



# THE FOOL LAUGHS

*By Theodore A. Tinsley*

The Kid's lips were smiling, his grey eyes dancing when he met Muddy Reed face to face. He needed every ounce of his courage, but he loved a fight and he never shot, even at a snake, without warning.

**L**EFTY BURKE could smell lightning before it struck; and as sole proprietor and barkeep at Man Size he found this peculiar gift of his mighty valuable. Only once in the past it failed him—and an ugly, ragged scar across his right cheekbone bore eloquent testimony to that single, unfortunate lapse. It never happened again.

Trouble at Man Size—and that meant pretty nearly all the time—always found Burke three jumps ahead, with his gun handy.

Consequently, when Lefty carefully laid his rag on the bar and squinted steadily at the far corner near the door, the noisy hub-bub ceased, and all eyes stared watchfully.

There was a shuffle in the crowd, and a rasping oath. Then, suddenly, a ringing shout of laughter broke the strained silence.

The men fell back, leaving a circle of space near the door; the two hidden antagonists came suddenly into view.

Lefty's cold eye kindled with a strange frosty warmth.

"The Kid!" he muttered under his breath.

From someone backed stiffly against the bar came a low-voiced murmur:

"Muddy Reed—an' the Laffin' Fool!"

The Kid's lips were smiling, his gray eyes dancing. Six foot, straight as an arrow, he couldn't have been a day over twenty. The man facing him was older and heavier; broad-shouldered, deep-chested, his hair shot through with streaks of gray. His face was dark with rage and he rumbled wrathfully in the back of his throat.

The Kid eyed him keenly, still smiling.

"Mind sayin' that again?" he asked mockingly. "I'm shore admittin' I love tuh laff! Does me good, I reckon. Whut wuz that last remark, Muddy?"

Reed's eyes flamed. He calmed himself with an effort.

"I said my say! You heard me shout! If you're aimin' fer tuh dodge trouble, I'm advisin' yuh tuh climb onto that fancy nag o' yourn, an' tell Bob Martin I ain't lettin' him through. That's all!"

The Kid's eyes narrowed.

"You own the range, Muddy?" He smiled.

"I ain't lettin' him through."

"You own Buffalo Waller?"

"I ain't lettin' him through."

"Whut about Bob's stock?"

"Tuh hell with his stock!"

The Kid through back his head and laughed again—a boyish, happy peal. He pointed his finger at Muddy Reed's chest.

"Stow this under your Stetson! The range ain't yourn. It ain't mine. It's free! Buffalo Waller ain't yourn. It ain't mine neither. Free! That's whut it is! An' if you fence it in, we're tearin' down said fence! An' if you figger on givin' Bob hell, he figgers on givin' yuh back double-dyed damnation!"

Reed's face flushed.

"If Bob Martin wuz dead anxious tuh settle this, he made one bad mistake when he sent you. You're nuthin' but a damn laffin' jackass!"

"Yo're a liar!" breathed the Kid—and leaped.

In that lightning instant Reed had clutched his

gun, and half drawn it from its holster. In the same lightning instant a grip of steel crushed the bones in Muddy's wrist. Hand and gun shot in a swift arc behind Reed's back. The crowd scattered.

The two men, bodies crushed chest to chest, heaved and stumbled. Up, up went the hand with the gun behind Muddy's back. There was a stunning report, and a bullet tore through the roof. Suddenly Reed gave an animal-like squeal and the weapon dropped to the floor from his pain-racked fingers.

The Kid with a mighty heave threw him back, and waited grimly for his rush. He came on headlong—crazed with rage. The Kid's blow was timed perfectly. Muddy, stopped in mid-stride, dropped in his tracks with a broken nose and face streaming blood. He lay deathlike.

An audible sigh rose from the crowd in Man Size. But nobody stepped forward. The Kid stood apart, moodily nursing his bruised knuckles with set face; till catching sight of Lefty's face behind the bar, his own features relaxed and his eyes twinkled with amusement.

Lefty made his way around the bar with a dented pail, and sent a stream of cold water sluicing over Muddy Reed's battered face. The fallen man, helped to his feet, swayed dizzily. Mechanically his eyes searched the floor at his feet for his lost gun; but someone had kicked it out of sight in the melee, and it was gone.

He raised his head and his glance met the Kid's. They stared at each other wordlessly. Reed's eyes burned in a horrible bloody mask. He spat and lurched forward. The Kid lounged easily before him—waiting.

"Remember!" muttered Muddy thickly. "Keep off that water hole! I'm tellin' yuh tuh keep off, but by God! I'm hopin' yuh don't!"

The Kid's laugh was joyous.

"From now on, Muddy, we ain't waterin' nowheres else," he promised. "See yuh some more!"

He strode quickly forth into the sunshine. There was a swift clatter of hoofs. Lefty Burke, deserting his battered bar, stepped through the doorway of Man Size and gazed thoughtfully after the tall, straight figure on the rangy little mount. The echo of a laugh drifted back. Lefty rubbed his scar reflectively as he slowly went back to the bar.

THEY lounged easily in the shadow of the bunkhouse just out of range of the sun. The cloudless sky was a huge, inverted bowl of

shimmering steel-blue. The faint line of low hills to the north flickered and crawled in the heat-haze.

The Kid fanned himself lazily with his Stetson and listened to the slow drawl of his companion. He blinked and nodded. "Can't git much hotter'n this," he thought dully.

There was a long pause. The Kid swung over on his elbow and stared at his friend. A troubled look filmed his clear eyes. Bob was lookin' right mean these days!

The Kid's glance took in the thin, lined face with its high cheekbones, the deep-set eyes, the loose, bony frame. He sat up suddenly with a profane exclamation.

"Snap out of it, Bob! Whut's wrong with yuh?"

Bob Martin's face creased in a tired smile, and he waved his arm in a futile gesture that took in the flaming sky and the parched earth.

"Most everything, I reckon," he murmured.

"Trouble with you," grunted the Kid, "is too much thinkin' an' not enough action. Now, me, I'm fer action—"

He broke off with a grin as he noted Bob's expression.

"I know," he continued doggedly. "A laffin' fool! That's me! But I ain't worryin' none. An' that's where yo're dead wrong. See?"

Martin's face clouded.

"Farrish's note is way overdue," he said quietly. "He ain't agonna wait forever. *That's* good fer a mite o' worryin', Kid! An' this damn dry heat! The cattle—"

"There yuh go again," interrupted the Kid. "The cattle! Whut's bitin' the cattle?"

He broke into a happy grin.

"Seems tuh me the cattle ain't worryin' none—not while Buffalo Waller keeps wet! Muddy an' me settled the hull thing!"

Martin frowned in annoyance.

"That's fool talk, Kid, an' yuh know it! An' knowin' Muddy Reed, I'm sayin' yuh ain't settled nuthin'."

"Well, if it ain't settled our cattle ain't carin'. They're nuzzlin' aroun' knee-deep—plumb contented."

"Whut about Muddy's big gate?"

"Ain't nary gate," grinned the Kid. "Jest an entrance! Fixed up neat an' proper with the aid an' comfort o' one axe—small."

He pinched Bob's biceps playfully, and scrambled to his feet.

"Don't lemme hear no more worryin'," he

grunted in mock savagery. "One more yipe, an' I'm promisin' tuh peg yuh down in the sun, so's yuh kin weep inter every leetle hop-toad's ear whut comes ahoppin' up tuh smell yuh!"

He burst into a gay laugh, and vanished into the bunkhouse with the easy swagger of pliant-muscled youth. Martin, gazing at his disappearing back, found himself grinning in sympathy.

"Damn laffin' fool!" he muttered to himself, smilingly.

He settled back against the bunk-house wall, staring ahead at the scorched plain, the old worried lines deepening between his eyes.

For a long time he stared. And then, suddenly, as he watched glumly, the wind blew a tiny puff of dust above the horizon. In a twinkling it grew larger—came speeding fast toward him.

Martin watched the tiny horse and rider slowly take shape. A moment later, with a quick exclamation, he had recognized the flying horseman.

He called sharply, without turning his head: "Kid!"

There was a stir within the bunk-house, and the Kid emerged sleepily. A glance at Bob Martin's strained pose snapped the Kid wide awake with a jerk. He gazed for a space at the oncoming rider, and then turned to meet Martin's questioning eyes.

"Reckon yo're right, Bob," said the Kid softly. "It's Manuel!"

They ran to meet him as he pulled up in a choking dust-cloud and slid from his horse. His swarthy face was gray, his lungs pumping. The Kid dragged him savagely to the bunk-house door, and clapped a canteen to his cracked lips. Manuel choked and took one long gulp. Martin's eyes were narrowed anxiously.

"Tell!" he commanded sternly. "We listen!"

Manuel's voice came in a choking cry:

"Ah, señor! They keel! Weeth thee knife. *En la espalda!* Thee back! I come queek!"

They shook him, plying him with questions.

Pepe was gone. *Muerto!* He, Manuel, had seen him. On his belly, so! With a knife in his back. And blood. *Mucho sangre!* Where? Ah, señor, at the cursed place of the water!

The terrified Manuel shivered violently at the remembrance. By degrees his story became clear.

Driven by the searing heat the dusty herd had gradually but surely swung for the cool haven of Buffalo Waller. Manuel and Pepe were nothing loath. The Kid had settled the trouble. Everything

would be all right! And so the weary, dusty animals had poured through the smashed gap in Muddy Reed's fence, and scattered along the forbidden watercourse, shrunk by the greedy earth and blazing sun to a tepid rivulet.

Everything went well for a brief space. The cattle managed to freshen up a bit. Manuel and Pepe, lolling together in the shade, smiled happily at each other and sang a duet of praise for the redoubtable Keed and his ready axe.

But when night drew on Manuel fell to shivering. There was something disquieting about the forbidden place. He spoke to Pepe. But Pepe only smiled. Pepe was a fool. He knew nothing—only to roll cigarettes and smile.

The next day Manuel rode far around the herd, and returning found Pepe's riderless horse—and a little further on, Pepe.

He lay on his face, cold, and sticky with his own blood. A heavy knife had been driven hilt-deep into his back, in one savage thrust.

Manuel's heart gave an agonized leap. He whirled his pony and fled the grewsome sight, whimpering. Not once did he rein in till he slid exhausted from his horse at Martin's feet.

"Ah, señor!" he moaned. "*Yo tengo miedo*. I have much fear. That Pepe, he look so ver' bad!"

The Kid and Bob exchanged a long, silent glance. The Kid's smile was cold and tight-lipped.

"It's a showdown!" he snapped. "This boy's no good! Who have we got?"

"Only Pedro," muttered Martin. "The other two are off at Sprague's."

"One breed! Hell! I tell yuh, Bob, white men come higher but they're shore handier. I allus said so."

He patted the trembling Manuel's shoulder.

"All right, *muchacho*. Git Pedro, an' saddle up three good hosses. *Pronto!*"

IT was getting sultry. In the west an ominous cloud-bank was piling up slowly. The horses were fresh and the three men rode fast. There was not much talk among them.

Bob Martin's deep-set eyes stared unwinkingly ahead, the lines in his haggard face etched a trifle deeper than usual. The Kid rode easily, his lips pursed in a soundless whistle. Pedro, the breed, was impassive. He broke the silence once.

"This Pepe, he ver' fine boy," he muttered slowly. "He laugh, he play guitar, he walk weeth the girls. *Un buen companero*. Why do they keel

thees boy, señor?"

The two white men made no answer, and Pedro with smouldering eyes relapsed into silence, toying absently with the hilt of his knife as he pondered the problem.

The ragged clouds ahead were tumbling swiftly across the sky, racing to meet the riders. A breeze fluttered past. The Kid raised his glance.

"Rain's comin' fast," he observed.

"Reckon we kin," murmured Bob.

Nothing more was said, but as though by common consent the three men urged on their flying mounts to greater speed. Half the sky was inky black. A hollow roll of thunder echoed and re-echoed. A rush of wind smote their faces.

The Kid rose in his stirrups.

"There's Buffalo Waller, Bob!"

As he spoke a blinding flash rent the blackness overhead, and the flood descended. Sheets of water. It ran in streams from the glistening flanks of the horses.

With the Kid in the lead they shot madly through the ragged break in Muddy Reed's fence, and splashed into the rain-fretted surface of Buffalo Waller.

The Kid's peering glance took in the scene expertly—the huddled cattle in the foreground, the murky mass of wooded slope ahead.

There came a jagged flash and the rain-drenched gloom leaped briefly into blinding light. With a cry the Kid was off his horse, pointing at the ground.

Afoot, the three pursuers stood silently together at the mute evidence before them—a trampled, crimson bog, already spreading and vanishing under the lash of the storm. There was no trace of Pepe.

But poor Pepe was not far off. A throaty grunt from Pedro drew them around a scatter of rocks. No need to search farther. The loosened earth had cracked and caved under the sudden flood. In the depression was a yellow swirl of water, and pointing upward in mute appeal the toe of a man's boot.

At the sight, Pedro's stolid face was convulsed. His eyeballs gleamed. He gave a cry and flung his arms aloft. The Kid's mouth opened, but before he could speak two spiteful cracks sounded in quick succession; and Pedro's horse was down, kicking feebly, his streaming neck arched desperately.

The three men dropped in their tracks, flattened to the earth. Bob's Winchester sent a

crashing sheet of flame into the gloom. Pedro gripped his knife. The Kid's mouth was smiling—but not his eyes.

They wriggled forward slowly, spreading out gradually as they went. The gloom shrouded them. At each ripping flash overhead they stiffened motionless. And at intervals, cleaving through the sheets of rain, came the whining pellets of death.

Crouched behind a weather-riven boulder, the Kid grimly marked the smother of storm-tossed bushes up the slope, and studied the stabbing flashes with expert eye. Two men. Good enough!

Soaked to the skin, mud-streaked, he gripped his Winchester joyously. The wild, ringing defiance of "the Laffin' Fool" echoed savagely. He lay silent under the hail of lead that came to answer him, but as Martin's rifle off to the left came into action, the Kid slid carefully from cover and wiggled forward—always forward. He marked Bob's steady advance to the left. Pedro, disdaining the rifle and trusting to his huge knife, had disappeared completely.

At the sudden thought of Pedro the Kid grunted in disgust. Bob's reliance on underpaid and shiftless Breeds was a sore spot with him. He crouched stiffly under a sudden onslaught from above, swearing fretfully.

It was in that instant that Pedro struck!

With a snarling cry a dim figure rose suddenly from the earth and hurled itself headlong into the tangle of bushes.

The Kid, on his feet in a second, was running up the slope desperately. A menacing figure loomed before him. The Kid's Stetson jerked from his head, and he felt a sudden, searing pain in his right forearm. But even as he reached with his left hand for his Colt, the other's arm dropped and he slumped forward on his face.

Bob Martin rose to his feet, a smile of contentment on his lean face. He rather prided himself on his neatness with a rifle; and as the Kid rolled over the body with the toe of his boot, and Bob noted the neat circle in his forehead, he sighed and patted his rifle tenderly.

From the bushes came Pedro with his victim. He dropped the limp figure beside the other, and stooping, jerked his knife free with a grunt of satisfaction.

Martin's glance moved slowly from the gaping chest-wound to the hate-distorted features of Muddy Reed. The storm had spent its fury, and

the thinning clouds showed patches of blue. He looked soberly at his two companions.

"I ain't sayin' we done wrong," he muttered slowly. "Leastways I ain't doubtin' but whut Muddy had a lot comin' tuh him. But, Kid, it don't look good, nohow. Here's two dead men, an' down yonder another one with his toes stickin' out o' the ground. I ain't denyin' it's justice, Kid, but still it ain't reely legal-like, now, is it? Hey?"

As Bob talked the Kid's strained face had gradually loosened. A twinkle slowly crept into his eyes.

"The trouble with you, Bob," he remarked, "is that yo're allus so damn busy a-worryin', yuh never know whut's goin' on in the busy world surroundin' us pore cow-waddies."

He smiled broadly.

"I know fer certain that Muddy had no more right tuh that water hole than you or me or anybuddy else. I kinda figgered I'd git me some A one safe an' sane advice on this same subject. So without losin' no time about it, I sashayed over tuh ole Jedge Rawlins an' tells him the hull story. He asks me a couple o' questions, an' inquires after yore health an' fortune; an' then he gives me an injunkshun paper, which same specifies that Muddy Reed has tuh do some damn tall explicatin' before he makes that water hole the child o' his buzzum."

The Kid laughed shortly.

"I made sure that Muddy got the happy news. An' then I looked fer Dave Hollis, him, nachelly enough, bein' the sheriff. I asks Dave whut's stirrin'; an' he sez nuthin' much. I tells him that ain't no sign fer a wise man tuh go by, an' relates the story all over again. Dave likewise inquires after yore health an' fortune. An' when I shakes hands an' hits the trail I'm feelin' right good, because I'm a speshul deppity assistin' Dave Hollis, havin' jest sworn tuh uphold the majesty o' the Law."

Bob's face wrinkled in a smile of amazement. Pedro stared. The Kid chuckled happily.

"Not legal-like? Bob, we're so damn legal it hurts! When you came down here on the gallop you was assistin' the speshul deppity tuh run down the murderer o' Pepe, not tuh speak nuthin' o' that busted injunkshun paper, an' the dignity o' Jedge Rawlin's Court. Legal? Hell!"

And, suddenly, throwing back his head, he burst into a clear, ringing laugh.