kid, and with his hand on the bridle he led the grey mustang away among the rocks. Escape was open to him by that wild path up the face of the precipice, and the Kid figured that few, if any, of the Regulators would venture to follow him there. Keeping in cover of rock and bush, the Kid vanished from the sight of the boy perched on the canyon wall. He heard Buck's shout of warning to the crowd below as he went.

"Say, you 'uns, he's beat it! Say, he's broke cover!"

There was an answering shout from the Blue Grass Regulators as they scrambled out of cover and jumped to their horses. Down the canyon side Buck came scrambling and clattering in a shower of loosened stones, eager to get to his broncho and join in the chase.

The Kid grinned as he heard the clatter of hoofs on the rugged rocks behind him. He was in the saddle now, on the path that wound away round a mighty cliff. The huge shoulder of the cliff interposed between him and his enemies. His path was a rough ledge, scarce three feet wide, dropping to a fathomless gulf on his right hand; on his left a wall of rock.

The sure-footed mustang trod that perilous path with care; the Kid, with a nerve of tempered steel, a nerve that nothing could shake, riding heedless of the death that lurked at every step. Behind him, clattering hoofs, shouting voices, random shots; but the hoof-beats ceased at the beginning of that dizzy path round the great rocky shoulder of the cliff. As the Kid had figured, few horsemen, or none, cared to trust themselves to that winding ledge.

And the Kid laughed as he heard the shouts of rage and disappointment behind him; the enraged voices of men defeated.

But the laugh died on his lips, and a throb ran through his heart. His iron nerve, seldom or never shaken, almost failed him at the sight of a cat-like, fearful figure on the dizzy path ahead of him. And with a catch of the breath, the Rio Kid stared at the huge puma on the path on which it was impossible to retreat or to turn.

CHAPTER III

THE GRIP OF THE PUMA!

"GEE-WHIZZ!" breathed the Kid.

From a gaping crevice in the rock wall back of the ledge, head and shoulders of the puma had emerged a few feet above the level of the path.

The brute was creeping out of its lair when the Kid came riding up the narrow slanting ledge.

In that deep crevice, hidden among the rocks, the puma had its den. Perhaps the clatter of hoofs had drawn it forth. The animal's fierce eyes

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were turned towards the Kid as he came, the shoulders were outside the crevice, the forepaws clawing on the rock. The eyes gleamed and glowed at the Kid, and the puma was preparing to leap out on the narrow path.

For a fraction of a second something like terror gripped the Kid, and his heart missed a beat. For the puma would have blocked the path, and on such a path no horseman could turn, no horseman could retreat. In that fraction of a second the Kid saw himself hurled, horse and rider, into the dizzy depths of the gulf that yawned under his right hand. But it was only for the fraction of a second.

For the Rio Kid knew that a few seconds spelled all the difference between life and death. Even as his heart thrilled with horror, even as the blood seemed to turn to ice in his veins, he drove his spurs at the flanks of his mustang and lashed with his quirt, and Side-Kicker leaped forward. The careful, cautious tread along the dizzy ledge was changed to a wild gallop, where few would have dared to crawl.

But that swiftness saved the Kid.

Before the puma had time, few seconds as it needed, to leap out on the ledge below the crevice, the Kid tore past. He tore past breathlessly, his face white as chalk, his teeth set, his grip steady on the reins. He felt, rather than saw, the slash of a claw that missed him by a bare inch, tearing a gash down his sleeve as it barely missed. He heard the deep roar from the puma as he swept on. But he had passed—in time !

Clatter ! clatter ! clatter !

He had passed through the very jaws of death, but swift decision had saved him from the puma. But Side-Kicker was going fast on a narrow ledge that gave little footing. Loose stones clattered over the edge and whistled down into the chasm ; every moment it seemed that the mustang must plunge over the dizzy verge and follow.

But the Kid's hands were like iron on the reins ; his iron nerve held good.

Every moment seemed certain death ; the keen wind in his ears was like the rustle of the wings of the Angel of Death. But slowly, steadily, the Kid checked the speed of his horse. Once, on the very edge, Side-Kicker seemed to slip ; but that iron grasp on the reins held him, and he recovered. And the Kid rode on, slower and slower, till the mustang dropped into a walk again.

Then the Kid, breathing hard and deep, pushed back his Stetson hat and wiped the streaming perspiration from his forehead.

"Gee !" breathed the Kid.

It had shaken him ; even the Rio Kid was shaken. And at a spot where the path broadened in a deep embayment of the cliff, the Kid drew in the mustang and dismounted.

He stroked the mustang's neck gently as Side-Kicker's muzzle nuzzled under his arm.

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"Good hoss!" murmured the Kid. "Good old hoss! I guess you've pulled me through, old hoss, and I surely reckon there ain't another cayuse in all Texas could have made the grade!"

The Kid looked back.

His keen eyes swept along the winding ledge, back to the spot where he had passed the puma. If the brute sought to follow him, he was ready. But the tawny brute seemed to have drawn back into his den in the deep crevice overlooking the ledge.

The Kid grinned.

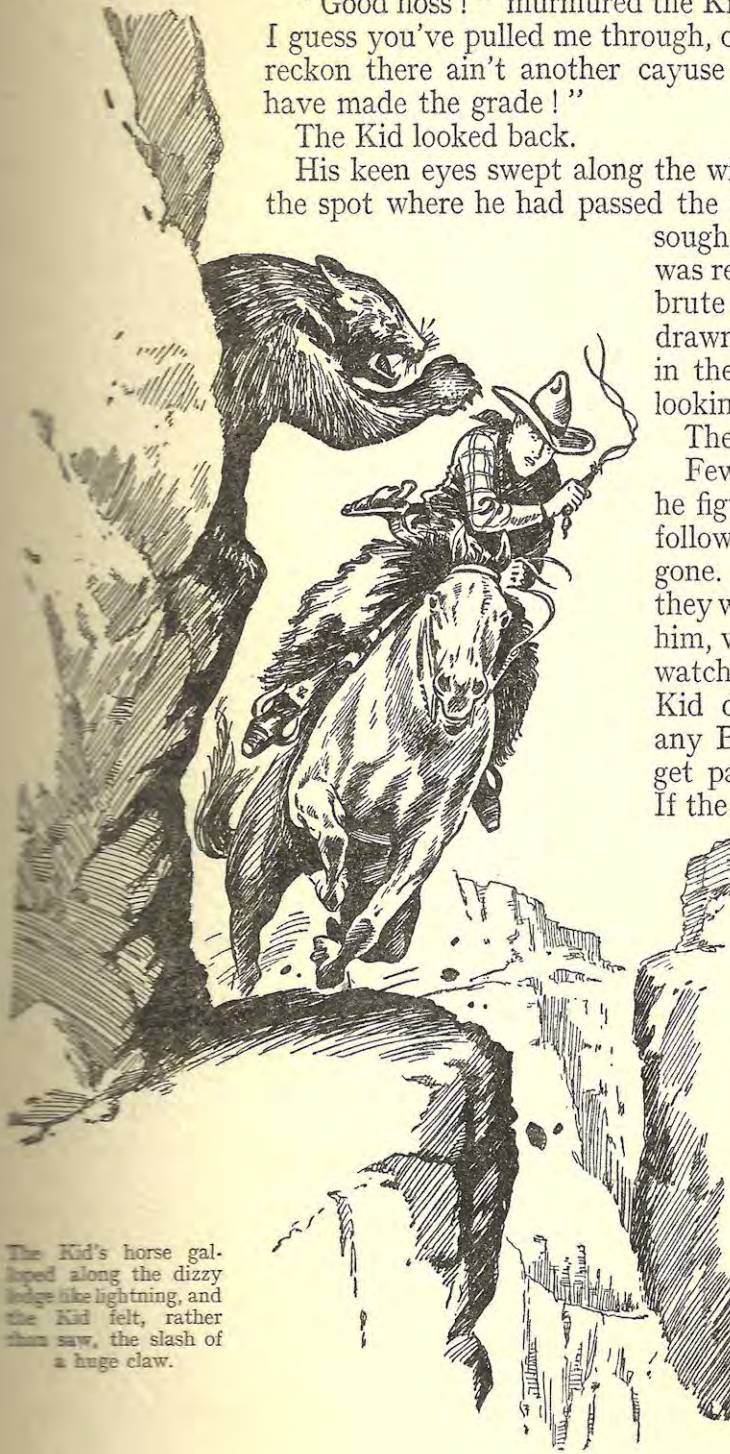
Few of the Regulators, he figured, would care to follow him the way he had gone. But if they followed, they would scarcely trouble him, with the savage puma watching the path. The Kid did not reckon that any Blue Grass guy would get past as he had done. If the sheriff and his men

wanted sudden death, they were welcome to follow.

Clatter, clatter!

The grin was wiped from the Kid's face. Round the great bulging shoulder of the cliff that hid the Regulators from his sight a single horseman appeared in view.

The Kid's face was grim as he looked at him and recognised the boy who had fired on



The Kid's horse galloped along the dizzy ledge like lightning, and the Kid felt, rather than saw, the slash of a huge claw.

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him—Buck Lick, the son of the sheriff of Blue Grass. With a face ablaze with excitement, too keen on the chase to heed danger, the boy came riding along the ledge.

Far in the distance, the Kid could hear a hoarse voice shouting—the voice of the sheriff calling to Buck to return. But the daring rider could not have returned had he wished. On that deadly path there was no turning.

“Shucks!” muttered the Kid.

His eyes were glued on the boy. His hand went to the walnut butt of a gun, and left it again. The boy was riding to his death. Already the Kid’s keen eyes picked up the nose of the puma pushed out from the crevice above the path.

And forgetting that the rider came as an enemy, the Kid shouted to him—shouted hoarsely:

“Say, young ’un! Pull in your critter! Pull in that cayuse, you dog-goned gink! Pull in!”

The boy had yet six yards to ride before he reached the crevice where the puma lurked.

There was a chance for him yet if he pulled in his horse. A chance that he might slip down from his saddle and get back to safety on foot. A chance—a dog’s chance, at least; and the Rio Kid wanted to give him that chance.

But at his shout the eyes of the rider turned on him, and a six-gun leaped into the boy’s hand.

Crack!

He was firing on the Kid.

“Doggone my cats!” gasped the Kid as he dodged. “Say, you locoed gink, pull in! Pull in! There’s a puma ahead of you. Pull in for your life! Oh, by the great horned toad!”

It was too late!

The horseman came riding on as he fired, and he reached the puma even as the Kid hoarsely shouted.

Then, as he saw his peril, he gave a sharp cry. The six-gun dropped from his hand, hurtling down into the depths of the gulf, and he grasped his reins with both hands.

The Kid, too far off to dream of giving help, even had help been possible, watched him with starting eyes.

Watching, he hardly breathed. Would the boy attempt to dash past the danger as the Kid had done? It was his only chance now—the slimmest chance a man ever had. Yes, he was spurring—gripping the reins and spurring hard.

From the opening of the rocky wall the long body of the puma hurled itself on the horseman.

Even as the reckless rider tore past, the claws of the puma were upon him, and the weight of the animal was thrown on the broncho.

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The Kid saw the boy snatch a knife from his belt ; he saw him drive it desperately into the furry mass that encumbered him. There was a roar from the puma, a panting cry from the rider. The broncho, squealing with terror, dashed on, the puma, its head thrown back in a roar of rage and pain, clinging to the horseman.

For a second that fearful scene flashed before the staring, starting eyes of the Rio Kid.

Then the broncho went plunging over the verge of the chasm.

In a shower of falling stones, horse and horseman and clinging puma shot downward into space.

The last squeal of the frightened horse floated upward ; the last enraged roar of the puma. Then they were gone. A hundred feet below sounded the crash of breaking branches at the bottom of the chasm. Then silence !

CHAPTER IV

SAVING A FOE !

THE Rio Kid wiped the sweat from his brow.
" Carry me home to die ! " he breathed.

He listened.

No sound came from below after that crash of branches. The Kid stepped to the edge of the rock ledge. He dropped on hands and knees and looked down over the dizzy verge.

Far below he could see the tops of trees, with a gleam of water here and there from the stream that flowed at the bottom of the chasm. But the branches, like a roof of greenery, hid what lay below from his searching sight.

Crack !

The Kid started and turned. In those tense moments he had forgotten his foes. He remembered them now.

He turned his head to see the bearded face of the sheriff of Blue Grass. The sheriff, on hands and knees, was creeping round the shoulder of the cliff. He had glimpsed the Kid and fired.

A six-gun leaped into the Kid's hand.

Bang, bang !

The Colt roared twice, and the creeping man on the ledge collapsed with a groan.

But the Kid had not fired to kill. The wounded man on the ledge raised himself and crawled back slowly and painfully the way he had come. Leaving a crimson trail on the rocks, he disappeared once more beyond the shoulder of the cliff to rejoin the defeated Regulators.

The Rio Kid holstered his gun.

Pursuit was stopped ; he knew that. The Regulators had heard the screaming of the falling horse, and they knew where the sheriff's son had

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gone. The sheriff had crawled back to them, hard hit. They cursed the Rio Kid with fierce threats of vengeance, but they did not venture round the protecting shoulder of the cliff on to the path of death. The Kid's gun commanded that path, and the most reckless galoot in Texas was not likely to venture. They were crowding the Kid no more.

The Kid took Side-Kicker's reins over his arm and led the mustang onward.

The way of escape lay wide open to the Kid. Behind him, stopped and defeated, the Blue Grass Regulators raved and cursed; but he had no more to fear from them. High over the rugged hills of the Mal Pais lay his way, to the cow-country beyond—to the wide spaces and freedom.

But the Kid's face was clouded with thought. He was not thinking of that ride, unimpeded now, to the wide spaces of the cow-country. He was thinking of the boy who had plunged to death in the chasm. There was a chance—a dog's chance—that he lived, if help came to him; the remotest of chances, perhaps, but it haunted the Rio Kid's mind. The boy had been hunting him, hunting him to his death; but that cut no ice with the Kid. But for the cruel fortune that had made him an outlaw against his will, the Kid might have ridden himself with a sheriff's posse. The boy had been his foe, but the Kid had no kick coming on that account. As he wound his way onward by the edge of the yawning gulf, the Kid's thoughts ran more and more on the boy. And when he came to a spot where his way lay onward and upward, and another way wound perilously downward, the Kid halted—and hesitated.

And he grinned sourly. For even while he hesitated, he knew which path he would take; it was the way of the Kid to horn into another man's troubles. And it was the downward winding path he took, treading softly and carefully, his mustang following with cautious tread.

Downward by precipitous ledges and ridges, till he reached the bottom of the barranca, and trod among the rugged rocks between which the stream flowed.

Leaving his horse, the Rio Kid searched for the man who had fallen. It was the puma he found first—dead, smashed shapeless by the crash on the rocks from a height of a hundred feet. And then he saw the broncho, dead in the stream, the water purling over him as he lay.

And then the Kid's keen eyes picked up something that stirred. On the bank, half in the water, lay the boy. The Kid had figured that he had a chance in a hundred of finding him alive; and it was the hundredth chance that had materialised.

He had fallen in deep water. While the puma had crashed on hard rock, and the broncho in the shallows, the boy had dropped plumb in the centre of the stream, where the water was deep; and the water had saved him. But he was hurt—sorely hurt. He had dragged himself to the bank and lay half-out of the water, exhausted. One cheek showed



The Kid's strong arms helped up Buck Lick and dragged him from the water.

red and raw, where the puma's claws had torn skin and flesh, and the blood ran down and tinged the water flowing round him. He was hurt—awfully hurt, and at his last gasp; but he was still stirring, striving feebly to drag himself from the stream.

And the Kid, as he reached him, was glad that he had come. He bent over the boy, and a white, startled face looked up at him.

"The Kid!" whispered the boy. "The Rio Kid!"

"You've said it!" agreed the Kid.

The colourless face twisted in a faint smile.

"You've got me, Kid! Shoot!"

"Aw, forget it!" snapped the Kid.

And his strong hands grasped the boy and dragged him from the water. He laid him on a bed of pine cones and his deft hands tended his hurts; the boy, half-conscious, watching him with dazed eyes. He was wrapped in the Kid's blanket when, bandaged and at ease, he sank into slumber at last; and when he awakened it was to find the Rio Kid sitting by his side, and Side-Kicker cropping the scant herbage along the stream.

He gazed at the Kid in wonder.

"Say, Kid!" he whispered.

"Spill it!" said the Kid.

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"You're the Rio Kid—the fire-bug of the Rio Grande that every sheriff in Texas is after?"

The Kid grinned.

"Sure!" he answered.

"And—you've saved me."

"I reckon!"

"Why?"

And the Kid chuckled.

"I guess it's because I'm a doggoned gink—the all-firedest geck in Texas," he answered. "I guess in a coupla days you'll be all right to walk your chinks, Buck, and you can sure hump it back to Blue Grass and tell the sheriff to try again! And mebbe you'll remember that even a goldarned fire-bug like the Rio Kid ain't so black as the galoots paint him when they get chewing the rag in the bunk-houses."

"I'll remember you're a white man, Kid," said the boy earnestly. "I'll remember you're the whitest man in Texas."

CHAPTER V

A DEBT REPAID.

It all came back into the Kid's mind as he sat with the strong riata round him, binding him to the tree, and looked at the young puncher sitting thoughtful and silent by the sinking fire. He remembered those wild days in the Mal Pais; remembered how he had nursed the helpless boy till he could travel, and had rustled him a horse to ride home on. After that the Kid had mounted Side-Kicker and ridden on his own wild way, never dreaming that he would ever see again the boy whose life he had saved in the depths of the Mal Pais.

And now he saw him, many a long mile from the Mal Pais; saw him as one of the Bar-X bunch, one of his captors; one of the bunch who, at dawn on the morrow, would ride him into Saddlehorn to take what was coming to him. He knew the sunburnt boyish face now, with the claw marks of the puma on the bronzed cheek, as the firelight played on it.

And the Kid shrugged his shoulders. He had saved the boy, but the boy could not, if he would, save him. The Kid was not thinking of that. He was glad that he had saved the boy; glad that there was that kind deed to go down in the long account, among many wild and desperate deeds that the Kid would rather not have remembered.

The firelight died lower.

The Bar-X punchers were sleeping. But one of the cowboys raised his head and glanced at the young puncher who sat on the log.

"I guess you needn't watch, Buck!" The Kid heard his words. "We got that fire-bug safe all right. I guess you can go sleep."

"O.K.," answered Buck. "He's a durn slippery cuss, and I reckon I'll watch!"

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The cowboy settled down in his blankets again. All were sleeping round the camp fire except Buck. The Kid smiled—a sour smile. Buck was not sleeping with the rest—he was staying awake to watch because the man who had saved him that wild day in the Mal Pais was a slippery cuss! The Kid had never dreamed of repayment of the debt; but it hurt him.

The firelight died away.

Black darkness wrapped the camp. Buck and the sleeping figures rolled in the blankets vanished from the Kid's sight. The Kid closed his weary eyes—perhaps sleep would come!

Sleep came—the Rio Kid slid into dreaming. He dreamed of that wild day in the Mal Pais; of the clutching claws of the puma on the rocky ledge. In his dream, the claws were on him, and he started and murmured and awoke. Something was touching his shoulder in the darkness; it was not all a dream. The Kid woke, as always, with all his senses on the alert; and from the darkness under the tree to which he was bound a whispering voice reached his ears.

"Quiet!"

That was all, but the Kid knew the whispering voice. The sharp edge of a knife glided over the riata, the rope fell apart. The Kid, his heart beating wildly, felt himself free.

A hand gripped his arm in the darkness and drew him. The Rio Kid trod softly as he followed his silent guide, the hand on his arm leading him, and he found himself close to the warm flank of a horse.

The Kid breathed hard.

Faintly, he made out the figure of his guide. Faintly, he saw the sunburnt face with the claw scratches on the cheek.

"Mount and ride!" The whisper came to the Kid. "Your guns are in your holsters—your cayuse is saddled—mount and ride, Kid!"

"I guess I knowed you, feller!" breathed the Kid. "But I reckoned you'd forgot the Mal Pais."

He saw the smile flicker on the shadowy face in the gloom.

"You're saving an outlaw!" breathed the Kid. "You're saving the fire-bug of the Rio Grande, hombre."

"I guess I'm saving the whitest man in Texas. Mount and ride."

A grip of the hand and the Rio Kid was in the saddle.

Through the silent night there was a thudding of hoof-beats; and from the startled camp came voices, calling, shouting, and the roar of six-guns fired at random into the gloom. Fiercely the Bar-X bunch blazed away into the darkness, with shouts of wrath; but the flying lead did not reach the Rio Kid. Far away in the darkness, by lonely ways in the heart of the trackless chaparral, rode the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, humming the tune of a merry fandango as he rode—a hunted outlaw, but the whitest man in Texas.
