

BANTAM BOOKS

LOUIS L'AMOUR

AMERICA'S FAVORITE STORYTELLER

LONG RIDE HOME



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LONG RIDE HOME

Louis L'Amour



BANTAM BOOKS

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LONG RIDE HOME

A Bantam Book

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Author's Note

THE CACTUS KID PAYS A DEBT

I have written several stories about the Cactus Kid. In this case some of the activity takes place in San Francisco. Bull-Run Allen was a known man on the Barbary Coast and vicinity and his place at the corner of Sullivan Alley and Pacific Street was notorious. One-Ear Tim was also known and his ear was said to have been chewed off during a physical arbitration with an unwilling robbery victim.

The Barbary Coast was known for its dives and for its multitude of ways of relieving innocent victims of their funds. However, once in a while they picked on the wrong man. The odds were against anybody with money, and the sooner one got away from the area, the better.

Many of the tough joints along the water-front were built over the hulks of old ships sunken in the bay to enlarge the land area. Most of the dives had a convenient trap-door for the disposal of surplus bodies or through which shanghaiied sailors could be taken by boat out to a waiting ship. It was not unusual; for a sight-seer to have a drink in such a dive and wake up on a slow boat to China. It was often a one-way trip.

**THE CACTUS KID
PAYS A DEBT**

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Four people, two women and two men, boarded the San Francisco boat in company with the Cactus Kid. Knight's Landing was a freight landing rather than a passenger stop, and the five had been drawn together while waiting on the dock.

Mr. Harper, pompous in black broadcloth, wore muttonchop whiskers and prominent mustache. Ronald Starrett, younger and immaculate in dark suit and hat, looked with disdain at the Kid's wide white hat, neat gray suit and high-heeled boots.

The Kid carried a carpetbag that never left his hands, a fact duly noted by both men and one of the women. The Kid, more at home aboard the hurricane deck of a bronc than on a river steamer, had good reason for care. He was taking fifteen thousand dollars, the final payment on the Walking YY, from his boss, Jim Wise, to old MacIntosh.

"What time does this boat get in?" the Kid asked of Harper.

"Around midnight," Harper said. "If you haven't a hotel in mind, I'd suggest the Palace."

"If you go there," Starrett added, "stay out of the Cinch Room or you'll lose everything you have."

"Thanks," the Cactus Kid responded dryly.

Five feet seven inches in his sock feet, and a compact one hundred and fifty-five, the Kid, with his shock of curly hair and a smile women thought charming, was usually taken to be younger and softer than he was.

On the Walking YY and in its vicinity the Kid was a

living legend, and the only person in his home country who did not tremble at the Kid's step was Jenny Simms—or if she did, it was in another sense.

"It's a positive shame!" the older woman burst out. "A young man like you, so nice looking and all, going to that awful town! You be careful of your company, young man!"

Nesselrode Clay, otherwise the Cactus Kid, flushed deeply. "I reckon I will, ma'am. I'll be in town only a few hours on business. I want to get back to the ranch."

Harper glanced thoughtfully at the carpetbag and Starrett's eyes followed. The younger woman, obviously a proud young lady, indulged in no idle conversation. Miss Lily Carfather was going to San Francisco with her aunt, somebody had said.

"It looks like a dull trip," Starrett's voice was casual. "Would anybody care for a quiet game of cards?"

Mr. Harper glanced up abruptly, taking in the young man with a suspicious, measuring eye. "Never play with strangers," he replied brusquely.

"I think," Lily Carfather said icily, "gambling is abominable!"

"On the contrary," Starrett defended, "it is a perfectly honorable pastime when played by gentlemen, and we are gentlemen here."

He drew out a deck of cards, broke the seal and shuffled the cards without skill. The Cactus Kid considered Ronald Starrett more carefully.

Harper glanced at his watch. "Well," he mumbled, "there is a good bit of time. . . . A little poker, you said?" He glanced at the Kid who shrugged and moved to the table.

"If," Starrett glanced at the women, "you'd care to join us? Please don't think me bold but—a friendly game? For small stakes?"

Lily Carfather dropped her eyes. "Well—" she hesitated.

"*Lily!*" The older woman was shocked. "You wouldn't."

"On the contrary—" her chin lifted defiantly—"I believe I shall!"

Ronald Starrett shuffled the cards and handed them to Harper for the cut. No limit was set, the Kid noticed, as

play began. Picking up his cards the Kid found himself with a pair of jacks.

The Cactus Kid had lost his innocence where cards were concerned in Tascosa when he was sixteen, and as this game proceeded, he grew increasingly interested. He stayed even, while his observant eyes noted that the end of the middle finger on Starrett's left hand was missing. Also, Mr. Harper played a shrewd and careful game, while behind the seeming innocence of Lily Carfather was considerable card savvy.

Suddenly the Kid found himself holding three nines. He considered them, decided to stay and on the draw picked up a pair of jacks. He won a small pot. And he won the next two hands.

"You're lucky, Mr. Clay," Starrett suggested, smiling. "Well, maybe we'll get some of it back later."

The Kid drew nothing on the following hand and threw in, but on the next he won a fair-sized pot. He found himself feeling a little like a missionary being banqueted by cannibals. He lost a little, won some more and found himself almost a hundred dollars ahead. He was not surprised when Starrett dealt him four kings and a trey. He tossed in the trey, drew a queen and began to bet.

After two rounds of betting, Harper dropped out. Starrett had taken two cards as had Lily. On the next round, with both the Kid and Lily raising, Starrett dropped out. On the showdown Lily had four aces. She gathered in the pot, winning more than a hundred dollars from the Kid alone.

Harper dealt and the Kid lost again, then Lily dealt and the Kid glanced at his cards and tossed them into the discard. The fun was over now and he was slated for the axe. When it came his turn to deal, he shuffled and easily built up a bottom stock from selected discards, passed the cards to Lily for the cut, then picked up the deck and shifted the cut in a smoothly done movement and proceeded to deal swiftly, building his own hand from the bottom until he held the three he wanted.

Harper threw in his hand but Starrett and Lily stayed.

The Kid gave Starrett three, Lily two, and himself—from the bottom—two. Picking up his hand he looked into the smug faces of a royal flush.

Lily glanced at her hand. "I want to raise it twenty dollars," she said sweetly.

"I'll see that and raise it ten," the Kid offered, "I feel lucky."

The pot built up until it contained almost four hundred dollars. Starrett called with a full house and Lily followed with a small straight. Coolly, the Kid placed his royal flush on the table and gathered in the pot.

Harper bit the end from his cigar and Lily's face grew pale, her eyes very bright. Starrett's face flushed dull red and his eyes grew angry. "You're very lucky!" he sneered.

It was Starrett's deal and the Kid knew it was coming right at him. And it came, starting with three aces. Coolly, he tossed in his hand and Starrett fumbled a card.

Lily smiled icily at the Kid. "What's the matter?" she asked, too sweetly. "Not lucky this time?"

"I'm a hunch player," the Kid lied, "and this isn't my hand."

Twice in the next hour the Cactus Kid realized they had him set for the kill, but he avoided it by throwing in a hand or making only an insignificant bet. Harper was a little ahead but Starrett was in the hole for more than six hundred and Lily had lost just as much. The Cactus Kid was over a thousand dollars a winner.

Suddenly, the Kid realized that Lily's aunt was no longer with them. Even as the thought came to him, she returned to the room. "I was worried," he said. "I was afraid you had taken my luck with you."

The aunt's eyes met Lily's and Lily glanced around the table. "Is anyone else thirsty?" she asked. "I am—very!"

"Let's call a waiter and have a few drinks," Starrett suggested.

The Kid nodded agreement, gathering up the discards. There had been an ace in those discards and Harper had held two kings. Now if— He palmed the ace and two kings and slipped them into a bottom stock. Riffing the cards he located another ace and king, adding them to the stock.

Then with swift, practiced movements he worked up two good hands for Starrett and Harper. He won again.

Starrett's polish was gone now and when he looked at the Kid, there was hatred in his eyes. Harper said nothing at all, but glanced thoughtfully at Lily.

The drinks were brought in and as they were placed on the table the Kid fumbled a chip, and in grabbing for it knocked over Lily's drink. The Kid sprang to his feet.

"Oh, I'm very sorry, Miss Carfather!" he exclaimed. "Here," he sat down and moved his own glass to her, "you're the thirsty one. Take mine."

Her eyes blazed with fury. "Keep your drink!" she flared. "I won't take anything from you!"

The Cactus Kid grinned suddenly. "No," he agreed, "none of you will."

Their eyes were on him, hard and implacable. "It was too easy," the Kid said cheerfully, "Starrett with that bobbed middle finger. It makes a bottom deal easier but it's a dead giveaway."

With his left hand he pulled the money toward him and began to pocket it. Their eyes, hot with greed, stared at the gold coins.

"I'll be damned if you take that money!" Harper's voice burst out low and hard.

The Cactus Kid smiled his charming, boyish smile. "Stop tryin' to work that derringer out of your pocket, Harper. I've got a Peacemaker in my hand under the table, an' if you feel like gamblin' on a .44 slug, start something."

Harper's gun was out, but he pointed it at Starrett. "Don't!" he barked. "Don't start anything, you fool! You want to get me killed?"

"He wouldn't care much, would he, Harper? They'd just have one less to split with."

With a swift, catlike movement, the Cactus Kid was on his feet, his gun covering them all. "Put that derringer in your pocket, Harper. You might get hurt."

His face red, Harper shoved the gun into his pocket. "All right, you got our money. Why don't you get out of here?"

"One thing yet," the Cactus Kid smiled, "an' maybe I'll hate myself for this, but I did hear her say she was thirsty. Lily, you drink my drink."

"Why—why." She sprang to her feet. "I'll do nothing of—"

"Drink it," he insisted. "You ordered it for me. Try your own medicine."

"I won't! You'd never have the nerve to shoot a woman! You wouldn't dare!"

"You're right. I wouldn't want it on my conscience, and threatening to shoot one of your friends wouldn't help. I think you'd see them both die first. No, there's a better way. You drink it or I'll turn you over to the Vigilantes. I hear there's some around again."

Her frightened eyes went to Starrett. "Drink it, Lily," Starrett said carefully. "We don't dare have them after us. You know that."

She stared at them with pure hatred, then picked up the glass. "I'll kill you for this!" she fairly hissed at the Kid. Then she downed the drink.

His eyes on them, the Kid stepped quickly back to the door, taking his carpetbag with him. Closing the door behind him he ran on tiptoes to the bow of the boat and down into the fo'c'stle. A tired and greasy sailor was tying his shoes.

"Look, mister," the seaman said, "this isn't—"

"I know it," the Kid produced a gold eagle, "I'll give you this for the use of your bunk until we dock and if you forget you saw me."

The seaman got up, grinning. "I'm due on watch, anyway. That's the easiest twenty I ever made!"

The Cactus Kid sat down to think. Obviously they had known he was carrying a large sum of money and had planned to get it away from him with the cards. He had outsmarted them and then spoiled their attempt to dope him. After what he had just done they would make a play not only for the money but for his life as well.

The Cactus Kid frowned. Four sharp operators had not chosen him by accident, but so far as he knew only Jim Wise and old McIntosh knew what he was carrying. It was preposterous to think that either might be involved in this.

Easing out of the bunk, the Kid crept up the ladder and looked out on deck. He froze into stillness in the shadows. A burly, sweated figure was standing near the bulwark a little aft of the companionway. As this man waited another came up and spoke to him. It was Harper!

So they had hired thugs on the boat. Feeling trapped, the Kid returned to the bunk to consider the matter. Opening the carpetbag he took out his other Colt, strapped the holster under his armpit, and tied it in place with piggin strings.

Finally he dozed, then slept. Awakening with a start he heard the sounds that told of coming alongside the dock and knew they were in San Francisco. Acting on a sudden inspiration, he worked swiftly with the contents of the carpetbag. When he was satisfied he walked boldly out on deck and headed for the gangway. Harper spotted him and spoke to the thug beside him.

None of the poorly lighted streets that led away from the dock looked inviting, but a four-horse carriage marked PALACE HOTEL stood waiting for prospective guests, and the Kid made for it. He was surprised to find Starrett in the carriage, for he had believed he was the first person down the gangway. The driver, a burly ruffian with a red mustache, glanced sharply at the Kid, then let his eyes move to Harper, who stood near a pile of packing cases. Harper nodded.

Other men crowded into the carriage, among them two huskies, and the Kid at once became alert.

The carriage swung into one of the dark streets, then turned into a cross street between high, unlighted buildings. One of the huskies reached up and took down the Palace Hotel sign. The other one looked at the Kid and grinned.

"Pull up!" Starrett ordered. "This is far enough!"

The Cactus Kid left his seat with a lunge, springing to neither right nor left as they probably expected, but straight ahead. He landed astride the nearest horse and with a wild Texas yell kicked with both heels. All four of the frightened animals lunged into their collars and took off down the cobbled street with men shouting and grabbing for holds behind them.

Slipping from the back of the horse to the tongue, the Kid worked his way forward to the lead team. The driver was trying to fight the horses to a stand, but the Kid reached and grabbed the reins. With a vicious jerk, he pulled them loose, and the driver, over-balanced, fell from his seat to the cobblestoned street. The horses picked up speed and ran wild, eyes rolling, jaws slavering.

The Cactus Kid heard the crack of a pistol and a shot went by his ear. Gripping the hip strap with his left hand, which also clutched the carpetbag, the Kid took a chance shot under his arm. Several of the riders had dropped from the rig but the others made a solid block that could scarcely be missed.

A yelp of pain sounded behind him and several men sprang from the carriage. Shoving the pistol into his waistband, the Kid swung astride the off lead horse and hauled desperately on the reins. As the carriage slowed he slid from the animal's back to the street. He scrambled up and ducked into an alley.

Someone yelled from the carriage as it rattled by, and a dark figure loomed in the alley and shouted a reply, then started for him. The Cactus Kid palmed his six-shooter and fired. The charging man fell on his face and the Kid wheeled and ran.

He ducked in and out of alleys until he was winded. Then a door showed suddenly, and he tried the knob. Miraculously, it was not locked and he stepped in, closing and barring it behind him. Feeling his way up dark stairs he knew from the faint sounds of tinny music that he was in a building that housed some kind of resort.

On the second floor landing he tried a door, but it was locked so he went on to the third floor. A door opened into a hallway with doors on either side. Swiftly, the Kid hurried down the hall to the head of another flight of stairs. A beefy man with a red face and a walrus mustache stood there.

"Hey!" he demanded roughly. "Who'd you come up with?"

"I came up the back stairs," the Cactus Kid replied, "and I'm going down the front stairs."

"Yeah?" His eyes traveled over the Kid from the broad hat to the carpetbag. "Yeah? Well, we'll talk to Bull Run first."

"Who's Bull Run?"

"Bull Run?" The thug was incredulous. "You ain't heard of Bull Run Allen?"

Something turned over inside the Cactus Kid. He had heard many cowhands and others talk of the BULL RUN, at the corner of Pacific Street and Sullivan Alley. It was one of the toughest and most criminal dives in a town that could boast of many of the worst in the world. He could not have found his way into a worse trap.

"No need to talk to him," he said. "All I want is to go through. Here—" he took a coin from his pocket—"say nothing to anybody. I had some trouble back in the street. Had to slug a gent."

The thug looked avariciously at the money. "Well, I guess it ain't none of my—" His voice broke and he gulped.

The Cactus Kid turned and found himself facing an elephant of a man in a snow-white, ruffled shirt with diamond studs. His big nose was a violent red, his huge hands glittered with gems.

"Who's this?" he demanded harshly. "What's goin' on?"

The thug swallowed. "It's this way, Bull Run," he began to explain. As he talked Allen nodded and studied the Kid. Finally he dropped a huge hand to the Kid's shoulder.

"Put away your money, son," he said genially, "and come wit' me. In trouble, are you? Couldn't have come to a better place. Law doesn't bother my place. I tell 'em you work for me an' it's all right. Let's go to my office."

Seating himself behind a huge desk, he grinned at the Kid. "Cattleman, hey? Used to figure I'd like that line my own self, but I got tied to this joint and couldn't get away. But I make plenty."

He bit the end from a black cigar and leaned forward, his smile fading. "All right, you got away with something good. Just split it down the middle and you can go—and you'll not be bothered."

"You've got me wrong, Allen," the Kid protested. "I've nothing of value. They fired me back on the ranch so I figured I'd come to town. Lost all I had, about fifteen