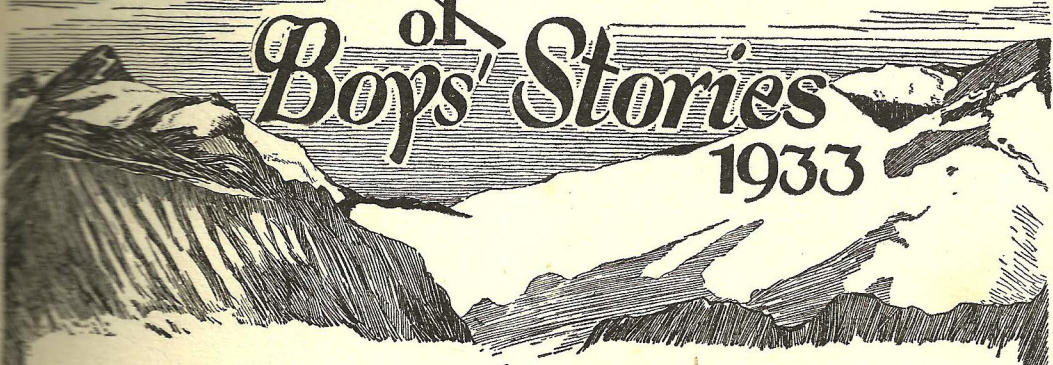


The POPULAR BOOK of BOYS' STORIES



T. CUNEO

The POPULAR BOOK of Boys' Stories 1933



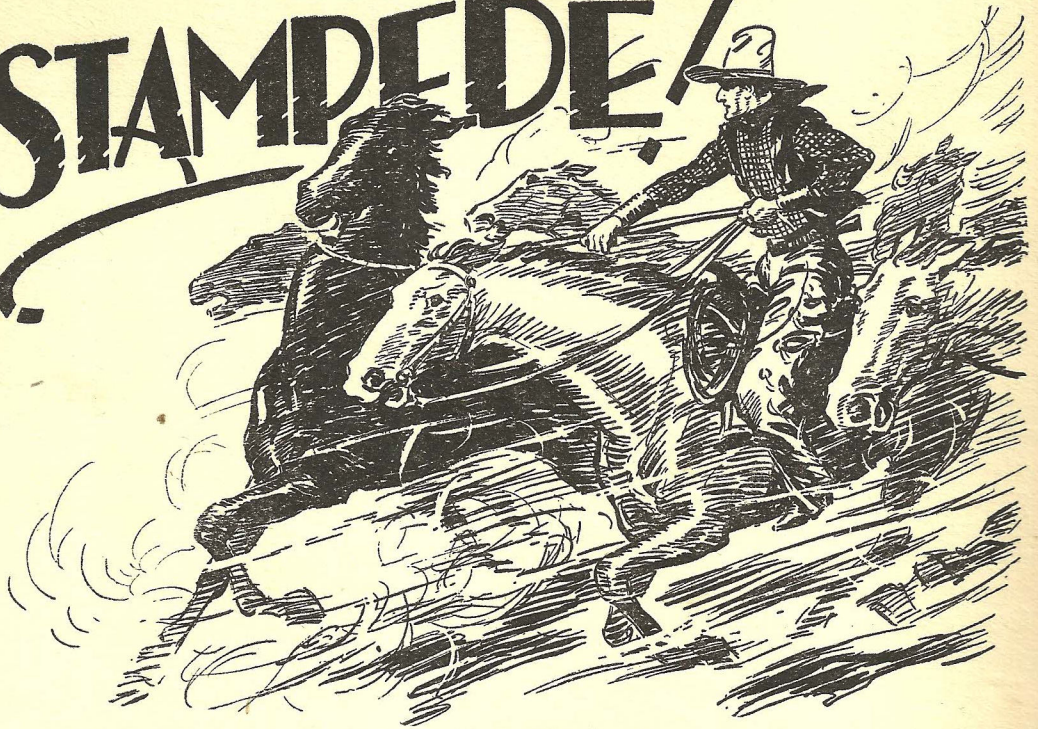
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STAMPEDE!



Hunted throughout the cow-country by Rangers and sheriffs, the Rio Kid, boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, is at last cornered at the Lazy-Y Ranch But the Kid's a dangerous man to crowd!

By
RALPH REDWAY

CHAPTER I CROWDING THE KID!

THE Rio Kid scented trouble the moment his eyes fell on the man with the scarred cheek. Sitting on the bench outside the bunkhouse of the Lazy-Y Ranch, the Kid had been taking his ease, glad of a rest after riding a long trail under the blazing sun of Texas. He was thinking of anything but trouble as he chewed the rag with half a dozen of the Lazy-Y punchers. But now he sat up and took notice, shifting his gun-belt a little to bring a walnut butt within reach of his hand. The expression on his handsome, sunburnt face did not change, but his alert eyes watched the man with the scar as he came striding down from the rancho.

The Kid felt that it was hard luck.

He had struck the Lazy-Y in the forenoon after a long ride on the sun-scorched llano. In that remote corner of Texas, far from his usual trails, he did not expect to horn into any guy who knew him by sight—knew

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him as the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande! He reckoned that they had heard of him; there was no corner of Texas where the name of the Rio Kid was not a topic in the bunkhouses and the round-up camps. But on his looks no hombre would have taken the Kid for an outlaw; he looked like what he, indeed, was—a kid cowpuncher. And his grey mustang, Side-Kicker, as well known as the Kid himself, had been turned into a pinto with a touch of paint by the Kid's skilled hand.

Trouble had a way of dogging the steps of the Rio Kid, but he did not figure on trouble when he struck the Lazy-Y.

Many of the bunch were out on the ranges, but there were half a dozen punchers there when the Kid rode up, and they gave him the rough but cordial welcome of Texas cowmen. It was pleasant enough to the Kid, after long lonely trails, to find himself among cowmen again, taken at face value, welcomed without suspicion. Fate had made him an outlaw, but at heart he was still the cheery cowpuncher who had punched cows in the happy old days in the valley of the Frio.

He turned Side-Kicker into the corral and fed with the punchers, and now he was talking ranch "shop" with the bunch—horses, cows, cattle-feed. It was like meat and drink to the Kid, and it was even in his mind that if there was a rider wanted at the Lazy-Y he might locate there and ride with the bunch, and throw his outlaw life behind him like an evil dream to be forgotten.

But that thought had to go, as the scarred man came along from the ranch-house.

For the Kid knew Rancher Starbottle at a glance. He knew where Starbottle had picked up that scar—from one of the walnut-butted guns that hung from the Kid's belt. And he figured that Jas Starbottle would know him, too, as soon as he got a look at him.

The Kid shifted his Stetson to bring the brim a little more over his face. Under it, his alert eyes were on the rancher. The Kid hated the thought of trouble, but he knew that it had to come. If the rancher knew him—and surely he would know him—guns would soon be roaring; every puncher there, chatting now so carelessly, would pull a gun at the name of the Rio Kid.

It was hard luck.

The Kid gave a glance towards the gateway of the corral. His horse was there—out of his reach. There were fifty or more horses in the corral and Side-Kicker was among them. There was not time to get his horse and hit the trail. Starbottle's eyes were already on him as he came towards the bunkhouse. His saddle lay by the corral gate where he had left it after turning Side-Kicker loose among the cayuses. But if the rancher, after all, did not recognise him the Kid had a faint hope. He hated to think of pulling his guns at the Lazy-Y. Keeping his face under the shadow of the Stetson, the Kid waited.

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There was a cloud on the rancher's face as he came up. It was not the sight of the Rio Kid that caused it—he had not spotted the Kid yet, at all events. But the Kid had already learned, from the talk of the punchers, that there had been trouble on the Lazy-Y; loss of cows and horses from the activities of rustlers across the border. The thinning of his herds by cattle-thieves, they had told him, had got the boss's goat.

“Who've you got here, Mesquite?”

The rancher rapped out the words sourly, his eyes on the Kid. He saw little of the Kid but his Stetson hat and his chaps, as the boy outlaw sat on the bench by the bunkhouse wall.

“Jest a puncher horned in for feed, boss,” answered Mesquite Bill, the foreman of the Lazy-Y.

The rancher gave a grunt.

“I guess you want to keep your eyes peeled on strangers, with rustlers lifting cows every other doggoned day,” he snapped.

“This galoot is sure O.K., boss. He sure don't look like a rustler,” said Mesquite. He grinned as he spoke. The handsome Kid, little more than a boy, looked like anything but a rustler.

The Kid rose to his feet.

He had hoped that the rancher would not give him any special attention; that he would pass on with no more than a glance. But that had been too much to hope.

Starbottle had stopped, and was staring at him hard.

“No offence, sir!” said the Kid mildly. “I've sure ridden a long trail from Packsaddle, and I was glad to horn in and feed with the boys. But I reckon it's time I hit the trail.”

He was turning away—still hoping—towards the corral.

“Stop!”

The rancher rapped out the word like a bullet.

Mesquite and the other punchers exchanged glances. They were wise to his sore temper, but they wondered what had got the boss now. There was nothing about that kid puncher to get his goat so far as they could see.

The Kid stopped.

It had to come! He knew that it had to come, though he had hoped to get by without pulling his guns.

“I guess I've seen you before, hombre!” said the rancher grimly. “Stand where you are, and let's see your face.”

“I'm telling you, boss——” began Mesquite.

“Quit chewing the rag, Mesquite! I'll tell all Texas I've seen that guy before, and I reckon I can give him his name! Did he horn in on a grey mustang?”

“Nope; he's riding a pinto, boss.”

“I guess the Rio Kid knows how to hide his cayuse with paint.”

“The Rio Kid!”

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It was a startled yell from the Lazy-Y punchers.

"Boss, you're sure dreaming——"

"Pull your gun, you gink—it's the Rio Kid!" roared Starbottle. His own hand was on his Colt, dragging it from his belt.

"Hands up!"

The Rio Kid's voice rang out swift and sharp. He made a swift leap back, out of reach of the staring bunch, and the walnut-butted guns were in his hands now—levelled, with his eyes glinting over them.

"Hands up!

Let go that gun, rancher—if you pull it, it's sure the last thing you'll do this side of Jordan! I guess you don't want the Rio Kid to tell you twice!"

With his gun half-drawn, Jas Starbottle stood staring at the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande.

Slowly, reluctantly, he released the butt.

There was death in the long-barrelled Colts that

looked at him—death in the glinting blue eyes that looked over the barrels from under the Stetson hat. And the punchers, reaching for their guns, withdrew their hands with almost ludicrous suddenness, and lifted them over their heads—and, more slowly, Jas Starbottle's hands went up.

From where he stood, with both guns levelled, the Kid had the whole group covered—and from the Rio Grande to the Colorado River the Rio Kid's shooting was known. There were seven men there who packed guns and counted life cheap; but the boy outlaw had the upper hand. The Rio Kid was a bad man to crowd.



"Hands up!" The Rio Kid's voice rang out swift and sharp as a pair of six-guns appeared in his hands like magic. Slowly the punchers lifted their hands over their heads.

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CHAPTER II

CORNERED!

“KEEP 'em up!” snapped the Kid.

“By the great horned toad!” The rancher's voice was thick with rage. “You doggoned firebug——”

“Aw, can it,” said the Kid. “Keep your paws up and cork it down, feller.”

“The Rio Kid!” muttered Mesquite Bill, staring blankly. “Carry me home to die. That guy's the Rio Kid!”

“You've said it,” agreed the Kid, a faint smile breaking out on his sunburnt face as he watched the amazed punchers, watchful as a hawk over his levelled guns.

“Gee! I guess we know now who's been rustling the cows,” said another of the punchers.

The Kid's face flushed crimson.

“Forget it!” he snapped. “I've sure never rustled a cow in my life, and if you've lost cows on this hyer ranch, I ain't wise to it.”

“You doggoned outlaw!” snarled Starbottle. It was all the enraged rancher could do to keep his hands up and restrain his desire to reach for a gun.

It was not the risk; it was the certainty of death that stopped him. But his eyes burned with rage at the cool Kid.

“You won't get by with this, goldarn you. You can't hold up this ranch, you doggoned gun-slinger.”

“I guess I never was figuring on holding up this ranch, feller,” said the Rio Kid quietly. “I just dropped in permiscus to feed with the boys, never figuring that any galoot here would savvy that I was the guy all the sheriffs in Texas are honing to meet. I reckon I'm ready to hit the trail without any gun-play. Give me my cayuse and let me ride, and you'll be none the worse for seeing the Rio Kid around.”

Starbottle laughed savagely.

“I guess you'll not ride till you back a bronc with your feet tied underneath, and a sheriff's posse riding herd over you,” he said. “You got away when we was after you in the Mal Pais country, when I was riding with the Rangers; but you won't get away this time. Shoot, if you want, you durned scallywag—but it's you for a rope and a branch.”

The Rio Kid breathed hard.

He was holding the bunch; not a man ventured to reach for a gun with the Kid's keen eyes watching over his Colts.

But getting away was another matter.

His horse was loose in the corral; his saddle lay at the corral gate. To get his cayuse, saddle up and ride, he had to pack his guns. He held the upper hand for the moment, but he was in a tight corner.

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"Say, feller!" The Kid's drawl was cool as ice. "You don't want to get your mad up. You got a mark on your face that I left there when you was hunting me with the Rangers in the Mal Pais; but I guess I could have put the lead through your cabeza if I'd wanted. If the sheriff gets me off this ranch, Jas Starbottle, you won't be sittin' up alive to watch him doing it."

There was a thudding of hoofs on the prairie trail.

Three Stetson hats nodded over the high grass.

Starbottle's eyes gleamed.

The Kid was holding the bunch, but at any moment riders might be coming in from the ranges. Three were coming in now, riding in from the plains towards the bunkhouse. They were yet distant, but the nodding Stetson hats were plainly seen, the galloping hoofs plainly heard.

The Rio Kid shut his teeth.

"You ain't letting up, rancher, and allowing a galoot to ride peaceable?" he asked, his tone quiet, amicable, almost persuasive.

"Forget it!" snarled Starbottle. "Burn powder, if you like—you've got me fixed. But you ain't riding."

"Not worth a cent, you ain't," said Mesquite.

Every face was dark and hostile now. Every man was watching for a chance to draw.

The Kid shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess I ain't honing for gun-play," he said. "But I reckon you've heard that the Rio Kid is a bad man to crowd—and you want to watch your step, you-uns. Keep 'em up if you ain't honing to hit Jordan mighty sudden."

As he spoke, the Rio Kid backed away towards the corral gate.

The bunch watched him like cats.

But the guns were still levelled, the blue eyes glinting over them. Louder and sharper sounded the galloping hoofs from the prairie. The Kid had a few minutes at the most.

Backing, step by step, he reached the corral gate. There he halted and belted his left-hand gun. With his free hand he unlatched the gate behind him, and picked up his saddle.

One long barrel still covered the group, ready to stream death at a hostile movement. The Kid backed into the gateway, leaving the gate wide open.

Jas Starbottle watched him with savage eyes. The Rio Kid was backing into the corral for his horse, his gun in his right hand, his saddle in his left. The corral was high-walled; there was no escape except by the gateway. The Kid would reach his horse, but he would ride out of the corral only to fall riddled by bullets. The Rio Kid had taken many a desperate chance in his wild life, but surely this was the most desperate chance of all.

With a sudden, backward jump, the Kid disappeared into the corral, and the wall hid him from sight. The next moment he was among the swarm of horses, cutting out Side-Kicker.

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In the same moment the hands that had been lifted over Stetsons dropped to gun-holsters; every man in the bunch had a Colt in his grip. Jas Starbottle whipped a gun from his belt, finger on trigger. His eyes were blazing.

"Watch out, you-'uns!" he snapped. "Shoot at sight; watch out and riddle him as he rides. By the great horned toad, if you let him ride clear, I'll sure fire the whole bunch."

"That guy ain't riding clear, boss," chuckled Mesquite. "We've sure got him where his hair is short."

The three riders from the prairie came dashing up. A word was enough for them, and they leaped from their broncos and joined the bunch, gun in hand, watching the gate of the corral.

Ten men, finger on trigger, gathered before the gateway, ready for the Rio Kid to gallop out on the mustang. Starbottle's eyes were burning.

"Shoot at sight, and shoot to kill!" he said between his teeth. "Give him a dog's chance and he'll ride clear. Shoot at sight."

"You bet, boss!"

"We got him!"

"I guess this is the Rio Kid's last trail!"

In a half-circle before the corral gate, gun in hand, with intent eyes, the Lazy-Y bunch watched and waited.

Half the sheriffs in Texas were hunting for the Rio Kid; through the length and breadth of the Lone Star State the Rangers were trailing him; and he had escaped the sheriffs and Rangers to fall by the hands of a bunch of punchers where he had looked for no peril. But the Rio Kid was not cinched yet.

CHAPTER III

THE STAMPEDE!

"**O**LD hoss, I guess we ain't hit a healthy spot," murmured the Rio Kid.

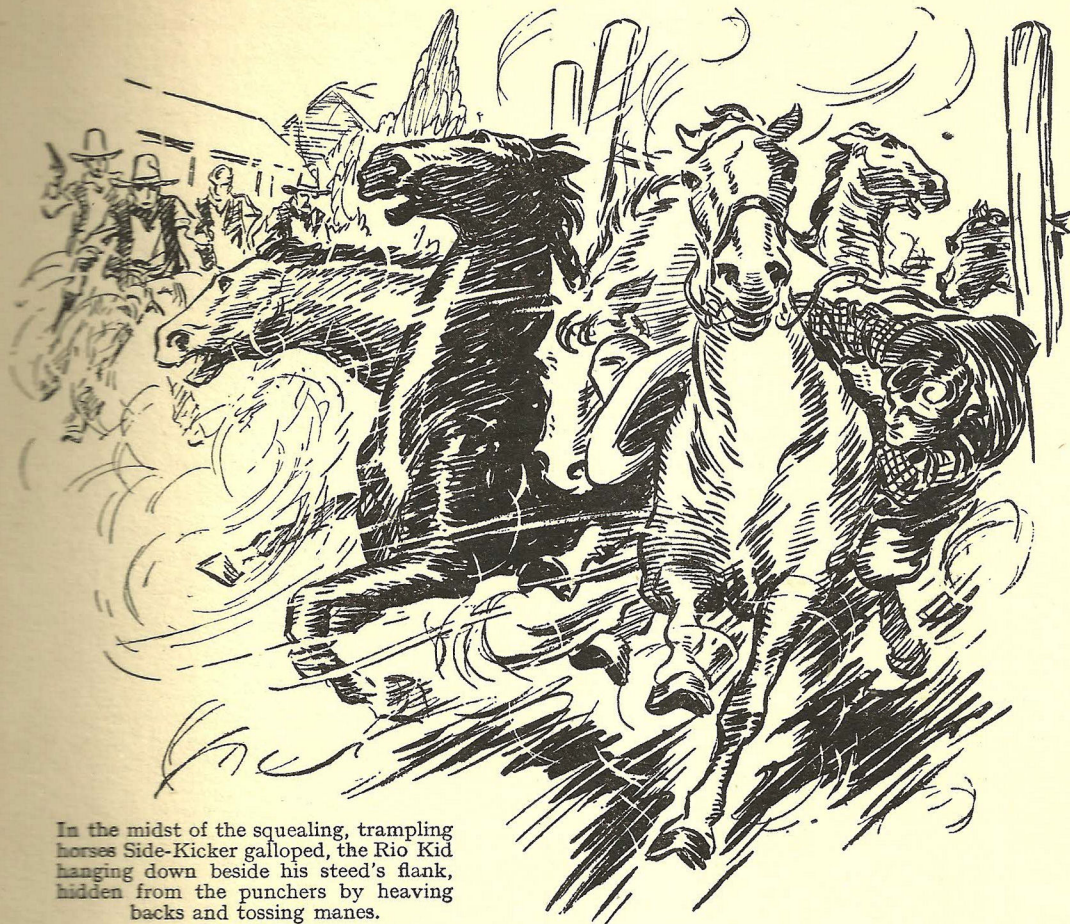
Side-Kicker looked at his master with his intelligent eyes. The Kid was talking to his cayuse, his constant companion on wild trails, the one friend in a world of enemies who had never failed him.

Quietly, coolly, the Kid saddled his mustang.

There were sixty horses in the corral, many of them fierce and savage buck-jumpers. A big bronco with red eyes and ears laid back eyed the Kid. But the Kid had a way with horses; he would have ventured without fear into the midst of the fiercest bunch of buck-jumpers in Texas or Mexico.

Taking no heed of the brutes round him, the Kid saddled Side-Kicker, and bent to fasten the cinch.

His eye swept the high wall of the corral. He shook his head. Even Side-Kicker could not have jumped it. There was only one way out—where



In the midst of the squealing, trampling horses Side-Kicker galloped, the Rio Kid hanging down beside his steed's flank, hidden from the punchers by heaving backs and tossing manes.

a group of grim men watched, finger on trigger. Tossing manes and backs screened the Kid from the corral. But when he rode out of the corral, he would ride in full view, and the guns would be roaring. But the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande was as cool as ice. The Kid had been crowded before, and always, so far, he had got by.

"We got to beat it, old hoss, and we got to beat it pronto," said the Kid. "Them jaspers allow they're going to shoot us up, old hoss; but they ain't cinched this baby yet—they ain't by a jugful! No, sir!"

The Kid grinned.

He had backed into the corral for his horse, but he did not figure that he had backed into a death-trap, as Jas Starbottle and his bunch reckoned. Danger and the Kid were old acquaintances, and in moments of dire danger his brain worked swiftly. His plans had already been cut and dried when he disappeared among the swarm of horses in the corral.

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He did not mount Side-Kicker. No horseman could have ridden out of the corral without sharp shot tearing through flesh and bone. That was not the Kid's game.

He took his long quirt and circled it round his head, cracking it like a succession of pistol-shots.

The long thong fell across the flanks of the big black bronco, the savage-eyed buck-jumper with his ears laid back. There was a shrill squeal of rage from the big black.

Crack, crack, crack! rang the heavy quirt.

Squealing, howling, tossing wild manes, the horses plunged to and fro with crashing hoofs. The long quirt lashed recklessly on all sides.

"Beat it, you doggoned cayuses, beat it!" roared the Rio Kid as he lashed. "Doggone my cats! Beat it, you pesky ginks!"

With lashing quirt and shouting voice, he drove the startled and excited horses before him in a wild squealing swarm towards the corral gate.

The Kid hated to start a stampede. He was a puncher born and bred, though luckless fate had driven him outside the law. He hated to lose a single cayuse, let alone a whole herd, even for the rancher who was watching to riddle him with lead. But he reckoned that his life was worth a bunch of cayuses. With lashing quirt, he drove the horses to the gallop, and the whole herd thundered away to the open gate.

"I guess this lets us out, old hoss!" grinned the Kid.

He flung a leg over his saddle. He did not mount. The Kid could ride like an Indian, with a leg over his horse, a hand on the neck, hanging down on his steed's flank.

In the midst of the squealing, trampling throng, Side-Kicker galloped, his rider unseen, or almost unseen, as he hung low over the mustang's side, surrounded by heaving backs and tossing manes.

There was a roar from the bunch outside the gateway.

They had expected the Rio Kid to ride out. But they had not expected him to ride out in the midst of a mad stampede of horses.

Jas Starbottle gave a yell of rage.

But he had to leap back as he yelled, barely escaping the trampling hoofs of the big black bronco that led the stampede.

Back scattered the punchers as the maddened herd thundered out.

No dozen men could have stopped that frantic rush of maddened, trampling horses. The punchers jumped for their lives, and the stampede went thundering by, in the midst of the stampede, the Rio Kid swinging low on the flank of his galloping mustang.

A thunder of hoofs came back from the prairie.

Crack, crack!

One or two of the punchers had a glimpse of the figure in Stetson and chaps that swung on the flank of the mustang, and loosed off shots. But the cracking of the Colts only added to the frantic excitement of the stampeding

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horses. With thundering hoofs, the whole herd went whirling away on the plains, leaving Jas Starbottle and his bunch yelling with rage behind them.

The Rio Kid swung himself up to the saddle.

He sat Side-Kicker, and looked back.

Round him rushed and trampled the maddened horses led by the big black—a sea of tossing manes, wild eyes, and snarling teeth. A fall was death—death under the trampling hoofs. But the Rio Kid laughed as he sat in his saddle and stared back at the ranch.

Men—no longer handling guns—were rushing for horses to pursue the herd.

Not a cayuse was left in the corral, but five or six were tied to the bunkhouse rail, and the punchers mounted them in hot haste, and drove them to furious speed with whip and spur. At their head came Jas Starbottle on a powerful white bronco, riding like the wind.

The rancher's face was set, his teeth shut hard. He was not thinking of the Rio Kid now, but of his herd of horses ; of heading off the stampede and getting the cayuses back to the ranch.

Even at the distance, the Kid read the look on the rancher's face and understood it, and he felt a pang.

There had been hard times on the Lazy-Y, with the cows thinned out by rustlers from over the border. The loss of his horses might spell disaster to the boss of the Lazy-Y, after his other losses. Little as the rancher would have guessed it, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande felt and thought, not like an outlaw, but like the cowpuncher he was still at heart. It gave the Kid a pang, but he shrugged his shoulders angrily, turned away his face, and rode on with the stampede. They had driven him to it, and he guessed that Jas Starbottle could take what was coming to him.

Tramp, tramp, tramp !

The earth seemed to shake under the thundering hoofs. The Kid rode fast—to draw rein was to be rushed over ; he had to ride for his life, till he could wind his way out of the throng. In a sea of tossing manes and steaming nostrils, the Rio Kid rode—for life and liberty.

CHAPTER IV

RIDE, COWBOY, RIDE !

CRACK !

The bullet flicked the rim of the Kid's Stetson.

“Doggone my cats !” breathed the Kid.

A gun was in his hand as he stared round.

He had hoped to ride clear of the Lazy-Y without burning powder, and in the midst of the stampeding horses he had reckoned that he would ride clear. But that bullet had gone close, and the Kid did not figure that the guy who had thrown lead was going to take another pot-shot at him.

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It was Jas Starbottle who had fired as he drove on the white bronco with reeking spurs. Far behind him four or five of the Lazy-Y bunch were strung out on the prairie, riding hard, but far behind. But the white bronco was as good a cayuse as the Kid's own Side-Kicker, and the rancher was close on the stampeding herd. His Colt was up for a second shot, his eyes glaring over it, when the Kid whirled in the saddle and fired.

There was a hoarse cry from the rancher.

The Colt was torn from his grasp, spinning away to the earth. For a moment, Jas Starbottle reckoned that his hand had gone with it, so sharp and numbing was the shock.

The Kid laughed.

The Kid could plant his lead where he liked, even from the back of a galloping horse. He had shot the rancher's gun away, and Starbottle was only the worse by a spurt of blood from a torn finger.

"Can it, feller!" yelled back the Kid. "Say, you quit throwin' lead before I let daylight through your doggoned cabeza! Quit, I tell you, you ornery galoot."

The rancher panted with rage.

He was disarmed, and he had to quit throwing lead. He spurred on his bronco with savage energy.

The Rio Kid holstered his gun and rode on.

A horse, catching a foot in a prairie-rabbit's hole, stumbled, and went sprawling before him with lashing heels, squealing and screaming. A touch from the Kid, and Side-Kicker rose to a leap, clearing the fallen horse and galloping on. The Kid had been within a split-second of a crash, and death under the trampling hoofs that thundered behind.

The herd was keeping together, led by the big black bronco. The Lazy-Y Ranch had dropped out of sight behind, and the rolling prairie was round them—dotted, far back, by the Stetsons of the pursuing punchers.

The Kid rode clear of the stampede at last, free of the thundering horses. Jas Starbottle, coming on with whip and spur, threw him a bitter glare of hate.

"You doggoned rustler!" The rancher's voice came to the Kid, hoarse with rage. "If I'd a gun——"

"I guess you want to be pleased you ain't, feller!" grinned the Kid. "I'd sure have to shoot you up, and I allow I never horned into the Lazy-Y to spill your vinegar. Forget it, rancher."

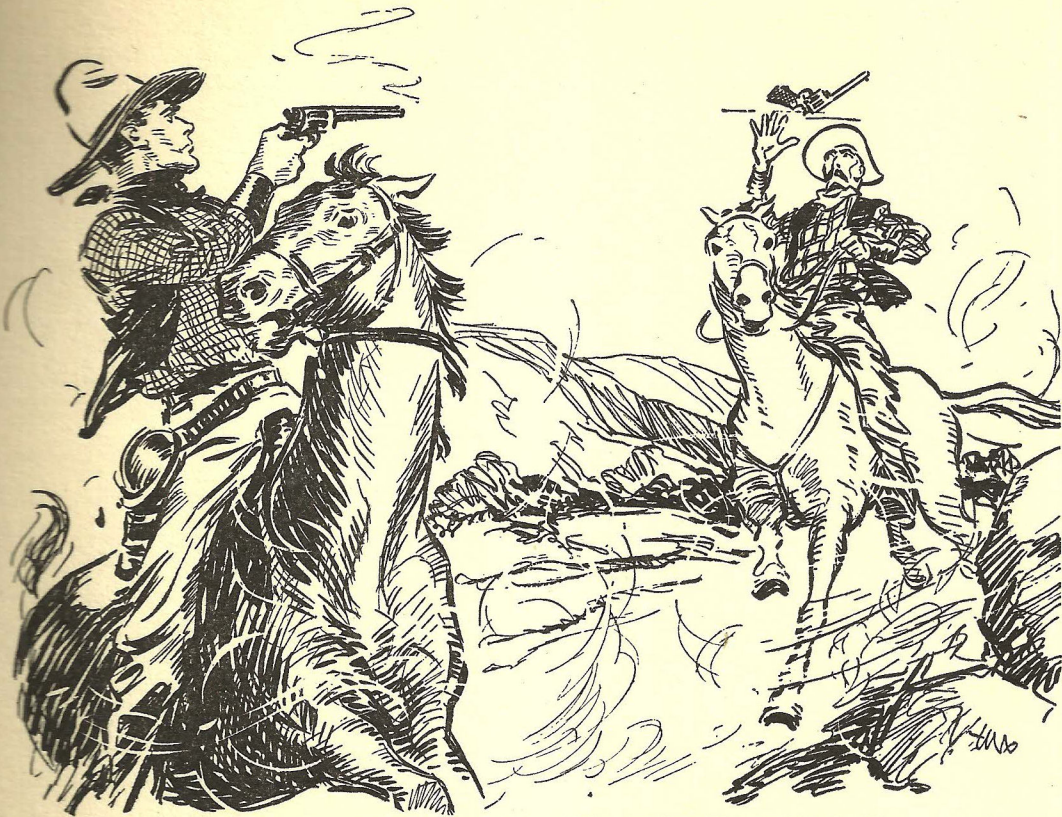
Starbottle shook a furious fist at the boy outlaw.

The Kid laughed back.

"Say, you want to get word to the sheriff bright an' early," he called. "He sure will have to burn the wind if he aims to catch this baby."

"Git!" snarled Starbottle. "You've got by with it, durn you—and you've lost me my cayuses, you doggoned rustler, after rustling my cows. Git!"

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The rancher's Colt was raised for a shot when the Kid whirled in his saddle and fired. There was a hoarse cry from Jas Starbottle as his gun was torn from his grasp.

The Kid was riding away, but he swung Side-Kicker back, and rode closer to the rancher.

"Say, feller," snapped the Kid, his eyes gleaming, "I've let you down easy, after you aiming to shoot me up with your bunch. But you don't want to call me a cow-thief, goldarn you! Take it back, you pesky gink, before I drop you off'n that critter."

The rancher gritted his teeth.

"Shoot, you durned rustler!" he snarled. "You've ruined me, and I guess you may as well put paid to it."

The Kid's hand was on a gun, but he released it.

"Aw, what you giving me?" he exclaimed. "If you've lost your cows, that I've never seen horn or tail of, you ain't lost your horses. Ain't you ever seen a stampede before, and you a rancher? Can't your bunch round up a herd of hosses after they've scattered on the prairie! What sort of guys are they if they can't?"

Starbottle flung back an oath.

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"That herd'll never be rounded up," he snarled. "They're heading right for the Rio Grande, you doggoned gun-slinger. I guess the rustlers won't leave a lot for my bunch to round up. By the great horned toad, if I'd a gun——"

He snapped the words off short, and rode on, with lashing quirt and reeking spur, giving the Kid no further word or look.

"Sho!" ejaculated the Kid.

He lifted himself in his stirrups, to stare ahead of the racing herd. Far away across the rolling prairie, there was a glimmer of wide waters in the burning sunshine.

Wide and glimmering, shallow in the summer heats, banked with wide stretches of mud, rolled the Rio Grande; beyond it, the chaparral stretching away into Mexico.

"Sho!" repeated the Kid.

His face set.

The Rio Kid was an outlaw; in his own country his hand was against every man, and every man's hand was against him. But the Kid was a puncher first and an outlaw second. He had hated to start the stampede, but he reckoned that his life was worth it. He hated still more the thought of losing Texas cayuses to Mexican rustlers. But if the runaway broncs once plunged through those glimmering shallows, the Kid did not need telling that Rancher Starbottle would never see hide nor hoof of them again.

"Doggone it!" growled the Kid.

The way was open for him to ride clear. Far behind, but coming on fast, were four or five of the Lazy-Y bunch. The wide prairie called to the Kid. Once the word went round that the Rio Kid was in the Lazy-Y country, the hunt would be up.

The Kid shook his head impatiently. Starbottle could take what was coming to him, and be durned to him! Let him lose his horses as he had lost his cows; it was his own funeral. So the Kid told himself savagely.

But while he told himself that it was not his funeral, and that he was a doggoned geck to horn into another man's troubles—and that man an enemy—the Kid was shaking out his reins and riding after the herd.

It was the Kid's way.

"Burn the wind, old hoss!" panted the Kid. "Burn the wind, Side-Kicker! I guess them cayuses is going to be rounded up, old hoss! Sure!"

The mustang tore on.

The Kid's eyes gleamed under the shadow of his Stetson. He was riding hard—as hard as he had ever ridden with the sheriff of Frio on his trail.

The outlaw of the Rio Grande had ceased to exist; in his place rode the puncher of Frio, the puncher that the Kid had always been at heart, though hard fate had made him an outlaw. He loosened his lasso as he rode.

Starbottle had dashed ahead, hoping yet to turn the herd. With a

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thunder of hoofs the Kid dashed past him. The riata was whirling in his hand, and the rancher shouted hoarsely, savagely.

"You durned horse-thief!"

The Kid heard him, and grinned sourly. The rancher reckoned that the outlaw was aiming to cinch a horse from the herd; he never dreamed of the Kid's intention.

But the Kid did not answer.

A touch of the spur sent Side-Kicker racing past the panting rancher. The Kid's eyes were on the big black that led the stampede.

There was no chance of stopping the maddened swarm of horses. But the Kid reckoned that there was a chance of turning them. He had to take his life in his hands to try that chance, but the Kid did not waste time thinking about that.

Faster and faster the mustang raced on at the edge of the thundering stampede. Closer and closer the Rio Kid drew to the tall black that thundered in the lead, winding in among the galloping cayuses. A stumble was death, and there were rabbit-holes and sun cracks in the prairie. Maddened horses shouldered Side-Kicker; a snap of savage teeth narrowly missed the Kid's chaps. He tore on unheeding.

Whiz!

The riata flew, uncoiling as it flew.

The noose settled, swift and sure, over the tossing head of the tall black.

There was a shrill squeal from the black as the noose gripped his neck. His crashing hoof-beats thudded on more furiously than before as he strove to tear himself loose from the riata.

"Cinched!" gasped the Kid. "By the great horned toad!"

He gave Side-Kicker a touch of the spur.

The mustang leaped on at lightning speed.

The Rio Kid was leading the herd now, with the big black on the rope. With hundreds of crashing hoofs behind him, he galloped on, leading the roped horse, and swerving away from the river as he rode. He reckoned that the cayuses would follow; and if Starbottle understood and horned in with his quirt on the flank of the herd, it was a sure thing.

Crack! Crack! came the ring of the rancher's quirt. He was following the Kid, riding on the edge of the stampede, crashing his quirt on tossing necks and heaving sides, to drive the cayuses in the direction the Kid was taking with the leader. The rancher had caught on; he knew now what the Kid was aiming at, and he shouted, his voice coming clear across the thud of hoofs:

"Attaboy! Ride, cowboy—ride!"

The Kid grinned.

He reckoned that the rancher was glad now that he had not got by with his gun-play. He was saving the herd for the man who had tried to shoot him up.

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The Kid's quirt was in play now, while the big black ran in the rope. Nothing could have stopped the stampede, but with luck and pluck it might be turned—and the Kid was turning it, backed up by the rancher. Jas Starbottle had forgotten that the wild rider ahead of him was the Rio Kid, the outlaw of Texas, the "fire-bug" he had aimed to shoot up or to hand over to the sheriff. He saw in him only a puncher who was doing the work of half a dozen punchers, and doing it better than half a dozen. He backed up the Kid's play, and slowly but surely the herd was turned from the direction of the river.

The Kid waved his quirt to Starbottle.

"Ride 'em, rancher!" he yelled. "I guess we're rounding up this bunch back to the ranch!"

"You said it!" panted the rancher.

With cracking quirts, they edged the galloping herd farther aside from the river. And now man after man from the Lazy-Y was galloping up, and joining in the task. The stampede swept on, but the riders had it in hand, and in a wide circle of many miles the herd was rounded back to the ranch. Then—and not till then—did the Rio Kid remember that he was not a ranch-rider, but a hunted outlaw.

The Rio Kid rubbed down his sweating mustang, eyed strangely by the Lazy-Y bunch. Side-Kicker was panting and throbbing, and he needed the Kid's care. Jas Starbottle crashed shut the bar at the corral gate and came towards the Kid. There was a curious expression on the scarred face of the Lazy-Y rancher.

He stood watching the Kid for long minutes in silence. The Kid was giving his attention to his horse, but his eyes were alert. If there was going to be gun-play, the Rio Kid would not be taken by surprise. But Jas Starbottle was not touching a gun.

Instead the rancher held out his hand.

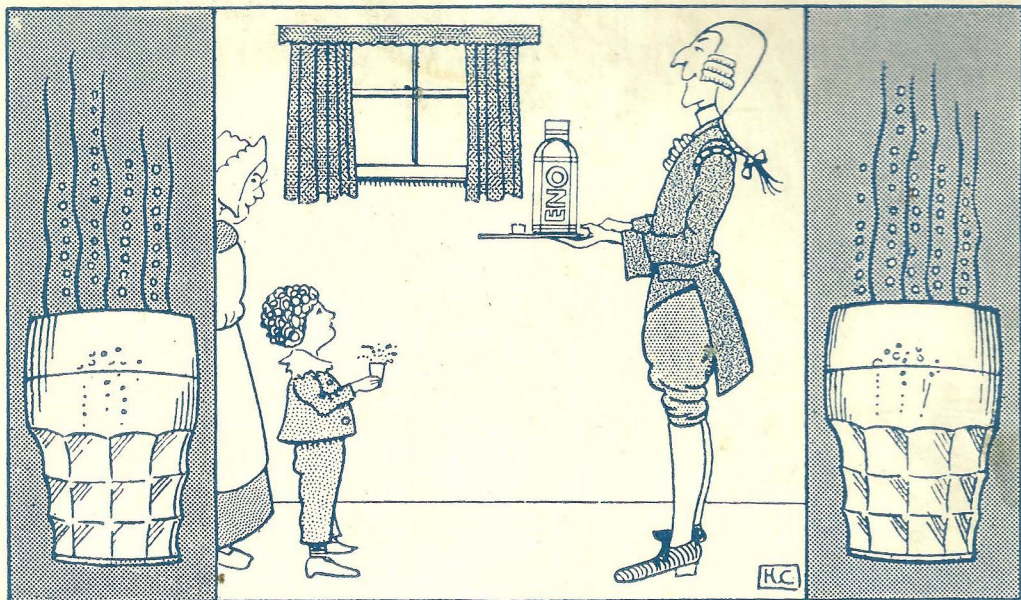
The Kid stared.

"I mean it, Kid! Outlaw or not, you're a white man through and through, and there's my fist on it!" said the rancher. "And if you ever get right with the law, Kid, and aim to punch cows again, you won't have to look farther than the Lazy-Y!"

"Feller," said the Kid, as he gripped the rancher's hand, "I'll say you've talked your piece like a little man. Mebbe I'll be right with the law some day, and then I guess I'll be proud to ride with your bunch. Now I reckon my best guess is to ride while the trail's open."

The Lazy-Y bunch stood and waved their Stetsons to the Rio Kid as he rode away into the dusk of the prairie. The Kid looked back and waved his hat and the galloping hoofs of his mustang died away into the falling night.

THE END



Hilary knows that the properest way
 For a sensible boy to start the day
 Is to take a glass that bubbles and winks
 And froths and sparkles while Hilary drinks.



Does Hilary drink alone? I doubt it.
 Nanny and James know all about it!



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