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1928.
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No. 495.

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2d



IS THE DATE OF
YOUR BIRTHDAY
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"THE MISSING HERO!"
Special Long School Story inside!

When the Rio Kid finds the odds heavily against him, it is not in his nature to turn tail and bolt. He puts all his faith in his big six-shooters, and they never let him down!

The RIO KID!

by Ralph Redway



ANOTHER BREATHLESSLY-THRILLING COMPLETE WESTERN YARN, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Sparshott Bunch!

THE firing ceased, and the Rio Kid yawned.

Bullet after bullet had crashed on the thick wooden walls of the little ranch house. Some of them had pierced the shutters and dropped within the building. But from the chink in the shutter, in the bright moonlight, the Kid could see no sign of the assailants, save the flashing of the rifles from moment to moment. The Sparshott bunch were keeping carefully in cover while they blazed away at the Loring ranch house.

But the firing ceased—the Sparshott bunch knew that they were burning powder for nothing. Silence fell on the ranch, and from the silence came the faint sound of the groaning of the man who had fallen to the Rio Kid's shot an hour before.

The Kid yawned.

"These jaspers sure get my goat," he said. "There's nine or ten in the bunch, but they ain't figuring on taking any chances."

"They've not gone," said Kent Loring.

"They sure ain't," agreed the Kid. "They won't go till daylight. I guess they won't keep it up after that, even in the Wildcat section of Montana. But it's hours to daylight yet."

"If you want to sleep, I guess I'll keep watch."

The Kid chuckled.

"No more sleep hyer to-night, feller. How long is it since it rained in this section?"

"Two weeks or more," answered the Montana cowman. "Why? What does that matter, Kid Carfax?"

This week:
**"FACING
THE ODDS!"**

"Heaps!" grinned the Kid. "I reckoned it had been dry here. Them galoots haven't any hunch to walk up to our guns; but they sure want to get us. If they've got any savvy, they'll fire the rancho—or try it on. I guess we ain't going to close our eyes, Loring! We want to watch out."

"Oh!" ejaculated Loring. "You can bet that will be their game," said the Kid. "But I guess they won't get home with it."

He looked from the chink in the shutter again.

The plains round the little rancho stretched white in the moonlight, the creek a trickle of silver. Sheds and broken fences, here and there a tree or a bush, afforded ample cover to the Sparshott bunch. Not a man was to be seen; but there were nearly a dozen enemies gathered round the building, as the Kid knew from the firing.

The Rio Kid waited patiently for the next move of the enemy. He hummed a tune softly as he waited. Kent Loring was grave and anxious,

but the Kid seemed to be enjoying life. Whether from motives of chivalry, or from the impulse that urged him so often to butt into trouble, the Rio Kid had taken the weaker side in the Sparshott feud; and now that he was in it, he was in it, as he would have said, body and boots. The Sparshott bunch believed, so far, that they had only Kent Loring to deal with in the lonely rancho; of the Rio Kid's presence they knew nothing yet.

A glimmer of flame spurted from the shadows behind a clump of ragged bushes. There was a sound of crackling. An arc of fire gleamed, as a burning torch was flung towards the rancho door.

"Try again!" grinned the Kid. The torch of twigs and pine knots fell short, and lay burning and smoking on the ground yards from the door.

Another followed it, falling as short. The Kid yawned again.

"If they was Injuns," he said, "they'd fix up burning arrows; but I guess they haven't the savvy to do it. But there ain't any cover near enough for that game they're playing. They'll have to come out."

"And then——" said Loring.

"Then I guess my gun will talk," chuckled the Kid.

There was a long pause.

Minutes ticked slowly away. Kent Loring watched from a chink, but there was no sound, no movement, nothing to be seen save the smoking torches that lay at a little distance. The Montana cowman turned away wearily to take a few turns up and down the room. But the Rio Kid did not stir from his chink. The Kid had the quiet patience of a Redskin, and he waited in silence, every nerve on the alert, unwearied.



When the move came, it came with startling suddenness.

From the cover of the bushes, a figure suddenly leaped, and darted forward to the house, a flaming torch in hand.

Hardly a second was required for the fellow to dash near enough to hurl the blazing torch against the door, and spring back into cover.

But a second was more than enough for the Rio Kid.

Bang!

The six-gun roared from the chink in the shutter, and the man with the torch pitched heavily forward, before he had taken three steps.

There was a terrible cry.

The man had fallen on the torch, which smoked and blazed under him, and his wild shrieks rang fearfully through the night.

He squirmed back, screaming, and disappeared behind the bushes again, leaving the torch smoking where it lay.

There was a yell of rage from the Sparshott bunch, and a roar of rifle-fire. Bullets rained on the walls and shutters of the ranch house.

"You got him!" panted Loring.

"Sure!"

From the night came a hoarse voice—the voice of Walt Sparshott, in husky tones of rage.

"That ain't young Loring! Kent Loring ain't all that sudden on the shoot! He ain't alone there."

"I guess he's on his lonesome, boss," said another voice. "They told me in Wildcat he had had to fire his last man."

"He ain't alone. I tell you," snarled Sparshott. "Kent Loring never fired that shot."

Loring laughed softly.

"They're wise to you now, Kid," he said.

"I guess so," the Rio Kid chuckled. "They won't try that game again. They'll sure give us a rest till the moon's down."

The Kid was right. The firing died away again; but there was no further attempt to fire the rancho. The torches burned out and expired. Silent—save for the muttering and moaning of two wounded men—the Sparshott bunch lay in cover and watched—and within the rancho watched and waited the Montana cowman and the boy puncher from Texas.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

At Close Quarters!

KENT LORING made a sudden movement, as he heard the bar of a shutter softly and cautiously moved. It was dark now—the darkest hour before the dawn. The moon had sunk, and darkness lay over the still plains that surrounded the lonely rancho.

"What's your game, Carfax?" breathed Loring.

He heard the Kid's soft chuckle in the gloom.

"I guess I'm going to wake up those jaspers, feller. They're sure getting ready now to creep in and fire the house, and I guess there ain't any stopping them in the dark—only one way! I'm going out."

"Not alone?"

"Yep! I guess this is a game I know," said the Kid cheerily. "You stand by with your rifle, Loring, and leave this to me. They'd tell you on the Double Bar, down in Texas, that a kid about my size can sure beat the

Apache at his own game. Leave it to me."

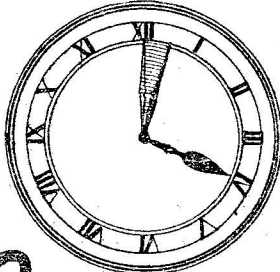
"But—"

"Feller, you got to leave it to me," said the Kid. "I'll be safer alone, if that's what's worrying you. I keep on telling you that this game is pie to me."

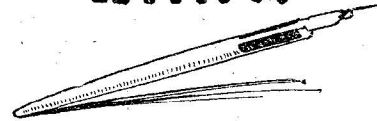
"But—" repeated Loring uneasily. "Oh, can it, and watch out!" interrupted the Kid.

"I'd rather come—"

"You'd sure spoil the whole caboodle if you did! Stand here with your shooting-iron and watch out! This is my game, hombre!"



**2 MINUTES
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MEMBERS OF THE BIRTHDAY GIFT
CLUB!**

The Kid opened the shutter softly.

Outside was deep darkness.

Through the long night the Sparshott bunch had watched and waited, and now their time had come. In the darkness it was possible to creep close to the walls of the rancho, with little danger from guns from within. The wooden building, dry as tinder after long sunny days, would burn like matchwood once the fire was placed to it. That was the game of the Sparshotts, and the Kid knew it as well as if they had sung it out to him. But the Kid had his own move to make first.

Silently he dropped outside the window.

The darkness that shrouded the enemy, shrouded the Rio Kid. He made no sound as he left the rancho. And Kent Loring, watching anxiously from the window, lost sight of him a moment later.

Stealthily as an Apache creeping on a foe, the Rio Kid crept round the building, and then, on his hands and knees, wormed his way across in deep shadow towards the shed where his mustang was bedded down.

Had the Sparshott bunch been on the watch for such a move, they could not have seen him or heard him. But the ruffians who were beseiging the lonely

rancho had no idea that the beseiged would break cover, with such odds against them in the open. They did not know the Rio Kid yet.

There was a murmur of low voices behind the shed. The Kid heard the hoarse voice of Walt Sparshott, muttering. He was within six feet of the gang gathered behind the shed, and he rose to his knees, covered by the corner of the building and gripped his guns.

"I guess I'll take it this time," Walt Sparshott was muttering. "I guess when that sticks agin the door, and a match is put to it, the hull shebang will go up in smoke afore them galoots can say no sugar in mine. You fellers watch out and wing them as they run."

"You bet, boss!"

"I reckon that galoot with young Loring is the feller who helped him on the Wildcat trail, and winged my brother Eben. It can't be anybody else. I know for sure that young Loring hasn't a single puncher left on his ranch. He's down to his last dollar, or near it, and, if he had the sense of a gopher, he would sell out and slide. I reckon the Sparshott feud is going to end to-night."

There was a rustling sound which the Kid knew was made by the gang bundling together dry wood and pine knots, to make the torch that was to fire the rancho.

He grinned.

Softly the Rio Kid rose to his feet. The Sparshott bunch, full of their ruthless intention, and sure of success now that darkness covered their approach to the rancho, were thinking of anything but an attack on themselves. But that was what was coming to them.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

There was a wild yell of alarm as the Kid suddenly leaped from his cover, fairly upon the crouching gang, firing right and left.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Startled men went plunging and scrambling in the gloom, wild yells and cries answered the rapid firing. Bang! Bang! Bang! Like lightning the walnut-butted guns, that had seen so much service in the hands of the Rio Kid, flashed and rang. For ten seconds there was pandemonium. And then hurried flying footsteps, panting breath, cries of terror, and a wild scrambling upon the horses to which the Sparshott bunch had fled. Bang! Bang! Bang! rang the Kid's six-guns after the fleeing bunch. The sudden attack in the darkness had been too much for the Sparshott bunch. Hardly a man of them escaped unscathed as they scrambled on their horses and fled, wildly galloping into the night.

Click! The Kid pulled trigger on an empty gun, and laughed. But he re-loaded rapidly, ready for the bunch if they turned back.

But they did not turn.

A wild bunch of horsemen, almost every one of them hit by flying lead, spurred frantically into the night, with a thunder of hoofs, and vanished into the shadowy plains.

The Rio Kid laughed.

The Sparshott bunch were gone! The thunder of hoofs died away into silence, and all was still again.

The Kid walked back towards the ranch-house.

"Don't shoot, hombre!" he called out.

"I guess it's little me!"

Kent Loring stared at him.

"But what—"

"They're gone," drawled the Kid.

"I guess they lighted out like they was sent for in a darned hurry."

"Gone!" breathed Kent.

"Sure! They ain't any fancy for

shooting at close quarters," said the Kid, with a chuckle. "I reckon they figured it was some earthquake when I dropped on them sudden. They seemed sort of surprised—they sure did! I reckon we can finish out our sleep till sun-up, feller."

The Kid stepped in at the window. Kent Loring, in silence, closed and barred the shutter.

"By gum!" he said, at last. "By gum! You are sure some gun-man, Kid Carfax. I guess they was rattled to light out like that."

"They sure was," agreed the Kid. And the Rio Kid rolled himself in his blanket, and slept soundly and peacefully till the sun was shining over the mountains and plains of the Montana cow country.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Beaten to the Draw!

"**Y**OU'RE sure some mule," the Kid said; and Kent Loring laughed.

They were riding across the scrubby plain in the blaze of sunshine. The Montana cowman and the puncher from Texas.

For three days the Rio Kid had been at the Loring ranch. And in those days he had demonstrated that he had not forgotten all that he had learned on the old Double Bar in Texas.

The Kid was a cow-puncher, born and bred. And Kent declared that he was more useful on the ranch than four or five hired men.

Undoubtedly the Kid put his beef into it.

Why he did so, unless it was his friendship for the Montana man, it would have been hard to say. There was no pay on the Loring ranch, even if the Kid had needed to work for pay, which he did not, since his clean-up in the gold country of Arizona.

If the young cowman was not down to his last dollar, as Walt Sparshott had said, he was very near it. The feud with the Sparshott clan had ruined the ranch.

There was but a handful of stock left, no money to replace herds, no money or labour to repair burnt fences and ruined buildings. Six men had worked at one time on the ranch, but the last of them was gone. And, but for the advent of the Rio Kid, Kent would have worked alone till the end came. That the end had to come was clear enough to the Rio Kid—clear to Kent, if he would have seen it. But he would not see it.

"You're sure some mule," repeated the Kid. "You ain't an earthy against them pesky Sparshotts. Three of them left, and a bunch of rough range-riders to back them. All the law there is in this country you could pack into a hat, leaving heap room for your cabeza. You want to quit, and hit the trail while the trail's open."

Kent shook his head.

"The Loring's ain't quitters," he said. "What do you reckon you are going

to do against that all-fired gang of dog-goned ginks?" exclaimed the Kid.

"Hold on till they get me, anyhow."

"Oh, shucks!" said the Kid.

It was against all reason, and perhaps, for that cause, the Rio Kid, in spite of his arguments, agreed all the way with the Montana rancher. The Kid never would have quit; and he liked a man who was not a quitter. But he saw clearly how it must end. In that desperate feud—desperate even for the rough cow-country—all who bore the name of Loring had fallen, with the exception of Kent. And three Sparshotts remained to carry on the feud against him, and the outfit at the Sparshott ranch were numerous and rough—all of them fighting men. The young fellow hadn't a ghost of a chance

of thousands of hoofs, smiled at the idea of range riding after two or three cows. But the few cows that remained were all that Kent had—and the Kid was there to help him. Two or three cows meant much more than the young rancher could afford to lose; and for a whole morning the two had been riding. And as they rode, the Kid's eyes were as alert and keen as if he had been riding in a wild Indian country.

"So it's settled that you ain't quitting," said the Rio Kid.

"Sure!"

"If you ain't quitting, you got to get the Sparshotts before they get you," said the Kid decidedly. "You want to pack a gun and shoot on sight."

"I sure pack a gun all the time, and I'm sure going to shoot on sight, if I



THE EMPTY SADDLE! From the dark plains the beat of a horse's galloping hoofs came to the Kid's ears. He turned, and his face darkened as a horse came panting up. It was Kent Loring's horse—but the saddle was empty! (See Chapter 4.)

of getting away with it. The night attack on the little rancho showed what methods the Sparshotts were willing to use. Common-sense urged Kent Loring to sell his land for what it would fetch, and hit the trail for a new country. And the Kid argued with him, and liked him all the better, because he would not. Nothing had been seen of the Sparshotts since that wild night. No doubt their hot reception had daunted them.

But if open attack was over, treacherous attack was all the more likely to follow. A shot from behind a tree was likely to end the feud. The Kid's eyes were wide open while he worked on the ranch, mending fences, patching buildings, punching cows, doing the hundred tasks that a cowman has to be able to do. He never stirred outside the walls without packing a gun. He would have welcomed another attack from the Sparshotts; but it did not come.

Now the two cowmen were riding in search of two or three stray cows—stray or stolen. The Kid, accustomed in the old days in Texas to dealing with herds

see Walt or Eben or Rube Sparshott," grinned Kent. "But they're a yellow gang—they'll keep out of sight and shoot from cover."

"Then ain't that your game, too?"

"Nix! I'm a white man if they ain't."

"Oh, you're sure plumb loco," exclaimed the Kid. "You're jest asking to be fitted for a coffin, you are, feller."

"So all Wildcat has told me, and they ain't got me yet; though I reckon they would have fixed me sure if you hadn't humped along, last time," said Kent. "But darn the Sparshotts, Carfax—we're looking for cows. This ain't a big ranch, but it's sure a big one for only two range riders. I guess I'll take the north side of the creek and leave you the other, and we'll meet at the shebang at sundown."

"If it's still standing!" grinned the Kid. "I never go out of sight of the shebang without expecting to see it going up in smoke when I get back."

"We got to chance that."

"We sure have!" assented the Kid.

They separated, and Loring splashed through the creek and disappeared behind a fold of the prairie.

The Kid rode thoughtfully on his way. Rounding up two or three cows on a wide country, broken by thickets and rocky draws, was a long task and a difficult task, and not one that the Kid would have chosen. But he had thrown in his lot, for the present, with the Montana rancher, and he meant business. It was as likely as not that the cows had been driven off by some of the Sparshott bunch; in which case they were gone for good. But the Kid picked up a trail at last that led him into a deep grassy hollow of the plain, where he found three cows at feed. They blinked at him with sleepy eyes as he rode up, and the Kid, looking at them, spotted the Loring brand.

"I guess you're my beef, you-uns," grinned the Kid, glad that he had been

successful. There were not a dozen cows left on the ranch, and every beast counted.

The cows unwillingly left their pasture, persuaded by the loud cracking of the Kid's Texas quirt. They lumbered away across the plain towards the rancho, the Kid riding after them, cracking his whip to keep them in motion, and wondering what the old Double-Bar bunch would have thought, could they have seen him at this job of driving three cows.

But the ranch-house was not yet in sight, when two horsemen appeared from a hollow in the plain. And the Kid dropped the quirt at once, and felt for his holster to make sure that his gun was handy. One of the horsemen was the man he had seen in the moonlight the night the rancho was attacked—Walter Sparshott. The other was a rough puncher. They were riding on Loring land; and the Kid grinned at the thought that they had been engaged on the same task as himself—hunting for what remained of the Loring herd. They rode directly towards him, their eyes fixed on him, and, like the Kid, they kept their hands near their guns. But it was evident that they did not know that he was the fellow who had helped Kent Loring to defend the rancho, or their guns would have been drawn at the sight of him.

"Say, feller," called out Walt Sparshott, as he came within speaking range.

"Same to you," answered the Kid affably.

"I guess I ain't seen you here before," said Sparshott, eyeing the Kid keenly and grimly. "What are you doing here?"

"Punching cows, feller!" answered the Kid.

"Lifting cows, you mean," grunted Sparshott. "I been looking for them cows, and I sure guess they belong to my outfit."

"You sure want to guess again," said

the Kid. "They got the Loring brand on their hides, feller."

"Brand blotting ain't a new game in the cow country," sneered Walt Sparshott. "You been changing the brands?"

The Kid's eyes flashed.

"Who are you, anyhow?" demanded Sparshott. "You ain't in young Loring's outfit—he ain't got a man left on his ranch, even a chore boy."

"I'm his new man," smiled the Kid.

"Oh shucks!" said Sparshott's companion. "Loring ain't got a dollar left to pay a new man!"

"Anyhow, they're my cows," said Sparshott. "You head them cows off towards my ranch, Hank."

"You bet!" said Hank.

"Hold on, fellers!" remonstrated the Kid. "Cattle-lifting ain't good enough. You let them cows alone. I'm rounding up them cows for my boss."

Sparshott gave him a grim look.

"You new to Montana?" he asked. He detected the lazy Texas drawl in the Kid's speech.

"Sure!"

"Where are you from?"

"The Rio Grande country," answered the Kid amiably.

"Waal, I reckon if you're wise, you'll hit the trail pronto, and get back to the Rio Grande country," said Walt Sparshott. "You don't want to butt in here, puncher."

"That's where you slip up, feller," smiled the Kid. "I'm butting in hyer, and keeping on butting in. I don't give a rap for all the Sparshotts in Montana. Let them cows alone if you ain't hunting trouble."

Sparshott's eyes gleamed at him with sudden suspicion.

"You the galoot that was with young Loring in his shack the other night?" he exclaimed.

"Sure!"

"Oh, gophers!" exclaimed Hank, "a little kid like you the galoot that shot up our crowd?"

The Kid grinned.

"Jest little me," he assented, "and I did admire the way you galoots started for the horizon. Nobody could have seen your heels for dust."

Walt Sparshott was staring at him with deadly menace. His hand was creeping nearer to his gun; and the Kid's keen eyes did not lose that movement.

"You want to let them cows alone," drawled the Kid. "I'm driving in them cows for my boss."

A quick glance was exchanged between Walt Sparshott and Hank. At the same second they grasped their guns and drew. One second more, and the Rio Kid would have rolled off his mustang with two bullets through his body. But with lightning speed the Kid's gun was in his hand, and it was the Kid who pulled trigger first.

Bang, bang!

The Kid fired twice, and only a single shot came back, and it missed by a yard. Walt Sparshott fell heavily from his horse, and Hank reeled forward and held on helplessly to his saddle. The Kid, his eyes like gleaming steel, looked at them over his smoking gun.

"Let up, puncher!" panted Hank faintly. "I guess I've got mine! Let up!" He stumbled from his horse.

"Drop that gun!" rapped out the Kid.

The puncher's gun dropped in the grass.

"You sure ain't got your ticket for soup yet, not by long chalks," grinned the Kid. "You've got off easy feller."

Hank, leaning heavily on his horse, stared down at Walt Sparshott. The Kid followed his glance. He had fired only in time to save his own life, and he had no regrets. It had been the Kid's life or Sparshott's, and the Montana man's life had gone out like a candle that was extinguished. With his gun still gripped in his hand, his face still savage and threatening, the eldest of the Sparshott clan lay extended in the grass—never to stir again of his own volition.

"I guess he's got his!" muttered Hank hoarsely. "You've got Walt Sparshott, puncher!"

"I sure reckon so," assented the Kid. "He asked for it, feller, and he sure got what he asked for. You want to tell his gang to keep clear of the Loring Ranch, hombre. You going to let them cows alone?"

"Sure!" gasped the Sparshott puncher.

"That's good enough."

The Kid drove the cows onward, the Sparshott puncher staring after him as he went, till the grassy ridges hid him from sight.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Last Blow!

"SHUCKS!"

The Rio Kid uttered the ejaculation suddenly.

The sun was sinking over the Montana uplands, when the Kid, driving the three loping cows, came in sight of the Loring ranch-house. But it was not the ranch-house that he saw first. What he saw was a thick column of smoke rising against the sky.

His sunburnt face set grimly.

He had warned Kent Loring that he had no chance it keeping up the fight against a numerous and unscrupulous bunch of enemies, and his words were proved true enough now. The Loring homestead was going up in smoke and flames.

Since Kent had had to part with the last of his men, the outcome had been only a matter of time. But for the Rio

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Kid's help, the end would have come sooner. Now it had come.

The Kid rode on towards the burning house. The place was deserted; there was no sign of an enemy there. Eben and Rube Sparshott, or their men, had been there—and gone! Only the wooden walls of the ranch were still standing, and burning—the roof had fallen in. Here and there other thick clouds of smoke rose from burning sheds. The Sparshotts had made a clean sweep this time.

"Thunder!" murmured the Kid, as he stood gazing at the scene of destruction.

It was what he had expected—what Kent had expected, as a matter of fact. Feuds in the cow country were merciless and ruthless. In the Wildcat country of Montana, law had little hold. Sheriffs and town marshalls kept clear of cowmen's feuds. The fight was between the Loring's and the Sparshotts, to be fought out to a finish without interference. And this looked like the finish for Kent Loring.

"I guess it's bedding-down on the prairie for you and me to-night, old hoss," said the Kid to the grey mustang.

He drove the three cows along the creek, to the hollow, screened by bushes and live oaks, where the handful of cows that remained to Kent had been concealed. But the cows were gone. Evidently they had been searched for and found in the hidden hollow. The Sparshotts had done their work thoroughly. Trampled ground, hoofmarks of cows and horses, remained to tell of what had become of the little bunch of cows, and that was all. Of all the Loring herds, the three cows that the Kid had rounded up were all that remained.

The Kid whistled.

It was the last blow, and after this it was impossible for Kent to carry on. The Loring ranch had gone up! The Kid put the three cows to the grass, and returned to the burning ranch-house.

He camped down at a little distance from the burning ranch, and unpacked his supper from his slicker pack. He wondered why Kent did not return. He could not still be hunting cows after darkness had fallen on the plains.

"Shucks!" the Kid muttered anxiously. "Have them pesky galoots got him? If they have, I guess I'll sure shoot up that Sparshott bunch before I hit the trail out of Montana. That crowd are sure pizen."

The moon came up over the dim hills. The fire was dying down now in a mass of glowing red.

Thud, thud, thud!

From the dark plains came the beat of a horse's galloping hoofs, and the Kid turned with a sigh of relief. But his handsome face darkened as the horse came panting up to the ranch. It was Kent Loring's horse—but the saddle was empty!

The Kid's teeth came together hard.

He caught the horse, and soothed the startled, frightened animal. There was blood on the saddle, blood on the sweating flanks of the horse. Harder grew the grim face of the Kid. He knew now that Kent Loring had met

Your Editor's Note Book

Readers will find on page 17 of this issue another long list of Birthday Dates. This is the second list, and I advise all my chums to look over it carefully. The date of your birth may be mentioned there, and should that be so, and you are also a registered member of the Birthday Club—then claim an Annual.

And here again, I would give you a timely piece of advice. Don't leave your claim too late, for you have only a few days in which to send it in. That's important!

Think of the issue in the balance. A six-shilling Annual absolutely Free! Worth while taking a little trouble over it—what?

Let me again emphasize the point to all those of my readers who have not so far filled in the registration coupon for the Club, that they are missing a wonderful treat by neglecting to do so.

The stock of Annuals is limited, and I do want you chaps to be in the running for one of these topping books.

Think how ripping it would be if the postman suddenly knocked at your door and handed you a parcel containing a "Hobby" or "Holiday" Annual.

Now, take the tip, chums, and join the Birthday Club to-day!

enemies on the prairie—and had not been lucky like the Kid.

"They've got him!"

The Kid tethered the horse. He called to his mustang to follow him, and left his supper untasted. Kent Loring, dead or wounded, had fallen from his horse, and the Kid's task now was to find him. Higher rose the moon over the Montana hills, higher and clearer, streaming down silver light on the prairie. In the dark the Rio Kid could have picked up a trail; in the clear moonlight it was child's play to him. Step by step he followed the trail of the horse that had come galloping home with empty saddle. It was a mile from the ranch that the Kid suddenly halted, as he heard a low groan from the shadowy grass.

A moment more, and he was bending over Kent Loring.

A white face looked up at him, white as chalk under the tan, in the glimmering light of the moon.

"You're hit, feller," said the Kid softly.

"They got me from behind a clump of live oaks," muttered Kent faintly.

"You ain't over the range yet," said the Kid. "I guess I'm going to doctor, you, feller."

Kent Loring lay silent in the grass, though he winced with pain as the Kid examined his wound. He had been shot from long range, and the bullet had gone clean through his shoulder. He was weak and faint from loss of blood; and had not the Kid found him he would have bled to death in the grass before dawn. But the Kid had found him, and the Kid was tending him with hands as gentle as a woman's. With his own silk neck-scarf, torn into

strips, the Kid bound up the wound.

"You'll pull through this, feller," said the Kid softly. "You've got a pard to look after you, and you'll pull through. I guess we're bedding-down for the night right here, and in the morning I'll sure get you into Wildcat and under a roof."

And, with his own blankets, the Kid made a bed for the Montana cowman in the thick grass.

"The game's up, puncher," said Kent, in a low voice. "I reckon I was a mule, just as you told me. The ranch is gone up, and I reckon they cleared off what was left of the cows—"

"They sure did—except for the three I found and drove in," said the Kid. "The game is sure up for you hyer, feller, so long as the Sparshotts are cavorting around. But you're going to be on your feet again in a week from now, and I'm sure watching you all that time."

Kent smiled faintly.

"You reckon I shall pull out of this?"

"You sure will!"

"I shall owe it to you, puncher. It was a lucky day for me when you rode into the Wildcat country."

"You want to sleep now, feller," said the Kid.

During the night the Kid watched over the wounded man, who lay in fitful slumber in the blankets. The Kid's face was grim while he watched.

In the morning Kent was conscious, though white and weak, and unable to help himself. But the Kid was there to help him. He fetched the horse from the burnt-out ranch, and mounted Kent upon it, and mounted his own mustang, holding the Montana cowman in the saddle as they rode closely side by side through the thick grass, heading for the town of Wildcat.

"You'll pull out of this, feller," said the Kid, "and before you begin ranching again, you'll go gunning after the Sparshotts, with a Texas puncher to help you. And you'll get a mortgage on the ranch, and start fresh and fair."

Kent grinned faintly.

"I guess I shall be looking for a job on a ranch to punch cows," he answered. "Nobody would lend me a hundred dollars on a mortgage in the Wildcat country. I guess I've tried that."

The Kid shook his head and smiled, thinking of the fat roll in his belt.

"I've sure got a hunch that you'll get a mortgage, and easy," he said. "There's a lawyer shark in Wildcat who will fix it up. You'll get five thousand dollars on a mortgage and start fresh, I tell you, feller."

And the Rio Kid knew what he was talking about. The Sparshott feud was on his hands now, and it was to come to an end, if the Rio Kid had not forgotten how to shoot, and if the notched walnut-butted guns in his low-hung holsters did not fail him.

THE END.

(Will the Kid fail his new-found friend, or will the Sparshotts succeed in their deadly scheming? Next week will tell. Don't miss: "THE KID'S LONE FIGHT!" next Tuesday.)

The BUNTER BROTHERS

— Merry Mirthmakers. —

ON THE TRAIL OF THE GRUB RAIDER!



Billy Bunter one day made a raid on his schoolfellows' tuck basket. But he didn't get away with it unseen. A wild shout, and Harry Wharton & Co. were in full cry after the podgy raider. "Yoicks! Tally-ho!" "Oh dear!" panted Billy, as he made a break for the school gates.



Down the road tore Billy, the raider. "I'll outwit them yet!" he gasped. "I've got a good start, and when I'm in the woods they won't be able to pick up my trail! This is where I smile! Ha, ha, ha!"



But Billy hadn't noticed the hole in the corner of the basket through which his tuck was falling, leaving a clear trail behind for his pursuers. "Ha! He went this way!" cried Harry Wharton merrily. "He thinks he'll get away!" "But he won't!" added Bob Cherry.



At last, in the shade of a tree, Billy sat down on a nice round stone to enjoy his looted tuck. Munch! Munch! Munch! "These carts are the finest Mrs. Mimble has made for a long time!" he warbled merrily.



But suddenly there was a terrific upheaval beneath Billy. For the object he had taken for a stone, turned out to be a prize porker having its afternoon nap. Porker didn't like such a weighty matter on his shoulders, and proceeded to shift it forthwith and instanter. "Yaroop!" howled Billy, leaping into the air.



Of course, that did it! Billy didn't wait to finish his purloined tuck, but started off helter-skelter in chase of the porker who had spoilt his picnic. And as he disappeared over the hill, Harry Wharton & Co. came up with a rush, and commenced to make hay with their rescued tuck. "This is where we smile! Ha, ha, ha!"