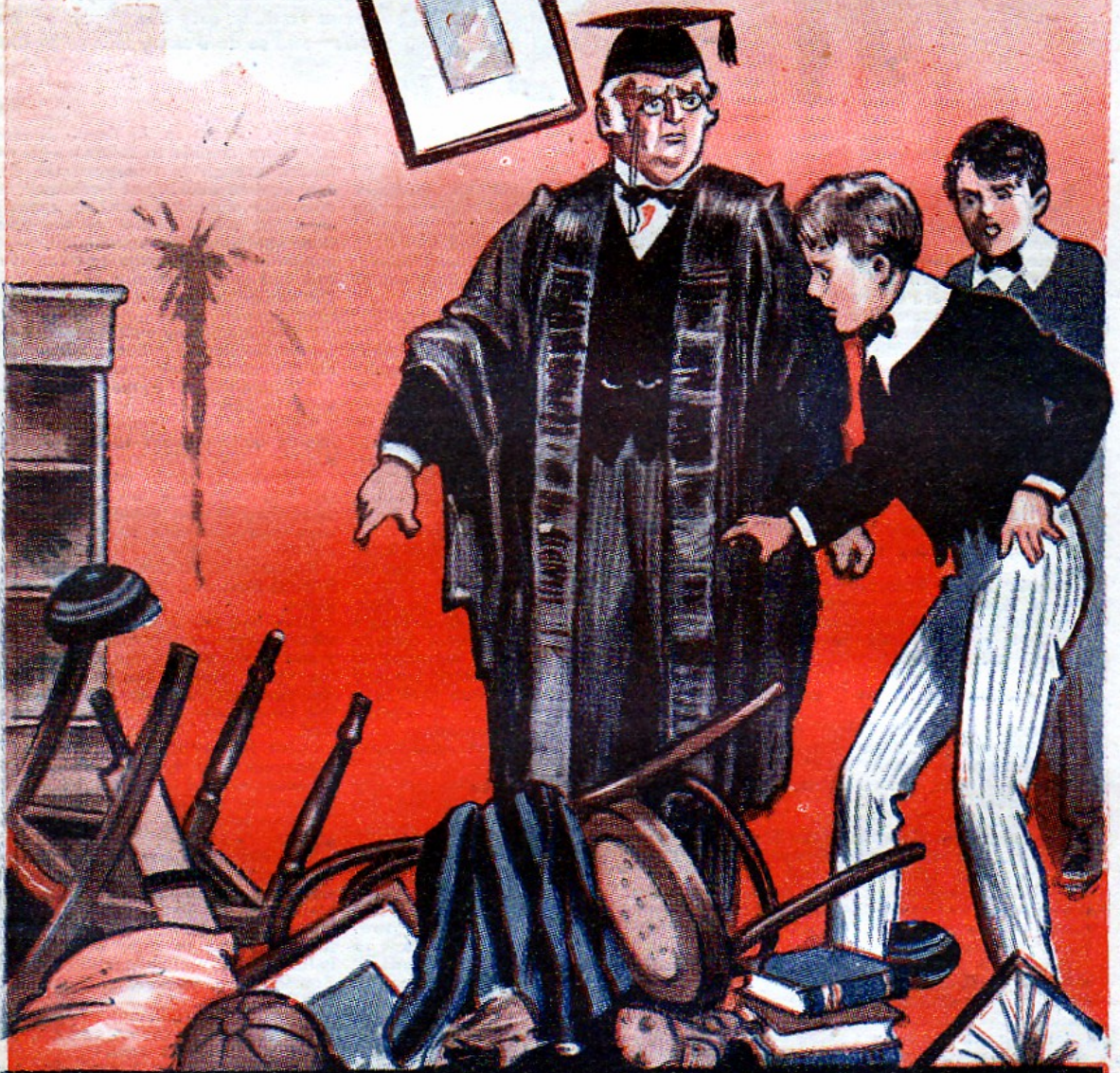


LIVE STORIES & ARTICLES *for*
the ADVENTURE-LOVING BOY!

The POPULAR

Week Ending
October 5th,
1929.
New Series.
No. 558.
EVERY
TUESDAY.

2^d



"IS THIS THE STATE IN WHICH YOU KEEP YOUR STUDY?"

*The Head's Surprise Visit proves
disastrous for the Rookwood Chums.*



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The New Boss of the Lazy-O!

THE little two-horse hack that ran from Pecos Bend to Packsaddle carried a single passenger. Jimmy Dace, the driver, could have told any galoot who that passenger was—or he figured that he could. He knew him as Mister Fairfax, the guy who had bought the Lazy-O Ranch at Packsaddle, and was going to take possession of his new property. And Jimmy Dace would have been as astonished as anyone to learn that the young man in the hack was more properly named Carfax, and that he had been known all through Texas as the Rio Kid.

Few, if any, would have known the Rio Kid as he lounged lazily in the rickety old hack, bumping along the trail to Packsaddle. Looking at his own face in his pocket mirror, the Kid hardly knew himself. And he reckoned that Texas sheriffs and Texas rangers would hardly get wise to him if they saw him.

The Kid had changed some.

He still wore the Stotson hat, but without the band of silver nuggets that was so widely known. The silver spurs and the goatskin chaparejos were gone. The walnut-butted guns no longer swung in the low-hung holsters. The holsters were gone with the guns. Nobody, looking at "Mister Fairfax," would have guessed that he was "holed" at all. But anyone who had known the Kid would have figured—correctly—that though his hardware was not on view it was within easy reach.

The Kid looked like a prosperous young rancher—as he was, for the time being, at least.

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were inseparable. And that was where the Kid felt the pinch hardest. He hated parting with his horse, even for a few days; he hated going afoot, and he loathed travelling on wheels. But he had marked out the game he was going to play, and he was going to play it.

Jimmy Dace, who drove the hack, was not a respectful person, as a rule, but he treated his solitary passenger, on this occasion, with marked respect. The man who had bought the Lazy-O was a man deserving of respect, for many reasons. The Lazy-O was the biggest ranch in the Packsaddle section of the Pecos country, and its long-horned herds roamed over scores of miles of rich grasslands. The Lazy-O bunch was the toughest bunch in Texas, and when they rolled into Packsaddle for a jamboree law-abiding citizens closed doors and windows and lay low till the bunch rode out again. And Jimmy Dace wondered, with deep respect, at a guy who looked little more than a boy, and who fancied that he could handle the Lazy-O bunch. Moreover, Jimmy respected wealth, and only a wealthy galoot could have bought the Lazy-O—forty thousand dollars, at the lowest figure, Jimmy reckoned, though the Lazy-O had been in the market for a long time, and, in fact, for years on end had been run by the foreman, Barney Baker, without much interference from distant proprietors. Jimmy wondered how Barney Baker would cotton to this new boss, who looked like a kid; and, privately, he opined that in buying the Lazy-O, Mister Fairfax had bought trouble.

Jimmy could have told Mister Fairfax quite a lot about his new property and its outfit, had he chosen to tell tales. He could have told him that

Barney Baker almost openly sold cattle belonging to the ranch, the proceeds of these sales going into Barney's own pocket, as every galoot in Packsaddle knew well. He could have warned him that if he worried Barney any, the Lazy-O property was more likely to interest his heirs than himself. He could have put him wise that in Packsaddle the law was chiefly the law of the man quickest on the draw, and that no sheriff within a hundred miles was likely to seek trouble with the Lazy-O bunch, if he could help it. He could, in fact, have told this handsome young rancher that in going to the Lazy-O he was most likely going to his own funeral.

But Jimmy did not tell Mister Fairfax all those things that he might have told him. It was no business of his, Jimmy reckoned, and a stranger who horned into the Packsaddle country could find things out for himself. Moreover, Jimmy was interested in figuring how long Mister Fairfax was likely to live after horning in. No insurance company would have taken on Mister Fairfax, at any price, on Jimmy Dace's estimation of his probable length of life.

But the young guy in the hack evidently did not know what a thorny trail he had started on. He seemed quite cheery and satisfied.

That certainly was the case. Except for parting with Side-Kicker, the Rio Kid was quite enjoying his new venture.

Rangers and sheriffs had been hot on the Kid's track. The boy outlaw of the Rio Grande had been hunted hard. He had been cornered in the Mal Pais, and the sheriff of Plug Hat had almost cinched him. By llano and sierra they had hunted the Rio Kid, and the Kid reckoned that it was time for him to disappear altogether. In a safe place the Kid had tucked away the fortune he had won in the Arizona gold-mines long ago. Much of it was gone, for the Kid was careless in such matters; but much remained—plenty for the boy

THE RIO KID—RANCHER!

By RALPH REDWAY

To own a ranch, and be lord and master over a gang of punchers, has always been the secret ambition of the Rio Kid, Boy Outlaw. At last comes the golden opportunity of realizing his dream, and the Kid is not slow in taking it.

outlaw's new venture. And there was something in this stunt that appealed to the Kid's sense of humour. They looked for him in the llano and the sierra, by mountain and plain they hunted him, but they were not likely to look for him bossing the biggest ranch in the Packsaddle country.

He had discarded his distinctive attire, he had parted, for a time, with Side-Kicker, he dressed like a rancher instead of a puncher; and he sported a little moustache, which made him look both older and different; and he did not figure that he was likely to be recognised. And Packsaddle was a far cry from the Rio Frio country, where he was best known. And the fact that it was a district that sheriffs disliked, out of regard for their health, recommended it to the Rio Kid. What was not healthy for sheriffs was likely to be all the healthier for the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

So the Kid smiled cheerily as he sat in the two-horse hack, bumping over a trail that was good for horsemen, but had never been made for wheels. He looked out on the Packsaddle country and liked it. It was a rich and well-watered country, abounding in rich grass, good feed for cattle, and little streams, rolling plains, fringed by belts of post-oak and pecan, deep coulees, where the rain gathered. The Kid figured that the Packsaddle herds would not thirst, even if all the rest of Texas was dry. And he was master of hundreds of acres of this rich country, which was a pleasant thought to the boy puncher, who had punched cows on the Double-Bar, in the Frio country, and who, like all punchers, had dreamed of having a ranch of his own some day. Now he had it, and he figured that life was going to be good.

Herds of cattle dotted the rolling prairie, through which the stage-trail ran. Several times the Kid sighted some puncher, riding his broncho knee-deep in grass, and his heart warmed to the sight. This, he told himself with a grin, was better than the Mal Pais and shooting up the rangers.

A slackening of speed, as Jimmy Dace pulled in his horses, caused the Kid to put his head out and glance at the driver.

"Say, we ain't hitting Packsaddle yet?" he asked.

"Nope."

"What are you pulling in for?"

Jimmy Dace gestured with his whip. "I guess there's two guys ahead who want to chew the rag with somebody," he answered.

The Kid glanced along the trail.

Two horsemen had pulled out from the plains, and sat in their saddles directly in the way of the hack. Punchers, they looked to the Kid, riders in chaps, with hard-bitten, reckless faces—punchers, the Kid figured, of a tough brand. They touched no weapon, but they plainly meant to stop the hack, and the Kid, scenting trouble, slid his hand down to where the walnut-

butted gun had once swung in the holster. Then he grinned, as his hand found nothing hanging by the well-fitting cord riding-breeches. And his hand slid round to the back of his belt, to make sure that the gun that was not in sight was safely there, all the same.

"A hold-up?" he asked.

"Not so's you'd notice it," answered Jimmy Dace.

"What's the game, then?" asked the Kid, puzzled.

Jimmy Dace looked down from his box at the handsome, inquiring face looking up at him from the window of the hack. An impulse of compassion stirred Jimmy's somewhat leathery heart. After all, the Kid was only a kid—a mere boy, playing rancher—and it was a shame to let him walk with his eyes shut into what was coming to him.

"Mister Fairfax, sir," said Jimmy, "them guys belong to the Lazy-O."

"My ranch?" said the Kid.

"They're in the Lazy-O outfit, and I guess they're Barney Baker's side-partners," said Jimmy, sinking his voice to a hoarse whisper, though the hack was not yet close to the waiting horsemen. "The one with the cast in his eye is Panhandle Pete—"

"Looks tough!" commented the Kid.

"Sure! The one with the scar on his jaw is the Coyote. His name's Jenson, but he's called the Coyote."

"Looks mean," said the Kid.

"That's how," said Jimmy Dace.

"Mister Fairfax, sir, they're stopping this hearse to see you, sir."

"Sort of welcome home?" drawled the Kid.

"Not on your life," said Jimmy Dace. "Sirce, I guess them guys is rough. Tain't my funeral, nohow, but I hate to see a tenderfoot mishandled."

The Kid smiled.

"I ain't exactly a tenderfoot, feller."

"I guess not," assented Jimmy. "I reckon you was raised among cows. You sure do look it, Mister Fairfax, sir. But—"

"They know at the ranch that I'm coming from Pecon Bend in this hack," remarked the Kid. "Two of the boys have rode out to meet me. I take that kindly."

Jimmy Dace stared at him.

"They've rode out to meet you, sure enough," he said. "Mister Fairfax, I guess they never told you a whole heap about the Lazy-O when they sold it to you."

"I guess I had all the particulars," said the Kid. "You want to say it ain't a good ranch?"

"Best in the Packsaddle country," answered Jimmy. "But did they tell you about the bunch?"

"They did not," said the Kid. "But I guess I'll pull all right with the bunch. And if I do not, feller, I guess a bunch can be frod."

Jimmy gave him a pitying look.

"You figure on firing the Lazy-O bunch?" he asked.

"Sure, if I don't like their ways."

Jimmy opened his mouth again—and closed it. He drove on slowly towards the two waiting horsemen. It was useless, he figured, to put this confident Kid wise, and he had to take what was coming to him.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Kid Means Business!

THE Rio Kid gazed with cool interest from the window of the hack. Jimmy Dace drew it to a halt at a gesture from the horseman with a cast in his eye—Panhandle Pete, as he had called him. Whatever attitude Mister Fairfax might adopt, Jimmy Dace did not aim at trouble with the men of the Lazy-O. Jimmy was by nature not a meek galoot at all; but when he walked in the presence of the Lazy-O men he walked warily.

"Arternoon, fellers!" said Jimmy, very civilly.

"You've got a passenger?" asked Panhandle Pete.

"You've said it."

"Name of Fairfax?"

"Right in once."

"Tell him to hop out."

Jimmy Dace called down to his passenger.

"Mister Fairfax, sir, you want to hop out and speak to those guys."

"Guess again," drawled the Kid. "I ain't hopping out a whole lot."

"For the love of Lucy, Mister Fairfax, sir, don't rile 'em!" murmured Jimmy Dace. "I'll tell the world you're a good little man, and I'd hate to see you quieted or shot up."

"I'd sure hate it myself, just a few," said the Kid cheerfully. "Tell them guys I'm their new boss, and I want to speak to them. They're to ride up to the window."

Jimmy made a hopeless gesture. "Say, we're waiting to see that guy!" called out the Coyote.

"He's a-coming," called back Jimmy Dace hastily. "Give the galoot a chance, you 'uns." He bent as low as he could, to give the Kid one last warning. "Mister Fairfax, sir, hop out, and talk turkey to them guys. I guess it ain't my funeral, and I sure don't want to rile the Lazy-O bunch, but I jest got to tell you that when they say hop, a guy had better hop. Did they tell you at Pecon Bend who bought the Lazy-O last fall?"

"They did not."

"Did they tell you he was found shot up on the prairie?"

"Geo!" said the Kid. "They did not."

"I guess they was plumb anxious to find a buyer for that ranch," said Jimmy. "I reckon it's been hanging on the market a long time, Mister Fairfax, sir. I guess they didn't tell you all they could, or you sure wouldn't have horned in to buy it. Mister Fairfax, sir, you talk turkey to them guys and get off safe."

The Kid smiled.

"Tell them guys to come up to the hack," he answered. "It's their boss orders them."

Jimmy sighed.

"You 'uns, your boss says you're to ride up to the hack and talk to him," he called out.

The two punchers stared, exchanged a glance, and then grinned. They rode up to the halted vehicle and stopped beside it, staring at the handsome, boyish face that looked out at them.

The Kid gave them an amiable smile.

"You boys belong to the Lazy-O?" he asked.

"Sure!" grunted Panhandle Pete.

"Then I'm pleased to meet up with you," said the Kid. "You want to know that I've bought the ranch—leastways, I've paid down on it, and aim to hand over the rest after I've looked it over. Comes to the same thing. I sure hope we're going to pull together fine at the Lazy-O."

"Step down from that hearse!" said Panhandle Pete curtly.

"Sho!"

"You hear me, yaup?" snapped the puncher.

"I sure ain't deaf," said the Kid pleasantly. "But you seem to have got it wrong, feller. You ain't boss—I'm boss. Chew on that a minute, and then take off your hat and say you're sorry."

Panhandle Pete stared at him.

"Gee whizz!" he said.

"Some greenhorn, I guess," remarked Coyote Jenson.

"Git down outer that hearse, you!" roared Panhandle Pete.

The Kid whistled softly.

"I've sure heard that Packsaddle is a tough country," he remarked. "Is that how a cowman talks to his boss in Packsaddle? I sure reckon that there's going to be a change on the Lazy-O."

"You hopping down?"

"Not a whole lot."

"Then I guess you'll be made," said Panhandle Pete.

The Kid looked at him steadily. His face was still cool and smiling, but there was a glint in his eyes.

"That's your say-so," he said. "You say the same, you Jenson?"

"Sure!" said the Coyote emphatically.

"That does it," said the Kid coolly. "You're both fired. You don't belong to the Lazy-O any more. Go back to the ranch and tell Mr. Baker I've fired you, and ask for your money."

"Loco!" said Panhandle Pete.

"Plumb loco!"

He dismounted from his broncho and wrenched open the door of the hack. Jimmy Dace sat tight on his box and chewed tobacco. He felt no call to intervene. He had warned the newcomer, and he left it at that. Not that intervention on Jimmy's part would have been any use.

"Now," said Panhandle Pete, his bearded, bronzed face flushed with anger. "You gitting down, Mister Fairfax, or you want to be handled?"

The Kid gave him a cheery nod. When it came to trouble he wanted room; and trouble was coming swiftly. He assented.

"If you're so particular I'll sure get down," he said.

"Pronto!" snarled Pete.

The Kid stepped out of the hack.

Both the punchers were dismounted now, and they had their quirts in their hands. The Kid realized that he had bought a surprise-package in the Lazy-O ranch. Lawyer Lucas, in Pecos Bend, had not told him what to expect in the Packsaddle country. But the Kid had no grouch about it. He figured that he was quite able to take care of himself, and he grinned as he surmised what these guys would have thought had they known that Mister Fairfax was the Rio Kid, the quickest man on the draw in all Texas. The Kid never looked for trouble, but trouble had a way of haunting his footsteps. And he had no objection to it when it came.

"Well, hyer I am, you 'uns," said the Kid cheerily. "If you want to shoot off your mouths, I guess I can give you

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a few minutes. Don't forget that you're fired from the Lazy-O."

"I guess you ain't the size of man to fire us, dog-gone you," growled Panhandle Pete. "We come hyer to put you wise. The bunch don't want you on Lazy-O. Got that?"

"I got it," assented the Kid.

"If you like to ride back to Pecos Bend while you're safe in one piece I guess I'll rustle you a horse."

"But I guess I've jest come from Pecos Bend," said the Kid, in innocent surprise. "I ain't going back any. I'm going to Packsaddle, and to-morrow I aim to take possession of the Lazy-O."

"You ain't been in Packsaddle afore, I guess."

"Nix!"

"I reckoned not. You don't savvy this country," said Panhandle Pete grimly. "I reckon you fancy that if you hit trouble at the ranch the sheriff will put things through for you."

"Ain't that the sheriff's job?" asked the Kid.

"Sure thing! But you want to find a sheriff who's anxious to get on the job in Packsaddle," answered the puncher. "You ask the sheriff at Pecos Bend to ride out to Lazy-O and see you through, and I guess he'll tell you to call again next year."

"You don't say!" remarked the Kid.

"We don't get a lot of sheriffs here," said Panhandle Pete. "Barney Baker runs the Lazy-O, and Barney's good enough for the bunch. And we ain't honing to see any boss cavorting around. You get me?"

The Kid laughed.

"I guess you'll see me cavorting around," he said. "Why, you giuk, I've paid down ten thousand dollars on that ranch—the other thirty thousand to be paid after I've seen it."

"I guess you can call it off and save the thirty thousand," said the puncher.

"And you figure that Lawyer Lucas will hand me back the ten if I call it off?" grinned the Kid.

"Not in your lifetime," chuckled the Coyote.

"Then I guess I go through with the deal," drawled the Kid. "Got any more to say, you guys?"

"You hitting it for Pecos Bend?"

"Not by a jugful."

"Waal, if you want to be quirted before you go, I guess I'd as soon quirt you as not," said Panhandle Pete.

The Kid laughed again. He had heard that the Lazy-O outfit were a tough bunch, but this way of meeting a now boss was, he figured, the limit. It was no wonder that a property like the Lazy-O had hung long in the market.

"You aim to quirt your boss?" he asked.

"Sure—if you don't hit the horizon pronto."

"I guess I've heard they're tough in Packsaddle," said the Kid. "But I never heard the like of this. Still, if you're honing to handle that quirt, I guess you'd better get on with it."

Panhandle Pete waited for no more. He made a rush at the Kid, swinging up the heavy quirt.

With a swift backward jump the Kid eluded the slash of the quirt, and before it could be lifted again he leaped forward as swiftly.

What seemed like a solid lump of lead crashed on the jaw of the puncher. It was the Kid's fist—and all the Kid's weight was behind it.

Panhandle Pete gave a gurgling gasp and flew backwards, and crashed down in the trail with a mighty crash.

"Gee!" gasped the Coyote.

His hand flew to his gun.

Crack!

How the Colt got into the Kid's hand seemed like magic to Jimmy Dace, watching with distended eyes from his box.

But it was there, and it was there in time. And the Kid burned powder before the Coyote could lift his hand with the gun in it.

There was a hoarse yell from Coyote Jenson as the gun flew from his hand and his right arm dropped to his side. He stood staggering and staring stupidly at his arm, which hung helplessly, streaming with blood. And Jimmy Dace ejaculated, in tones of wonder and awe:

"Gee! Carry me home to die!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Kid Comes to Town!

THE Rio Kid stood smiling; the smoking Colt in his hand. Panhandle Pete still sprawled dazedly in the trail. Coyote Jenson staggered back to the hack, and stood leaning on it, his face white, his legs sagging under him, his broken arm hanging at his side helplessly.

Panhandle Pete staggered up. He felt his jaw with his hand, as if to ascertain that it was still there.

"Dog-gone my cats!" he muttered hoarsely.

"You want any more, feller?" asked the Kid amiably.

The puncher grabbed at a gun. "Don't!" said the Kid quietly.

The walnut-butted Colt was looking at the Lazy-O puncher, the Kid's finger on the trigger.

"Guess again, feller," advised the Kid. "You touch that gun and you're a dead guy. Guess again."

Slowly the puncher's hand came away from his belt. The Kid's voice was cool and drawling, his face smiling, but his eyes glinted like cold steel over the revolver. Panhandle Pete knew that he was looking death in the face.

"You—you durned, dog-goned lobo-wolf!" he muttered, his voice husky with rage.

"I guess you ain't the first guy that's woke me up for a gopher and found he'd woke up a prairie wolf," said the Kid. "Take that gun and drop it in the trail."

Panhandle Pete took the gun from his belt. He was sorely tempted to lift it and attempt a pot-shot. But something in the glinting eyes of the Kid warned him off. He knew that he would be a dead man before he could pull the trigger. The gun crashed to the ground.

"That's better," smiled the Kid. "You jump to orders that-a-way, feller, and I guess I may keep you on at the Lazy-O, after all. I sure ain't anxious to fire any of the bunch. I guess we'll pull together as thick as fleas on a Mexican dog when we know one another better. You jest got to learn to behave and you'll find me as good a boss as a cow-man could want. You get me?"

"You figure on going on to the Lazy-O?"

"Sure!"

"I guess the bunch will be glad to see you," muttered the puncher. "I guess we'll all be powerful glad to see you, Mister Fairfax."

"That's sure good to hear," said the Kid. "You tell them at the Lazy-O that I'm coming along to-morrow, and tell Barney Baker to ride into Packsaddle this evening and see me at the hotel there. Now don't shoot off your mouth any more. You've spilled a awful already. Get on your cayuse and ride."

Panhandle gave him a look, and gave

a longing glance at the gun lying in the trail."

"Forget it, feller!" said the Kid. "Don't I keep on telling you that you ain't woke up a gopher, but a prairie wolf, all teeth and claws. You want to let that sink into your cabeza. Put that pard of yourn on his bronc and tote him away. I guess he wants tying up some."

guy that's put it over the Lazy-O bunch and got away with it."

The Kid stepped into the hack, and the driver gathered up his reins, cracked his whip, and drove on towards the distant cow-town, still in a state of wonder and surpriso.

The Kid leaned back in his seat, a thoughtful expression on his face.

It was clear, he reflected, how trouble dogged his steps. From those old days on the Double-Bar Ranch in the Frio country, when the Kid, innocent of any wrongdoing, had been driven into outlawry, trouble had followed him like his shadow. He could say, with a clear conscience, that he never hunted it; but

Baker king-pin till a new buyer came along—to be played in the same way. This was a game that could be played in a country like Packsaddle, but it could not, the Kid reckoned, be played on him. He had bought the Lazy-O, and he was going to run the Lazy-O. And though the Kid never hunted for trouble he had a certain zest in meeting it when it came. There was something in him that loved a fight.

The hack rolled on, bumping on the uneven trail, and Packsaddle came in sight at last, in the glow of the sunset.

The Kid looked with interest at the cow-town as he approached it. It was



STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER! What seemed like a lump of lead crashed on the jaw of the puncher. It was the Kid's fist, and all the Kid's weight was behind it. Panhandle Pete gave a gurgling gasp, and flew backwards, and crashed down in the trail. (See Chapter 2.)

With a muttered curse, the Lazy-O puncher turned away. In grim silence he helped the wounded man into his saddle, and the two rode away together across the plain.

The Kid restored his gun to its place. He smiled as he met the wondering stare of Jimmy Dace.

"We ain't wasted a lot of time, feller," remarked the Kid, "and I'm sure glad to have met up with some of my bunch. But I reckon you'd better get on."

"Jumpin' gophers!" murmured the driver. "Mister Fairfax, sir, I guess I hand it to you. I guess you're the first

it always seemed to come. Still, there was no doubt that the Kid seemed to thrive on it.

He quite realized that he had been, to some extent, played for a sucker when they sold him the Lazy-O. He had no doubt that Lawyer Lucas at Pecos Bend was in cahoots with Barney Baker at the Lazy-O, and that they stood together to keep the Lazy-O on its present footing. No doubt that Barney made a good thing of it, running the ranch as if it were his own. No doubt that they expected him to be scared off, and to lose the big deposit he had paid on the purchase price, leaving Barney

like a hundred other cow-towns that he had seen—one irregular street, lined with shacks, shanties, 'doby houses, and frame houses, with a timber hotel and a timber saloon. The hack rolled up to the hotel where a dozen horses were hitched to the well-gnawed rail in front of the building. The usual crowd of loafers and curious citizens had gathered to see the hack come in from Pecos Bend. Packsaddle was far from rail-ways, and the hack from Pecos was its only regular communication with the outside world, and brought mails and newspapers, baggage, and an occasional THE POPULAR.—No. 558.

passenger, three times a week. The arrival of the stage was always a matter of interest in a cow-town, buried in the vast prairies. On this occasion the interest was greater than usual, for all Packsaddle knew that the new boss of the Lazy-O was arriving that day from Pecos Bend.

Two or three score of punchers and others were lounging in front of the timber building, watching for the hack. There was a general movement as it rolled up and Jimmy Dace brought it to a halt with a flourish. Half-a-dozen voices called out at once:

"You got him, Jimmy?"

Jimmy grinned down from his box, "Sure!" he answered.

A short, muscular puncher, bow-legged from incessant riding, straddled forward. The Kid, from the hack, noted that the crowd gave way with great care to the bow-legged man. But he did not need that to tell him that the man was a gun-man—a "killer." He knew the type—the hard, cold face, the ice-cold eyes.

"You say you got him?" asked the bow-legged man.

"I sure got him, Lariat," answered Jimmy, very civilly.

"Wasn't you met up on the trail?" demanded Lariat. "I reckoned some of the boys was meeting up with you."

That told the Kid that the bow-legged man was a Lazy-O man. He reckoned that the Lazy-O bunch took in some of the hardest characters even in the lawless Packsaddle country.

"We was sure met up with, Lariat," said Jimmy Dace. "Panhandle Pete and the Coyote."

"Waal, then, what you giving us?" demanded Lariat. "Mean to say they let the guy come on to town?"

"They sure did."

"I guess I don't got you," growled Lariat.

He turned from Jimmy as the Kid stepped from the hack.

Every eye in the crowd fastened on the Kid immediately.

The Kid wondered, for a moment, whether any galoot in Packsaddle happened to know the Rio Kid by sight, and whether the change in his looks would pass muster.

But there was no sign of recognition in any face—only keen interest, tinged with derision. The buying and selling of the Lazy-O, as the Kid learned later, was a standing joke in Packsaddle.

Every man there was keen to look at the new proprietor of the Lazy-O, keen to size him up, and see what sort of a guy he was. And they wanted to know how he had got so far as the cow-town, as it was an open secret that some of the Lazy-O bunch had aimed to meet the hack and warn him off.

The Kid glanced round casually and started for the hotel entrance. The bow-legged man planted himself promptly in the way.

"Say, you Mister Fairfax?" he asked. "You've got me," assented the Kid. "I reckon you're a Lazy-O man?"

"Yep!"

"One of my outfit then," said the Kid pleasantly. "Take a look at your boss, if you want, and then step lively. I guess I'm honing for some supper, feller."

The cold eyes of the gun-man watched him curiously. He did not step aside, or make any movement to do so.

"I reckon your supper can wait, Mr. Fairfax," he remarked, in icy tones. "I want to know the hang of this. Wasn't you told on the trail that Packsaddle ain't a healthy place for you?"

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"I kinder guessed it from the way them guys carried on," said the Kid. "But they was quite satisfied, when they went, that I can look after my health."

The gun-man eyed him, evidently puzzled. There was a hush in the crowd. Every man there knew the gun-man's intentions, and the Kid was not blind to them. But he smiled pleasantly.

Barney Baker, he reckoned, was handling this matter in a business-like way. If a quibbling on the trail did not frighten off the new boss there was a gun-man waiting for him at Packsaddle, and it was going to be gun-play. There was no doubt that any man who bought the Lazy-O was buying trouble.

"I guess Panhandle Pete put you wise that you wasn't wanted on the Lazy-O," said Lariat, at last.

"He kinder dropped a hint that-a-way," assented the Kid. "From what I figured, it seems that the outfit ain't honing to get a new boss. But they'll sure come to like it when they know me. I'm a good little man when I ain't riled."

There was a laugh, and the gun-man's cold eyes glittered.

"I don't rightly know how you got past the guys," he said. "But—"

"I ain't keeping it a secret," said the Kid cheerily. "They sure was too fresh, and I fired them."

This Week's Tall Story!



William Gosling, porter at Greyfriars School, sternly refuses a handsome tip from Maulverer!

"Fired them?" gasped Lariat.

"Jest that. Fired them from the bunch," said the Kid innocently. "I guess a ranch boss can fire his hands if he wants to."

"Gee whiz!"

"They was very fresh," said the Kid confidently, conscious that every ear was hanging on every word. "They sure was fresh. But after I handled Pete and let daylight through Coyote they was like lambs. I guess they know how to behave when they're told."

"You handled Pete and drilled Coyote?" stutored the gun-man blankly. "What you giving us, you ornery locoed gink?"

"Straight goods," answered the Kid. "Jimmy Dace will tell you, if you hone to know. Me, I'm for supper."

"You ain't for supper yet," said Lariat grimly. "I guess you won't want any supper, Mister Fairfax, when we're through."

"Feller, I'm hungry, after coming all the way from Pecos Bend," said the Kid. "I guess it's me for grub. Stand back!"

"Not on your lifetime," sneered Lariat.

"The Lazy-O bunch sure do want to learn manners," said the Kid pleasantly. "I figure that they've got a boss now to teach them. I don't take lip from any man in my outfit. You're fired, Lariat!"

"Fired! Me?"

"You got me. Don't let me see you on the Lazy-O when I hump along to-morrow or I shall sure have to use boot-leather on you," said the Kid.

There was a breathless hush and a rustle as men crowded back out of the line of fire. For less than that—much less than that—Lariat had shot up more than one man in Packsaddle, and every man knew, too, that he was there to pick trouble with the new boss of the ranch.

Lariat drew a deep, deep breath.

"You figure that you'll use boot-leather on me?" he said at last. "You figure that you'll fire me from the bunch? Carry me home to die!"

"I've told you to stand aside, feller," the Kid pointed out. "I guess I ain't taking the trouble to walk round you. You moving?"

"Not so's you'd notice," drawled the gun-man.

"I guess you'll be moved, pronto!"

"Wade in!" grinned Lariat.

The bow-legged man stood like a rock in the Kid's path, his hands very near his low-along guns. That he aimed to draw and fire as soon as the Kid made a hostile movement every man knew, and already the Packsaddle men figured that the Lazy-O would be wanting another new boss. But they did not know the Rio Kid.

"I guess I'm giving you a chance," urged the Kid. "I've sure fired you from my outfit, but I ain't honing for trouble with you. Get out of the way, you wall-eyed, slab-sided, pie-faced coyote!"

Like a flash Lariat's hand gripped a gun. But, fast as he was, he was not fast enough. Instantly at the motion the Kid leaped on him, and before the gun could leave the holster the Kid's grasp was on the gun-man. The bow-legged puncher, swung from his feet with that sudden grasp, went crashing to the ground, and the revolver was kicked from his hand. His left hand grasped the other gun as he sprawled, and the Kid's riding-boot stamped gun and hand together to the earth, to the accompaniment of a scream of pain from Lariat.

The Kid was not smiling now.

He grasped the sprawling ruffian by the neck, dragged him up with a swing of his sinewy arms, twirled him round helplessly, and planted a crashing kick on his buckskin trousers.

Lariat flew into the street and rolled over, almost under the feet of Jimmy Dace's horses.

The Kid glanced at him and walked into the timber hotel. He was, as he had said, hungry after his long drive from Pecos Bend, and wanted his supper. Outside the hotel he left a buzzing crowd, wild with excitement. Often enough there was excitement in the cow-town of Packsaddle, but never had it reached such a pitch as now. The arrival of the new boss of the Lazy-O had caused all Packsaddle to sit up and take notice.

THE END.

(The Kid is in for a lively time when he takes over the Lazy-O Ranch—but that does not worry this cheery young outlaw. He's had more worries than most men—and got over them. Don't miss reading: "THE NEW BOSS OF THE LAZY-O!" next week!)